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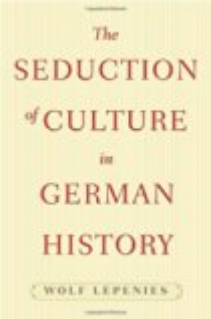
Wolf Lepenies. *The Seduction of Culture in German History.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006. 270 pp. $24.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-691-12131-4.



Reviewed by Todd Weir

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On the occasion of his acceptance of the 2006 Peace Prize of the German Book Trade, eminent sociologist Wolf Lepenies took those Western intellectuals and politicians to task who have interpreted fundamentalist Islamic terror as a symptom of a looming "war of cultures." This interpretation is not only objectively false, he argued, but plays to the interests of fundamentalists. He considered the contrary call for a "coalition of cultures" to be equally simplistic. Instead, Lepenies suggested that his audience initiate a constructive engagement with the "historical recognition of the tight interweaving of the West with the Islamic world."[1] Although not named directly by Lepenies in his speech, public figures like historian Hans-Ulrich Wehler and Chancellor Angela Merkel have asserted the existence of a deep cultural gap between the West and Islam to oppose Turkish membership in the European Union. The idea that cultures are monolithic, trans-historical entities is a seductive explanation for international conflicts. However, as Lepenies sets out to demonstrate in this volume, "the seduction of culture" is a particularly German vice that has had disastrous consequences.

The author positions himself within the now standard interpretation of the role of *Kultur* in German history. This holds that the "anti-political" celebration of culture was initially elevated by German middle class elites as their "sphere of freedom" under autocratic monarchy, but later "turned against the parliamentary politics of the democratic state" (p. 4). What the reader will find new in Lepenies's account is, first of all, his application of this argument to more recent German history, in particular, to what he sees as the failure of East German intellectuals to provide leadership to East Germans in 1989. Second, instead of attempting a synthetic account of the history of *Kultur*, Lepenies takes a musical, impressionistic approach to "the old problem."

The thesis that the "overrating of culture at the expense of politics" played a leading role in all major German political disasters operates as a sort of *basso continuo* throughout eleven chapters that criss-cross the past 200 years. Against this background, numerous intellectual voices are

heard that reflect, refract and problematize this thesis. Thus Lepenies does not tarry on the villains, but focuses on liberal intellectuals as imperfect heroes who best reveal the ambiguous tensions between politics and culture in German history. He repeatedly calls upon Theodor Adorno, Friedrich Meinecke and Hannah Arendt as witnesses and critics, but also chides them for their contradictory statements. He looks for connections across time to create "vignettes" that reveal "the kaleidoscopic recurrence of problems and themes, leitmotifs and authors" (p. 8). This "history-of-ideas approach" is consistent with some of Lepenies's long-term methodological interests in "entangled histories" and "elective affinities."[2] However, as Lepenies's work progresses into the Cold War period, the compelling combination of musical composition and intellectual history largely breaks down, for reasons I will discuss below.

The first chapter begins with a critique of the idea formerly adhered to by Lepenies that philosophical idealism and inwardness constituted a German intellectual *Sonderweg*. He no longer accepts a western norm of modernization from which to judge this path and he has also discarded the idea that there is a single German character. Nonetheless, he still claims that overestimation of culture and indifference to politics "nowhere played a greater role than in Germany and have nowhere else survived to the same degree" (p. 6). Thus, although he dispenses with the name, Lepenies makes a good case for restating key elements of the *Sonderweg* thesis from an "ironic distance."

Lepenies takes his cue as to the importance of irony for a proper appropriation of the German cultural tradition from Thomas Mann, the subject of the second chapter. Irony, Lepenies believes, helped Mann make the leap from ***Reflections of an Unpolitical Man*** (1918) to advocacy of democracy and political responsibility. Mann's insights and his "timeless ambivalence" allow him to play the part of Lepenies's Virgil, who accompanies the author in subsequent chapters through the inferno of Germany's twentieth century.

In the next three chapters, Lepenies follows the critical approach taken in his acceptance speech in Frankfurt. He first characterizes the historical genesis of binary conceptions of national difference and then confounds them by uncovering subterranean connections, counter-narratives and contradictions. These are the best chapters of the book.

Lepenies introduces chapter 3 with Goebbels's and Hitler's avowals of an unbridgeable gulf between German cultural greatness and American cultural poverty. Against this backdrop, he opens up Thomas Mann's 1922 essay on the elective affinities between the German Romantic novelists and the democratic Walt Whitman. This alternative history linked German Romanticism to cosmopolitanism and tolerance and thereby built an intellectual foundation for Mann's own "conversion" to democracy. Lepenies then substantiates these elective affinities by looking at the very real contribution of German philosophy and art to the development of American transcendentalism.

Chapter 4 takes on the claim made by the American conservative Allan Bloom that German thought helped lead American intellectuals down the path of a cynical cultural relativism. After highlighting the enormous positive contribution of German émigrés to American postwar academia, including Bloom's own mentor Leo Strauss, Lepenies turns the tables on Bloom by noting the similarity between the cultural pessimism of his ***Closing of the American Mind*** (1987) and that found in Ernst Robert Curtius's ***Deutscher Geist in Gefahr*** (1932).

Lepenies addresses German-French "culture wars" in chapter 5. After recreating moments of exchange and of hostility, the author hones in on the efforts of Maurice Halbwachs to mediate between the patriarchs of the German and French sociological traditions, Max Weber and Emile Durkheim. Here Lepenies weaves together the

history of scientific transfer with Halbwachs's demands for "intellectual resistance" to tyranny and his suffering and ultimate death at the hands of the German state. The themes of Holocaust and culture and of Germans and Jews touched on here form the focus of chapter 6 on intellectuals in the postwar period.

In chapter 7 Lepenies examines the popularity of Goethe in both German states after 1949, where it was widely accepted that a proper reading of Goethe would necessarily lead to the "moral repair" of the population. Against this assumption Lepenies shows that not only had the Nazis successfully instrumentalized Goethe, but that the East German state also used "Goethe's legacy ... as an arsenal providing the weapons for an antimodernist attack against the West" (p. 162). The GDR put "greater emphasis on Goethe as its guide and witness for cultural policy" than the BRD, as illustrated by Walter Ulbricht's famous statement of 1962 that the GDR represented *Faust III* (p. 163). Using poll statistics that revealed a consistently lower interest in Goethe among West Germans, Lepenies argues that "East Germans seemed to feel much closer to Goethe and his spiritual heritage," implying thereby a partial success of SED cultural policy (p. 155).

This material sets the stage for the boldest and yet most questionable interpretation in this book. In chapter 8 Lepenies proposes that West German intellectuals were ultimately able to break free of the myth of culture through internationalization and their criticism of the "moral failure to confront the Nazi past" (p. 168). East Germany meanwhile effectively became the cultural heir to National Socialism. In the East, "the years from 1933 to 1989 belong to a single epoch conspicuously lacking in cultural modernity" and characterized by "a continuity of moral cowardice" (pp. 167, 168). The GDR's forty-year "intellectual disaster" led to an "intellectual tragicomedy" in 1989, when East German intellectuals failed to understand the will of their people and hence failed as an "interpreting class" (p. 170, 172). Members of the intellectual elites, such as Stefan Heym, Christa Wolf and the dissidents of the Neues Forum, shared an "inner-worldly socialism" (p. 171). This made them collectively unable "to make a clean-cut choice between two fundamental ethics," by which Lepenies clearly means Max Weber's "ethics of intention" and "ethics of responsibility" (p. 173). By following the "ethics of intention" East German intellectuals failed to lead the revolution and become its "intellectual heroes."

The discussion of Poland and Czechoslovakia in chapter 9, otherwise out of place in a book on German history, was apparently inserted by Lepenies as a comparative case to heighten his critique of East German intellectuals. Writers like Vaclav Havel proved that dissident intellectuals could make "a heroic comeback to the political stage" (p. 181). Having long fought for human rights, they were able to convert their moral capital into political leadership and lead their peoples to democracy. After a transitional period, Lepenies concludes, these moral prophets naturally gave way to the pragmatic "shopkeepers" or became "shopkeepers" themselves (p. 183).

Coinciding with the strong thesis on the *Wende* is an abrupt switch in tone and methodology. The tools of intellectual history are abandoned in favor of the rhetorical style of the political essay, of which Lepenies is a master. This switch is also evident in his use of sources. Whereas previous chapters incorporated ample statements by intellectuals, in this chapter Lepenies only cites a single East German voice, that of dissident leader Bärbel Bohley. Her statement, "We had hoped for justice, and all we got was the rule of law," demonstrates for Lepenies the critical intellectuals' "fundamental contempt for politics and the procedural intricacies of democracy" (p. 175). Omitting East German voices is presumably justified by Lepenies's disqualification of East German intelligentsia as having conformed to the "politi-

cally correct" and largely "boring and repetitive" socialist culture and for having merely "dealt with minor corrections of the established cultural canon" (p. 168). He disqualifies the dissident intellectuals too, for having been "molded by a milieu conspicuously lacking in cultural modernity" (p. 175).

This *a priori* exclusion of intellectual voices is questionable for a book claiming to be an intellectual history. The same holds for the evident lack of serious examination of secondary sources. Of the nine footnotes for chapter 8, only one cites a work that actually deals with reunification. The following chapter on Eastern Europe similarly cites only two articles on the subject. The collapse of scholarly distance and of a basis for falsification corresponds to Lepenies's insertion of himself into the text as an eyewitness. He recounts two scenes in which he directly or indirectly witnessed East German intellectual failure (pp. 168, 174).

Lepenies's interpretation of the *Wende* rests on two debatable analytical moves. First, he takes the slogan "we are the people!" chanted in the demonstrations in fall of 1989 at face value, that is as the self-constitution of the people as a single entity. By treating "the people" as the authentic voice of freedom and pragmatic self-interest and as "the heroes of this revolution" (p. 172), Lepenies sets up the East German intellectuals to appear inauthentic and blind when the modified slogan "we are one people!" revealed the "true intentions of the crowd" (p. 172). Second, Lepenies downplays the structural elements that contributed to this disconnect between the intellectuals and the population, such as the lack of a functioning public sphere and the open invitation to economic and political unity on offer from a powerful and wealthy German neighbor. Discounting this latter structural element allows him to make the comparative contrast with the intellectual "heroes" of Central Europe. Yet one wants to ask the counterfactual questions: if socialist Czechoslovakia had had a larger capitalist Czechoslovakia next door, would the population have voted in the playwright Vaclav Havel? Or would they, like their East German neighbors, not have immediately voted in the "shopkeepers" who promised them the quickest path to unification?

These essentializations are necessary for Lepenies's Weberian argument that it was the continuity of what Thomas Mann called the "machtgeschützte Innerlichkeit" of German intellectuals under authoritarian regimes that led them to misunderstand "the meaning of words" (p. 172). Rather than accept the existence of an essential difference of political aims between the majority of the East German population and the intellectuals, he relies ultimately on culture as the explanatory factor. The GDR, he writes, was "a culture with blurred moral alternatives. This is one reason why the revolution in the GDR did not give rise to intellectual heroes" (p. 173).

By placing East German intellectuals in a continuum with Nazi apologists and earlier cultural critics, Lepenies's analysis drifts here towards a moral-cultural totalitarianism theory. The sociologist Detlev Pollack rightly criticizes this type of thinking in studies of the *Wende* by other leading Western European and West German scholars, who made "the tradition of unpolitical, civilization-critical German thought responsible for the conformity of independent [oppositional] groups" in the GDR. They invoked a German spirit that is "collectively oriented, obedient to authority, skeptical of democracy and apolitical" and that makes the impression of being "a metaphysical category, that floats over all historical realities, does not need socio-cultural mediation and does its work with an iron necessity [that is] undisturbed by world-historical catastrophes, socio-revolutionary restructuring of society and cultural discontinuities."[3] This criticism can be applied to Lepenies, who uses culture as a simple and seductive explanation for a complex phenomenon.

Rather than deconstructing oppositions by searching for historical entanglements, as he did in previous chapters, Lepenies's analysis of East Germany is set on constructing them. To do so, he abandons the earlier impressionistic journeys written with light musicality and from an ironic distance and turns to political essays written with heavy sarcasm. His tone and his treatment of East German intellectuals may well reveal more about the reigning attitude of his generation of West German elites towards the East than about the East German intellectuals themselves.

It is significant that the German version of this book has been marketed as a popular *Sachbuch* with the subtitle of "German Stories."[4] Whereas most chapters are longer than those in the English version, the German version condenses the three chapters on East and West Germany into a single chapter entitled "On the Way to Unity." Here Lepenies curtails and softens his criticism of East German intellectuals and embeds their failure in a hopeful, if still slightly ambivalent, look at reunification as the "End of the *Sonderweg*." As the East Germans carry the cultural *Sonderweg* with them into the grave, Günther Grass appears as a redemptive figure in Lepenies's narrative; he shows how critical (West) German intellectuals finally established a healthy relationship between culture and politics.

This volume is a series of essays written in effortless and beautiful prose by one of Germany's most important social scientists. It provides useful meditations on the entangled histories of a number of important twentieth-century intellectuals in Germany, France and the United States. Lepenies's interpretation of the *Wende* as a "failure of the interpreting class" is nonetheless open to both substantive and methodological criticism. Like the theses recently advanced upon receiving the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade, however, Lepenies's book nonetheless deserves attention and will no doubt elicit an interesting debate.

Notes

[1]. Printed in *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, no. 232, October 9, 2006, p. 17.

[2]. Wolf Lepenies, *Entangled Histories and Negotiated Universals: Centers and Peripheries in a Changing World* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2003); *Gefährliche Wahlverwandtschaften. Essays zur Wissenschaftsgeschichte* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1989).

[3]. Detlef Pollack, *Politischer Protest. Politisch alternative Gruppen in der DDR* (Opladen: Leske und Budrich, 2000), pp. 20-21.

[4]. The significantly modified German version of this text was published as *Kultur und Politik. Deutsche Geschichten* (Munich: Hanser, 2006).

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