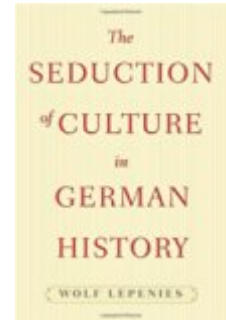


Wolf Lepenies. *The Seduction of Culture in German History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006. 270 pp. \$24.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-691-12131-4.



Reviewed by Anna Manchin

Published on H-Nationalism (October, 2006)

Wolf Lepenies, one of Germany's foremost public intellectuals, has written a fascinating and chilling essay on the seemingly unshakable German "attitude" of valuing culture over politics. This attitude contributed not only to the rise of fascism; it also accounted for the historian Friedrich Meinecke's conviction that, in the aftermath of World War II, Germany did not need a political reckoning, but an "intensified development of the Germans' inner existence," preferably in spiritual-religious Goethe communities.

Fritz Stern's notion of a specific "Germanic spirit" and various revisions of it were crucial to the writing of an earlier generation of intellectual historians (including George Mosse, Fritz Ringer, and Peter Gay) who searched for an explanation for fascism's quick and easy rise to power in a nation of Germany's intellectual and cultural heritage. They all found an answer in German culture's romantic, anti-rationalist, and anti-democratic tendencies; a new mix of romanticism and technology, along with a lack of a liberal political tradition; the specific experience and spiritual mode of German society after the war; and the

German tendency to embrace "art as a model for life," and they all agreed that cultural climate was important for politics. [1] Recent histories of the period have done much to undermine the notion of German peculiarity and of a general and unchanging German national character. Yet the role of cultural trends as powerful agents still needs to be seriously addressed. Lepenies's book does just this.

Lepenies offers a fresh departure in the debate: instead of taking for granted the intellectual tendency to see in culture a "noble substitute for politics," he examines the role of this attitude in German domestic and foreign policy, through various episodes in Germany's intellectual history. Lepenies's essay is at once a political and an intellectual history of an idea (that culture is more important than politics), attesting to the fact that the two realms are inseparable. On the one hand, he examines how influential intellectuals throughout German history such as Johann Wolfgang Goethe imagined the relationship between culture and politics. On the other, he shows his readers how an exalted notion of culture became a political

statement shaping public life and politics, as when Goethe was held up as the spiritual godfather of the German Democratic Republic.

The Seduction of Culture is about the relationship between culture and politics, denied in the cliché of the apolitical German spirit. Lepenies reconstructs, through a series of interwoven intellectual debates and dialogues taking place at particular historical moments, the evolution and cultural work of this idea. Embraced by followers of Goethe when German culture as yet had no state, the notion was transformed in Imperial Germany where "Goethe's skepticism toward the realm of politics in general was misused as an argument against party politics in particular" (p. 157).

The idea of a superior German *Kultur* was used to support German political aggression in 1914, and helped Hitler's party justify its policies in the Third Reich. Furthermore, despite the expectation that the political catastrophe of World War II and the Holocaust would forever discredit the exaltation of culture over politics, the notion of a sacrosanct high culture survived in Germany well into the postwar period. It continued to thrive in West Germany, obstructing a political reckoning with the past, and in East Germany, where "internal emigration" remained a preferred solution for intellectuals.

Addressing the issue of the foreign politics of German *Kultur*, Lepenies convincingly argues that the idea of an anti-rational, anti-political German culture was also used by Alan Bloom in his book *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987) to support a conservative turn in U.S. domestic cultural politics. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the idea continued to take its political toll: East German dissidents, encouraged by the condescension of Westerners, rejected the idea of political compromise and refused to take part in the politics of a unified Germany, thus leaving the West without a serious challenge. A crucial opportunity to reevaluate the status quo was missed (p. 175). Moreover, when the EU member states shied

away from taking political steps toward a fuller economic (Eastern) European integration, emphasizing the importance of cultural unity and celebrating the achievements of East European culture became a way of covering up the embarrassment for the lack of political commitment on the part of the Economic Union.

In making all these points, Lepenies draws on an impressive range of sources, using public lectures, speeches and private correspondence as well as books and articles. He focuses on prominent and diverse intellectuals (Germans, German émigrés, French, and American) who addressed the relationship between culture and politics, among them Johann von Goethe, Julien Benda, Friedrich Meinecke, Alan Bloom, Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers. Of particular interest, Thomas Mann's evolving political thought and biography serve as a guide throughout the book. Mann's initial rejection of parliamentary politics in Germany turned into a spirited defense of the Weimar Republic and of democratic politics from the 1920s. But through these years, as an émigré and representative of German *Kultur* in the United States, he struggled to reconcile a commitment to democratic politics with "German romanticism." When Mann returned to Europe at the end of his life, he expressed his support for the United States through enthusiastic praise for its culture, but not for its politics.

As Lepenies shows, the seeming continuity of this "attitude" can be deceiving: neither culture nor politics had the same meaning, over time and to everyone. Lepenies demonstrates that the exaltation of culture over politics could be used to support very different attitudes, political positions, and outcomes. One of the most striking examples is the debate between émigrés and "inner émigrés" in postwar Germany. The novelist Frank Thiess, a self-declared "inner émigré," argued that internal exiles had contributed the most to the survival of German culture ("nowhere had Goethe been read more intensely than in Germany ... un-

der Nazi dictatorship") whose loss would have been the greatest catastrophe of all (p. 139). On the other hand, Thomas Mann--criticized by "internal émigrés" for his "alienation from Germany"--blamed German inwardness and irrationalism as the cause of Germany's political failures (p. 138, 140). Their political differences notwithstanding, both sides showed a remarkable similarity in their attitude: both "mystified culture" and failed to search for a political explanation or political responsibility. The view of high culture and politics they both shared supported entirely different political views.

A recurring point of the book is that the separation of politics and culture was a dangerous illusion in German history because it denied the political in culture while simultaneously renouncing political responsibility. Separating politics and culture easily gives the impression that only high-ranking politicians are responsible for politics, not citizens of the state. It is unrealistic and dangerous to restrict the meaning of "politics" to formal or party politics, so that anything short of "politics" can be let off the political hook. In fact, to talk about culture, especially "national culture" or "universal culture" is always a political act with political consequences. As Thomas Mann said in 1933, quoting Richard Wagner, "whoever tries to get away from the political deceives himself" (quoted, p. 176).

Lepenies's book also presents a history of the intellectual in the age of the modern mass public--not a specifically German story. The dilemma of the public role of the intellectual and the modern notion of high culture were both raised in the early nineteenth century by romantic artists who correctly felt that their identity and position in the modern world had to be redefined. The discussions of high culture and politics in Lepenies's account are intertwined throughout with a debate on what public (political) roles are available and possible for the modern intellectual in mass society.

One of the points Lepenies makes is that this German attitude allowed both a reverent trust in high culture and an apolitical attitude to survive with an untarnished reputation in Germany after World War II. The persistence of this idea implies the stability of the notion of culture as meaning high cultural artistic and intellectual production, and the belief that the sacred, inner realm of artistic and intellectual creation can be separated from the social, economic, and political context in which it takes place. It would also be interesting to address more specifically the investment of cultural and political players in this notion of culture. When and how was this consensus on the meaning of culture (high culture) challenged, when did it change, and with what effect?

Perhaps to the dismay of culturally conservative intellectuals, popular culture undeniably came to play a role in public debates in Germany. As Andreas Huyssen has argued, it was not the products of German avant-garde art that finally initiated widespread public discussion of the Holocaust in West Germany, but rather American popular culture, through the airing of the NBC miniseries *Holocaust* in Germany in 1979.[2]

What role did the changing view of popular culture and the changing position of high culture play in the German tendency to value culture over politics? Lepenies's book leaves you with the desire for elaboration on the politics of the boundaries separating *Kultur* from culture. Particularly, it would be interesting to juxtapose the belief that high culture survived the Third Reich unscathed, and the only casualty was "everyday" culture, or what Lepenies refers to as "common decency" with the high cultural disdain for the commercial, the popular and the everyday.

Notes

[1]. See Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of the German Ideology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961); Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture and Politics in Weimar and the Third Re-*

ich (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984); and Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989).

[2]. Andreas Huyssen, "The Politics of Identification: Holocaust and West German Drama," in *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 98.

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Citation: Anna Manchin. Review of Lepenies, Wolf. *The Seduction of Culture in German History*. H-Nationalism, H-Net Reviews. October, 2006.

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