

German Historical Institute  
Washington, D.C.  
Occasional Paper No. 8

**CULTURE AND POLITICS  
IN NINETEENTH- AND  
TWENTIETH-CENTURY GERMANY**

*edited by*  
*Hartmut Lehmann*

**CULTURE AND POLITICS  
IN NINETEENTH- AND  
TWENTIETH-CENTURY GERMANY**

*Edited by*

*Hartmut Lehmann*

Occasional Paper No. 8  
Edited by Hartmut Lehmann,  
Manfred F. Boemeke, and Janine Micunek  
©Copyright 1992 by German Historical Institute  
Published by the  
GERMAN HISTORICAL INSTITUTE  
1607 New Hampshire Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20009  
Tel. (202) 387-3355

## Contents

<b>Introduction</b> <i>Hartmut Lehmann</i>	5
<b>Metamorphosis of Censorship in Modern Germany</b> <i>Peter Jelavich</i>	9
<b>Thomas Mann's Modernist Conversion to Politics</b> <i>Fritz Ringer</i>	21
<b>Culture, Politics, and the Censor</b> <i>Claudia Koonz</i>	33
<b>Rethinking Modernity in Germany</b> <i>Frank Trommler</i>	39





## Introduction

*Hartmut Lehmann*

In 1917, on the occasion of the quadricentennial of Martin Luther's revolt against Rome, the Divinity School of the University of Chicago asked Frank Wakeley Gunsaulus, a then famous poet and minister who had served both the Methodist and Congregational churches, to deliver two lectures. In the conclusion of the second of these lectures, Gunsaulus drew a sharp distinction between the German traditions he found praiseworthy and those he detested and against which, in his opinion, America had just gone to war. For Gunsaulus, the "good" Germany was represented by such individuals as Luther, Kant, Lessing, Goethe, Schiller, Bach, Mendelssohn, and Beethoven; that is, by theologians, philosophers, poets, and musicians. Among the good Germans, he also counted Steuben, Herkimer, DeKalb, Carl Schurz, and Franz Siegel—German military leaders and politicians who had left Germany and joined the American cause.

In contrast, the "bad" Germany was represented by "Prussianized autocracy," "Kaiserism," "despotism"—by all forces that attempted, in Gunsaulus's words, to "Germanize mankind with the help of Krupp guns, poison gases, and liquid fire." Gunsaulus, although by no means he alone, viewed the *political* Germany in 1917 in a totally negative light, whereas *das andere Deutschland*, the Germany that he thought had to be liberated, was the Germany of an amazingly rich culture.<sup>1</sup>

Three decades later, at the end of the Second World War, the eminent German historian Friedrich Meinecke published his book, *Die deutsche Katastrophe* (The German Catastrophe), in which he made a similar distinction. In his opinion, the monstrous events of the past twelve years could be described only by the term "catastrophe." These events had been caused by political developments that had gone terribly awry, developments that were not rooted in the German tradition exclusively, but that had still culminated in the fateful rule of National Socialism in Germany. According to

---

<sup>1</sup> Frank Wakeley Gunsaulus, *Martin Luther and the Morning Hour in Europe* (Chicago, 1917), 46.

Meinecke, in order to overcome militarism and Hitlerism, mass Machiavellianism (as he called it), and Bolshevism, there was only one hope: namely, the heritage of German culture. As is well known, Meinecke proposed that all German towns and larger villages establish so-called Goethe communities (*Goethegemeinden*)—a proposal received rather condescendingly by some of his contemporaries. Meinecke hoped that by cultivating music from Bach to Brahms and by reviving the literary works of Goethe, Schiller, Hölderlin, Mörike, Conrad Ferdinand Meyer, and Rilke, the Germans would be able to overcome their militaristic past and break away from the hubris of power politics that had led their country into an abyss and resulted in a catastrophe.<sup>2</sup>

Even four decades after the Second World War, Meinecke's views are still prevalent in various manifestations among Germany's friends and neighbors. While they admire the German cultural tradition and cherish its cultural heritage, they instinctively judge German politics in a critical light. But then, after everything Germany's neighbors experienced in the course of the first half of the twentieth century, this should hardly surprise us.

"Culture and Politics in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Germany": the relationships, the tensions, and the discrepancies in the development of culture and politics in modern Germany comprised the topic of a symposium that the German Historical Institute organized as its contribution to "A Tribute to Germany" in Washington, D.C., in the summer of 1992. We were very fortunate to have been able to assemble on this occasion a first-rate group of scholars: Professors Peter Jelavich of the University of Texas at Austin, Fritz Ringer of the University of Pittsburgh, Claudia Koonz of Duke University, and Frank Trommler of the University of Pennsylvania.

It goes without saying that the speakers were not able to cover the full range of problems and questions related to such a broad theme as the one chosen, and some aspects could only be touched upon briefly. This is true, for example, for the relationship between federalism and cultural diversity, as well as cultural productivity, in modern Germany. Throughout the modern era, Germany had a

---

<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Meinecke, *Die deutsche Katastrophe: Betrachtungen und Erinnerungen* (5th ed., Wiesbaden, 1955; 1st ed. 1946).



number of regional political and cultural centers. More often than not, pride in regional cultural achievements was strong, and it reinforced the decentralization of Central Europe in the political field as well. However, whether the regional centers of political power coincided with regional centers of cultural creativity is just as debatable as the short-term and long-term cultural effects of the drive toward a more unitary political organization, most notably in Weimar Germany and the Third Reich.

Another matter that might have deserved more attention is the role of the educated German middle class, the *Bildungsbürgertum*. It was this group within German society that proved to be the most productive in the field of culture—in literature as well as in music and architecture. One can argue that much of nineteenth- and twentieth-century culture reflects the world view and self-perception of this single group; at the same time, it may be said that the political ambitions of this group were not fulfilled. The cultural productivity of the *Bildungsbürgertum* could therefore be seen as a matter of compensation and, in part, as a result of its inner emigration. One should not carry this argument too far, however. There can be no doubt that the German *Bildungsbürgertum* managed to create a vibrant world that attracted all other segments of German society.

A third set of problems that was not discussed in detail is related to the rise and reign, as well as the perversion, of German nationalism. Within the realm of culture, nationalism supported such notions as the heroization of the exponents of national history and politics and the heroic conception of such matters as war and death for the national cause. This seems simple enough. But, at the same time, for several reasons, the influence of nationalism in political matters is difficult to analyze and hard to describe. We can observe, for instance, that German artists produced no first-rate works dealing with certain national themes or figures of national pride. Even in 1883, on the occasion of the quadricentennial of Martin Luther's birth, no outstanding drama on Luther was produced, and the same holds true for many other idols of German national culture. However, there was an enormous influence of nationalism on the more popular cultural level. Novels about the adventures of Germans in the colonies come to mind, or monuments commemorating the war of 1870–1871, the *Kriegerdenkmäler* established in almost all German communities.

What is fascinating about the cultural influence of nationalism is its ambivalent character. On the one hand, in many instances, nationalism was connected to conservative values and to a conservative world view. The nation's past, and the lessons derived from it, seemed to govern the artistic forms of expression in this field. On the other hand, nationalism was closely related to notions of progress and modernization, urbanization and industrialization, and sometimes even to ideas of secularization. In this sense, it is revealing that the monuments erected to honor Bismarck, the *Bismarcktürme*, were a far cry from the old monuments honoring kings and generals, since they represented the hero in an abstract, almost ultramodern fashion.

In the United States, the image of the relationship between German culture and German politics was deeply influenced by the views of German refugees. This is true for the forty-eighters, such as Carl Schurz, as for the emigrés of the 1930s. These exiles cherished much of German culture even after they had been forced to leave their country. At the same time, they were highly critical of German politics, and understandably so. It would be worthwhile to analyze how German emigrants, on the one hand, promulgated the virtues of German culture, while, on the other hand, venting their deep skepticism about German politics.

I would like to thank the Goethe-Institut in Washington, D.C., for providing generous financial support for the symposium. We met on May 8, 1992. The anniversary of the unconditional surrender of Nazi Germany was indeed an appropriate date to reflect on our theme.

## Metamorphoses of Censorship in Modern Germany

*Peter Jelavich*

Although I tend to believe that writers and artists have precious little influence on society at large or on "the greater course of events," there is one phenomenon that makes me pause: namely, censorship. If state authorities go out of their way to influence, control, or even suppress the arts, then I am forced to conclude that writers and artists must be doing something right after all. The inadvertent respect paid by repressive regimes to subversive authors was underscored by Italo Calvino in his novel, *If on a winter's night a traveller*. There the head censor of a fictitious Latin American dictatorship says: "Nobody these days holds the written word in such high esteem as police states do.... What statistic allows one to identify the nations where literature enjoys true consideration better than the sums appropriated for controlling it and suppressing it? Where it is the object of such attention, literature gains an extraordinary authority, inconceivable in countries where it is allowed to vegetate as an innocuous pastime, without risks."<sup>1</sup> Despite the obvious irony of this scene, it underscores a valid point: governments of many modern states have taken an interest in artistic production, an interest born more out of political worry than aesthetic appreciation.

This holds true for Germany as well, although the issue there is complicated by the fact that its political system has changed several times over the past century, from the German Empire to the Weimar Republic, the Nazi regime, and the two postwar republics. This diversity makes Germany an ideal area to study the various guises that censorship can adopt in the modern world. Many of its manifestations were (and are) indirect, and one can debate at length which activities should or should not be labeled "censorship." After all, every German regime since 1918—when censorship was legally abolished—has denied that it engaged in the practice. That denial

---

Note: This talk has been published previously in *German Politics and Society* 27 (Fall 1992).

<sup>1</sup> Italo Calvino, *If on a winter's night a traveller*, trans. William Weaver (San Diego, 1981), 235–36.

was based on an overly narrow definition, namely the equation of censorship with prior or preliminary censorship, a system whereby governmental approval was required before a work of art could be published, displayed, or performed. In reality, most writers and artists producing under the various post-1918 regimes would argue that censorship (more broadly defined) did exist in some form. I will thus attempt to outline briefly some of the means by which the various German regimes have attempted to manipulate artistic production.

Imperial Germany granted legal freedom to the press and to the visual arts, but works performed on stage had to gain prior approval from the local police, which included officers who formally acted as censors. Thus there was, legalistically speaking, censorship only of the theater (and of cinema, after the turn of the century). Yet even in print or on canvas, one could not express anything one wanted: one had to respect the strictures of the Criminal Code, which included paragraphs prohibiting blasphemy, obscenity, or lese majesty. These were the issues that got writers and artists into trouble in the Imperial era. If they wrote, etched, or painted works that were deemed blasphemous, pornographic, or insulting to royalty, they were hauled into court. Conviction entailed fines, jail sentences of up to a year, and physical destruction of the offending works. This system set a pattern for future German states: freedom of expression granted by the constitution was whittled down by the Criminal Code.

Article 142 of the Weimar constitution guaranteed full freedom to the arts and sciences, and article 118 proclaimed freedom of speech and of the press by asserting: "There will be no censorship" (*Eine Zensur findet nicht statt*). Nevertheless, freedom of expression was qualified by the phrase that confined it "within the limits of the general laws" (*innerhalb der Schranken der allgemeinen Gesetze*)—in short, there was still the largely unrevised Criminal Code to worry about. The paragraph against *Majestätsbeleidigung* was obviously dropped, since there no longer was a *Majestät*, and the government was explicitly prohibited from prosecuting writers or artists for their political beliefs. Nevertheless, one could still be brought to trial for blasphemy or obscenity. In the 1920s, these laws were occasionally used as pretexts to harass creative artists who engaged in critical *political* statements. After all, people who have subversive things to say about the state will also tend to make wicked comments about

sex and religion. Individuals brought to trial included writers like Walter Hasenclever and Johannes R Becher, and artists like George Grosz, Georg Schols, and Otto Dix. In almost all cases, however, the people prosecuted were declared innocent, or relatively small fines were imposed on them.

These trials underscored the limits and paradoxes of censorship in a parliamentary democracy, and thus raised some issues that were to be reflected later in the Federal Republic. Weimar governments, whether conservative or Social Democratic, were generally loathe to prosecute writers and artists. They did so only when important pressure groups, such as the churches or the more vociferous members of the conservative parties, forced the issue. The main problem with such trials was that they invariably backfired. Weimar prosecutors knew what Wilhelmine police officials had learned before them: the banning of a work generated tremendous publicity for the writer or artist in question. The proscribed text or image might be taken off the market, but that would increase sales of the writer's or artist's other products. Although most authors sincerely condemned censorship and judicial harassment, some had a more cynical attitude: in correspondence with their friends, a few writers expressed the hope that their works would get banned, in order to gain increased public visibility.

This paradox made Wilhelmine and Weimar prosecutors hesitate before going to court. Nevertheless, conservative and far-right groups were willing to force the issue, because prosecution of offensive art could serve a useful political function. Although individual writers and artists might get off lightly or completely, the trials invariably broadcast the existence of supposedly obscene or sacrilegious works, and thus inflamed the passions of conservative sectors of the population. By attacking offensive art, conservatives could mobilize their supporters and could spread the belief that republican democracy allowed "too much freedom." This tactic of smearing art to consolidate right-wing votes was used very effectively by Nazi politicians after 1929 (and somewhat less effectively by Jesse Helms in 1990 and Pat Buchanan in 1992).

A marked intensification of legal attacks on the arts actually began a year and a half before the Nazi takeover. The Second Emergency Decree of July 17, 1931, allowed the police to confiscate works that threatened "public safety and order." It was used primarily to suppress Communist political agitation, which included

leftist literature and performances, such as those of the agitprop troupes or Bertolt Brecht. After his coup in Prussia, Franz von Papen tightened press and speech restrictions even further. The emergency decrees passed by the Nazis in the first months of 1933 thus built and expanded upon earlier laws. Over the course of that year, however, it became clear that the Nazis were planning a much more comprehensive shake-up of the cultural sphere. The Wilhelmine and Weimar regimes had granted relative freedom to the arts: except for prior censorship of theater and film in Imperial Germany, literary and artistic works could be challenged in court only after their appearance. The Nazis, in contrast, wanted to shape the arts from their inception. This more grandiose desire for thorough cultural control required drastic means of implementation, which took the form of the Reich Culture Chamber (*Reichskulturkammer*). Only writers or artists who belonged to this new Nazi organization were allowed to produce and market their works. Of course, individuals who were liberal, leftist, or Jewish were excluded. This narrowed the number of cultural producers, and also obviated from the start the need to institute a formal system of preliminary censorship.

Formally instituted censorship was also unnecessary because there were so many competing Nazi institutions, as well as sycophantic individuals, that were eager to play watchdog roles. Several Nazi cultural organizations, with overlapping and rival spheres of competence, had members on the lookout for deviations. Recalcitrant authors or artists could be reported to the Culture Chamber, which circulated a constantly updated "black list" of undesirable books; they also could be reported to the police or to the Gestapo. Even mild criticism of Nazi policies could result in expulsion from the Culture Chamber—tantamount to a prohibition on artistic activity—as well as several weeks in a concentration camp ("to reconsider your views," according to the Nazi phrase). Thus the threat of denunciation by ambitious bureaucrats or private citizens constituted the primary mode of censorship. A formal system of censorship was unnecessary because the Nazis could count on private initiative, the "invisible hand" of denunciation.

The Nazis also expanded upon one of the by-products of the anti-modernist trials of the 1920s. Although the Weimar cases did little actual damage to the writers and artists prosecuted, they did generate disgust with modernist art among conservative citizens. The Nazis artificially resurrected that disgust, years after the modernists

and leftists had been silenced, by mounting the exhibitions of "degenerate art" and "degenerate music" in 1937 and 1938. These shows underscored a basic premise of Nazi culture: while it was desirable to remold artists, it was even more important to control the taste of the public at large. The National Socialists wanted to create a citizenry that would scorn works that did not conform to their ideas and values. They recognized that the most effective system of censorship would be one in which the general public had internalized official norms to such an extent that, even should an individual writer or artist create a nonconformist work, it would meet a cold, or better yet, a hostile reception.

Paradoxically, this power of public opinion had been demonstrated two decades earlier, during the liberalized atmosphere of the Weimar Republic. Writers had applauded the abolition of censorship in 1918, but already by 1919, people like Kurt Tucholsky were claiming that the paying public was an even stricter censor than those that sat in the police stations: the populace at large simply had no interest in hearing ideas that were overly critical of themselves or their nation. Of course, one could have told Tucholsky and others like him that "free citizens" had every right to "freely choose" not to listen to his words. But the issue was not that straightforward, since the state still had indirect means of influencing the way the public made choices in the "free market" of the arts. This is true for any modern democracy: to the extent that a state socializes its citizenry and inculcates norms, it helps determine the parameters of what the reading or viewing public "freely" and "willingly" chooses. The most obvious instrument of such socialization is the school system. Insofar as the classroom is the place where most people learn to read, it also has great influence on how people read and what they read. The Weimar reading public, having been raised in Wilhelmine schools, was by and large inoculated against critical or modernist literature; it was immunized in advance against much of what is now called "Weimar culture." Indeed, conservative values continued to be inculcated in Weimar children due to the holdover of teachers from the Imperial era.

Against such a contention, one could argue that schools are only one instrument of socialization: families, neighborhoods, and peer groups often are more influential. That is why, in an "open" society, state-controlled modes of socialization are ultimately limited. It was precisely for this reason that the Nazis sought to control so many

avenues of socialization: families, schools, youth groups, and beyond. The Nazis sought to recast all of these in their own ideational and normative mode. To the extent that they succeeded, they could forgo direct censorship of the arts. To the extent that they failed, they could use threats and terror to silence potential producers and recipients of subversive art.

After the interlude of Allied military control, the year 1949 marked another turning point in the history of German censorship. The constitutions of both the Federal Republic and the German Democratic Republic specifically prohibited censorship, but few people were fooled by those clauses. The Basic Law of the Federal Republic retained the phrase, "Eine Zensur findet nicht statt," but it again restricted expression to "the limits of the general laws." Thus, the 1950s and 1960s witnessed a reversion to the conditions of the Weimar era: the paragraphs of the Criminal Code condemning obscenity and blasphemy were used on occasion to suppress offensive works. Predictably, the old problem reappeared: all attempts to ban a work invariably generated some sympathy and much free publicity for the artist or writer in question. Moreover, by the late 1960s, public attitudes were changing. Secularization and the so-called sexual revolution made it almost impossible to enforce older norms of "good taste." Once the blasphemy and obscenity laws were no longer strictly applied, there was a flood of contentious works in literature and the arts. They initially had great shock value, but, rather rapidly, many of them lost their impact. This accentuated another paradox of censorship applicable to a society. By restricting discussion of certain themes (namely religion, sex, and politics), the state makes those topics particularly interesting to many writers and artists, as well as to numerous readers and viewers. Conversely, when the restrictions are lifted, the offending subjects lose their aura of the forbidden and hence become less enticing. This indicates that the state itself is complicit in adding power and attraction to the arts whenever it proscribes them.

The relaxing of judicial standards in the Federal Republic did not, however, make all writers happy. By the 1970s, the debate over censorship focused on cultural institutions directly controlled by the state. In Germany this includes not only state and municipal theaters, which had been public entities since the nineteenth century, but also the all-important media of radio and especially television. One especially virulent but not atypical attack was penned by Rolf



Hochhuth. In an article entitled "Censorship in the Federal Republic," he claimed that politicians could forgo direct censorship of works because they indirectly controlled so many outlets for the arts. Censorship was exercised informally by the public theater managers, museum directors, and television and radio programmers, whose jobs were dependent upon the good will and the purse strings of politicians. Hochhuth claimed:

The potentates of the Federal Republic rarely cry after the public prosecutor when they need a legal advocate to oppose art—for they are still clever enough to avoid playing the censor themselves. They calmly rely upon the art commissars that they have installed in the control towers of the mass media...managing directors, artistic directors, department heads above all of television, of municipal arts programs, of theater, of radio...Not the courts, but the state's intellectual office holders are the actual censors in our Republic ...more powerful, more far-reaching, less conspicuous than the judicial ones.<sup>2</sup>

Even if Hochhuth exaggerated, he pointed to an important problem. When there is much public money available for the arts, there is also a large bureaucratic staff that administers the funds, a staff which is appointed by and responsible to political authorities. Politicians do not have to intervene directly in the decision-making process; they simply need civil servants who recognize and respect the unwritten parameters of what is politically acceptable. Of course, one could argue that since the cities and states of the Federal Republic do not control all artistic channels, they are not engaging in censorship: one can always turn to private theaters or publishers (and now, finally, to private TV stations). That is certainly true, but Hochhuth countered that the state-subsidized institutions engage in unfair competition precisely because they receive public funds. Moreover, he contended that the subsidies have a *Bestechungsfunktion*, insofar as they bribe potentially critical writers and artists into staying within the proper bounds.

This points to another, more general paradox of modern governments' relationship to the arts. Writers, artists, and performers are often critical of the "free market" of cultural production, and

---

<sup>2</sup> Rolf Hochhuth, "Zensur in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland," in *Rolf Hochhuth: Dokumente zur politischen Wirkung*, ed. Reinhardt Hoffmeister (Munich, 1980), 305–306, 310.

they request state subsidies to engage in artistic activities that do not attract a sufficiently large paying public. Yet, when public institutions try to impose restrictions on the use of grant money—restrictions relating to political, sexual, or religious content—the potential recipients cry "censorship!" That dynamic occurs with some regularity in Germany and was seen recently in the United States during debates over NEA funding of supposedly obscene exhibitions and performance art. The dilemma faced by innovative artists everywhere is that they must convince their governments to maximize financial support and minimize supervisory control of artistic endeavors.

The areas of cultural activity controlled by the state were, of course, much smaller in the Federal Republic than in the GDR, where one encounters yet again a totally different system of supervising the arts. East German officials invariably denied that censorship existed, but actually, the East German state controlled even more cultural channels than the Nazi state had. This does not mean that the GDR was more repressive than the Nazi regime—that would be very far from the truth. Nevertheless, the fact that all theaters, cinemas, publishing houses, newspapers, and radio and television stations were state-owned allowed for more direct government influence in the cultural sphere. As in Nazi Germany, anyone who wanted to publish had to belong to a writers' union, the *Schriftstellerverband*. The model for that organization was not, of course, the Nazis' Culture Chamber but rather the Writers' League formed in the Soviet Union in the 1930s. Furthermore, the GDR instituted the most comprehensive system of prior censorship that Germany has ever seen. In practice, all works printed, all plays staged, and all films screened had to procure preliminary approval from some state agency. Authors, for example, had to "discuss" their manuscripts with one or more editors at the state-owned publishing houses. The editors then had to acquire a "license" to print the work from the state publishing office, a subdivision of the Ministry of Culture. Since SED members held commanding posts in all of these agencies at every level, authorship was in practice subjected to Party supervision.

This de facto prior censorship was complemented by a carrot-and-stick system of incentives. The carrots given to conformist writers could be rather fat and tasty (given the limited resources of the GDR): a guaranteed income—i.e. freedom from the vicissitudes

of the market faced by Western colleagues; a nice apartment, car, or other amenities; special vacation homes and freedom to travel; and public accolades and social prestige. Conversely, failure to conform could have harsh consequences. Dismissal from the Writers' Union amounted to a prohibition to publish. Moreover, the judicial system could be invoked in its full severity. Although the constitution of the GDR guaranteed freedom of expression, its criminal code imposed stiff jail sentences for "agitation hostile to the state" (*staatsfeindliche Hetze*) and "defamation of the state" (*Staatsverleumdung*). These and other laws could be used to imprison authors who criticized the GDR or who depicted the less admirable realities of socialism. As in Nazi Germany, the threat of denunciation—in this case to the ubiquitous *Staatssicherheit*—was a major instrument for ensuring conformity.

At the same time that the ruling SED sought to control the arts, it also sought to mold new citizens through the instruments of socialization mentioned above: schools, youth groups, families, and the like. As in Nazi Germany, it sought to reform not so much the arts themselves as their potential recipients. The SED did not succeed because there were some writers and millions of citizens who did not want to play the game. Some citizens who wanted to hear different ideas went to oppositional gatherings in churches or read clandestinely circulated poems and stories. But the average person did not need to show such civic courage: he or she could simply turn to West German radio and television stations. As for oppositional writers, many were harassed, some were jailed, and the most recalcitrant were expelled to the West, beginning with Wolf Biermann in 1976.

But what of those who remained in the GDR and continued to publish "officially"? Were they all collaborators, as has been insinuated recently? The issue is, of course, highly complex, and I will conclude by indicating only a few of its dimensions. On the one hand, writers like Christa Wolf could legitimately argue that they were acting in a subversive manner by making claims for subjectivity and individuality. Such issues are subversive almost by definition in a society whose government strives to control all means of socialization. On the other hand, one could argue that even if Wolf were not a direct tool of the state, she served its interests indirectly and inadvertently, since her works had a *Ventilfunktion*: they allowed people to let off steam vicariously, and thus to diffuse tensions.

Furthermore, by arguing for interiority, such works fashioned citizens who did not conform to the state's norms, but who did not actively oppose them, either.

Although I tend to be suspicious of Foucaultian arguments, there is a sense in which the government of the GDR occasionally created its own opposition in order to better exert its rule. This was clearest in the case of cabarets: in 1974 every *Kreis* of the GDR was ordered to found a cabaret that was supposed to criticize, within limits, faults within the system. More recently, Biermann has contended that the non-conformist scene of Prenzlauer Berg was in fact encouraged by the *Staatssicherheit* as a means of diverting dissent into less overtly political channels. Be that as it may, it is certainly conceivable that critical literature was recognized as having important diversionary functions. If this were the case, then nonconformist writers would have been forced to end in either self-delusion or self-conscious cynicism. The fact that, from the mid-1970s on, writers like Christa Wolf and Volker Braun were attracted to Anton Chekhov and depicted their characters and their own lives in Chekhovian terms suggests that they were conscious of their contradictions and limitations (for example, Wolf's *Sommerstück* and Braun's *Übergangsgesellschaft*).

Nevertheless, I do not think that these writers ever despaired totally, for they clung to the notion that they had a special mission; they claimed, in fact, that they were the true voice of the people. At a meeting of the anguished *Schriftstellerverband* in March 1990, Wolf referred to the soon-to-be-defunct GDR as a state "in which we were often expected to speak vicariously for others—because no other institution expressed the contradictions that tore ever deeper into this country, and because others would have paid a higher price had they spoken out."<sup>3</sup> But did these writers really speak for the people any more so than did the SED? In the past century, Alexis de Tocqueville noted that in situations where there were no free elections, anyone and everyone could have claimed to be the voice of the people. The fact that the electorate deserted the writers soon after it turned against the SED suggests that neither the authors nor the Communists had been the *vox populi*.

---

<sup>3</sup> Christa Wolf, *Reden im Herbst* (Berlin, 1990), 166.

Whatever the case, writers and artists in the newly annexed territories of the Federal Republic are now forced to reassess their functions and their themes. A whole genre of literature and art had been based upon calls for greater freedom and individuality in the name of socialist ideals, but against the practices of "real-existing socialism." With the demise not only of the GDR, but of all socialist societies, those visions and goals have died as well. In his recent poem, "Property" (*Das Eigentum*), Volker Braun wrote: "my country is going to the west" (mein Land geht in den Westen), a fact which forced him to conclude: "my whole text becomes incomprehensible" (unverständlich wird mein ganzer Text). And at the meeting in March 1990, Christa Wolf cited a question raised by Heinrich Heine after the outbreak of the revolution of 1848: "How can a person write without censorship, if he has always lived under censorship?" Heine posed that question ironically. So, too, did Wolf, because she did not believe that the writers' task had ended "simply because the powers that we have to confront have changed."<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 168.



## Thomas Mann's Modernist Conversion to Politics

*Fritz Ringer*

Almost exactly forty-seven years ago, on May 29, 1945, Thomas Mann gave a public lecture at the Library of Congress, not far from here. His title was "Germany and the Germans"—but it just as easily could have been "Culture and Politics in Modern Germany," for that is really what he talked about.<sup>1</sup> In addressing the German catastrophe and German guilt, he explicitly refused the easy role of representing "the good Germany" while condemning "the bad." There is only one Germany, he said, in effect, and "through the devil's cunning," the best in it has "turned into evil." What he offered his audience was explicitly conceived as an exercise in "German self-criticism," and his main subject matter was "the melancholy story" of "German inwardness."<sup>2</sup>

He began that story by evoking his Hanseatic hometown of Lübeck as he was just then portraying it in *Doktor Faustus* (1947); that is, with something late-medieval lingering in its atmosphere, something of "hysteria" and "latent spiritual epidemic." Indeed, he went on to suggest that as a "representative of the German soul," Goethe's Faust must be imagined as a musician, a "professor with a touch of demonism," archaically provincial, abstract and mystically "musical," driven to his pact with the devil by sheer intellectual arrogance and by the need to surpass the rest of mankind in "depth." But for Mann, this "depth," "musicality," or "inwardness" of the German soul reflected a fateful "divorce of the speculative and the socio-political element of human energy, and the complete predominance of the former over the latter."<sup>3</sup>

Turning to another archetype of German "inwardness"—the "musical theologian" Martin Luther—Mann confessed that he did not like him, that he would have felt personally more comfortable with Erasmus or with Pope Leo X, the "amiable humanist" whom Luther called "The Devil's sow." The great reformer's Bible

---

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Mann, "Germany and the Germans," in *Thomas Mann's Addresses Delivered at the Library of Congress, 1942–1949* (Washington, 1963), 45–66.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 64–65.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 50–52.

translation in effect created the German language, and his commitment to the priesthood of all believers launched the modern quest for spiritual and intellectual freedom. Yet Luther knew nothing of *political* liberty, or of the *liberty of the citizen*. During the peasant rebellions of the 1520s, when German history might have taken a crucial "turn toward liberty," Luther urged that the rebels be "killed like mad dogs."

His anti-political servility, the product of musical-German inwardness and unworldliness, was not only responsible for the centuries-old obsequious attitude of the Germans toward their princes and toward the power of the state, it not only partly created and partly fostered the German dualism of boldest speculation on the one hand and political immaturity on the other. But it is also and chiefly typical in a monumental and defiant manner of the purely German sundering of the national impulse and the ideal of political liberty.<sup>4</sup>

One of the consequences, Mann believed, was that too many nineteenth- and twentieth-century Germans failed to see liberty as a *domestic* political issue; the freedom they sought was the freedom to be German, and only German. No revolution like that of 1789 ever helped in Germany to link the concept of "the nation" with the idea of civic self-determination. "Liberty" could thus come to signify a "stubborn individualism outwardly, in its relation to the world, to Europe, to civilization." Goethe deliberately kept a critical distance from the populist nationalism that spread among his countrymen in opposition to the Napoleonic regime. The "curse," as Mann called it, was that even Goethe's posture served mainly to *deepen* the divide between spiritual and political liberty in the culture (*Bildungsbegriff*) of the German middle classes.<sup>5</sup>

Toward the end of his lecture, Mann spoke of German Romanticism. Its emphasis upon the "emotional in the forms of ecstasy and Dionysiac intoxication," he said, signaled its psychological bent toward disease and death, which Nietzsche had detected.

In Germany, its real home, it has most strongly preserved this iridescent dualism, as glorification of the vital in contrast to the purely moral, and likewise as kinship to death. As German spirit, as Romantic counter-revolution, it has contributed deep and vitalizing impulses to European thought, but ... its life and death pride has

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 52–55, esp. 55.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 56–57.



disdained to accept any correcting instruction from ... the spirit of European religion of humanity, from European democracy.<sup>6</sup>

In its Bismarckian *real*-political form, then nourished by the "suffering and humiliation of a lost war," and in the end reduced to the "mass" level of a Hitler, Mann concluded, the "Romantic germ of disease and death" ultimately "broke out into hysterical barbarism," into crime and catastrophe.

What makes Mann's lecture particularly moving is that it really was, at least partly, an exercise in self-criticism. Indeed, as I am certainly not the first to notice, it was the second of two major steps that Mann took quite deliberately in order to separate himself from the problematic position he had taken in his *Reflections of an Unpolitical Man* of 1918. At each of these steps, he substantially readjusted his earlier interpretations of the German cultural heritage while evolving a new vision, both of the present and of his place in it. Each step was marked, not only by a major literary work but also by at least one shorter essay or public address on the pressing political issues of the day. And, while his reorientations never led Mann away from his art or his cultural concerns, they moved him progressively closer to the world of active and practical politics.

There is no time here to discuss either *The Reflections of an Unpolitical Man* or the two great works that flanked it. Suffice it to say that *Buddenbrooks* (1901), Mann's first novel, reflected the influences of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, particularly in its association of heightened artistic awareness with decadence and disease. The burgher patriciate, whose decline it chronicled, Mann's tale suggested, had once managed to combine an active commercial and civic life with a traditional code of conduct and a natural, if not profound relationship to an artistic culture that was presumably artisanal in origin. The fate of the later generations of *Buddenbrooks* was partly physiological; that was the naturalistic face of decadence as nervous debility and increased sensibility. But the fall of the *Buddenbrooks* also had a socio-historical aspect, in that an older world of burgher-artisans and burgher-artists was overwhelmed by a more rapacious age, one restrained neither by cultural commitments nor by inherited norms and customs. To be sure, the burgher-artist had always been to some degree separated from the ordinary

---

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 63–64.

burgher. But, during the late nineteenth century—to oversimplify for the sake of emphasis—the burgher was replaced by the grasping bourgeois, even while the artist descended into the realm of the demonic.

This helps to explain the anguished vehemence of *Reflections*, for Mann's "unpolitical man" was the burgher-artisan and, above all, the burgher-artist. The burgher-artisan was set off against both the bourgeois and the democratic "citizen" in the French manner. Apparently, he had an "unpolitical" sense of his connectedness to his "nation." Though not an artist in the full sense, he was not without sensibility, and he was certainly neither a utilitarian nor a philistine, a *Spießbürger*. The bourgeois stood for plutocratic domination and progress at the cost of tradition and principle. And the other great danger to art in a "mass" age, of course, was the literary propagandist (*Zivilisationsliterat*), the facile didact of enlightenment and of democracy. Thomas Mann's rivalry with his brother Heinrich did nothing to soften his passion.

The tone of *Reflections* and some of its key oppositions were anticipated in Mann's "Thoughts in Wartime" of 1914, which in fact opened with a (by then) conventional contrast between "civilization" and "culture." In Mann's version, civilization meant "reason, enlightenment, and the softening of manners," but also "skepticism" and "dissolution." It stood against "the instinctual drives, the passions"; it was "anti-demonic, anti-heroic," and hostile to "genius."

Art, like all culture, is the sublimation of the demonic ... its knowledge [is] deeper than enlightenment; its cognition not science and scholarship, but sensuality and mysticism....

Art is by no means interested in progress and enlightenment, in the comforts of the social contract, in short, in the civilizing of mankind. Its humanity is thoroughly unpolitical in character, its growth independent of social and political forms. Fanaticism and superstition have not impeded its fruition ... and it certainly has a more intimate relationship with the passions and with nature than with reason and with intellect.... It has been ... [related] to religion and to sexual love; but one can also compare it with another elementary force ... [namely] war.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Mann, "Gedanken im Kriege," in his *Schriften zur Politik* (Frankfurt, 1970), 7–23, here 8–9. My translation.

With that last phrase, Mann joined the chorus of enthusiasm with which so many German academics and intellectuals accompanied the First World War. As moralists, though of course not as politicians, he said, we artists had come to abhor the peacetime environment in which we had found ourselves, which "stank of the decay products of civilization." Thus, our hearts rejoiced at the outbreak of war, which meant "purification" and the hope of liberation from "the internal hatreds that the comforts of peace had allowed to become poisonous."<sup>8</sup>

The German literature of the "cultural war," to which Mann thus contributed, was a response to Western European broadsides against German militarism, and Mann was not the only German to respond by identifying with Frederick II during the Seven Years' War. Mann noted that Frederick, too, had faced a Europe "united in hatred"; the difference between the Prussian soldier-king and the *philosophe* Voltaire seemed an embodiment of the antithesis between culture and civilization. Mann rebelled at the thought that the West proposed to *force* Germany to convert from militarism to democracy and civilization.

True, the Germans are far less enamored than their Western neighbors of the word "civilization." ... They have always preferred the word and concept of "culture," ... because it has a purely human content [rather than] ... a political connotation.... The German soul is too deep to take civilization to be a high ideal, let alone the ultimate one.... [This makes Germany appear] strange, repellent, and wild to the people of other, more shallow nations. [This is] its "militarism," its conservative commitment to customary norms, its soldierly morality—an element of the demonic and heroic.<sup>9</sup>

That, in sum, is where Mann stood in 1914, together with the vast majority of university-educated Germans and obviously very far from the views he expressed in 1945!

The transformation of his thought that followed upon the publication of *Reflections* in 1918, however, was both thorough and rapid—rapid enough to suggest that his wartime outburst may have functioned as a catharsis. By 1922, in any case, he was ready to defend the young Weimar Republic before an audience that included right-wing students prepared audibly to signal their recurrent

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 9–12.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 12–14, 20–21, and esp. 15–16, 23.

disapproval. Mann portrayed himself as a "conservative," a "burgher" trying to guide the new regime by filling its institutional forms with a stabilizing weight of ideas. But he also bluntly warned against traditionally heroic views of a war that had become a massive mechanical slaughter. Appalled at the political murder of the republican statesman Walter Rathenau, moreover, Mann lashed out against the fatal drift from romanticism to obscurantist reaction, "sentimental brutality," and outright "terror." The Republic was not just an accident or a by-product of defeat, he insisted, but an inner reality and something utterly inescapable. Well before 1914, he argued, the old monarchical regime had simply lost touch with the nation, which thus ultimately had to assume responsibility for its own fate. Perhaps the new state would in fact prove more hospitable than its discredited predecessor to German art and thought.<sup>10</sup>

To ground his new political stance, Mann then offered parallel interpretations of Walt Whitman, the American poet of democracy, and Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenberg), the arch-romantic German legitimist, who had nevertheless occasionally evoked the philosophical ideals of a "republic" and European confederation. What Whitman and Novalis shared, Mann argued, was an underlying erotic mysticism, "sympathy with the organic." Not only in Novalis but also in Whitman, this source of depth-psychological energy could express itself as a dream of death or as a sense of the affinity between eros and dissolution. But it could also nourish a commitment, at least in Whitman, to an "erotic, all-embracing democratism," a vision of humanity that recalled the youth of Greece.<sup>11</sup>

If you like, all poetry is disease, since all is profoundly, inseparably, incurably bound up with ideas of beauty and death.... Interest in death and disease, in the pathological, in decay, is only one form of expression for interest in life.... He who is interested in organic life is particularly interested in death; it might be a good subject for a novel concerned with the education of the human being [*Bildungsroman*] to show that the experience of death is in the last analysis an experience of life; that it leads to the human.

---

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Mann, "The German Republic," in Mann, *Order of the Day: Political Essays and Speeches of Two Decades*, trans. H. T. Lowe-Porter (New York, 1942), 3–45, esp. 10–13, 14, 16–17 for this paragraph.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 25–29, 39–42.

... Humanity. It is the mean between aesthetic isolation and undignified levelling of the individual to the general; between mysticism and ethics; between inwardness and the State; between a death-bound negation of ethical and civic values and a purely ethical philistine rationalism; it is truly our German mean, the Beautiful and Human, of which our finest spirits have dreamed. We are honouring its explicit, legal form ... when we yield our still stiff and unaccustomed tongues to utter the cry: "Long live the Republic!"<sup>12</sup>

The *Bildungsroman* referred to in this passage was, of course, *The Magic Mountain* (1924), Mann's most unashamedly didactic novel. It certainly explored the two variants of the "sympathy for the organic," but it also frankly recommended life and, in some sense, even enlightenment against the demonic and the penchant for death. And yet Mann could not come to rest in the middle ground he had reached by the early 1920s. For the advance of "sentimental brutality" and then "terror" in his homeland ultimately forced him not only into exile, but also into an increasingly practical political stance. Defending the "dignity of man" and the common foundations of European culture against fascist barbarism, he spoke out ever more plainly against appeasement, but for moderate socialism, the popular front, and Roosevelt's welfare state.<sup>13</sup> That is how he became the critic of German inwardness who lectured not far from here in 1945.

If I have thus recalled Thomas Mann's evolution between 1914 and 1945, I have done so partly because it seems to me a truly admirable exercise in self-criticism, a persistent effort to clarify, and thus to transcend, the inherited assumptions of a cultural world. At the same time, Mann's path exemplifies a broader intellectual transformation that has profoundly altered the relationship between culture and politics in twentieth-century Germany. To explain what I mean, however, I must move away from the traditional history of ideas, from *Geistesgeschichte*, which consistently served as the medium of Mann's interactions with his tradition. I must shift the focus instead to the social history of knowledge, not in order to dismiss Mann's thought or to reduce it to a mere reflex, but to make it

---

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 43–44, 45.

<sup>13</sup> The two most interesting and important political addresses are "Deutsche Ansprache: Ein Appell an die Vernunft" (1930), and "Vom kommenden Sieg der Demokratie" (1937), in Mann, *Schriften zur Politik*, 74–93, 106–35.

more understandable in its wider context. In short, I must ask you to tolerate a quick summary of an argument I initially advanced during the late 1960s in a book on *The Decline of the German Mandarins*.<sup>14</sup>

Because educational modernization came relatively early and industrialization came relatively late in Germany, an educated upper middle class of civil servants, Protestant pastors, lawyers, doctors, secondary teachers, and university professors achieved a particularly prominent position in nineteenth-century German society. The "mandarins," members of the university-educated or "academic" professions, made up an educated stratum (*Bildungsschicht*) that was more a status elite than an economic class in Max Weber's terms. The social prestige, style of life, and self-image of the educated were based more on their learning than on their aristocratic birth on the one hand, or wealth and economic power on the other. Their close ties to the monarchical civil service gave them a degree of political influence, at least during a transitional period in German history, and they claimed a broader cultural leadership as intellectual notables as well. Institutionally, it was the revitalization of the German universities during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that secured their position, together with the early emergence of a certified corps of university-educated secondary teachers and of a highly developed scale of educational qualifications and entitlements. The preeminent place of the German university professors and the outstanding achievements of German university scholarship during the nineteenth century were built on these social foundations. The German academics were so-called mandarin intellectuals, partly because they were the most prominent representatives of the mandarin elite as a whole. But they also controlled the standards of access to that elite, and they were its natural spokesmen. They formulated and expressed its political and cultural aspirations, its ideology.

---

<sup>14</sup> *The Decline of the German Mandarins: The German Academic Community, 1890–1933*, has been reissued (with a new preface) by the University Press of New England (Hanover, N.H., 1990), but the summations that follow are taken from my *Fields of Knowledge: French Academic Culture in Comparative Perspective* (New York, 1992), 1–3, 7–8, 202–204.

The central element in "mandarin ideology" was the immensely influential notion of cultivation (*Bildung*), the vision of learning as personal self-fulfillment through interpretive interaction with venerated texts. The ideal of cultivation in turn shaped the German meaning of culture, along with the associated contrast between inward culture and external civilization. The essentially interpretive model of *Bildung* inspired the dominant hermeneutic tradition in German philological and historical scholarship, as well as the German conception of the *Geisteswissenschaften*, the disciplines devoted to the objectification of mind. The commitment to *Bildung* also fostered a profound distrust of instrumental or utilitarian forms of knowledge, which in turn colored the German tradition of academic freedom. The objective of *Bildung* implied personal and evaluative insight (*Weltanschauung*) rather than manipulative intervention in nature or social processes. At a more immediately political level, the mandarin ideals of the legal and cultural states (*Rechtsstaat*, *Kulturstaat*) eventually gave rise to a revulsion against modern interest-based politics: the typical form of the unpolitical stance.

Since the late nineteenth century, the social position and cultural leadership of the German mandarin intellectuals came under pressure from changes within the educational system as well as in the larger environment. Industrialization, when it came, proceeded very swiftly. It was accompanied by an unusually high degree of industrial concentration on the one hand, and by the rapid advance of working-class organization on the other. The growing power of money and that of "the masses" confronted each other in an undisguised conflict of material interests. The high capitalist class society made traditional status conventions appear increasingly irrelevant, even as technical civilization threatened to overwhelm the inherited norms of humanist culture. In secondary and higher education, substantial increases in enrollment and the rise of "realistic" or technical studies raised the specters of "massification" and "utilitarianism," while the seemingly inexorable advance of disciplinary specialization threatened to sever the tie between scholarship or science (*Wissenschaft*) and *Weltanschauung* in the idealist philosophy of *Bildung*. In response to these converging pressures, a creative and partly critical minority of academic modernists attempted to translate vital elements of the mandarin

heritage in ways that might ensure their continued relevance. But the large majority of orthodox mandarin intellectuals gravitated toward a more exclusively defensive position that ultimately took on escapist and purely irrational dimensions under the impact of defeat, revolution, and inflation during the Weimar period.

Before 1918, most German academics liked to think—against strong evidence to the contrary—that the bureaucratic monarchy could somehow rise above class conflict and reverse the disaffection of the masses by pursuing a paternalistic program of social policy. Economic individualism and unrestrained capitalism found few supporters in the German academic community; the mandarin intellectuals were not "bourgeois thinkers" in that sense of the term. Yet many of them identified with the conservative and nationalist forces in Wilhelmine politics, distrusted potentially democratic alternatives, and directed their deepest hostility against working-class Social Democracy. During the Weimar period, the orthodox majority of German university professors supported the "national" opposition to the new regime. Unable to perceive democratic liberalism as a genuine political principle and unwilling seriously to address the distributive questions that strained the Republic's parliamentary system, they became addicted to moralistic attacks upon the "party state." They preached the primacy of the national community over its parts, or the need for an "idealistic" alternative to economic class conflict; some dreamed of an intellectual revolution that would restore the empire of "mind" in public affairs. And, of course, such "apolitical" or idealistic prophecies had very material political consequences.

In both the Wilhelmine and Weimar periods, to be sure, a substantial minority of German university faculty took less one-sided positions on the political issues of their time. They were more critical than their colleagues of the Wilhelmine political and social system, and they partly or wholly resisted the annexationist hysteria that infected the German academic community during the First World War. After 1918, they supported the genuinely republican parties. In this they were guided less by a genuine enthusiasm for democracy than by a sense of realism and the hope that the Republic might be encouraged to pursue moderate policies. Among the members of this relatively progressive minority, some were determined *cultural* individualists and therefore "liberals" in some sense of that term; others more closely resembled the type of the enlight-



ened or reformist "conservative"; only a handful directed truly radical criticisms at the political assumptions prevailing among their colleagues. From the near-orthodox reformism of Friedrich Meinecke and the more determined "modernism" of Georg Simmel, Ernst Troeltsch, and the brothers Max and Alfred Weber, the political scale extended to the "radical modernism" of the early Karl Mannheim and the leftist Hegelianism of the Frankfurt School. Varying degrees of heterodoxy were not only individual responses to unusual or distancing experiences of all kinds, from contacts outside the academic world to an encounter with anti-Semitism; they were also immediate consequences of intellectual crisis and incongruity, especially for the most perceptive and intellectually rigorous participants in the debates that took place.

Indeed, the most important difference between the two main groups of mandarin intellectuals was not political at all; it had to do, rather, with their divergent relationships to their cultural tradition. The modernists shared many of the assumptions of the orthodox majority. Yet they did not merely repeat these common orientations; they described and analyzed them from a certain critical distance. They made it their overall project to free the German intellectual heritage from outdated and indefensible accretions, while reinterpreting or translating its most vital elements for a new environment and a broader audience. They accordingly took a selective and *active* stance toward a belief system that their orthodox colleagues had merely perpetuated in a passive way. The real difference between the orthodox, the modernists, and the radical modernists, in other words, lay not on a political scale from right to left, but on a continuum from the uncritical reproduction to the self-conscious mastery of an intellectual tradition.

The socio-historical analysis that I briefly sketched was initially developed from a close reading of a massive sample of speeches and other writings by German academic humanists and social scientists who were active between 1890 and 1933; it was in no way designed to provide a context for an appreciation of any of Thomas Mann's works. Indeed, it was not intended to chart the whole spectrum of German intellectual life even in the period it addressed. As a strictly empirical study of German academic culture, it inevitably left out of account not only the great non-academic writers, but also the whole world of the artistic and literary avant-garde, along with such journals of the intellectual left and right as *Die Weltbühne* on the

one hand, and *Die Tat* on the other. Nevertheless, the patterns of thought I found in the sources I considered certainly prevailed among educated Germans even outside the universities. For, to a significant degree, the German cultural world of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was still dominated by the universities and the concerns of an educated elite in decline. Free-lance or unaffiliated writers were generally less influential in Germany than in France throughout much of this period, as I have tried to demonstrate in some recent work.

My main point is that the Thomas Mann of the *Reflections of an Unpolitical Man* was, in fact, a brilliant exponent of what I have called mandarin orthodoxy, while the Thomas Mann of *The Magic Mountain* and *Doktor Faustus*, the Thomas Mann who lectured nearby in 1945, perfectly exemplified the modernist project I have tried to describe. To find a more vivid defense of that project, and an even more specifically *political* one, one would have to turn to Max Weber's polemic from 1918 in behalf of democratic parliamentarianism, which was quite deliberately directed against the views then dominant among his colleagues.<sup>15</sup> The German university faculty of today may not have the status or the influence that their grandfathers had. But in both the academic and the wider civic culture of present-day Germany, it is the decided liberalism of Max Weber and Mann's moving self-transformation that have carried the day.

---

<sup>15</sup> Max Weber, "Parlament und Regierung im neugeordneten Deutschland," in *Gesammelte politische Schriften*, 3rd rev. ed., ed. Johannes Winckelmann (Tübingen, 1971), 306–443.

## Culture, Politics, and the Censor

*Claudia Koonz*

Peter Jelavich and Fritz Ringer approach, from complementary directions, the relationship between culture and politics. On this date, May 8, the anniversary of the fall of the Third Reich, it is sobering to think about the censor's political invasion of culture and inspiring to remember one writer's entry into self-conscious political thinking. Jelavich depicts the forms of censorship that determined the political acceptability of cultural productions under five regimes. In examining Thomas Mann's *Auseinandersetzungen* with his own political values, Ringer highlights the process by which Mann came to understand that cultural values could not be separated from political events. In overcoming his own *Innerlichkeit*, Mann confronted what he saw as a long-standing tendency for German intellectuals to distrust politics. Even though both papers transcend the opposition between politics and culture, they refer to dualities, such as free versus censored, political versus nonpolitical, community versus individual, Enlightenment versus Romanticism, and traditional versus modernist. In my comment, I would like to explore some of the ambiguities of these binary concepts.

In addition to official censorship, cultural authority itself can act as a repressive force without any explicit intervention from state officials. We might imagine, for example, eager students of mandarin professors in pre-1914 Austria or Germany, perhaps avid readers of Thomas Mann, who could well have joined the outraged protest against Gustav Klimt's painting *Philosophy*, which was commissioned by the Department of Education and exhibited at the Vienna Secession of 1900. They might also have rejoiced when their protests against Oskar Kokoschka's first exhibit in 1900 resulted in his dismissal from the Vienna School of Applied Arts. I think, too, of so many students in my own classes who find Ingeborg Holm and Hans Hansen the ideal couple, while they call Tonio Kröger "weird." It would not be difficult to imagine them rejecting a fellowship application from Lisabeta Ivanovna. Ringer's paper underscores the extraordinary integrity of Thomas Mann's political self-education. The news today of Marlene Dietrich's death reminds us of another great German who refused to cordon off her artistic career from its political setting.

Censorship, as Jelavich reminds us, has also co-existed with liberal, democratic institutions. Although the Weimar years are conventionally regarded as a halcyon period of German culture, one ought also to remember the persistence of limitations on free expression. In 1921 George Grosz and the organizers of the First International Dada Fair in Berlin were charged with insulting the military. Otto Dix was charged with obscenity for his *Girl before a Mirror* in 1922. In 1928 Grosz and his publisher were found guilty of blasphemy in paintings of Christ. Throughout the Weimar era, Paragraph 184–184a of the German Criminal Code of 1871, which outlawed "indecent or obscene writings and illustrations," remained in force. Thus, even during a period that one regards as liberal, the force of censorship continued to operate. In many, and perhaps most cases, the offending artists and writers managed to have their convictions overturned. Nevertheless, the threat of a court trial exerted a "chilling effect" on them.

It would be inaccurate, furthermore, to think of the censors themselves as bigoted and dour civil servants. Over the decades, legions of patriotic, well-intentioned censors acted in the public interest. One hallmark of modernity is the belief in an unfettered circulation of ideas. For centuries, religious and political leaders have felt responsible for regulating the basic commodities of public life: bread and ideas. In commemorating the French Revolution, the historian Roger Chartier compared the governmental regulation of both. In the physiocratic thinking of the *ancien régime*, food prices had to be regulated and books carefully censored in order to guarantee a balanced physical and intellectual life.

As I read about the tradition of political interference with culture, I pictured the encounter that Robert Darnton described vividly in his *Berlin Journal*. In June 1990, at the Sector for Literature of the GDR in the East German Ministry of Culture, Darnton talked about literature with Hans-Jürgen Wesener and Christina Horn. Both enthusiastically described their former occupation. Certainly, the title "censors" did not apply to them. Rather, they saw themselves as facilitators eager to help authors who wished to have their books published. The constitution of the GDR outlawed censorship of any kind. More importantly, these East Germans had grown up believing in humane values. In the West, they observed, the profit motive selected what material people read; but in the East, ideals determined which books were published.

Wesener and Horn mastered the system of literary encouragement and felt proud of their ability to manipulate their superiors. Darnton observed, "By mixing socialist doctrine with the Prussian bureaucracy, the East Germans had created a perfect system for stifling literature while at the same time persuading themselves that they were stimulating it."<sup>1</sup>

While no governmental censorship currently interferes with artistic freedom in the Federal Republic, some forms of subtle watchfulness have developed. For several decades, a set of informal taboos on images related to the Holocaust has confronted artists and writers. Frank Trommler's review of Anselm Kiefer's paintings addresses the prohibition of the use of icons of the Holocaust in Germany.<sup>2</sup> Especially after Kiefer's works began to sell at high prices on the American art market, critics complained about the misuse of a brutal event. When the film *Europa, Europa* portrayed a young Jewish man's remarkable struggle to save his life under Nazism, many German critics faulted it for presenting a negative picture of a Jewish victim. This version of "political correctness" seems to have already generated a backlash, as people express their racial bigotry with a new openness.

As Jelavich noted, censorship causes a reverse effect by calling attention to the offending idea or image. Under Wilhelm II, censors perpetually debated whether to publicize dissident ideas. Of course, *lèse-majesté* resulted in instant silencing. But what of satire—the novel *Caligula*, for example? To prohibit its portrait of a vicious and insane emperor (modeled after the Kaiser) would have been to admit an unflattering affinity. To publish it would have spread mockery of the monarch. Literary control in the German Democratic Republic faced an additional problem, because the authors of forbidden texts found publishers in the Federal Republic. With the end of officially sanctioned culture in the former GDR, the government approved such art as Fritz Cremer's sculptures and the novels of Willi Bredel and Hans Marchwitza. Will Western art museums continue to display the art they purchased from artists who had been officially sanctioned by the GDR? Semi-dissidents, like Christa Wolf, also

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert Darnton, *Berlin Journal 1989–1990* (New York, 1991), 217.

<sup>2</sup> Frank Trommler, "Germany's Past as Artifact," *Journal of Modern History* 61 (December 1989), 724–35.

suffer new confrontations today. Censorship has a far wider impact than merely that of repression.

Furthermore, Jelavich's discussion of the *Entartete Kunst* exhibits presents an entirely new phenomenon: attacks on artists being used as tools for political mobilization. Through racist art theorists like Paul Schultze-Naumburg, Nazi bureaucrats set out to purge the art that Germans would be allowed to see. But they did more. Rather than hiding "dangerous" works of art, they displayed them, which exposed the artists as well as the subjects of the pieces to ridicule. Art works that had been merely controversial during the Weimar Republic became political in the Third Reich. Perhaps because I live in Jesse Helms' home state, I would like to draw a parallel to this phenomenon. In 1989, Andreas Serrano's photograph *Piss Christ* was exhibited in North Carolina. No incident resulted. Few people had even heard about the show. Soon afterward, Rev. Donald Wildmon and the American Family Association protested against the funding that Serrano had received from the National Endowment for the Arts. Almost at once, Senators Alphonse D'Amato and Jesse Helms denounced this "blasphemy" on the Senate floor. Similarly, in 1989, Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs were exhibited in Berkeley, California, without incident. Then these works appeared in an exhibit in Washington, D.C., and politicians denounced them as disgusting. We have seen culture used to appeal to patriotism and to stir up hatred. Thomas Mann himself contributed to the upsurge of wartime fever in World War I. But the use of "degenerate" culture as a focus for populist outrage was new in Nazi Germany, and it has not since disappeared.

These two papers on censorship and one man's escape from the politically circumscribed world created by National Socialistic repression remind us of the perpetual watchfulness required to maintain basic freedoms. Thomas Mann peopled his novels with polarized characters: the exotic, creative person with a foreign air and the sensible, sterile *Bürger* from solid Northern stock. He called on his reader to move beyond both and to integrate the finest traditions of both extremes—warning us that to succumb meant spiritual (or, in the case of *Mario and the Magician*, physical) death. In 1933 his commitment led him to leave his homeland. And, in memory of Marlene Dietrich, let me commemorate as well this great artist's confrontation with political and cultural opposites. In her characters, Dietrich integrated a strident toughness with a deeply seductive

femininity. The tension between these poles, like the conflicts within so many of Mann's characters, created a magic sphere that pulled audiences out of their conventional lives. An artist's ability to pull us into new spaces filled with novel possibilities provides us with one prerequisite for critically evaluating the cultural and political environment framed by official and informal censorship. It is fitting today, at the German Historical Institute in Washington, D.C., to pay homage to both Thomas Mann and Marlene Dietrich: two artists who were citizens of the world and who found a second home in the United States.





## Rethinking Modernity in Germany

*Frank Trommler*

In my comments on culture and politics in Germany, I am pleased to reflect on Peter Jelavich's and Fritz Ringer's insightful presentations, since both speakers dispel lingering doubts about the political importance of the role of culture. This is all the more helpful because today's date, May 8, has carried a distinct political stigma for Germans since 1945. Talking about literature on this day, and especially about Thomas Mann, is, as both colleagues eloquently document, not an exercise in escapism from the realities of German politics. To the contrary, it leads right into these realities. Thomas Mann's plea for political understanding of literature in 1945 was meant as a summary of his development as a German writer in the twentieth century.

Tracing the interference of governments in theater, literature, and the arts as a way of determining the relationship of politics and culture is, of course, not a new endeavor. By analyzing the censorship practices of different German regimes since the *Kaiserreich*, however, Jelavich illuminates some of the continuities of German political culture, which make Thomas Mann's embrace of politics more understandable. As Jelavich shows, such interference is a two-way street: by reducing aesthetic practices to a political phenomenon, it also elevates them, often providing a more powerful appeal to the public than writers and artists could have generated by themselves. This rings true again with the events of 1989, when a great number of East German writers lost their most watchful and resourceful reader, the SED regime. Since then they have been left with the vicissitudes of the capitalist market.

In general, German writers and artists can hardly be considered adherents of the capitalist market system. Even Thomas Mann's later enthusiasm about the human aspects of Western democracy did not translate into an endorsement of the accompanying market rules. Fritz Ringer is correct in placing Mann side by side with the caste of the German university professors, the "mandarins," whose decline from their eminent position in the second half of the nineteenth century he has analyzed with great acumen. As a man of many letters, Mann always shared the sense of entitlement that gave the representatives of *Geist* and *Wissenschaft* in Germany a much envied

place above the materialistic pursuits of industrial production and everyday profit-making. Ringer's reading of Mann's conversion from the "mandarin orthodoxy," the antidemocratic, antisocialist (and anti-social) stance, to that of the "modernist Mandarin" who supported the Weimar Republic, is illuminating not only as a comment on Mann's feelings of political accomplishment but also as a confirmation of Ringer's concept of the "mandarins." According to Ringer, Thomas Mann succeeded where most German academics failed: in the embrace of Western democracy. In Ringer's words: "Mann's path exemplifies a broader intellectual transformation that has profoundly altered the relationship between culture and politics in twentieth-century Germany."

Welcoming Thomas Mann, the once anti-Western German conservative, in the camp of American-style democracy has been a satisfying inclination of American scholars. Ringer joins them with his agenda of contrasting Mann's achievement with the decline and eventual failure of the "orthodox" mandarins. In this view, Mann confirmed the concept of Western democracy as the only way to modernity from the entrapments of German authoritarianism and academicism. Following Ringer, who attaches the term "modernist" to such democratic-minded academics as Friedrich Meinecke, one can hardly escape the conclusion that Thomas Mann must have opened the door for those German writers and intellectuals, especially of the younger generation, who, after 1945, looked for models in their struggle to build a modern democratic culture.

Yet, a closer look at the literary beginnings after World War II and at the emergence of Heinrich Böll, Siegfried Lenz, Günter Grass, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, and other well known figures does not confirm this conclusion. As a matter of fact, in the pursuit of a democratic opposition that characterized the public image of the literary Group 47 between 1947 and 1967, Thomas Mann plays no role. Instead, one notices among the postwar authors a pattern of distancing from the master which differed greatly from the accusations against Mann on the part of older authors such as Frank Thiess and Walter von Molo. The younger authors expressed their respect for exiled writers but insisted that they had to articulate their very own experience of Nazism and war. They insisted on a point zero of their literary practice.

A rather different conclusion presents itself that Thomas Mann's breakthrough to Western democracy, as articulated in his

critique of the Germans in 1945, was more the closure of an intellectual development than the departure for a new one. Take, in contrast, the inconspicuous, often bland prose style with which Böll, who later was also honored with the Nobel prize, assumed the moral conscience of a Germany that had to come to terms with its heinous crimes of the Nazi period, keeping alive the memory of war, persecution, and guilt. Take, for example, Böll's unmagisterial way of standing up against the reemergence of Nazi tendencies and later, in the 1970s, his pleas for fairness in the years of terrorism. Böll's insistence on a new beginning meant that the old paradigm of *Geist* versus *Macht* had lost its cathartic value for his and his generation's experience. While one might regret the break in the continuity from Thomas and Heinrich Mann, one must recognize that with the loss of the writer's pretention to speak as a *praeceptor nationis*, the new oppositional self-assertion of the younger authors became itself a source of democracy in the Federal Republic. When Frank Schirrmacher, in his article in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* of October 2, 1990, criticized the fact that such authors as Böll, Grass, and Walser became the classics of the Federal Republic and suggested to deposit them, once and for all, into the annals of that state, he clearly confirmed their success in creating a new relationship of German writers to state and society. They did not take over the exiles' concept of *Geist* fighting barbarism, for this venture represented the conclusion of a particular entanglement of intellectuals who went through the first war and the first republic, which were both lost. Thomas Mann's satisfaction of finally having gotten it right could not have been transferred to the younger generation.

Having stated this with a critical eye toward Ringer's portrayal of Thomas Mann as the catalyst of a new relationship between culture and politics in twentieth-century Germany, I hasten to add that Ringer himself, in his *The Decline of the German Mandarins*, has provided the due to Mann's failure to do so. By placing Mann side by side with the German academics, Ringer extends their characteristics to the author of *The Magic Mountain*. What are those characteristics? Ringer, in his most innovative and influential contribution to the sociology of knowledge, has derived the mandarins' thinking from their role in society. Their basic concerns were "attitudes, not theories; and they manifested themselves in a

characteristic set of mental habits and semantic references."<sup>1</sup> As a precursor of Pierre Bourdieu, the French sociologist, Ringer has been successful in tracing the mandarins' decline to their inability to go beyond their habitus of academic self-importance and high-mindedness. Thomas Mann is no exception to the fact that this habitus has hardly changed in the transition from authoritarian to democratic "mandarindom." In his self-stylization as the *praeceptor Germaniae*, he satisfied the need for an incarnation of the German *Geist* in exile, yet the same stylization prevented him from becoming a model for the younger generation in their plight to articulate a new beginning. The same is true of Friedrich Meinecke, who had stayed in Germany and, in his treatise of 1946, *Die deutsche Katastrophe*, propagated the recapturing of a *geistige Haltung* through the establishment of Goethe communities as a way of coming to terms with the German defeat.

It is this kind of self-involved "mandarindom" that I see reflected in Ringer's own conclusion when he attributes a profound alteration of the "relationship between culture and politics in twentieth-century Germany" to mandarins such as Thomas Mann. I have no qualms about Mann's contribution to the sustenance of a better, more spiritual Germany in America. But I am suspicious when the term "modernist" is used to define German academics according to their half-hearted acceptance of Western democracy. To apply the term "modernist" to a political understanding with which academics had caught up as a consequence of the German defeat in 1918 reflects certain American concepts of modernity, but it is otherwise quite reductionist. The proclaimed cultural alterations remain firmly within the confines of intellectual pursuits. Not surprisingly, the perception of modernity and modernization from within these confines tended to dwell on the threats to the high status of *Geist* and *Kultur*, of which the mandarins claimed to be the national guardians. Modernity, seen through its "mental habits and semantic references," became synonymous with mass culture, the fading of spiritual authenticity, and the loss of interpretive entitlement.

This leads to my central question: If Germans in the twentieth century have made great contributions to the modernist culture that

---

<sup>1</sup> Fritz Ringer, *The Decline of the German Mandarins: The German Academic Community, 1890–1933* (Cambridge, Mass., 1969), 119.

has been around for many decades in design, architecture, and behavioral and scientific transformations, why is it that the mandarin view of modernity as expressed by Mann, Meinecke, or Max Weber, with its share of academic reductionism, is still being used as the parameter for a definition of this culture? A thorough reply to this question would, of course, take more than a short comment. Nonetheless, I think it is an important question to ask if one reviews the relationship between politics and culture in twentieth-century Germany at a time when scholars such as Ringer or Bourdieu dismantle the social idiosyncracies of the "homo academicus," sometimes even against their own interests as academics.

To ask such a question is to take a second look at the interpretive entitlement of my own profession and to rethink the fact that modernization did not just mean an ever-increasing rationalization process—an anonymous happening, a *Schicksal*—but rather that it also led to a consciously developed culture of modernity as a transformation of social and mental attitudes vis-à-vis reality. While Max Weber has been invoked for almost every definition of the rationalization process, in the constant reconfirmation of his disillusioned cultural superego he has little to offer for the critical recognition of this transformation, let alone for the exasperating dynamics of the aesthetic and behavioral restructuring of society that took shape mostly outside of the scientific self-encoding of rationality.

The practitioners of the German *Werkbund*, for instance, the forerunners of the Bauhaus, linked the definition of culture to its application within the pragmatic pursuits of modern life, to the reconciliation of aesthetic form and the usefulness of its products. After historicism and *Jugendstil*, after the failed revitalization of German cultural life through elaborately invented historical traditions and the decorative staging of contemporary bourgeois life at the turn of the century, this program meant a rapprochement with materialism, contaminating the traditional idealist privileges of high art and its audience. The projected harmonization of production, product, and consumption was conceived as a step into a new era, not just into a new style. Its centers lay outside of the universities, were connected with industry, craft firms, and state-sponsored institutions, such as craft schools and art academies. Recognizing industrialization as the manifest destiny of the German nation, this modernism was as much a pattern of behavior, the expression of a modern *Haltung*, as it was an aesthetic structuring of political and economic pursuits.

The fact that the increasingly widespread notion of *Sachlichkeit* (matter-of-factness, sobriety, objectivity) was used at least since 1904 in order to expound the characteristics of the reform movement, also attests to its attitudinal dynamics: *Sachlichkeit* primarily as a *Haltung* toward reality that could be learned and expressed and from which new patterns of lifestyle could emerge.

The central contribution of the German reform movement to the development of what has been labeled Modernism or International Style was the break with the nineteenth-century juxtaposition of art and industry. It is characterized by the compromise with which artistic elites reclaimed important segments of society's material life for an aesthetic approach: the compromise with the pragmatics of capitalist production and consumption. While designers, architects, and artists expanded their productive terrain to the extent that one spoke of a reconciliation of art and industrial society through applied arts, craft firms and manufacturing industries, following the pioneering efforts of Peter Behrens at AEG, won new markets inside and outside of Germany, thanks to the innovative aesthetic qualities of their products.

In the reform movement, the formulation of modernity gained its energizing qualities from the correlation of the search for a new *Gestalt* of the self and its *Lebenskultur* above the class struggle with the search for a new *Gestalt* of the nation. As the design of buildings, appliances, machines, and luxury and everyday objects tended to project a national dimension, it was characterized by its rejection not only of the allegories of Wilhelmine idealism, but also of the traditional conception of politics as party and interest politics. In its critique of politics, this agenda cut across national boundaries; Walter Gropius did not have to repeal the formal assumptions of his design when he legitimized the Bauhaus program in the Weimar Republic by its social commitment and international applicability. The notion that the creation of a new society was conditioned upon a reform of culture and behavior found adherents in many countries. John Dewey, Randolph Bourne, and American Progressives have said much about it, Bourne with an explicitly positive reference in 1915 to the German culture of modernity.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Randolph Bourne, "American Use for German Ideals," in *War and the Intellectuals: Essays by Randolph S. Bourne, 1915–1919*, ed. Carl Resek (New York, 1964), 48–52.

Unlike Theodor W Adorno, who used the encounter with the commercialized American culture for a reconfirmation of his belief in the redemptive qualities of European high culture, one should avail oneself of these transnational perspectives which, in the case of American observers, help to focus on the mandarin obsession with the dichotomy of high and low. The answer to my question why the mandarin view still strongly dominates the conceptualization of modernity is closely related to an understanding of this obsession. Threatened by the loss of interpretive entitlement, the obsession to maintain the dichotomy of high and low is an understandable defense against a loss in status. Yet, what makes this defense utterly self-serving at the expense of other participants in the restructuring of society is the juxtaposition of rationality to irrationality as the irrefutable moral anchor of the reflections of modernity. Accordingly, when rationality is declared a myth because instrumental rationality tends to overpower moral safeguards for humanity, it moves into the place of irrationality as the ultimate "low" that is usually associated with "the masses" or manipulated mass culture. At this juncture, a higher rationality is invoked, for which the aesthetic distinction of high art serves as an analogue, be it in Max Weber's concept of charisma reflecting Stefan George's poetic self-projection, or be it Adorno's negative dialectics reflecting the authenticity *ex nihilo* of avant-garde works of art.

Let me stop here in order not to distract from my central question concerning the place of modernity in the shifts between politics and culture in twentieth-century Germany. It should suffice to say that at the end of World War II, when Thomas Mann not only wrote the essay "Germany and the Germans" but also segments of his novel *Doktor Faustus*, his collaboration with Adorno was quite successful. It was a collaboration that confirmed the need for mutual support. While the writer turned to the mandarin in order to conceptualize an aesthetic of absoluteness for his hero, the German composer, Adorno resumed the mandarin practice of regenerating the cultural superego in a reflection of the imminent loss of culture and art. Obviously, in the academy this constellation is still being seen as a point of departure rather than of closure.