



Michael J. Cowan. *Cult of the Will: Nervousness and German Modernity.* University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008. ix + 343 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-271-03206-1.



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Commissioned by Susan R. Boettcher

At the heart of Michael Cowan's story about nervousness and German modernity is what he describes as a "paradigm shift" (p. 3) from reactive, impressionistic, and deterministic tropes in the late nineteenth century to more expressive, creative, and volitional ones around 1900. His baseline narrative involves the re-imagining of human agency at a time when positivist and determinist doctrines had largely denied individuals any power to shape their own destiny. To study this process of re-imagining agency, he takes the "rebellious nervous body" (p. 11) as a metaphor for a broader set of cultural forces (especially the capitalist economy but also technology and urbanity) that were relentlessly and uncontrollably bearing down on individuals and thwarting their wills.

Against the backdrop of this general narrative structure, Cowan's study concerns modern motivational therapies. He has written a history of German attempts to reclaim individual autonomy and galvanize self-confidence. He argues that many of these new remedies sought to achieve

their ends through ritual performances of the body. Unlike psychoanalysis, which worked its therapeutic magic through biographic catharsis, Cowan makes the case for the ability of imagined bodies to stoke the fires of the will and instill fantasies of unlimited power. He understands this as a "second modern technique of the self," standing alongside psychoanalysis as its "ongoing *double*, born from the same experience of nervousness and modern insecurity" (p. 264).

The first chapter essentially lays out some of the late-nineteenth-century discourse on the demise of liberal optimism, hypersensitivity, and the aesthetics of impressionism. Cowan's chief theme is the nervous entrepreneur, for which he draws substantially on the writings of Karl Lamprecht and Willy Hellpach. Their nervous entrepreneur was volitionally impaired, lacked self-confidence, and seemed powerless in the face of large socioeconomic forces. Cowan goes on to explore the relationship between this putatively capitalist-induced state of abulia and its expression in the aesthetics of impressionism. Not sur-

prisingly perhaps, he turns here to Austrian commentators, especially Hermann Bahr and Hugo von Hofmannsthal, and the reception of Joris-Karl Huysmans's novel *À rebours* (1884). Cowan sees the cultivation of an aesthetics of nervous sensations and *Stimmungen* as serving to "objectify the insecurity accompanying liberal economics" (p. 39). To illustrate further the collapse of confidence in human agency in the face of expanding economic forces, Cowan concludes the chapter with an extended discussion of Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* (1901) that highlights its similarities with the historical narratives of Hellpach and Lamprecht.

Having thus set the stage, the remainder of the monograph is a study of some of the responses to this moribund state of fin-de-siècle willpower. Cowan divides these responses into four chapters on healing, training, educating, and mapping the will. In chapter 2, on healing the will, Cowan lays out the transition from rest cures for neurasthenia to the promotion of willed activity in line with the bourgeois work ethic. Again invoking a "paradigm shift" (p. 83) from physiology to psychology around 1900, Cowan argues that a "new psychology" derived the cause of nervousness no longer from physical exhaustion, but rather from emotional distress. Cowan then examines handbooks and self-help literature on *Willenstherapie* to study how hypnosis and autosuggestion corresponded with various forms of bodily performance to produce a subjective sense of willpower. Cowan stresses the influence of the French psychologists Jules Payot and Paul Émile Lévy on German practitioners, especially Reinhold Gerling, whose *Gymnastik des Willens* (1905) he cites regularly, albeit in its heavily revised 1920 edition.

In chapter 3, the book turns to gymnastics and body culture to illustrate efforts to train the will. Obviously, gymnastic traditions stretch well back into the nineteenth century, but Cowan sees them receiving added impetus from the rise of nervousness and as evolving in new directions,

especially toward athletic competitions in areas such as high jumping, weightlifting, bicycle riding, and so on. Such athletic performances also cultivated new aesthetic sensibilities, in which ideals and fantasies of the sporting body were in turn read as expressions of enhanced willpower and performative force. Body culture thereby enlisted willpower and aesthetic experience in the service of a "broader motivational project designed to overcome the pessimism associated with nineteenth-century neurasthenia" (p. 140).

Chapter 4 on educating the will touches very briefly on reform pedagogy before turning to Émile Jaques-Dalcroze's School of Rhythmical Gymnastics in Dresden. Cowan interprets Jaques-Dalcroze's school as using bodily performance and discipline to produce a "fantasy of autonomy within a modern culture that no longer seemed to allow it" (p. 188). In a section on rhythm, work, and the modern body, he also explores Karl Büchner's *Arbeit und Rhythmus* (1896), arguing that through the revival of organic rhythms, Büchner was seeking to regain control over the body and objective culture. However, Cowan reads Büchner's emphasis on singing, chanting, clapping, and other such activities as essentially a premodern, "primitivist" solution to a modern problem.

The final chapter dives into an extended discussion of Alfred Kubin's *Die Andere Seite* (1909). The gist of Cowan's argument is that Kubin is able to sustain the tension between a decadent abulic neurasthenia with its aesthetic flight into subjective *Stimmungen* on the one hand, and the futuristic fantasies of technological modernity and boundless willpower on the other. Kubin's protagonist exhibits a kind of "hybrid subjectivity" (p. 248) that is able to span these contradictory imaginations and thereby--presumably better--confront the insecurities of modern life.

Throughout the book, Cowan draws on a myriad of source material. He ranges widely from a selection of self-help literature, to the theoretical tracts of psychologists like Hellpach, the reform

program of Ellen Key, and the scientific experiments of Narziß Ach. He uses Alfred Döblin's *Die Tänzerin und der Leib* (1910) to tease out the contradictions inherent in efforts to control the body using motivational therapies. He introduces Josef Schumpeter's image of the entrepreneur who has reclaimed his active agency and welcomes insecurity as a new opportunity to make money. He assesses the reception of the spiritual exercises and rituals devised by Blaise Pascal and Ignatius of Loyola. In the chapter on gymnastics and body culture he discusses calisthenics and a male beauty contest at the "Licht- Luft- und Sportbad" in Berlin in 1912. He even extends his analysis beyond World War I, to consider Wilhelm Prager's film *Wege zu Kraft und Schönheit* (1924).

While historians should certainly celebrate this material diversity of sources, ranging so eclectically is also fraught with difficulties. The obstacles to this sort of analysis are so severe that I was left wondering whether the topic as Cowan frames it is simply too unwieldy and expansive to be covered in any plausibly cogent fashion. Cowan's approach results in a kind of Swiss-cheese historical universe, in which the reader enjoys his exploration of many illuminating quadrants, but is also left feeling that lots of important dark matter has gone unnoticed. Many of the themes of this book have a great deal in common with turn-of-the-century *Lebensreformbewegungen* (and *Lebensphilosophie*); but strangely Cowan never engages the historical literature on these movements; indeed, he seems oblivious to most of it. Furthermore, a whole doctrine of mental reflexes in German medical discourse, which Cowan does not discuss here, drew on analogies from physiology in defining the relationship between body and mind. For decades, this doctrine infused much of the debate on hypnotism and volition in Germany, and would seem to lie at the very core of the relationship that Cowan investigates between "bodily performances" and a "subjective sense of willpower" (p. 102). Some of the paradoxes he identifies in the use of habitual body prac-

tices to restore willpower and enhance autonomy might have seemed less perplexing had he dug deeper into the literature on mental reflexes.

The geographic distribution of Cowan's account also seems uneven. For example, at various times his dramatis persona is remarkably well populated by Austrian (Bahr, Hofmannsthal, Kubin) and Saxon (Lamprecht, Jaques-Dalcroze, Bücher) figures, prompting me to wonder just which galaxy of "German modernity" was at stake. Even more surprising, however, is that Cowan spends so much time star-gazing in France, without ever explaining to his readers why. In many respects, the book takes French discourse as its point of departure. Figures such as Théodule Ribot, Jean-Marie Charcot, Pierre Janet, and Paul Émil Lévy are far more prominent in his analysis than most of the German protagonists. Many sections take examples from French discourse as their starting points and then follow up with phrases like "German writers also ... " This approach would be fine if Cowan's book was about transnational French-German discourse; but it is not. No doubt French thought was significant in German discourse, but the problem of cultural transmission and discursive contexts is not evaluated with any analytic rigor.

In Cowan's intellectual universe, significant "indigenous" developments get--to put it mildly--marginalized. By his account, one could be forgiven for assuming that Friedrich Nietzsche was little more than a small planet in orbit around the French neurologist Charles Féré. And the most substantial account of Wilhelm Wundt's thought (six lines) is relegated to a footnote, without so much as mentioning him in the main text. A similar fate awaits the work of Arnold Schopenhauer a few pages on. His doctrines--which by Cowan's own admission became a "staple topos" (p. 281) of the period--are relegated to a single footnote early in chapter 2. Were these figures any less important than Lamprecht or Kubin, whom Cowan highlights? Did they somehow not play on the

imaginations of contemporaries? Or simply not on the imagination of the author? That a study on the "cult of the will" in Germany around 1900 can somehow manage without engaging these seminal icons of the German *Willensdiskurs* is beyond me and, it must be said, a testament to a remarkable cultivation of willful neglect.

Even some of the key figures that Cowan does treat appear curiously truncated and selectively appropriated, with no attempt made to grasp their larger intellectual or political agendas. For example, Hellpach's concept of bourgeois *Reizsamkeit* is juxtaposed with the idea of proletarian *Lenksamkeit*. But Cowan reads only the bourgeois side of Hellpach's analysis. If in fact, as Cowan stresses at the end of his book, the "history of modernity's infatuation with the will is the history of a particular sort of fear" (p. 255), then why not also read the specter of Hellpach's *Lenksamkeit* as an expression of anxieties about status loss and social revolution? Paying attention to such countervailing interpretations would have allowed Cowan to demonstrate more clearly that the object of many of the motivational techniques he describes was not just the new nervous body, but the older, exhausted, and lethargic one as well. In the imaginations of many, the *Lebensreformbewegung* was not so much about controlling nervous bodies as about suffusing moribund ones with life.

In spite of all this criticism, one must applaud Cowan's efforts in hoeing such a difficult row--indeed, a row that I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy. By the end of the book Cowan is at least wise and humble enough to recognize that the "complete history of that second modern technique of the self--and above all the history of its social and cultural functions in the modern world--has yet to be written" (p. 264). In struggling to tame such an unwieldy body of historical evidence, Cowan's book and others must be commended for beginning to give us the means to write histories of

twentieth-century selves. For that, and for all of its twinkling stars, this book is worth the read.

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