Emma Goldman, *The Social Significance of the Modern Drama*
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THE SCANDINAVIAN DRAMA: HENRIK IBSEN

THE PILLARS OF SOCIETY

THE disintegrating effect of the Social Lie, of Duty, as an imposition and outrage, and of the spirit of Provincialism, as a stifling factor, are brought out with dynamic force in "The Pillars of Society."

Consul Bernick, driven by the conception of his duty toward the House of Bernick, begins his career with a terrible lie. He sells his love for *Lona Hessel* in return for the large dowry of her step-sister *Betty*, whom he does not love. To forget his treachery, he enters into a clandestine relationship with an actress of the town. When surprised in her room by the drunken husband, young *Bernick* jumps out of the window, and then graciously accepts the offer of his bosom friend, *Johan*, to let him take the blame.

Johan, together with his faithful sister *Lona*, leaves for America. In return for his devotion, young *Bernick* helps to rob his friend of his good name, by acquiescing in the rumors circulating in the town that *Johan* had broken into the safe of the *Bernicks* and stolen a large sum of money.

In the opening scene of "The Pillars of Society," we find *Consul Bernick* at the height of his career. The richest, most powerful and respected citizen of the community, he is held up as the model of an ideal husband and devoted father. In short, a worthy pillar of society.

The best ladies of the town come together in the home of the Bernicks. They represent the society for the "Lapsed and Lost," and they gather to do a little charitable sewing and a lot of charitable gossip. It is through them we learn that *Dina Dorf*, the ward of *Bernick*, is the issue of the supposed escapade of *Johan* and the actress.

With them, giving unctuous spiritual advice and representing the purity and morality of the community, is *Rector Rorlund*, hidebound, self-righteous, and narrow-minded.

Into this deadening atmosphere of mental and social provincialism comes *Lona Hessel*, refreshing and invigorating as the wind of the plains. She has returned to her native town together with *Johan*.

The moment she enters the house of *Bernick*, the whole structure begins to totter. For in *Lona's* own words, "Fie, fie--this moral linen here smells so tainted--just like a shroud. I am accustomed to the air of the prairies now, I can tell you. . . . Wait a little, wait a little--we'll soon rise from the sepulcher. We must have broad daylight here when my boy comes."

Broad daylight is indeed needed in the community of *Consul Bernick*, and above all in the life of the *Consul* himself.

It seems to be the psychology of a lie that it can never stand alone. *Consul Bernick* is compelled to weave a network of lies to sustain his foundation. In the disguise of a good husband, he upbraids, nags, and tortures his wife on the slightest provocation. In the mask of a devoted father, he tyrannizes and bullies his only child as only a despot used to being obeyed can do. Under the cloak of a benevolent citizen he buys up public land for his own profit. Posing as a true Christian, he even goes so far as to jeopardize human life. Because of business considerations he sends *The Indian Girl*, an unseaworthy, rotten vessel, on a voyage, although he is assured by one of his most capable and faithful workers that the ship cannot make the journey, that it is sure to go down. But *Consul Bernick* is a pillar of society; he needs the respect and good will of his fellow citizens. He must go from precipice to precipice, to keep up appearances.

Lona alone sees the abyss facing him, and tells him: "What does it matter whether such a society is supported or not? What is it that passes current here? Lies and shams--nothing else. Here are you, the first man in the town, living in wealth and pride, in power and honor, you, who have set the brand of crime upon an innocent man." She might have added, *many* innocent men, for *Johan* was not the only one at whose expense *Karsten Bernick* built up his career.

The end is inevitable. In the words of *Lona*: "All this eminence, and you yourself along with it, stand on a trembling quicksand; a moment may come, a word may be spoken, and, if you do not save yourself in time, you and your whole grandeur go to the bottom."

But for *Lona*, or, rather, what she symbolizes, *Bernick*--even as *The Indian Girl*--would go to the bottom.

In the last act, the whole town is preparing to give the great philanthropist and benefactor, the eminent pillar of society, an ovation. There are fireworks, music, gifts and speeches in honor of *Consul Bernick*. At that very moment, the only child of the *Consul* is hiding in *The Indian Girl* to escape the tyranny of his home. *Johan*, too, is supposed to sail on the same ship, and with him, *Dina*, who has learned the whole truth and is eager to escape from her prison, to go to a free atmosphere, to become independent, and then to unite with *Johan* in love and freedom. As *Dina* says: "Yes, I will be your wife. But first I will work, and become something for myself, just as you are. I will give myself, I will not be taken."

Consul Bernick, too, is beginning to realize himself. The strain of events and the final shock that he had exposed his own child to such peril, act like a stroke of lightning on the *Consul*. It makes him see that a house built on lies, shams, and crime must eventually sink by its own weight. Surrounded by those who truly love and therefore understand him, *Consul Bernick*, no longer the pillar of society, but the man become conscious of his better self.

"Where have I been?" he exclaims. "You will be horrified when you know. Now, I feel as if I had just recovered my senses after being poisoned. But I feel--I feel that I *can* be young and strong again. Oh, come nearer--closer around me. Come, Betty! Come, Olaf! Come, Martha! Oh, Martha, it seems as though I had never seen you in all these years. And we--we have a long, earnest day of work before us; I most of all. But let it come; gather close around me, you true and faithful women. I have learned this, in these days: it is you women who are the Pillars of Society."

Lona: "Then you have learned a poor wisdom, brother-in-law. No, no; the spirit of Truth and of Freedom--these are the Pillars of Society."

The spirit of truth and freedom is the socio-revolutionary significance of "The Pillars of Society." Those, who, like *Consul Bernick*, fail to realize this all-important fact, go on patching up *The Indian Girl*, which is Ibsen's symbol for our society. But they, too, must learn that society is rotten to the core; that patching up or reforming one sore spot merely drives the social poison deeper into the system, and that all must go to the bottom unless the spirit of Truth and Freedom revolutionize the world.