

Weimar Culture

The Outsider as Insider

P.Gay

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I have always been a bit skeptical as to the scholarship of Gay. I recall the title 'Germany tried Democracy' which I found a bit patronizing and thought about Gay as an outsider to German affairs and really having little business to expound on matters he did not understand. But later on I learned that Gay was in fact German that he was born in 1923 and thus lived in the Weimar republic until he was ten and only escaped his native land, which had turned so hostile to him, at the eve of disaster. In other words would he not be much more qualified to write about Germany and especially during that time period than an outsider such as me could ever hope for¹ ?

Peter Gay is a man on the left, and who could be on the right in those heady days (the book was published in 1968 a mere 35 years after the demise of the Weimar Republic as the author points out), especially when the subject is German history between the wars. Now the problem is that it is not quite easy to distinguish between what is left and what is right. Of course it is obvious in retrospect because then you can see who was on the right or wrong side of history, the verdict of posterity being harsh and with no appeal; and it also becomes clear when you make a deeper analysis of meaning, but there is seldom time and patience to make such. The initial outbreak of the War was greeted with enthusiasm among wide swatches of the German population, from the ignorant and easily affected mob to thoughtful intellectuals and liberals. The case of Thomas Mann, bitterly opposed by his brother Heinrich at the time, and his championship of *Kultur* above mere *Zivilization* is a well-known one. There was a feeling that a war would be a kind of catharsis, rouse the population from its moral and spiritual lethargy caused by materialistic welfare. Those sentiments are indeed seductive, especially when articulated by someone like Thomas Mann, and I am sure that in slightly different contexts, they are still popular among many and actually draw on deep psychological needs. I am not sure that the nationalistic fervor that inspired the Germans did not also inspire other war-monging nations, especially the French, whose tradition and history of militarism was more deeply entrenched than that of the Germans, whose typical role had been that of victims, as seen by the spectacle of the Thirty Years War. Prussia is of course the one exemption among the small petty German states, in fact the only one who gained

¹ It is symptomatic that when Gay arrived in the States they exchanged their original German name 'Freude' for 'Gay' long before the latter achieved that special meaning it is nowadays attached to. Anyway 'gay' was never an appropriate translation for 'Freude' e.g. 'joy' would have been a better one, but as often is the case, there is no perfect one. One may also compare the translation of Nietzsche's 'Die fröhliche Wissenschaft' into 'The Gay Science' which now must be seen as a howler and has lead many unsuspecting librarians and book store sales men to put it on the Gay and Lesbian shelves!

regional status as a minor power. Prussia and Prussianism had in fact many virtues, and those should not be seen as mere subservient to a military tradition, even if the military may have been the one who had benefited from it the most. The Prussian virtue of obedience and dutifulness is a two-edged sword which cuts both ways. Prussia became great with Bismarck and the unification he brought about made Germany for the first time a real power. And economically a most successful one, and also politically in many ways an exemplary one with its farsighted social legislation. Bismarck remains a highly controversial figure, now as well as back during his time. The vulgar picture of him as a symbol for aggressive militarism is deeply misleading. He was a very complicated man, admittedly with sentimental ties to '*Junkertum*', but clearly transcending his origin, even if shaped by it. Ostensibly he was a man of no mean literary talent, with intellectual interests, and with an abhorrence of war². But above all he was a political animal, and politics is a dirty business. Nevertheless the legacy he left behind turned out to be a deeply defective when he was succeeded by men of much lesser intellectual and political status. Germany was not a democracy on the Anglo-Saxon level, the chancellor was not responsible to an elected body but to the emperor. The emperor was also a symbol, as became particularly clear with the ascent of Wilhelm II, and as such not a steady pole to lean against³. Then there are of course more to democracy than representation, more important still are democratic institutions such as the legal system and the quality of schools and higher learning. Then finally, connected with these, are egalitarian aspects which are often confused with democracy. On all of those other counts Germany was ahead of class conscious Britain (not that class divisions did not exist in Germany as in almost all societies, but one doubts it was so entrenched, the aristocracy (as in France) playing a more sentimental role), which was in fact one of the reasons that Bertrand Russell and others opposed the war as a result of governmental short-sighted propaganda.

The war was a disaster, far from being an uplifting experience as sentimentally envisioned, it was not only close to exterminating '*Zivilization*' but also as a consequence '*Kultur*' as well. On top of the injury, which was shared to a bigger and lesser degree by all participants of the war⁴ there was insult. In so many words Germany was branded as the instigator of the War and thus subjected to humiliating diplomatic treatment and harsh reparations. This caused a domestic trauma whose ramifications went deep unintended as they may have been. Whether Germany was the sole instigator of the First World War remains a controversial issue even a century after its instigation (and soon also after its

² His three diversions into war may be seen as 'surgical', although the Franco-Prussian War, as opposed to the limited but decisive engagement against the rival Austria, did go out of hand, as wars tend to go, but compared to the mayhem caused by a Napoleon or a Gustavus Adolphus, marginal.

³ Trump has been likened to Napoleon III (see article written, partly tongue in cheek, by S-E Liedman, DN November 28, 2016) another apt comparison would be with Wilhelm II who along with Trump could not be taken entirely seriously by the administration and was probably (along with Trump?) seen as a security risk, he did not tweet, but that was not by choice but by lack of opportunity, and did often come with grand announcements, which caused the German diplomatic services much unnecessary grief.

⁴ Some marginal participants such as Romania reaped all the benefits of peace without any of the sacrifices of war.

conclusion)⁵. One may see the War as shock therapy, the cure worse than the disease. It did profoundly change many people forcing them to reconsider their erstwhile opinions and convictions, one example being Thomas Mann, who in the process was reconciled with his brother⁶. The Weimar Republic which ensued was a triumph of political wisdom and concession, but as such it lacked all elements of heroism and no one really warmed to it, even those as *Vernunftrepublikaner* would have had a duty to whole-heartedly support it, but feeling and reason, are as we all know, often at odds with each other, and even if we may pay lip service to the dictates of reason, deep down we honor the dictates of the heart deeper, as Pascal claimed to the effect that the heart knows what reason does not.

German militarism I find a questionable notion, but what is less questionable is the tradition of German idealism, which we should never forget was mostly confined to its most vocal segments, and hence the most advertised. The deepest sense of this idealism is to be found in the elevation, not to say, the deification of the poet, or as we say in Germanic language *der Dichter* which means more than just a poet, as can be seen as a mere wordsmith, but a visionary able to see deeper and further than mere mortals. Shakespeare plays an important role in the collective literary consciousness of the British, but the Germans are more than ready to appropriate him as one of their own. But in Britain there is no counterpart to Goethe, nor to the adulation the latter has been the subject of⁷. Fontane notes that the English are so unmusical and essentially, unlike the Germans, music does not play an important part in their lives⁸. But undeniably music has an emotional aspect that works also on the unmusical, or perhaps especially on the unmusical⁹. And even if the idealism and metaphysical leanings of a German professor may have little direct impact on the man in the street, the 'music' it engenders may reach many more. Music is about form and the subsequent emotion, not about reason and contents. You may not understand any of the meaning of a text, but that does not mean that you are indifferent to its music. How many understand Nietzsche (including Nietzsche himself) versus how many are mesmerized by him and his language? Thus the

⁵ Clark in his recent book 'Sleepwalkers' goes at some considerable length to exonerate the Germans, in particular pointing out the aggressiveness of the French, and a long time before Kennan wrote about the Fateful Alliance between Russia and France, without which the War as it came about most likely would not have come about.

⁶ Gay mentions at length *der Zauberberg* as the manifestation of Mann conceding his mistakes.

⁷ It is interesting that initially Schiller enjoyed higher prestige than Goethe, and his plays were regularly performed until the end of the 19th century.

⁸ If we take the modern success of popular music such ethnic differences make little sense, but I am sure that at the time of Fontane's observation in the middle of the 19th century they had some relevance. More educated Germans were expected to be musically proficient than their British counterparts, and songs probably played a more central part in social gatherings, and of course when it comes to composers during the period many more were German than English. One should also note that the present craze and centrality of popular music has much more to do with passive consumerism, listening to music, not performing it, and being part of spectacles were the actual music seems more incidental.

⁹ Somewhat fancifully one may argue that a mathematical argument in the social sciences may sway the mathematically illiterate (which means most of the population) much more than the mathematicians, contrary to vulgar expectation)

German idealism did permeate a large section of the population. Gay brings attention to the 'Wandervogel' movement before the war¹⁰ imbued with a sentimental attachment to freedom and unsullied nature, which had equal appeal to the right and the left, the very vagueness, which of course is the main characteristics of German idealism and which also allows a great variety of interpretations. There is of course a significant difference between the right and left when it comes to content and consequences, but much less so when it comes to formality and emotional appeal. A *Wandervogel* can as well end up a Communist as a so called Reactionary. At the time there was a sentimentalization for the collective, the need for the individual to subordinate its individuality to the collective spirit¹¹. One may think of the etymology of 'Fascism', like the sheaf we are strong together but weak one by one, easily individually broken. This is an image and a metaphor equally applicable to the left as to the so called 'fascists'. In fact 'socialism' had a general appeal and the growing Nazi-movement was quick to appropriate this in their name, as well as the popular anti-capitalist stand. The rise of the Nazi movement is a mystery, and to my mind, never satisfactorily explained. The Nazi party was not a political party they rightly (and proudly) claimed but in fact a movement¹², and it did not progress politically although it did participate in the political theater by being part of elections. Karl Lueger, the controversial mayor of Vienna before the war, was a political anti-semitite. He was in fact the founder of modern political anti-antisemitism, meaning the ambition to exploit a vague anti-antisemitic feeling, for definite political aims. The Jewish writer Stefan Zweig writes very respectfully of him in his memoirs (*Die Welt von Gestern*) and assures his reader that he was an excellent man, and whose anti-antisemitism should not be taken personally. But of course Hitler may have been inspired by him (no one is born an anti-semitite) and seen its potential. But Nazism was not a political party, and although it let drop its anti-capitalists ambitions, it took political anti-antisemitism literally (something one expects, according to Zweig, Lueger would never have done¹³). It was not a question of politics any longer. A movement may be healthy, but it may also be diseased, and the latter seems to be the easiest way of viewing Nazism¹⁴. Now the irony is that if not Weimar had been a parliamentary democracy Hitler would never have come to power. The movement, whose influence and appeal was actually waning, something Hitler and his cohorts well understood, were forced to tender the iron while it was still hot. It is easy to see that the steps which were taken to put Hitler at the helm, were one of gross incompetence, because

¹⁰ Memorably depicted by Hans Fallada in his memoirs of his youth (*Damals bei uns daheim*).

¹¹ Leftists also point out the emphasis on the individual and its self-improvement in leftist ideologies point out to the successful efforts to educate the working classes individual by individual. This is of course an elitist view-point, and thus leftists tend to be culturally conservative and thus join hands with the culturedly inclined among the rightists. In the Modern left this distinction has been blurred to serve the ideology of egalitarianism, with disastrous results on the school system.

¹² Similar tendencies can be found among the Social Democrats that appeal to people to be part of a movement not a mere political party

¹³ In fact Jews did not suffer during his tenure during which he transformed Vienna into a modern model city

¹⁴ Of course this way of putting it does not offer much of an explanation, even if it at first sight might do so.

in spite of The Nazi party taking part in the electoral game, it was no ordinary political party. The seizure, formally on wholly democratic ways, proved within weeks to dismantle the whole democratic system. This points to the dilemma of democratic representation, the mob can elevate to power the least suitable, a dilemma which was clearly articulated already by Plato, and forms the core of his political convictions, and which has branded him as an anti-democrat ever since.

But of course the rise of Nazism is not the subject of Gay's book, but the peculiar form of culture it embedded and emboldened, a culture with deep roots in German idealism.

By culture Gay means the Arts i.e. literature, theater, films, paintings, and also architecture, but when it comes to academics he restricts himself to history with some reference to philosophy. Not a word about the sciences and this is of course a big defect if you want to give a more comprehensive picture, but this is not the ambition of the author, he just wants to write an essay (complete with an extensive bibliography, has he read all those books?). Otherwise what would one make of somebody like Max Planck the quintessential Prussian who effected the deepest and most fundamental revolution in Physics - Quantum theory. It probably would not have been possible without a Prussian mentality, whatever that means. Incidentally the mathematicians and the physicists were the ones less susceptible to succumb to the seduction of Nazism. That may say less about the mathematicians and the physicists themselves than about the disciplines. In fact Germany lost by emigration, forced or voluntary, its leadership in science. Among the geniuses Gay lists that emigrated, only Einstein appears as a representative of science.

The roots of Weimar culture is to be seen already before the war. Hölderlin, Kleist and Büchner are names from the early 19th century which were rediscovered at the turn of the century. Kleist may not have been totally forgotten but he was brought into the limelight from which he had been expelled (if he ever had occupied it). Hölderlin, not to mention Büchner were more obscure. Hölderlin had had a brief period of sanity, while Büchner had a very brief life. That made them of course very romantic. The great poet before the war was Rilke. He was greatly admired, in fact almost deified as a *Dichter*, something which puzzled and worried him. Rilke was obviously superior to his admirers (as Wittgenstein?). But what did those poets really write? Gay has to confess to a certain bewilderment. Did people understand it, or was it just music to them, sense subservient to form and sound? It is here that the reference to Stefan George and his coterie fits in, the other secret Germany, as the author calls it, under the radar of the Wilhelmine society. The Weimar republic gave a license to experimentation and a disintegration of norms and became an invitation to such subversive and secret undergrounds. There had been close to anarchy, after all a Germany on the Soviet model was close to being formed after the collapse of society following the military surrender, and one was actually briefly formed in Bavaria. Just as in Russia there had been a split of the socialists into a more moderate parliamentary kind - the Social Democrats and a more radical revolutionary kind - the Spartacists, led by the charismatic leaders Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg who later were assassinated. But unlike Russia, order was restored, and more moderate, democratic forces prevailed. The Weimar Republic was born out of political and social chaos and against all predictions it managed to hang on. The radicalism that was thwarted politically found an outlet in the arts, just as it also had in the early years of the Soviet

Republic until the repressive conservatism of Stalin took over. Artistic license was close to moral license and the Sodom and Gomorrah that Berlin came to symbolize also came to symbolize the Weimar 'Zeitgeist' as one of decadence. Heinrich Mann was a chronicler of the Weimar years while those years and times did not seem to have interested his brother Thomas, who represented a more classical German *Bildung*. In Modern editions the works of Heinrich Mann have often pictures by expressionists as Kirchner on the cover, which would be more or less unthinkable when it comes to his brother. The prose of Heinrich Mann is expressionistic in character, some would say in a hap-dash way, while Thomas Mann writes an unhurried lucid prose if somewhat convoluted, as the author remarks: Mann did not like to be simple if it was at all possible to be complicated. Actually an attitude I have some sympathy for.

Expressionism is a catch phrase whose meaning is suggested rather than clarified. Obviously related to Impressionism it emphasized inner reality as opposed to outer reality. Rather than record what you see it depicts what you feel. Of course the Germans was not the first to initiate the change of orientation of art from a more objective mission, where the skill of the painter was paramount, to a more subjective one, where art was an expression of emotions, and technical skill was secondary. This is of course what Modern Art is all about, Art is no longer a complement to Science, but something quite different. Thus the rather short lived reign of Expressionism was to become the most prominent German contribution to Modern Art, with sources such as Munch and French school of Fauvism at the turn of the century. In addition to Kirchner Gay brings up Max Beckmann with great enthusiasm¹⁵ as well as George Grosz and Otto Dix, the former a relentless caricaturist of Berlin decadence where fat industrialists and military men play the leading roles of villains, while Dix was known for his anti-war depictions. But expressionism also involved the theater, and the experimental plays by Strindberg certainly, the author claims, provided an inspiration, just as the realistic plays by Ibsen had deeply influenced British and Continental drama earlier. In fact the expressionist painters dabbled in poetry and the poets and playwrights dabbled in painting¹⁶. Among the expressionists playwrights Carl Zuckmeyer merits special mention, but he saw expressionism as a mere experiment and eventually abandoned it, and his later works are much more conventional¹⁷. Expressionism for all its subjectivity is still figurative, but non-figurative painting was perhaps the most radical innovation of the modern time period. We are here once again in the objective realm of art whose object it is to explore the huge realm of visual possibility of which the traditional realistic painting is just a very small segment. Now the boundary between the concrete and the abstract is a tenuous one, in fact abstract art can be seen as concrete, as

¹⁵ He in particular lauds Beckmann's supreme draftsmanship, which, however, does not come into its own in his expressionist paintings. He also refers to the striking self-portrait of the artist as a young man in a tuxedo. I saw it first in the Busch-Reisinger museum in the early 70's and it made for some reason a deep impression on me, maybe because of the formal wear of the artist. It is also the first painting I consciously encountered by Beckmann.

¹⁶ Strindberg dabbled in painting of a marked expressionist and non-figurative nature. He boasted to Munch that he was the greatest painter of the North. To some extent he was vindicated, his paintings now fetch hefty sums. Munch, however, did not dabble neither as a poet nor as a playwright.

¹⁷ At least the one published 1945 and reviewed earlier in this volume

it is its own object, and not a mere copy of one¹⁸. It creates its own existence as an object in the real world. If you take some fruit compote say, and drop some cream in it and stir, you create very pleasing visual displays as the cream mixes with the colorful compote. You create those easily, it does not take any skill (except to know when to stop) and there is no issue of mimesis involved, you do not copy something already in existence, you create something. The copying becomes coincident with the creation. What are the selective and aesthetic criteria involved? Kandinsky active in the *Der Blaue Reiter* in Munich, was a very self-conscious non-figurativist, gradually converging to the non-figuratively domain, writing about his efforts in an intellectual way. However, the most typical and representative art manifestation during the Weimar period was *Die neue Sachlichkeit* and the closely related Bauhaus-movement headed by Walter Gropius, first established in Weimar, then moved to Dessau, and spending its final year in Berlin until it was dismantled¹⁹ by the new regime. It had connections with the British Arts and Craft movements of William Morris and can be seen as its modernization. Its purpose was unashamedly educational, not to say didactic, to combine the skill of craft with the vision of art and bring about an aesthetic enchantment of everyday life by improving the taste of the general public, if by necessity through sheer exposure. It differed from the British movement in its minimalistic ambitions doing away with ornaments for its own sake and wedding beauty to function. It may seem to be an anti-thesis to the unabashedly subjective expressionism, factual rather than fancy, the art of engineering, but in fact there was a big overlap with expressionistic painters sharing similar subversive sentiments²⁰. Not surprisingly the movement also included architecture where its ambitions of simplicity and functionality, would be particularly apposite, thus the Bauhaus buildings were not just buildings but designed to express (!) the spirit of the undertaking.

When it comes to academics, Gay dismisses German academics as stuffy and conventional. This is a defective assessment based on the fact that Gay only considers historians, and even with this proviso, it cries out for qualifications. German historical scholarship of the 19th century, with Ranke as the figure head, is rightly admired and set an example for the rest of the world, characterized by its emphasis on original sources and meticulous interpretations of them. It was the Germans who for the first time submitted the Bible to a critical historical scrutiny, which of course run counter to prevailing norms of piety, after all the name of Jehovah is never said out allowed, and religious texts should be beyond such petty investigations. What has Gay against German historians? Their tendency to metaphysical speculations, their romantic idea of Germany? Few finds his approval, most enthusiastic he is about Eckart Kehr (1902-33) somewhat less so of his adviser Friedrich Meinecke (1862-54). Kehr caused a scandal by claiming that the rise of Germany more had to do with commerce than guidance by a transcendent mission, thus a serious jab

¹⁸ A Modern house would in neolithic time been something literally unseen and could thus be viewed as an abstract sculpture. Now we are used to them, but why are paintings of them seen as concrete and not abstract? If you make a painting depicting an abstract painting, does it as painting become figurative and concrete by depicting an object in the real world?

¹⁹ The buildings still stand in Dessau where they can be inspected

²⁰ Morris himself was a social activist in 19th century and a poet as well as a textile designer moving in pre-Raphaelite circles. He certainly would have felt at home at Weimar.

against an idealistic version of history. His adviser warned him against his radicalism, however interesting and commendable, and advised him to tone it down in order not to compromise his career. As to Meinecke Gay concentrates on his work *Idee des Staatsräson* which he likens to Mann's *der Zauberberg*. He faults him for his tragic vision of Power and the contradiction between private and public moral, in short in seeking the good, you are reduced to resorting to evil means. By formulating the problem of power in terms of tragedy, he elevates a merely practical problem by giving it metaphysical dignity, according to the author, and this is all the result of an unfortunate influence of traditional German idealism, Gay writes regrettingly.

As to the literary depiction of the Weimar period, Heinrich Mann is an obvious candidate, so is also Hans Fallada, who, however, does not merit a mention (at least not one meriting a name in the index as opposed to the voluminous bibliography) in the essay, although by his more popular and accessible books, he may give a more realistic picture. Kästner suffers the same fate as does Roth, but Döblin and his *Berlin Alexanderplatz* earns at least a mention, and Stefan Zweig is even mentioned repeatedly. In the world of Gay, the two Manns predominate.

When it comes to music he has neither much to say, but it is after all just an essay and an attempt with no ambitions of comprehensiveness. Much, however, is devoted to the revolt of the son and the revenge of the father. Did the Weimar Republic start as a revolt of the younger generation against the militarism of the older and end as the revenge of the latter. Clear is that the Nazi movement did enlist the support of the young more than the old. But after all idealism and the search for wholeness is something that appeals to the young and untried. In Nazism sordid politics was replaced by beauty with mildly put disastrous consequences.

The Weimar period was short, not even fourteen years. It can conveniently be divided into three period. The first was traumatic with humiliation by the French as to reparations and the occupation of the Ruhr district which resulted in a run-away inflation in 1923 which deeply traumatized the society and wiped away life savings. But the government miraculously got the inflation under control, first issuing *Rentenmark* then *Reichmark* and re-establishing trust which is the basis of any monetary economy. What follows were years of relative prosperity. Germany emerged from its pariah status through the Locarno treaty and there were reductions in the reparation payments²¹, after all it was a big country with a potentially vibrant economy resilient enough to reassert itself after the one catastrophe after the other in the 20th century. Then came the financial crash of 1929 with unemployment on a really big scale. But tides were about to turn, and the Nazi movement seized the day before they were doomed to fade away by the next cycle of prosperity, which they now could claim as their own. The Weimar period was a period of party politics, and as such least of all heroic. The Social Democrats and the Center Party with the support of Stresemann's more conservative People's Party dominated the parliament, making do from one change of government to another, actually accomplishing things as we have just noted. It all came to an end when President Hindenburg offered the chancellorship to Hitler, which Gay sees not as a betrayal (after all in spite of dire forebodings Hindenburg turned

²¹ Margaret MacMillan claims in *Peacemakers* (reviewed in these volumes) that the Germans in the end ended up paying much less than what the French had to surrender after 1871.

out to be a conscientious President playing under the democratic rules of the constitution according to the author) but as an act of senility of the old man and the result of bad advice. The Nazi-movement was not a political party but something else and turned out not to be controllable by fair means²². The rest is history as they say. Germany between the wars did in spite of some territorial losses retain most of its lands (and would have had a logical claim to incorporate the Austrian stump) and had all the potential to become as strong and economically dominating as it had been before the war, had it not embarked on heroic adventures but kept to the narrow and mundane path. In retrospect it did not have much to complain about.

August 22–23, 2017 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se

²² There is much hysteria about neo-Nazi sects taking control of the government, but the situation in Germany in the early thirties was profoundly different from that of Modern Western Democracies that the analogies are simply pointless. This does of course not preclude the fall of democracy, but there are many ways of how that can come about, and they may not be so easy to identify initially, but that is a different story.