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**The Politics  
of  
Cultural Despair**

*A Study in the Rise of the Germanic Ideology*

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nomically-determined motives. Yet at the same time, within and without the historical profession, there has been a growing presumption against the notion that material factors alone are capable of explaining the past. Specific studies, for example, have shown that cultural, spiritual, and psychic factors must be taken into account if we are to understand the triumphs of irrationality that marked fascism. To the further exploration of politics as psychodrama, of projective politics, of the irrational ingredients in all politics, I can hope that this book may prove useful.

It was written solely as an explication of the past—a past that haunts us still. If it has acquired a new meaning for the present, if it helps to focus attention on the persistent deficiencies of a certain kind of unreflective, uncritical modernity and also on the dangers of exuberant reform movements that in the name of idealism claim to be immune from accountability, that in their utopianism propose collective solutions for grievances and aspirations that do not allow for collective solutions, then the author can gratefully ponder such unanticipated timelessness of his work, even if he would prefer to live in a world in which the politics of cultural despair had nothing but an historic resonance.

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## Introduction

*Tout commence en mystique et tout finit en politique.*

CHARLES PEGUY

*As a rule . . . it doesn't profit me to read Jeremiads against evil—the example of a little good has more effect.*

WILLIAM JAMES

This is a study in the pathology of cultural criticism. By analyzing the thought and influence of three leading critics of modern Germany, this study will demonstrate the dangers and dilemmas of a particular type of cultural despair. Lagarde, Langbehn, and Moeller van den Bruck—their active lives spanning the years from the middle of the past century to the threshold of Hitler's Third Reich—attacked, often incisively and justly, the deficiencies of German culture and the German spirit. But they were more than the critics of Germany's cultural crisis; they were its symptoms and victims as well. Unable to endure the ills which they diagnosed and which they had experienced in their own lives, they sought to become prophets who would point the way to a national rebirth. Hence, they propounded all manner of reforms, ruthless and idealistic, nationalistic and utopian. It was this leap from despair to utopia across all existing reality that gave their thought its fantastic quality.

As moralists and as the guardians of what they thought was an ancient tradition, they attacked the progress of modernity—the growing power of liberalism and secularism. They enumerated the discontents of Germany's industrial civilization and warned against the loss of faith, of unity, of "values." All three were foes of commerce and cities as well—heroic vitalists who denigrated reason and routine. Deeply dissatisfied

with the condition of Germany, they predicted that all Germans would soon suffer from the same anguish that they felt.

As early as the 1850's, Lagarde, a biblical scholar and a lonely, embittered man, decried the decline in German intellectual life and the dissolution of its moral ethos. He became one of the sharpest critics of Bismarck's political successes and a brilliant polemicist against modern Protestantism. In 1890, Langbehn, a failure and a psychopath, wrote a sensational best seller, a rhapsody of irrationality, denouncing the whole intellectualistic and scientific bent of German culture, the extinction of art and individuality, the drift toward conformity. During the following two decades, Moeller van den Bruck, a self-styled outsider and a talented litterateur, attacked the Philistinism and liberalism of the Wilhelmine age. After the First World War, he became the leading figure of the young conservatives, and his best known work, *Das Dritte Reich*, published in 1922, provided the German right with its dominant political myth.

Although writing at different times, these three men attacked the same cultural forces in much the same manner. Tirelessly they denounced what they considered the shortcomings of German life, and their complaints illuminate the underside of German culture. Their despair over the condition of Germany reflected and heightened the despair of their countrymen, and through these men we can see the current of disaffection rising until it merged with the nihilistic tide of national socialism.

Above all, these men loathed liberalism; Lagarde and Moeller saw in liberalism the cause and the incarnation of all evil. It may seem curious that they should have fastened on liberalism, the one political force in Germany that perpetually lost. To understand why they did this leads us to the core of their thought. They attacked liberalism because it seemed to them the principal premise of modern society; everything they dreaded seemed to spring from it: the bourgeois life, Manchesterism, materialism, parliament and the parties, the lack of political leadership. Even more, they sensed in liberalism the source of all their inner sufferings. Theirs was a resentment of loneliness; their one desire was for a new faith, a new community of believers, a world with fixed standards and no doubts, a new national religion that would bind all Germans together. All this, liberalism denied.

Hence, they hated liberalism, blamed it for making outcasts of them, for uprooting them from their imaginary past, and from their faith.

Their proposed reforms, their utopias, were meant to overcome this liberal world, and their reforms as well as their criticisms reflected the strong subjective element of their thought. "I have no use for abstract truth. I want to bind and liberate my people," proclaimed Lagarde, and like the other critics later, he turned to nationalism and to a new folk-rootedness as the only possible means of redemption.<sup>1</sup> Only some outside agent, they felt, some conspiracy, could have dissolved the ancient unity of the folk; hence by stamping out the agents of dissension and by instituting various reforms, the older community could be reestablished. For all their individualism and their professed horror of the state, these men had great faith in the efficacy of political and cultural planning.

They were literary racists as well, and Lagarde and Langbehn were vigorous anti-Semites, seeing in Jewish "bacilli," the insidious forces of dissolution. They were frightened by national disunity, which Lagarde sensed and Moeller witnessed, and all three critics explicitly demanded a Führer who would embody and compel unity and expunge all domestic conflicts. Their final vision was a new German destiny, a Germany which, purged and disciplined at home, would stand forth as the greatest power of the world, ready at last to rally *Germania irredenta*.

These in brief were the elements of their cultural thought. Together they constituted an ideology, at once an indictment, a program, and a mystique. This ideology I call "Germanic" because its principal goals were the revival of a mythical *Deutschtum* and the creation of political institutions that would embody and preserve this peculiar character of the Germans. All their works were suffused by this mixture of cultural despair and mystical nationalism that was radically different from the untroubled nationalism of their contemporaries. The character of their thought and of their appeal to German society corresponded to a recent German definition of ideology: "A political ideology always possesses the fever of passion, the sense of affective belongingness. It is something driving, an impulse, a spiritual force. . . . A true ideology expresses what one lives for."<sup>2</sup> Still more apt, perhaps, would be Alfred

Fouillée's term, *idées-forces*, because these ideas "united the imagination with the will, the anticipated vision of things with their execution."<sup>3</sup>

The ideas of Lagarde, Langbehn, and Moeller were not clasped in a system, but their import strongly affected the sentiments, the *Lebensgeföhle*, of respectable Germans for two generations before Hitler. These *idées-forces* remained, to be sure, a subterranean force, an undercurrent of belief, visible only in moments of crisis. But they nurtured the idealistic rejection of modern society and the resentment against the imperfections of Western ideals and institutions, that contributed so greatly to the debility of democracy in Germany.

The appeal of these *idées-forces* was heightened by the style of Lagarde, Langbehn, and Moeller. All three wrote with great fervor and passion. They condemned or prophesied, rather than exposted or argued, and all their writings showed that they despised the discourse of intellectuals, depreciated reason, and exalted intuition. Humorless and murky, their prose was fitfully lit up by mystical, but apodictic epigrams. For decades they were hailed as Germanic critics and prophets.

I chose these three men not because their ideas were particularly original, but because their thought and their impact on German life demonstrate the existence of a cultural crisis in modern Germany. These three men were the sick analysts of a partly sick society—and as such they played an important and hitherto neglected role in German history. The usual methods of intellectual history would not have been appropriate to this subject. *Ideengeschichte*, the critical exposition of ideas, cannot grasp the style and spirit of these men's work nor would it be enough to sketch their ideas against the background of the time. They wrote directly out of their own sufferings and experiences, and hence the psychic dimensions of their biographies were singularly relevant to their work. These I have tried to suggest, tentatively and without straying into fields that properly belong to psychologists. I attempted to show the importance of this new type of cultural malcontent, and to show how he facilitated the intrusion into politics of essentially unpolitical grievances.

This study, then, takes up the origins, content, and impact of an ideology which not only resembles national socialism, but which the National Socialists themselves acknowledged as an essential part of their legacy. But it will also point to

another link, admittedly less tangible—to wit, that the Germanic critics in the peculiar tension between their lives and their ideological aspirations anticipate the type of malcontent who, in the 1920's, found a haven in the idealism of the Hitler movement. This may suggest that while in our historical interpretations of Hitler's triumph we have noted everything, from the dangers of Article 48 of the Weimar Constitution to the role of Big Business, we may not have sufficiently reckoned with the politically exploitable discontent which for so long has been embedded in German culture.

## ii

The success of national socialism in Germany should not obscure the fact that the nationalist attack on modern culture is a general Western phenomenon that preceded and has outlived national socialism. In 1927, just before the final rise of national socialism, two European writers of very different persuasion called attention to this movement, labeling it the "conservative revolution" and the "treason of the intellectuals."

The Austrian poet, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, himself a latter-day supporter of the movement, spoke of the many Germans who sought

*not freedom but communal bonds [Bindung]. . . . Never was a German fight for freedom more fervent and yet more tenacious than this fight for true coercion [Zwang], this refusal to surrender to a coercion that was not coercive enough. . . . [It began as] an inner opposition to that spiritual upheaval of the sixteenth century which we usually grasp in its two aspects, the Renaissance and the Reformation. I am speaking of a process which is nothing less than a conservative revolution, of a dimension which surpasses anything that European history has seen so far. Its goal is to achieve a form, a new German reality in which all Germans can participate.<sup>4</sup>*

In the same year, Julien Benda, the alarmed rationalist, noted and deplored that in

about 1890 the men of letters, especially in France and Italy, realized with astonishing astuteness that the doctrines of arbitrary authority, discipline, tradition, contempt for the spirit of liberty, assertion of the morality of war and slavery, were opportunities for haughty and rigid poses infinitely more likely to strike the imagination of simple souls than the sentimentalities of Liberalism and Humanitarianism.

He denounced this rise of political passions and the European movement against Jewry, democracy, and socialism, and his particular targets were the intellectuals who "began to play the game of political passions. . . . Our age is indeed the age of the *intellectual organization of political hatreds*." <sup>5</sup> I hope to show that ours is the age of the *political organization* of cultural hatreds and personal resentments.

Until recently this conservative revolution—let alone its pan-European character—has escaped historians.<sup>6</sup> Its intellectual message has been so elusive and its political manifestations have been so sporadic that few men have recognized the power and pervasiveness of this revolutionary mood. Because of its very illogicality, the term conservative revolution is apt. The movement did embody a paradox: its followers sought to destroy the despised present in order to recapture an idealized past in an imaginary future. They were disinherited conservatives, who had nothing to conserve, because the spiritual values of the past had largely been buried and the material remnants of conservative power did not interest them. They sought a breakthrough to the past, and they longed for a new community in which old ideas and institutions would once again command universal allegiance.

The term conservative revolution as used in this book denotes the ideological attack on modernity, on the complex of ideas and institutions that characterize our liberal, secular, and industrial civilization. For nearly two hundred years this attack has proceeded on many levels, gaining political strength and losing intellectual coherence. Its history is the record of a great vulgarization, favored always by the emergence of social weaknesses and by the spread of modernity to ever new areas of the world. Our liberal and industrial society leaves many people dissatisfied—spiritually and materially. The spiritually alienated have often turned to the ideology of the conservative revolution.

This movement against modernity has gone through many stages. It began as a criticism of modernity in the minds of some romantics; it received its most radical intellectual expression in Nietzsche and Dostoevski, who deepened the attack on modernity by a radical reinterpretation of man and who concluded with a pervasive pessimism concerning the future of the West. The next stage—and these stages represent no legitimate succession of ideas—was the transformation

of this cultural criticism into a vague political ideology of the right. Combining cultural criticism with extreme nationalism, these ideologists maintained that the character of modern liberal society was alien to the spirit and tradition of their peoples. This ideology, attuned though it was to the distinct national traditions of each country, was essentially similar in every Continental country. The originators of this ideology were themselves already the victims of modernity, writing no longer as critics but as partisans and prophets. These ideologists appealed to a still less intellectual group—a group I would call, after the machine breakers of the 1820's, cultural Luddites, who in their resentment of modernity sought to smash the whole machinery of culture. It was at this point that the conservative revolution could erupt into politics; usually it took the form of some desperate force of the right that was able, with the help of this ideology, to exploit the spiritual and psychological grievances of masses of men. Modern society harbors many such people, and at moments of private or public strain the cultural discontent may turn into violent political disaffection. In times of health, a society produces fewer such men and can contain this form of discontent; in times of trouble and division, this discontent grows stronger, as society grows less capable of dealing with it.

The intellectual roots of the conservative revolution reach back to a formidable tradition. Rousseau had fathered a new type of cultural criticism, and his followers, particularly in Germany, linked his criticism to an attack on what they called the naïve rationalism and the mechanistic thought of the Enlightenment. Having distorted the Enlightenment, they then held it responsible for every kind of cultural ill, and insisted that enlightened thought was powerless even to grasp these ills. In Germany, from 1770 to 1830, cultural criticism and the denigration of rationalism were often fused, and it was this tradition which was to play so important a role in the formation of the later conservative revolution in Europe. In the West, where modern society was already emerging, a succession of moralists from Carlyle to Burckhardt warned about the particular ills of this new culture. The debate about the democratic dangers to freedom and about the leveling tendency of mass society, so familiar to us today, is an old concern in Europe.

Despite the many differences between them, Nietzsche and

Dostoevski may be regarded as the leading figures of this movement. In their attacks on contemporary culture they pierced to the heart of liberalism and denied its philosophical premises. Man is not primarily rational, but volitional; he is not by nature good nor capable of perfectibility; the politics of liberal individualism rest on an illusion; evil exists and is an inherent aspect of human life; positivistic science and rationalism are divorced from reality and at best only partly valid; the idea of historical progress is false and blinds men to the approaching catastrophes of the twentieth century. Nietzsche was the first to understand the psychological force of resentment and to warn against its soul-destroying power. The catastrophes that he and Dostoevski foresaw would be the more terrible because of the overwhelming fact of the nineteenth century—because, in Nietzsche's words, God is dead.

The historic fact of this decline in Christian faith deeply affected the next stage of the conservative revolution, the stage of the ideologists who did not have Nietzsche's courage to condemn the present without senselessly glorifying the past or promising a final collective redemption. For these men, the loss of religion heightened every other uncertainty, and they said—and often themselves felt—that life in the post-Christian, liberal era was unbearable.\*

The conservative revolutionaries denounced every aspect of the capitalistic society and its putative materialism. They railed against the spiritual emptiness of life in an urban, commercial civilization, and lamented the decline of intellect and virtue in a mass society. They attacked the press as corrupt, the political parties as the agents of national dissension, and the new rulers as ineffectual mediocrities. The bleaker their picture of the present, the more attractive seemed the past, and they indulged in nostalgic recollections of the un-

\* "The unchristening of Europe in our time is not quite complete; neither was her christening in the Dark Ages. But roughly speaking we may say that whereas all history was for our ancestors divided into two periods, the pre-Christian and the Christian, and two only, for us it falls into three—the pre-Christian, the Christian, and what may reasonably be called the post-Christian. This surely must make a momentous difference. I am not here considering either the christening or the unchristening from a theological point of view. I am considering them simply as cultural changes. When I do that, it appears to me that the second change is even more radical than the first." C. S. Lewis, *De Descriptione Temporum. An Inaugural Lecture*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1955, p. 7.

corrupted life of earlier rural communities, when men were peasants and kings true rulers. Most of them thought that this world had been destroyed by evil hands; consequently they firmly believed in a conspiratorial view of history and society. The villain usually was the Jew, who more and more frequently came to be depicted as the very incarnation of modernity. All of these charges, however exaggerated and distorted, had some basis in reality. If there had been no speculative boom and fraudulence in Germany in the early 1870's and no Panama Scandal in France, it would have been harder, and perhaps impossible, to write this particular kind of indictment of Jewry and modernity. The charges were linked to reality, and that was the precondition of their success.

The chief target of the conservative revolutionaries, however, was liberalism. All the vast and undesirable changes in the lives and feelings of Western man they blamed on liberalism. They sensed that liberalism was the spiritual and political basis of modernity and they sought to equate liberalism with Manchesterism, with the disregard of man's spiritual aspirations, with the acceptance of economic selfishness and exploitation, with the *embourgeoisement* of life and morals. They ignored—or maligned—the ideal aspirations of liberalism, its dedication to freedom, the hospitality to science, the rational, humane, tolerant view of man. For what they loosely called liberalism constituted little less than the culmination of the secular, moral tradition of the West.

That liberalism was much more than an economic or political philosophy has been recognized for a long time. In the 1860's already, Cardinal Newman said of liberalism: "It is scarcely now a party; it is the educated lay world . . . it is nothing else than that deep, plausible scepticism, which I spoke about as being the development of human reason, as practically exercised by the natural man."<sup>7</sup> Nearly a century later, Lionel Trilling said of America that liberalism was our "sole intellectual tradition."<sup>8</sup> It was liberalism in this larger sense that the conservative revolution fought, and by doing so, it could most easily make the leap from cultural to political criticism.

The conservative revolutionaries were not the only, or even the dominant, opponents of liberalism. The Catholic Church, particularly under the reign of Pope Pius IX, some Protestant groups, conservatives, and socialists were agreed on the inade-

quacy of liberalism.\* By the end of the nineteenth century, the liberals themselves changed their political philosophy by gradually adopting a paternalistic program. As a consequence, today's political rhetoric is full of confusion concerning the true meaning of liberalism. Amidst this confusion, some critics persist in blaming liberalism for everything they find undesirable in modernity.

The ideologists of the conservative revolution superimposed a vision of national redemption upon their dissatisfaction with liberal culture and with the loss of authoritative faith. They posed as the true champions of nationalism, and berated the socialists for their internationalism, and the liberals for their pacifism and their indifference to national greatness. At the very least they demanded greater national authority and cohesion, and usually they were partisans of imperialism or national aggrandizement as well. Often their longing for national heroism led them to worship violence, which in turn they justified by arguments drawn from social Darwinism or racism.

These nationalist ideologists appeared simultaneously in almost every Continental country. In the last decades of the century, it became apparent that the ideology of cultural despair and national redemption could arouse the support of a still less intellectualized group, and could thus be carried into politics. The similarities between the three writers analyzed in this book and Maurras and Barrès, D'Annunzio and Enrico Corradini, are inescapable and are reflected also in the simultaneous emergence of their kind of ideology into the politics of their countries. The Action Française and the anti-Dreyfusards, the Christian Socialists in Vienna under Karl Lueger, the pan-Germans and the anti-Semitic parties in Ger-

\* Of relevance in this connection are Max Weber's remarks: "The church belongs to the conservative forces in European countries: first, the Roman Catholic Church . . . but also the Lutheran Church. Both of these churches support the peasant, with his conservative way of life, against the demolition of urban rationalist culture. . . . It happens nowadays in the civilized countries—a peculiar and, in more than one respect, a serious fact—that the representatives of the highest interests of culture turn their eyes back, and, with deep antipathy standing opposed to the inevitable development of capitalism, refuse to co-operate in rearing the structure of the future." Max Weber, "Capitalism and Rural Society in Germany," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, New York, Oxford University Press, 1946, pp. 370-372.

many, and the Italian nationalists that emerged in 1903—all of these attested the power and importance of the Ideology of Resentment.\* Perhaps certain aspects of American Populism could be included here as well. The political organization of this opposition to liberal society coincided with the weakening of liberal rule itself. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Europeans, for the first time, found solace in nationalist idealism, in the exultation of heroism, and in the vague social and imperial promises of minor prophets.<sup>9</sup>

Under the auspicious conditions of declining liberalism, this political organization of resentment erupted time and again. It first arose in the 1890's, and it became powerful again in the late 1920's and early 1930's, under the impact of the depression and the enfeeblement of democracy. Nor were we purged of this affliction by 1945. Anyone who remembers the short-lived Poujadist movement, for example, or McCarthyism, or who reads the columns of our *National Review*, will be unlikely to pronounce the conservative revolution dead.†

\* Yet modern critics have often failed to recognize this movement and its Western dimension. Its initial appearance is sometimes entirely neglected, as in this recent summary: "The ideologies of the nineteenth century were universalistic, humanistic, and fashioned by intellectuals. . . . The driving forces of the old ideologies were social equality and, in the largest sense, freedom." Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology in the West. On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties*, Glencoe, Free Press, 1960, p. 373. A standard work on modern ideologies did not get beyond the unsatisfactory formulation: "Ideologically, the combination of corporatism and manic nationalism equals fascism." Eugene Golob, *The Isms. A History and Evaluation*, New York, Harper & Bros., 1954, p. 560. On the contrary, the problem is to dissociate this phenomenon from the convenient label of fascism and to explore the psychological and political roots of this form of discontent. The reason why historians have on the whole ignored the subject or turned to it only after it assumed the form of national socialism, is that they are trained to deal with ideas and events, not with a power of discontent as expressed in unreason and fantasy. But this kind of subterranean and neurotic force is intrinsically important, and sheds light on the more prominent and healthier elements of society as well.

† I am referring here to the rise of what Richard Hofstadter has called "the pseudo-conservative revolt" and of whose followers he wrote: "They have little in common with the temperate and compromising spirit of true conservatism in the classical sense of the word, and they are far from pleased with the dominant practical conservatism of the moment as it is represented by the Eisenhower Administration. Their political reactions express rather a profound if largely unconscious

Rather we must accept the fact that this kind of rebellion against modernity lies latent in Western society and that its confused, fantastic program, its irrational and unpolitical rhetoric, embodies aspirations just as genuine, though not as generous or tangible, as the aspirations embodied in other and more familiar movements of reform.

Cultural pessimism has a strong appeal in America today. As political conditions appear stable at home or irremediable abroad, American intellectuals have become concerned with the cultural problems of our society, and have substituted sociological or cultural analyses for political criticism. No culture has ever been more solicitous about itself than ours, and in this constant pulse-taking of our cultural health many ills are discovered and often wrongly diagnosed. In the past two decades attacks on our materialism, on the decline of our moral stamina, on all the putative ills of our mass society have been heard from every side. A prominent clergyman has told us that "Americanism without God is synonymous with paganism, nazism, fascism, and atheistic communism," and a professional educator that "the very atmosphere of the university tends to corrode the average student's traditional moral and religious beliefs."<sup>10</sup> We hear as well the familiar call for faith and order in the often strident voices of the Angry Young Men.\* Behind the slogans and the unreflective critics is the real suffering of men. There is a discontent in the Western world that does not stem from economic want or from the threat of war; rather it springs from dissatisfaction with life in an urban and industrialized culture—a dissatisfaction that the three critics discussed in this book felt and fostered.

hatred of our society and its ways—a hatred which one would hesitate to impute to them if one did not have suggestive clinical evidence." Richard Hofstadter, "The Pseudo-Conservative Revolt," in *The New American Right*, ed. by Daniel Bell, New York 1955, p. 35.

\* The English outsiders make the search for authority explicit. As Colin Wilson said: "I believe that our civilization is in decline, and that Outsiders are a symptom of that decline. They are men in reaction against scientific materialism; *men who would once have found their orientation in the Church.* . . . The Outsider's sickness is an instinctive craving for discipline. He is too intelligent to serve a cause that his intellect finds contemptible. Consequently, he must find a discipline that his critical intellect can approve—a moral discipline, a spiritual

Only in German did it become a decisive intellectual and political force. I believe that this particular reaction to modernity was deeply embedded in German thought and society, and that this curiously idealistic, unpolitical discontent constitutes the main link between all that is venerable and great in the German past and the triumph of national socialism.

Although the conservative revolution was a European phenomenon, only in Germany did it become a decisive intellectual and political force. I believe that this particular reaction to modernity was deeply embedded in German thought and society, and that this curiously idealistic, unpolitical discontent constitutes the main link between all that is venerable and great in the German past and the triumph of national socialism.

There are three main reasons for the appeal of this form of discontent, all of them exemplified in the wide influence that Lagarde, Langbehn, and Moeller van den Bruck had on German thought and politics. First, the style and intent of their criticism were in the line of some of the most important cultural traditions of Germany. Second, their criticism touched upon some of the true weaknesses of German culture, and by its verisimilitude gained credence. Third, the political life of Germany from 1870 to 1933 was marked by the very divisiveness that these men decried, and this in turn facilitated the intrusion of their sentiments into politics. The conservative revolution in general, and the thought of these three men in particular, touched the realities of German life more closely than the similar thought of conservative revolutionaries elsewhere.

There is another reason for the success of the conservative revolution. As we saw, the primary target was modernity as

discipline. But society lacks the Outsider's penetrating critical intellect. In its secret craving for a discipline, for something to follow, it runs after every fire-eating politician, every heart-throb evangelist, every dictator with a programme." According to Stuart Holroyd, "The obstacles which prevent the average modern man from ever attaining to the religious attitude are numerous. Three centuries of humanist culture have bequeathed us a burden of ideas and attitudes which few people ever get around even to questioning, and which are quite incompatible with the religious attitude. Liberalism, the dogma of equality, the faith in scientific method, the myth of progress and the idea of the perfectibility of man, may be cited as examples. We all grew up in the climate of these ideas, and it is difficult for us to shake ourselves free of them. But we must, somehow, if we are to survive as anything more than a race of ingenious little animals." Colin Wilson, "Beyond the Outsider," in *Declaration*, ed. by Tom Maschler, London, Macgibbon and Kee, 1957, pp. 37 and 42; and Stuart Holroyd, "A Sense of Crisis," in *ibid.*, p. 188.

These words  
Real basis  
for traditional politics

part of German culture

Events in German history confirmed their fears.



embodied in the rational, liberal, and capitalistic society, which in its political form was shaped, at least on the Continent, by the French Revolution. So far as the German critics opposed this society, they could more easily appeal to a powerful strain in German nationalism. The generation of Arndt and Fichte had already denounced liberal ideas and political institutions as alien, "un-German," and Western. The Germanic critics could more readily dismiss the ideas of 1789 as alien frauds than could Barrès, say, or Maurras. Finally, liberalism and the parliamentary tradition had never been as strong in Germany as in the Western countries, and were therefore easier to attack. In Germany, where liberalism had had so accommodating a character and so unsuccessful a political career, it was easy first to make it despicable and then to despise it.<sup>11</sup>

Lagarde, Langbehn, and Moeller van den Bruck were idealists, and as such they appealed to the educated classes of Germany, whose yearning to be idealistic predisposed them to this kind of appeal. The term "idealist" is ambiguous in English; it is still more elusive in German, where it connotes as well the major philosophical tradition of modern Germany. But the idealism I have in mind was no longer a formal philosophical system. Rather it was an attitude toward life, a set of sentiments and values, that the educated classes inherited from common intellectual traditions and that were gradually adapted to their position in society. Intellectually this idealism was derived from the great works of the idealist period, from Goethe, Kant, and Schiller; it was taught at the higher schools and cultivated in the homes. The residue of the earlier philosophy can be found in the rhetoric of the later period, in the continued predilection for abstract and metaphysical terms, in the implicit belief that the spirit or the idea was the ultimate expression of reality. This idealism involved also the recollection of earlier moral imperatives and esthetic ideals; the great classicist Ludwig Curtius wrote of the ideal of German humanism: "This 'pure humanity' was not a pale abstract theory, but a moral command, directed at each individual, for the reconstruction of his personal life."<sup>12</sup> This command, the essence of what the Germans often called individualism, could best be followed by the pursuit of culture, by literary and esthetic education. The idealism of the later nineteenth century embodied an exceptional veneration for learning, for

the cultivation of the self. At its best, this veneration inspired the dedicated energy of Germany's scholars; at its worst, it degenerated into a kind of culture Philistinism, adding a powerful rationalization to the already formidable barrier between the educated and the uneducated classes.<sup>13</sup>

This idealism, with its emphasis on culture and the cultivation of *Innerlichkeit*, did not encourage political participation or even political concern. Neither did the semiauthoritarian political order which Bismarck had installed in 1871. Rebuffed in actuality and turned inward by their beliefs, the German elite tended to become estranged from reality and disdainful of it. It lost the power to deal with practical matters in practical terms; as Friedrich Meinecke put it: "Specifically German also . . . was the tendency to elevate something primarily practical into a universal world-view theory."<sup>14</sup>

Bismarck had created a state that had no constitutional theory; its justification, he thought, was that it worked. Power thinly disguised on the one hand, and spirit emptied of all practicality on the other—these surely were two aspects of imperial Germany. The link between the two realms was the idealization of power; the middle classes, in Max Weber's phrase, "ethicized" Bismarck's achievement of power. This also encouraged a certain idolatry of idealism in politics. Practical ideas and programs were discounted in favor of complete disinterestedness and the right kind of *Haltung* or character.\* By the same token, Lagarde, Langbehn, and Moeller van den Bruck, outsiders all, appealed as idealists, whether their ideas had a shred of practicality or not.

Finally, these men appealed to large segments of German society because they were idealistic and religious. For the Protestant academic classes had fused Christianity and German idealism so as to forge a *Kulturreligion*, which hid beneath pious allusions to Goethe, Schiller, and the Bible a most thoroughgoing secularization. The religious tone remained, even after the religious faith and the religious canons had disappeared. Hence these three men, as well as the conservative revo-

\* As one example, consider Theodor Eschenburg's description of Ernst Bassermann, the leader of the National Liberals during most of the Wilhelmine period: "His political views were not the product of long reflections, but corresponded to his *Lebensgefühl* and his sensibilities, to his reverent character and to the tradition in which he was raised." Theodor Eschenburg, *Das Kaiserreich am Scheideweg*. Bassermann, *Bülou und der Block*, Berlin, Verlag für Kulturpolitik, 1929, p. 25.

lutionaries generally, appealed to the religious sentimentality of some, to the genuine desire for religion of others.

*Artists & thinkers the heroes not politicians*

This Kulturreligion embraced nationalism as well, for it insisted on the identity of German idealism and nationalism. The essence of the German nation was expressed in its spirit, revealed by its artists and thinkers, and at times still reflected in the life of the simple, unspoiled folk. In imperial Germany, this type of cultural nationalism grew, until it found its fullest expression in the First World War, when German intellectuals insisted that they were culturally independent of the West and that the German empire as then constituted fully embodied the supreme cultural values of the German people.

Given this type of idealism, it is no wonder that the German intellectual classes were particularly responsive to the pleadings of Lagarde, Langbehn, and Moeller van den Bruck. Their sentiments proved to have been shared by many people. It is often forgotten that after 1871 many thoughtful Germans were gripped by a mood of mingled pride and disenchantment: pride in the power and the unity of the Reich, disenchantment with the culture of the empire, with the fact that beneath the crust of prosperous politics the old Germany was disintegrating, pulled apart by modernity—by liberalism, secularism, and industrialism. Common were the lamentations about the decline of the German spirit, the defeat of idealism by the forces of realism in politics and of materialism in business. Many would have agreed with Nietzsche's epigram of 1888: "'German spirit': for the past eighteen years a contradiction in terms." The educated German—the academic, the bureaucrat, the professional man—had for generations occupied a place of distinction just below the aristocrat, and he was now puzzled and disturbed by the rise of a society that accorded equal or superior distinction to men of crasser aims and morals. Dismay was often heard; it appeared clearly in Mommsen's academic addresses, in which time and again he dealt with

the spiritual development of our people under the radiance of good fortune. As the soldier can more easily withstand the dangers and deprivations of war than the intoxication of victory, so we are living before and amidst a spontaneous regeneration of old moral afflictions and a spontaneous generation of new afflictions which spread like an epidemic and which threaten the foundations of our society.<sup>15</sup>

Fear of this "moral decay," as Mommsen called it, was deep-seated, and Lagarde, Langbehn, and Moeller van den Bruck not only thundered against this decay, but offered remedies which generations of unpolitical, idealistic Germans regarded as noble and practical.

As we look back on imperial Germany, we can hardly wonder that the immense cultural upheaval caused such concern. What is surprising, and explicable only if we remember the idealistic insulation of the educated citizens, is that often they mistook change for decline, and, consistent with their conception of history, attributed the decline to a moral failing. Certainly German views on culture were no more realistic than their views on politics. Self-knowledge is no more common among nations than among men; still, few societies in the modern world were so remote from reality as the Germans in the years of the empire.

*change decline*

The real conditions were bad enough and justified some of the fears. With a suddenness that has had no parallel, the industrial revolution changed the face and character of German society. The story of that transformation is familiar enough; in the popular mind, the classical horrors of the industrial revolution are properly associated with England, not with Germany. The patent miseries of late eighteenth-century industrialization did not appear in Germany. The real cost, the psychic cost, has been ignored. Yet the history of Germany from 1871 to 1945 records not only the most extreme economic antagonisms of an industrial society, but the violent resentment against the new industrialism, which in different guises erupted time and again in German life.

*Indust. Rev.*

To a people sentimental about nature and their ancient towns, the sudden rise of monstrously big and ugly cities was distressing. Nor did Germany do things by halves; by 1910, it had almost as many large cities as the entire rest of the Continent. In those cities a different way of life prevailed. The quiet tone and ordered life of preindustrial society were replaced by a strident tone and by continual change. The pressures of commercialism were heavy indeed, and there was some truth to the charges that the arts and education were in decline. The Protestant Church was losing its power and vitality. And in this changing Germany, there arose the newly emancipated Jews, themselves torn between their old identity and the promise of a new assimilation, who by gaining con-

siderable influence over the cultural life of the nation could be held responsible for some of its shortcomings. Many a German honestly felt that this new society was fundamentally un-German, that the true character of German life had been violated.

Beyond the fear of cultural decline lay a still vaguer sense of malaise concerning Germany's political future. Here too the industrial revolution had wrought immense changes. Bismarck had unified the German states, but the industrial revolution wrecked anew the unity of the German people. The emergence of industrialization under the already repressive and anachronistic regime of Bismarck deepened old and created new class antagonisms. In no other state did feudal and proletarian forces confront each other so directly, for in no other industrial country did the bourgeoisie play so insignificant a political role. The symptoms of these new divisions were clearly manifest, as was Bismarck's alarming use of state power to war against Catholics and socialists. But few Germans understood the causes of these new antagonisms, and justifiable concern was often dissipated in the rhetoric of resentment. If there was political conflict, if the Bismarckian system failed to work, then the fault must lie with the new political machinery, with parliaments, with political parties, with the whole system of incipient democracy. These charges—which Lagarde made with great passion and success—had a certain verisimilitude to them because Bismarck had invested parliamentary bodies with little power or responsibility and hence they seemed to be useless appendages to an otherwise efficient government. Parties were held in low esteem, and the absence of a true conservative party, that is, of a party that was more than a narrow interest group, was a great loss to the political education of Germans. The power of delusion was great, evidenced most clearly by the common longing for a Caesar, for an ultimate authority that would somehow reconcile and transcend all divisions and would realize the one common goal of all upper-class Germans, a great national future. In imperial Germany, interest ruled and sentiment disguised, and it required the penetrating mind of Max Weber to see through the sham and to discern the true condition of Germany. As early as 1895, in his inaugural address, he noted that "to have a declining economic class hold political authority in its hands

CONCRETE  
POLITICAL  
CONCERNS

is dangerous and in the long run incompatible with the national interest." But the bourgeoisie, Weber added, was politically too immature to rule, too prone to yearn for a new Caesar, too willing to substitute 'ethical' for political ideals. Nor did the proletariat possess the statesmanlike qualities that would allow it to rule.<sup>16</sup> Others could not see Weber's vision of political truth, but were oppressed by vague and formless premonitions of disaster. *lack of subtle understatement's dissonant*

Cultural discontent, Caesarism, and nationalist hope were the dominant sentiments of many Germans before the First World War. These feelings found expression in the great exaltation of August, 1914, when at last the cultural boredom of the nation was lifted, when politics were suspended, when the nation in danger would soon become the nation triumphant. The exaltation waned, but in its first flush, German intellectuals, most notably Thomas Mann, summed up the whole idealistic, unpolitical tradition of German life by juxtaposing two types of freedom—the Germanic freedom of the inner man and the external freedom of "Western" liberal man. *WEIMAR informed fears.*

For large segments of the educated classes, the Weimar Republic was discredited in advance, morally bankrupt before it was established. For four years the Germans had battled the West, and many of them elevated that struggle, too, into the metaphysical realm, believing that the Germanic and the Western characters were antithetical. When the republic did come, it was almost a parody of their fears. This was the liberal state, as they had dreaded it—divided, defenseless, and defeated, the victim of selfish interests at home and abroad. As for the culture of Weimar, could a more dissonant triumph of modernity be imagined? Powerful as cultural despair, Caesarism, and nationalist hope had already been in the prewar consciousness, the very weakness of Weimar inflamed these feelings and made them stronger still. *was seen in meta-physical terms*

It was in Weimar that the conservative revolution reached the height of its power. Moeller van den Bruck's *Das Dritte Reich*, a final summary of the resentments and aspirations of the would-be conservatives, had a great appeal to many educated Germans. The pleas of Thomas Mann and a few others for the restoration of political reason and their warnings against the "sentimental brutality" that pervaded the German

right were of no avail.\* Decades of political delusion had done their work, and many a conservative German shudderingly admired the terroristic idealism of Hitler's movement. The National Socialists gathered together the millions of malcontents, of whose existence the conservative revolutionaries had for so long spoken, and for whose relief they had designed such dangerous and elusive ideals.

\* In the declining years of the Weimar Republic, Thomas Mann ridiculed the pretensions and the political implications of the conservative revolution. He often chose academic audiences to clarify his position and to dissociate himself formally from a position which at one time had been his own. "Obscurantism—in politics we call it reaction—is brutality; it is sentimental brutality insofar as it tries to hide its brutal and irrational character 'under the impressive mask' of Germanic temperament and loyalty." Thomas Mann, "Von Deutscher Republik," *Bemühungen*, Berlin 1925, p. 151.

## I: Paul de Lagarde and a Germanic Religion