

ISAIAH BERLIN LECTURE

## Overestimating Culture: A German Problem

WOLF LEPENIES

*Wissenschaftskolleg, Berlin*

### Bombs on Dresden—and the Rosenkavalier in the skies

ON 13 FEBRUARY 1945 A YOUNG MOTHER with a baby in her arms and her sister holding a small boy by the hand missed the overcrowded train to Dresden. So they had to spend the night in a village nearby. The farm where they found shelter was on elevated ground, and among the images the boy could later recall from his childhood was a stroll in the open on the night that Dresden burned. Quietly but with a definite feeling of triumph, he occasionally spoke of this night—as if there were personal merit in having survived the disaster. When the refugees returned to their quarters, the grownups stayed up for a long time. The boy was put to bed, but the door was open a crack, letting in light. So he could see above him a lampshade of glass fibres that softly clinked back and forth. Could any German artillery or flak have remained to shake the ground and make the lamp move? Sleep came swiftly.

The boy could not have known that, at the same time, his father was only two kilometres away—2,000 metres in the sky above Dresden, to be exact—as one of the few German night fighter pilots who had still scrambled to attack the Allied bomber fleet. Again that night, most of the pilots had rushed from flash to flash and had finally had to land without ever making contact with the enemy. German air defences were having

Read at the Academy 11 April 2002.

*Proceedings of the British Academy*, 121, 235–256. © The British Academy 2003.

increasing difficulties figuring out the courses and destinations of the British and American bomber squadrons. Often the night fighter pilots had to use incidental clues from the ground to guess where they should fly.

When my father took off with his squadron on the evening of 13 February, they initially flew toward Strasbourg in a waiting pattern, circling there to receive destination orders from the ground. The orders, however, did not come. The crew included a pilot, an observer, a gunner, and a radio operator. When the ground spotting station suddenly rebroadcast a radio programme with the waltz sequences from the *Rosenkavalier*, the educated men on board—two crew members had doctorates—thought they knew where they should fly: Vienna. So they headed toward the city that provides the setting for the *Rosenkavalier*, but the longer they flew, the more they doubted that Vienna was really the target of the Allied attack. Then the gunner remembered the city where the *Rosenkavalier* had had its world première on 26 January 1911, and so they turned back toward Dresden to prevent what could no longer be prevented.

Bombs on Dresden and the *Rosenkavalier* in the skies—a disturbing symbol that suggests itself to me for the close connection that war and culture, education and destruction, politics and poetry, and spirit and violence entered into in Germany. I would like to talk about one aspect of this disquieting connection: the traditional overestimation of culture at the expense of politics that has long shaped German history and that has not fully disappeared in the present.

### German culture abroad: victorious in defeat

While the Allies fought Hitler, German thought conquered the West, not least the United States. ‘The new American life-style [became] a Disneyland version of the Weimar Republic for the whole family.’<sup>1</sup> This is a quotation from what the *New York Times* called ‘that rarest of documents, a genuinely profound book’.<sup>2</sup> Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind* is, in my view, not a particularly good diagnosis, but it is a striking symptom of the uneasiness that the massive import of German culture

<sup>1</sup> Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York, 1987), p. 147.

<sup>2</sup> Roger Kimball, ‘The Groves of Ignorance’, *The New York Times Book Review*, 5 April, 1987, p. 7.

caused in the United States. Bloom deplors an invasion that led to a dramatic change in American philosophical thought and to the formation of a new language, one the Americans from now on felt compelled to speak in analysing their own culture. Cab drivers all of a sudden used words like *Gestalt* and Max Weber's terminology invaded everyday life, like the *Charisma Cleaners*, which Bloom, to his horror, found in Chicago.

In the nineteenth century, when authors like John Stuart Mill and Matthew Arnold tried to soften utilitarian thought by propagating what they called the 'culture of the feelings', they turned to German philosophy and poetry—as did the French whenever they tired of their Cartesianism. The same happened in the United States. Nietzsche's rejection of rationalism on rational grounds, Freud's discovery of the unconscious, Max Weber's attempt at disenchanting the world, Heidegger's Hellenism, Thomas Mann's mysteries and sufferings as described in *Death in Venice*—they all joined in a successful attack on the rational project of American culture. Americans thus became utterly dependent on German missionaries for their knowledge of Greece and Rome, Judaism and Christianity. Admiringly, Bloom tells the story of Alexandre Koyré, who was excited when, in 1940 in Chicago, one of his students, unaware that the philosopher was not his contemporary, always spoke in his paper of 'Mr Aristotle'. That was Bloom's American dream: to send Professor Weber back to Heidelberg and Dr Freud back to Vienna, while not only Mr Aristotle, but also Mr Plato and Mr Locke and even Monsieur Rousseau would be granted permanent residence in the United States.

Allan Bloom's teacher at Chicago was an émigré—Leo Strauss. One could argue that *The Closing of the American Mind* is nothing but an updated sequel to *Natural Right and History*, the Walgreen Lectures that Leo Strauss gave in 1949, the year two separate German states were founded. He asked whether the American nation still believed in its original faith, i.e. the self-evidence of the natural and divine foundations of the rights of man. He came to the conclusion that there was no longer any difference between the abandonment of the idea of natural right and adherence to it. The difference between German thought on the one hand and that of Western Europe and the United States on the other had completely vanished. Leo Strauss concluded: 'It would not be the first time that a nation, defeated on the battlefield and, as it were, annihilated as a political being, has deprived its conquerors of the most sublime fruit of victory by imposing on them the yoke of its own thought.'<sup>3</sup> Victorious in

<sup>3</sup> Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago/London, 1971), p. 2.

defeat, German culture had proved its fundamental assumption: it could not only compensate, it could even take its revenge on politics.

### Lessons in diminished particularity

If there is anything like a German ideology, it consists in playing off Romanticism against the Enlightenment, the Middle Ages against the modern world, culture against civilisation, and *Gemeinschaft* against *Gesellschaft*. This 'exceptionalism' was always a point of pride—not least because it was based on cultural aspirations and achievements. The inward realm established by German idealism, the classic literature of Weimar, and the classical and romantic styles in music preceded the founding of the political nation by more than a hundred years. Henceforth, they legitimated any withdrawal of the individual from society into the sphere of culture and private life.

Having reached a similar conclusion in a book some years ago, I was pleased when Hans Magnus Enzensberger quoted it at length in one of his essays. Pleasure turned into perplexity, though, when I realised that he had used my own words to characterise the modern history of—Spain. Thus, I was taught an ironic lesson: German history is not nearly as exceptional as the Germans are inclined to believe. In recent decades, this lesson in diminished particularity has been convincingly taught in attempts to show the persistence of the *ancien régime* in all of modern Europe; in the examination of the interconnectedness of Europe's societies and their politics in the decade after the First World War; in the reconstruction of a cycle of German national doctrines whose ideological transitions, rather than ideological persistence, are seen as characteristic; and in the assurance that cultural pessimism was not a German specialty, but rather a feature of bourgeois societies in general.<sup>4</sup>

These attempts to counteract 'the chronic overstatement of the unfolding and ultimate triumph of modernity',<sup>5</sup> did much to reinsert Germany's peculiar past into a broader context of European history. At the same time, they reflected a climate of opinion that enticed revisionist historians to insist on the imitative character of National Socialism,

<sup>4</sup> I am alluding to publications by Arno Mayer, Charles Maier, Harold James, Jim Sheehan, John Breuilly, David Blackbourn, and Geoff Eley.

<sup>5</sup> Arno J. Mayer, *The Persistence of the Old Regime. Europe to the Great War* (New York, 1981), p. 5.

whose ideology, they claimed, was modelled on the earlier fascisms of Latin Europe, and whose atrocities mirrored the earlier crimes of Stalinism. Using chronology not only as an explanation but, equally falsely, also as an excuse, German particularity was thus seen as almost a European normality. The holocaust was reduced to little more than a dreadful accident on a road where careless and ideology-intoxicated driving was not the exception but the rule. The search for embeddedness led to understanding and understanding eventually led to forgiveness and to oblivion: *Tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner*.

To understand German history and its peculiarities has been a challenge not only for professional historians, but for philosophers as well. Moreover, it seemed as if only philosophy could come up with an explanation for historical developments that, at first glance, eluded historical understanding. That was the argument in John Dewey's *German Philosophy and Politics* as well as in George Santayana's *Egotism in German Philosophy*, which were published in 1915 and 1916, respectively. Dewey singled out Kant's doctrine of the two realms—'one outer, physical and necessary, the other inner, ideal and free . . . primacy always [lying] with the inner'<sup>6</sup>—as the most important element for understanding German national life; and George Santayana did the same when he described transcendental philosophy as its preferred 'method of looking in one's own breast'—adding, somewhat caustically, 'that the German breast was no longer that anatomical region which Locke had intended to probe, but a purely metaphysical point of departure. . . .'<sup>7</sup> For Santayana, the perversity of German thought consisted in glorifying an egotism that other nations regarded as an impediment to be got rid of as quickly as possible. But Dewey, who was not less critical, also admired the pervasiveness of the transcendental method, which had made Germany the only country in the world where even cavalry generals employed philosophy to bring home practical lessons. The most striking parallel between Dewey and Santayana, however, is that, at the beginning of and during the Second World War, both republished books they had written in the middle of the First World War and now felt entitled to reprint without any alteration. Apparently, Germany and German Culture had not changed at all.

<sup>6</sup> John Dewey, *German Philosophy and Politics* (Freeport, NY, 1942), p. 69.

<sup>7</sup> George Santayana, *Egotism in German Philosophy* (New York, 1940), p. 21.

### The typical German

Publishing his memoirs, with the title *The German Catastrophe* in 1946, the historian Friedrich Meinecke saw only one way to reactivate the nation's spiritual life and moral decency: small Goethe societies must be established in all German cities and towns. 'Meeting in churches whenever possible, members of these cultural communities were to give public readings of the German classics, combined with recitals of the best German music.'<sup>8</sup> Not only Germans, however, saw inwardness as their country's political predicament and at the same time its cultural ideal. Foreign authors asserted this as well—and possibly even more than the Germans did. When in 1942 and 1943 the London Institute of Sociology organised a series of lectures on *The German Mind and Outlook*, the result was quite flattering for the nation with which Britain found itself at war for the second time in a generation. The debates were chaired by G. P. Gooch, who proudly identified himself not only as the President of the Institute of Sociology, but also of the English Goethe Society. The Institute's secretary summed them up: 'Whatever may be the coming shape of German society, it is impossible to envisage a condition that shall be stable, pacific and humane, unless it embodies the master ideas of Goethe: faith in individual development, sympathy and unity with nature, vision and imagination unceasingly transforming the mundane and commonplace into symbol, drama, and poetry.'<sup>9</sup> This meant that the failure of German politics must be repaired at home—and that, in fact, it could be repaired by drama and by poetry. The better Germany, the cultural nation, would survive the war unharmed.

Debates like those of the London Institute of Sociology, which ended in a kind of Goethe epiphany, still matter today in the land of poets and thinkers. In 1949 the Allensbach Institut, the German equivalent of the Gallup Institute, asked a representative sample of Germans about their knowledge of and relationship to Goethe. This was the year when the Federal Republic was founded, as the Institute proudly recalls. Generously funded by the largest German TV station, the Goethe poll was repeated in 1999, when the poet's two-hundred and fiftieth anniversary was cele-

<sup>8</sup> Fritz Ringer, *The Decline of the German Mandarins. The German Academic Community, 1890–1933* (Hanover and London, 1969), p. 443. In the German original, Meinecke speaks of 'Goethegemeinden'. Cf. Friedrich Meinecke, *Die deutsche Katastrophe. Betrachtungen und Erinnerungen*, 4th imp. (Wiesbaden, 1949), p. 174.

<sup>9</sup> Alexander Farquharson, 'Summary', in *The German Mind and Outlook*, ed. G. P. Gooch et al. (London, 1945), p. 218.

brated with much pomp and circumstance.<sup>10</sup> Mentioned abroad, these polls sound rather funny—at home they were and are still taken seriously indeed. In 1949, for instance, Germans were asked whether, after 1945, they had had ‘a major spiritual experience’. Only a disappointing 46 per cent answered ‘Yes’—a result the pollsters judged so dismal that it had to be compensated by the answer of a publisher, who claimed he had a major spiritual experience each day. Somewhat mischievously, he added: ‘This is a stupid question indeed. I would go so far as to say that any German who had not had a major spiritual experience since 1945 had better hang himself.’

The Goethe polls make it possible to compare the Germans of 1949 with those of today and to compare East and West almost ten years after unification. Asked, for instance, whether they considered Goethe a typical German, 47 per cent in the East, but only 31 per cent in the West answered in the affirmative. Do you know at least one Goethe poem by heart? Only 10 per cent in the West, but 25 per cent in the East do. East Germans seem to feel closer to Goethe and his legacy than West Germans do. The German press found much food for thought in the fact that in 1949 the majority of Germans considered Faust the most important character in Goethe’s drama, whereas fifty years later Mephistopheles had sneaked into first place—if only in the West. In the East, Faust still played the leading role.

The most intriguing aspect of the Goethe polls, however, does not lie in the answers they yielded, but in the importance both the interviewers and the public attributed to these surveys. The people’s image of Goethe was seen as a litmus test for the state of the nation. Two results were especially reassuring. First, Goethe’s popularity had not dramatically diminished since 1949. Second, Goethe was even more popular in the East than in the West. This meant that the cultural nation was alive and well. It also meant that German unification had turned out to be an asset, not a liability, in the attempt to preserve the best that Germany has to offer to itself and to the world: culture. The polls also showed some disturbing results: for instance, why do only 27 per cent of those Germans who regard themselves as moderately leftist see in Goethe the typical German, whereas 48 per cent of the political right do? This question has remained unanswered, because unasked.

<sup>10</sup> Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach, *Demoskopie und Kulturgeschichte*. Eine Goethe-Umfrage für das Nachtprogramm des NWDR 1949 wird 1999 für das ZDF-Nachtstudio wiederholt, Allensbach/Bodensee 1999.

### A strange indifference to politics

Whenever George Santayana taught German metaphysics at Harvard, he felt ‘something sinister at work, something at once hollow and aggressive’<sup>11</sup>—a statement of inspired vagueness sharpened, twenty-five years later, by John Dewey, who spoke of the ‘strains of continuity connecting the creed of Hitler with the classic philosophic tradition of Germany’.<sup>12</sup> Such claims of continuity which often were stretched to claims of causality have not been very convincing—regardless of whether individuals like Luther, Kant, Schelling and Nietzsche or intellectual movements like Idealism or Romanticism were seen as the beginning of a road that inevitably, with Hitler, turned out to be a dead end.

The question how Germany could become a modern economy without fostering modern social values and political institutions is generally answered by referring to the preponderance of the state, which gave from above what, in other countries, the bourgeoisie had to fight for and acquire through its own efforts. Modern Germany, it has been argued, ‘thought primarily in terms of the might and majesty of the state, modern England primarily in terms of the rights and liberties of the citizen’.<sup>13</sup> This view has come under attack. Still, one can hardly deny that idolisation of the state has shaped the contours of German society and the course of German history to a large extent. This has involved a considerable weakening of politics and of the public sphere. At times, it could seem as if Germany was a state without politics. Yet it never aimed at being a state without culture.

Fritz Stern has convincingly argued that the strange indifference to politics that characterised German private and public life can be largely explained by the high premium placed on cultural pre-eminence and on the illiberal elitism that prevailed in Germany since the time of Weimar classicism. Culture was the arena of the absolute, a realm without compromise. Its exaltation led to the illusion that culture could be a substitute for power and therefore a substitute for politics.<sup>14</sup> Unlike ‘civilisation’, ‘culture’ has remained a term that, in the German language, is almost naturally distant from, if not contrary to, ‘politics’. The connotation of

<sup>11</sup> Santayana, *Egotism*, p. viii.

<sup>12</sup> Dewey, *Philosophy and Politics*, p. 15.

<sup>13</sup> Gooch *et al.*, p. viii.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Fritz Stern’s books *The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of the Germanic Ideology* (Berkeley, 1974), and *The Failure of Illiberalism* (New York, 1972).

'culture' is as positive, warm, and promising as that of 'politics' is ambivalent, cold, and suspicious. Even today, the term 'Weimar Republic' suffers from linguistic bruises, whereas 'Weimar Culture' is nostalgically remembered as a great promise that has remained largely unfulfilled.

The holocaust, the great divide of Western civilisation, should have marked the point of no return, after which the exaltation of culture over politics was no longer possible in Germany. That is, I believe, what Theodor Adorno wanted to say when he called barbarous any attempt to write a poem after Auschwitz. The poems Paul Celan wrote after Auschwitz were anything but barbarous—because his poetry reflected the helplessness, not the power, of culture. Yet the holocaust did not mark the end of an overestimation of culture at the expense of politics. One reason for this was the aesthetic appeal of fascism and later National Socialism.

### The aesthetic appeal of fascism

Today we are inclined to think of National Socialism and culture as a contradiction in terms. One look at Adolf Hitler at the Munich exhibition of 'degenerate art' in 1937, poking fun at some of the greatest paintings of our century, is enough to strengthen our belief that the Nazis could not but destroy the *Kulturstaat* which had, for centuries, been the idol of German self-understanding and national pride. True, many Nazi figures—Hitler the painter, Goebbels the novelist, and Albert Speer the architect—still carried the artistic ambitions of their youth around with them after they seized power, sometimes turning meetings of the inner circle of the Nazi party's leadership into a quixotic *salon des refusés*. Yet we can only laugh or shake our head in disbelief when we read about Hitler telling Sir Neville Henderson, the British ambassador, that he was tired of politics and longed to return to oil painting, 'as soon as I have carried out my program for Germany. . . . I feel that I have it in my soul to become one of the great artists of the age and that future historians will remember me, not for what I have done for Germany, but for my art.'<sup>15</sup>

More through ritual than through belief, National Socialism was able to cast an aesthetic spell on many intellectuals even outside Germany. Wyndham Lewis was not the only one who—in his book on the Hitler

<sup>15</sup> As reported in an article in *Time* of 11 Sept. 1939, p. 29. The caption of the article was 'Painters' War', alluding thereby to the fact that the Polish Commander-in-Chief, Marshal Edward Smigly-Rydz, was 'an able if academic landscapist'.

cult published after the outbreak of the Second World War—originally regarded Hitler as a politician with a muse, though he added immediately, as if shocked by his own words, that if Hitler were a poet, he would be ‘one of the most boring poets’.<sup>16</sup> In France, members of the political far right envied Germany because National Socialism was seen as the legitimate heir to the fascist movements that had their origin in the Latin countries of Europe. While fascism had become sclerotic and unsure of itself in both Italy and France, it had been vigorously transformed in Germany. National Socialism had preserved the anarchistic and artistic attitudes characteristic of early Fascism: a youthful disrespect for established authority and the general will to *épater le bourgeois*, especially since the bourgeoisie was, to a large extent, identified with Jewish cluture.<sup>17</sup>

Rilke had once seen in Mussolini above all a man of poetic qualities. Fascism was seen by many as the equivalent of *l’art pour l’art* in politics.<sup>18</sup> In France, admiration for what Brasillach would call ‘the aesthetic sensibilities’ of Hitler as an individual and National Socialism as a movement had disastrous consequences.<sup>19</sup> Many *hommes de lettres* who were sceptics when they set out to attend the rallies of the National Socialist party returned as fanatics: ‘Oui, Hitler est bon’, was Alphonse de Chateaubriant’s resumé in 1937, whereby a strange aesthetic fascination was turned into a dangerous moral judgement.<sup>20</sup> These writers and intellectuals created a context of empathy and understanding that made collaboration not only possible but honourable and even necessary. Among the last troops defending Hitler’s chancery in Berlin against the Red Army was the SS division ‘Charlemagne’, which consisted of French and francophone volunteers. They believed they were fighting a culture war in which European values had to be defended against Asian bolshevism and American materialism. It is this far-reaching cultural underpinning of National

<sup>16</sup> Wyndham Lewis, *The Hitler Cult* (New York, 1972) p. 47.

<sup>17</sup> Here, I cannot pay due attention to the difference between ‘collaboration with Germany’ and ‘collaboration with the Nazis’ which has been stressed by Stanley Hoffmann. Cf. his article ‘Self-Ensnared: Collaboration with Nazi Germany’, in *Decline or Renewal? France since the 1930s* (New York, 1974), pp. 26–44.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Erwin von Beckerath, *Wesen und Werden des faschistischen Staates* (Berlin, 1927).

<sup>19</sup> William R. Tucker, ‘Politics and Aesthetics: The Fascism of Robert Brasillach’, *The Western Political Quarterly*, 15 (1962), 608.

<sup>20</sup> Alphonse de Chateaubriant, *La Gerbe des Forces (Nouvelle Allemagne)* (Paris, 1937), p. 69. But not only the French fascists were impressed by the Nuremberg party rallies. In 1937, Neville Henderson went there for the first time: ‘The effect, which was both solemn and beautiful, was like being inside a cathedral of ice. . . . I had spent six years in St. Petersburg before the war in the best days of the old Russian ballet, but in grandiose beauty I have never seen a ballet to compare with it.’ Neville Henderson, *Failure of a Mission* (New York, 1940), pp. 66–7.

Socialist politics that makes it so wrong, in my view, to make light of the films of Leni Riefenstahl or an author like Paul de Man's predilections for German 'aesthetic nationalism',<sup>21</sup> to see them as expressions of a merely peripheral and hence morally defensible sympathy for Nazism. They point to the heart of the matter.

### Art and morality

In 1939, an extraordinary and shocking portrait of Hitler was published in *Esquire*. The portrait was shocking not least because of its title: 'That Man is My Brother'. The author was Thomas Mann. With him, a great artist seemed to take Hitler's artistic claims seriously. The disappointed bohemian painter who passed unopposed from one political triumph to the other was a catastrophe, a miserable phenomenon, and yet one could not help viewing him with a certain shuddering admiration: 'Must I not, however much it hurts', wrote Thomas Mann, 'regard the man as an artist-phenomenon? Mortifyingly enough, it is all there: the difficulty, the laziness, the pathetic formlessness in youth. . . . The . . . vegetating existence in the depths of a moral and mental Bohemia; the fundamental arrogance that thinks itself too good for any sensible and honorable activity, on the grounds of its vague intuition that it is reserved for something else. . . . A brother—a rather unpleasant and mortifying brother. He makes me nervous, the relationship is painful to a degree. But I will not disclaim it.'<sup>22</sup>

'That Man is My Brother' is a literary masterpiece. It points to the moral limits of art and literature. Caught in irony, Thomas Mann the artist was unable to come to terms with a phenomenon like Hitler, since 'the moral sphere . . . is really not altogether the artist's concern'. It was the moral distance inherent in the arts and in literature which, in European history, had led many to regard the great man, the genius, as usually an aesthetic, not an ethical phenomenon. So, whether one liked it or not, Hitler—in part an aesthetic phenomenon in which madness was tempered with discretion—must also be called a genius. In portraying Hitler, Thomas Mann pointed to the moral limits of artistic aspiration and aesthetic judgement. He did not fall prey to the illusion that there is an

<sup>21</sup> Lindsay Waters, 'Paul de Man: A Sketch of Two Generations', Werner Hamacher *et al.* (eds.), *Responses. On Paul de Man's Wartime Journalism* (Lincoln, 1989), pp. 397–403.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Mann, 'That Man is My Brother', *Esquire*, 11 (1939), No. 3: 132, 133.

elective affinity between artistic Modernism and democratic beliefs. Almost the opposite seems to be true. Among the great painters whom Hitler and his comrades publicly despised, quite a few would have been only too glad to be accepted by their third-rate colleague, because they felt close to his ideas. In calling Hitler his brother, Thomas Mann helped an uncomfortable truth come to light. At its core, artistic Modernism was by no means genuinely democratic; rather, it overtly displayed a propensity for authoritarian, if not totalitarian views. As an aesthetic programme, however, Modernism could not be condemned on moral grounds. To avoid censorship, it had to be contained, as it were, in a social context in which moral considerations permeated politics and public life.

That is why the illusory overrating of culture played such a dangerous role in German history. When culture was accepted as a compensation for politics, the absence of morality in the public sphere was accepted as well. The aesthetic appeal first of fascism and later of National Socialism was not a superficial phenomenon. It must be a core element in any attempt to explain the attractiveness of Nazi ideology for a large segment of the German bourgeoisie and many German artists and intellectuals. When members of the London Institute of Sociology predicted that Germany would be able to survive Nazism only if its core cultural values, represented by Goethe, were restored, they fell prey to the grand German illusion: culture came first, politics followed. The contrary was true. To survive the civilisational break it had inflicted upon Europe, Germany would have to give up the most German of all ideologies: the illusion that culture can compensate for politics. This process took a long time. The traditional overestimation of culture at the expense of politics survived the Second World War well into the second German republic. One of the reasons for this was a blurring of exile and emigration.

### The blurring of exile and emigration

In the summer of 1948, the German writer Gottfried Benn, a physician whose poems and prose had tested the German language to the extreme, offered a sweeping explanation for the past and future catastrophes of his times: 'In my view', he wrote in a letter from Berlin, 'the West is doomed not at all by the totalitarian systems or the crimes of the SS, not even by its material impoverishment or the Gottwalds and Molotovs, but by the abject surrender of its intelligentsia to political concepts. The *zoon politicon*, that Greek blunder, that Balkan notion—that is the germ of our

impending doom.<sup>23</sup> Benn, a master of surprising prose, thus turned the classical problem of Germany's intelligentsia upside-down. He did not deplore the aloofness of the German intelligentsia from the public realm that had made them easy prey for the Nazis—he pretended that the intellectual had failed to remain an unpolitical man and had thereby contributed to a political catastrophe. He closed his letter in bitter irony: 'And so farewell, and greetings from this blockaded city without electric power, from the very part of the city which, in consequence of that Greek blunder and the resulting historical world, is on the brink of famine. . . . But it is the city whose brilliance I loved, whose misery I now endure as that of the place where I belong, the city in which I lived to see the Second, Third, and now the Fourth Reich, and from which nothing will ever make me emigrate.' Neither the open disdain for democracy nor the tacit acceptance of the Nazi Regime as a legitimate period in German history is the most important passage in this disturbing document. What is so disturbing about it is the poet's belief that he had—while serving as a physician in the German army—lived in exile, artistically as well as politically. When the war ended, emigration and exile had become, in Germany, blurred genres of existence.<sup>24</sup>

Not 1945, the year in which the Second World War ended, but 1948, the year of the monetary reform, must be seen as the turning point in the history of post-war Germany. Not bad conscience but a new currency propelled the change that brought with it a new society. German history in the twentieth century is a disclaimer of discontinuities. Neither the year 1933 nor the year 1945 marked a break—at least not for large segments of the scientific intelligentsia and the cultural elite. When intellectual temperaments, similar in their anti-democratic resentment and yet as different from each other as the philosopher Martin Heidegger, the jurist Carl Schmitt, the poet Gottfried Benn, and the officer and anarchist Ernst Jünger, expressed their sympathy for the Nazis' seizure of power, one must not see this as a conversion, but as a sign of continuity. The ominous year 1933 was not a break, it was the fulfillment of German history. In the state of the Nazis, the cultural nation would be reborn.

It was the aesthetic appeal that turned large segments of the German intelligentsia into followers of the Nazi regime—at least for a while. The sympathies of many fellow travellers dwindled only when, on the 30 June

<sup>23</sup> Gottfried Benn, 'Letter from Berlin, July 1948', in *Prose, Essays, Poems*, ed. Volkmar Sander (New York, 1987), p. 80.

<sup>24</sup> The allusion is, of course, to Clifford Geertz's 'Blurred Genres: The Refiguration of Social Thought', *The American Scholar*, 49 (1980), No. 2: 165–79.

1934, dissidents within the National Socialist party and suspected enemies of the state were executed without trial. Members of the intelligentsia who had sympathised with the Nazis reacted in disgust. However, it was more the absence of taste than the lawlessness that they found intolerable in the behaviour of the Nazi death squads. They were not morally appalled, but aesthetically disappointed. This had been the dream of much of the cultural elite: that Germany would become a state in which politics and culture would no longer be separated. It was the fascist dream of a theatrical state.<sup>25</sup> When the dream turned out to be an illusion, it was disappointment, not distance or opposition, that followed. After 1934, many German intellectuals would have gladly remained fascists—if the Nazis had only tolerated it.

### Reticence to emigrate

When Gottfried Benn was asked why he had remained in Germany even after 1934, he replied that the idea of emigrating had never occurred to him. To go into exile was no viable intellectual option, because it had no tradition in Germany. The notion of ‘emigration’, which would only later acquire its ethical weight, allegedly did not yet exist. When members of his generation left Germany, Benn said, they were not acting politically, they were just trying to escape personal hardship and unpleasant circumstances by travelling elsewhere. That was a cynical statement indeed. There was also an anti-Semitic tone in the rejection of emigration and exile: a German could not possibly adopt what had been the fate of the Jewish people for centuries.<sup>26</sup>

One may be inclined not to take Benn’s argument too seriously. After all, it did not explain anything, it was just an excuse. The case of Thomas Mann, however, shows how difficult it was for a non-Jewish German intellectual to accept the idea and the reality of emigration and of exile.

<sup>25</sup> I have not used the term ‘theatre state’ because Clifford Geertz wrote that ‘the expressive nature of the Balinese state . . . was always pointed not toward tyranny’ and that in Bali ‘power served pomp, not pomp served power’. This qualification almost precludes the borrowing of even a term, not to mention a concept. Cf. Clifford Geertz, *Negara. The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali* (Princeton, 1980), p. 13.

<sup>26</sup> In July 1934, Thomas Mann speculated about the fate of the German people after the end of the Nazi regime: ‘Perhaps history has in fact intended for them the role of the Jews, one which even Goethe thought befitted them: to be one day scattered throughout the world and to view their existence with an intellectually proud self-irony.’ Thomas Mann, *Past Masters*, trans. H. T. Lowe-Porter (New York, 1933), p. 220.

In February 1933 Thomas Mann had left Germany for Amsterdam, Brussels, and Paris, where, after a triumphant beginning in Munich, he was scheduled to talk about Richard Wagner, whose art, as Thomas Mann was eager to remind his audiences at home and abroad, was the epitome of German culture insofar as it displayed ‘a complete anarchistic indifference to the state, as long as the spiritually German, the “Deutsche Kunst” survives.’<sup>27</sup> A vacation in Switzerland was to follow. There, his children persuaded him to stay. Yet, the thought of returning home remained with him. For a long time, his wish was to go back to Germany and live there in a kind of inner emigration. For him as well, the point of no return is reached with the Röhm massacres in 1934. Until then, Thomas Mann had withstood pressure to react publicly to what was happening in Germany. Eventually, he yielded. The decision to act politically came with an artistic farewell. On 9 August 1934 Thomas Mann wrote in his diary: ‘The whole day nothing but rain and thunderstorms, so that one cannot go out. I made excerpts for my political statement . . . In the evening I browsed through my diaries and noted passages of political importance . . . Katia and the children were listening to the radio, which was broadcasting the “Twilight of the Gods” from Bayreuth, which was constantly disturbed by the thunderstorm. I resisted listening to it, I do not want to hear anything from Germany anymore . . . It’s nothing but cultural propaganda. My toothache is coming back.’<sup>28</sup>

### German culture at home: a moral failure turned to intellectual advantage

Fifty years ago, Leo Strauss complained that German thought had become indistinguishable from Western thought in general. In retrospect, one must see this complaint of a German émigré as the prophecy of one of the great political success stories of the twentieth century. First the Federal Republic and then all of Germany became part of the West. The ‘Sonderweg’, German exceptionalism, has finally flowed into the mainstream of parliamentary democracy, the market, and the rule of law. The revolt of culture against civilisation is over. It no longer makes sense to think of culture as a compensation for politics. Fifty years ago, however, things looked different.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Mann, ‘The Sufferings and Greatness of Richard Wagner’, *Past Masters*, pp. 90, 86.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 502 (my translation).

In the West, German culture did not merely survive the war. It fared well after defeat and capitulation. Politics seemed to be discredited forever, a re-militarisation of the country was unthinkable, only culture—due not least to the ‘inner exile’ where so many intellectuals had taken refuge—was left with a legitimate past and hopes for the future. At the same time, culture in Germany was shaped by experiences of emigration, exile, and re-immigration. It became difficult to identify purely German traditions of thought and scholarship; as a rule, a mixture of domestic and especially Anglo-Saxon traditions prevailed. The Federal Republic’s political and military loyalty to the West was thus enhanced by its cultural ‘Westernisation’.

In 1964, when German sociologists recalled that an economist named Max Weber had written some interesting stuff around the turn of the century, the scholars they invited to talk about him were an émigré philosopher, Herbert Marcuse, who was now teaching in California; a French political scientist who had studied in Berlin, Raymond Aron; and an American sociologist who had graduated from Heidelberg, Talcott Parsons. It is almost beyond belief that in France an author like Emile Durkheim could have become a French classic only after a detour abroad. Ideas and ideologies of German origin, methods and men were not simply stored in exile; they survived in another cultural milieu by actively adapting to it before they returned to West Germany. It was still easy for Georg Simmel to unmask pragmatism as nothing more than Nietzsche’s thought in American disguise. After the Second World War, it had become much more difficult to identify the thoughts and traditions that first emigrated and then returned to Germany. Empirical social research, for instance, was widely regarded as an instrument of Anglo-Saxon re-education; not many knew that it was already flourishing in Vienna when Columbia University was just taking shape.

The situation in the East was different. Forced political loyalty to the communist regime in the Soviet Union was not conducive to restructuring scientific thought or cultural belief-systems in innovative ways. Yet while the Federal Republic was Westernised, the German Democratic Republic did not undergo a similar process of Russification. While broken English became the *lingua franca* for West German tourists, many East Germans simply refused to speak Russian. The West was internationalised, while the East remained a province where the *Internationale* had to be sung daily. Censorship took its toll. In the East, the years from 1933 to 1989 belong to a single epoch conspicuously lacking in cultural modernity.

In West Germany, a moral failure turned into intellectual advantage. Denazification foundered. The old elites were reactivated rather soon. The confrontation between émigrés and fellow travellers, between opponents of the regime and its collaborators, between Jews who had been driven out of their fatherland and anti-Semites who had been responsible for their flight led to the production of works of art and scholarly books both provocative and full of innovative energy. In philosophy, the intellectual tension created by a constellation of thinkers like Heidegger, Jaspers, Karl Löwith, and Hannah Arendt was awesome. In sociology, the confrontation of the Frankfurt School with the émigré Karl Popper on the one hand, and scholars like Arnold Gehlen and Helmut Schelsky, both members of the Nazi party, on the other, shaped the development of the discipline. To this day, German historians are caught in bitter feuds over their professional legacy, haunted by past masters who were both moral cowards and intellectual bravados during the time of the Third Reich.

In East Germany, good moral intentions turned out to be an intellectual disaster. Communists who had survived Nazi persecution and Russian exile tried to make denazification work. Culture became politically correct, but also boring and repetitive. Debates among the intelligentsia dealt with minor corrections of the established cultural canon, but they never questioned the canon itself. Once seen as stimulating within the intellectual micro-climate of the GDR, these debates have today rightly been forgotten. Bertolt Brecht was something of an exception, but even he turned more and more into a principal who was, above all, interested in the survival of his company. The communist émigrés first helped the GDR to win moral recognition, but this recognition withered away with the fall of communism. When the archives of the Communist Party in Moscow were opened, it became evident what an ignominious role heroes of German emigration to the East had played during the purges and political trials of the 1930s. They had left one totalitarian regime—only to succumb to another.

### The failure of the interpreting class

What the cultural elite of the GDR had learned better than anything was the art of being ruled (Wyndham Lewis). Unlike Poland or Czechoslovakia, East Germany never had a sizeable samizdat nor a catacomb culture; and unlike Hungary, it did not—and could not—produce groups of engaged

émigrés. A Czech writer who fled to Paris or to London thereby became an alienated speaker. A writer from Leipzig who went to Munich or to Berlin was still living in Germany. More important still: he remained a native speaker. Those who stayed in the GDR found, as a rule, ways and means to come to an understanding with the *nomenklatura*. Not all intellectuals became fellow travellers, to be sure, but a great many of them enjoyed the security and subsidies accorded to the cultural elite by a communist regime that levelled, but never equalised.

When Thomas Carlyle spoke of the man of letters as a modern priest and of the 'Priesthood of the Writers of Books' that had become so influential in modern times, he was not speaking merely metaphorically. He believed that literary men who wanted to fulfill their mission ought to be poor. They had to form a monastic order. Communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe probably committed their worst mistake in forcing members of the cultural elite to either collaborate or join the lower classes. Many of them had to work as furnace stokers and road sweepers, as cab drivers and handymen. Thus they became members of mendicant orders indeed. The communist regimes in the East were dealt a deadly blow by an intellectual proletariat they themselves had created. The situation in the GDR was different. Its cultural elite suffered from a lack of discriminative strain: it lived in a milieu with blurred moral alternatives. Put to the test with the breakdown of the regime, the failure of the cultural elite became obvious. It was the failure of the interpreting class.

The first successful German revolution was a true and spontaneous *levée en masse*—aided by the very visible hand of Mikhail Gorbachev. It was neither the result of a long and open struggle against communist rule, like the fight of Solidarnosc in Poland, nor the final triumph of twenty years of resistance in the underground of Prague, nor of shrewd piecemeal reform in Budapest. The German November revolution was neither led by a workers' union nor designed by the cultural and intellectual elite. Its heroes were hundreds and thousands of ordinary people who grasped the chance to leave a dictatorship by fleeing to the West German embassies in Prague and Budapest. Its heroes were thousands and hundreds of thousands who took to the streets of Leipzig and of Dresden. Their exit and their voice created the revolution.<sup>29</sup> In this revolution, the intellectuals were with the crowd, but not of it. The heroes of this revolu-

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Albert O. Hirschman's brilliant interpretation of the collapse of the German Democratic Republic: 'Exit, Voice and the Fate of the German Democratic Republic', in *A Propensity to Self-Subversion* (Cambridge, MA, 1995), pp. 9–44.

tion were, with a few exceptions, no intellectuals. In contrast to the upheaval in Prague, for instance, artists and students were not spearheading the revolt.

‘Wir sind das Volk’ (We are the people) was a most appropriate slogan indeed. Intellectuals admired the slogan—and misunderstood it completely. In the framework of their own mentality, this slogan had to be read as the wish for the immediate realisation of a socialist dream while in reality it expressed the farewell to any socialist utopia. When the Berlin wall was breached on the eve of 9 November 1989, the slogan was only slightly changed. Now the masses no longer chanted: ‘We are the people’, but: ‘We are one people’. This minor change of just one single word, however, revealed their true intentions: to join the capitalist West. At that time it became obvious that the cultural elite—in the East as well as in the West—had been unable to read the public mood. Intellectuals had failed on their own ground. They had not only misjudged a political power structure and overrated the strength of the Eastern economy. They had misunderstood the meaning of words. Culture is about interpretation and making sense. In Germany, the cultural elite has had great difficulties in making sense of unification. The failure of the cultural elite was neither the misjudgement of amateur-politicians nor the miscalculation of would-be economists: it was the failure of the interpreting class. The overrating of culture at the expense of politics remained a feature of German intellectual life—beyond the process of political unification.

In his attack on German philosophical egotism, George Santayana had written that ‘just as in pantheism God is naturalized into a cosmic force, so in German philosophy the Biblical piety of the earlier Protestants is secularized into social and patriotic zeal’.<sup>30</sup> Political opposition in the GDR was, to a considerable extent, propelled by Protestant zeal. The Lutheran church knew how to get along with the socialist state, but at the same time it was able to resist and to contradict, often at great personal sacrifice for individual members of the Church. Their moral convictions, however, never developed into a political strategy. The moralisation of politics led to a mentality of ‘all or nothing’ which, in the end, desecrated for all time the concept of politics, at least of party politics, which is nothing else than politics in a democracy. I vividly remember a meeting of a small group of former East German dissidents with Senator Edward Kennedy and Willy Brandt shortly after the fall of the Berlin wall. The dissidents, sticking to principles, and the Senator, trying to promote

<sup>30</sup> Santayana, *Egotism*, p. 12.

pragmatism, had nothing to say to each other. It was especially sad that Willy Brandt, the émigré, was not able to translate between the two 'camps' and remained almost speechless throughout the meeting.

So, unlike after the end of the Second World War, when the confrontation of moral alternatives, the coexistence of fellow travellers and refugees, of victims and perpetrators, of internal and external exiles had created a cultural milieu full of tension and thus creativity, nothing comparable happened after 1989. The moral alternatives confronting each other were murky. There were no real émigrés and only a few dissidents. Most important perhaps was another difference: though many of them nostalgically represented the best of Germany's cultural past, the émigrés who returned after 1945 were also carriers of new ideas, whereas the East German dissidents were moulded by a milieu conspicuously lacking cultural modernity. After 1945, pragmatism and a culture of compromise entered Germany; after 1989, idealism and inwardness were coming back. Even when the dissidents had won their freedom of political expression, their fundamental contempt for politics and the procedural intricacies of democracy remained. 'We had hoped for justice, and all we got was the rule of the law', one of them quipped. Most of the dissidents rejected the idea of forming a party and when parties were formed, it happened with great inner resistance indeed. The anti-politics of the East German protest movement thus created a political vacuum that furthered the resurgence of the communist party in the East and remained without any influence in the West. Cultural protest in Germany continued to be inefficient because compromise was not accepted as a political value. Once more culture, with 'a voice as tender and as powerful as religion itself',<sup>31</sup> claimed to be the better politics.

### Epilogue: Weimar and St Helena

On 30 April 1932, one hundred years after the poet's death, Paul Valéry gave an address in honour of Goethe in the *Grand Amphithéâtre* of the Sorbonne. Valéry had great difficulties in preparing his speech, as he wrote in a letter to André Gide. He did not know German and not much of Goethe, having read only a few of his works, among them *Faust* in French translation and some biological stuff, *crâne et plante*, which he called, somewhat condescendingly, 'not bad at all'. It had taken him five

<sup>31</sup> Stern, *The Failure of Illiberalism*, p. 5.

whole days to type the speech on his old Remington typewriter and when it was written he no longer wanted to read it. There was something in Goethe that disturbed him: 'Il y a quelque chose qui me gêne chez Goethe.' And yet I do not know of a greater tribute to Goethe, 'the most complex figure in the world', than this speech. Valéry used the opportunity of his talk in the Sorbonne to dwell on a theme that had been the *idée directrice* of many of his own works: how might the world, and especially Europe, have developed if political and intellectual power 'had been able to join forces, or at least if the relations between them had been less precarious'.<sup>32</sup> Valéry never stopped dreaming of what he called a *politique de l'esprit*, but he knew that he was only dreaming: 'The two forms of power may well be incommensurable quantities; and it is no doubt necessary that they should be so.'

Among the handful of men in which Valéry's dream seemed to have come true were Napoleon and Goethe, 'one of them no doubt . . . the wisest, the other perhaps the maddest of mortals . . . both of them . . . the most exciting characters in the world'.<sup>33</sup> That is why the year 1808, when Goethe and Napoleon met in Erfurt, was such a priceless moment in world history: 'Coquetry was essential at such a meeting. Each wanted to appear at his ease, and carefully arranged his smile. They were two magicians attempting to charm one another. Napoleon assumed the role of emperor of the mind and even of literature. Goethe appeared as the embodiment of mind itself.'

Valéry's description of the Erfurt meeting is extraordinary, a drama in itself, full of a tension that, even today, has lost nothing of its vibrant power. Goethe is nothing less than the incorporation of German culture, i.e. of inwardness far from politics, he is 'courtier, confidant, minister, a diligent official, a poet, collector, and naturalist' at the same time; the great, in Germany perhaps the greatest, 'apologist of the world of Appearances. . . . In the evening of his days, in the heart of Europe, himself the centre of attraction and admiration of all intelligent people', Valéry writes, Goethe probably thought of Napoleon, 'perhaps his greatest memory, whose look still lingered in his eyes.'<sup>34</sup> The French writer

<sup>32</sup> Paul Valéry, 'Address in Honor of Goethe', in *The Collected Works of Paul Valéry*, ed. Jackson Mathews (Princeton, 1968), vol. 9, p. 147.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 173.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 156, 161. In this context, it is interesting to note that Maurice Barrès called Goethe's drama *Iphigénie* 'a civilizing work which "defends the rights of society against the arrogance of the spirit"'—a rejection of the German overestimation of culture if there ever was one. I am quoting Barrès from Thomas Mann's speech 'Goethe and Democracy', which he delivered in the

does not hesitate to admire a German poet who admires a French genius, but into his glowing admiration Valéry stirs a pinch of disturbing and in the end devastating critique—not so much of Goethe as of the German understanding of him: ‘Wolfgang von Goethe was to die a little more than ten years after the death of the Emperor, in that little Weimar which was a sort of delicious St. Helena for him. . . .’<sup>35</sup>

Weimar ‘une sorte de Sainte-Hélène délicieuse’—that meant that the happy coexistence of political and intellectual power had been nothing but an episode in German history, a remote island, an exile from which no Goethe would return. In Germany, there was a political promise in culture then which had not been fulfilled.

---

Library of Congress on 2 May 1949. It seems to me that this speech, in which Thomas Mann mentions the Sorbonne address from 1932, is an implicit answer to Paul Valéry—and full of complicity.

<sup>35</sup> Valéry, ‘Address in Honour of Goethe’, pp. 174, 175.