

Conclusions and Prospects

When one thinks of democracy, Germany is generally not the first country that comes to mind.¹

The words cited above were written by a historian in the late 1990s. They surely resonate differently in a German context than in a non-German one. More than fifty years after World War II, the reliability of the Germans as democratic partners is still in doubt—at least for some observers. It is this doubt, a sword suspended over the head of the German people, that causes establishment politicians to despair (or grovel), rightists to lash out, and elitist writers to retreat into visions of the past. The left, especially the intellectual left, has typically sought to wield this sword itself, perhaps as a compensation for a lack of political influence in postwar German society. The spectre of National Socialism in general and Auschwitz in particular continues to darken the scene in the now reunited country, and there are no signs that it will fade from view in the foreseeable future. (As I write this, the wire services are carrying a story about violence at the 1998 World Cup entitled “In France, Hooligans Are Awakening Memories of a Dark Past.”²) One can discern two possible reactions to this state of affairs. First of all, Germans can strive to be model democrats and responsible members of the international community (although there is no little disagreement about what that might entail).³ Second, the very basis for the suspicion directed toward the German people can be reexamined and put in a new light. Aside from fringe groups, there would be little support for the portrayal of the Third Reich as a benign system that went wrong, but a reassessment of the Conservative Revolution and its representatives is much less controversial, simply because this phe-

nomenon is relatively unknown, both at home and abroad. It is just such a reassessment that has been launched in the post-Wall period.

In 1993, the respected Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft published a detailed analysis of the Conservative Revolution.⁴ The author, Stefan Breuer, emphasized that his book was a purely scholarly exercise: "It is not intended as 'an aid to the rightist intelligentsia in Germany' (Mohler 1989, 2:7) . . . or meant to provide the opposite camp with cheap targets [wohlfeile Feindbilder]" (6). The mention of Armin Mohler in the introduction demonstrates that Breuer feared that he might be dismissed as another partisan like his predecessor. Anyone who has read his study has no trouble distinguishing between the two. Breuer would like to get rid of the term "Conservative Revolution" altogether, because it is "an untenable concept" that leads to confusion (181). He sees elements like a fascination with the apocalypse, the willingness to use violence, and male bonding as common features (47), but the only common position that he can discover is opposition to political liberalism as "a Western phenomenon unsuitable to the German character" (181). Beyond this opposition, he takes pains to make it absolutely clear that the Conservative Revolution was not an attempt to return to the premodern world, but rather one of many "diverse designs for modernity" that were being discussed in the Weimar Republic (180). Concomitant with this interpretation is a complete rejection of the "special path" thesis—premodern elites did not dominate Wilhelminian Germany, he argues against Arno Mayer and others—and the claim that Weimar Germany was a "bourgeois" society like any other (15). Its unusual aspects were limited to the heterogeneity of the middle class (thanks to the presence of the *Bildungsbürgertum*) and the "fixation" with the state as the "sole guarantor of unity and universality" (18-19). This is indeed rather "academic (6)," especially since Breuer states that the Conservative Revolution (which he prefers to term the New Nationalism) did not survive the Third Reich, "despite attempts to revive it" (201). Although he plays with the idea of a Conservative Revolution that did manage to outmaneuver the Nazis (it would probably have been a dictatorial and irredentist regime minus the Holocaust and World War II, he thinks [194]), the present relevance of the New (Charismatic) Nationalism is to be found beyond Western Europe. The "heirs" to the tradition can be found in Teheran, Baghdad, Black Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Slavic countries, Breuer tells us (201). This is supposedly an "echo" of what was "played through" in Germany after 1918 (201). Such a scenario places German nationalism firmly in the past and ignores present resus-

citation efforts. Given the “threat” to the West emanating from the venues just listed, Breuer hopes that the once-virulent German nationalism will in the coming years function not only as an example of the dangers involved in deviating from the Western path, but also as an occasion for reflection about the nature of that path. We might ask ourselves, he suggests, if a “technological civilization” that is “indifferent” to individual traditions that have evolved over time is immune to criticism (202). Writing in the years before 1989, he did not foresee that many representatives of the German New Right would repeatedly ask this question after reunification.

Two studies that appeared in 1995 proceed from assumptions similar, although not identical, to Breuer’s. Rolf Peter Sieferle’s biographical sketches of five major representatives of the Conservative Revolution (including Ernst Jünger)⁵ all portray Germans, but the author emphasizes that the movement was practically “pan-European” (19, 44). Like Breuer, Sieferle views the Conservative Revolution as a thing of the past, a “purely historical phenomenon” that can now be comprehended without fighting it (21). Its protagonists were working on “projects of an alternative modernity” (43), but it was not they, but rather the Nazis who succeeded with their “real Conservative Revolution” (24). According to Sieferle, National Socialism was only one of the “five elements” that coexisted in the 1920s, which he categorizes as the “volkish,” the “national Socialist,” the “revolutionary nationalist,” the “activist-vitalist,” and the “biological naturalist.” Although Sieferle is not a proponent of these “elements,” he is also not an advocate of a one-dimensional model of modernization or a history of the West in which the final result seems inevitable (201). It is perhaps not coincidental that he illustrates this by referring to the United States:

It can easily be demonstrated that contemporary U.S. society, for example, does not in some ways fulfill the criteria of modernity that were developed in current theories. The ideal of “secularization” is confronted with a widespread religious fundamentalism. “Democratic participation” is realized in an oligarchical party system with low voter turnout. An unpredictable justice system contradicts the rule of law. . . . Instead of growing equality, we find a widening social gap, instead of “rationality,” the dominance of the myths of mass culture. The “state monopoly of force” is retreating in the face of growing violent crime. Finally, one can hardly still speak of a “cultural integration” in light of the increasing segmentation of society into races and ethnic groups. (202)

Although such issues also appear in Sichelschmidt’s polemic, they are brought up here because Sieferle is unhappy about the direction that U.S. society is

taking, not because he is eager to gloat about it. While reconstructing the ideologies of Nazism and the Conservative Revolution, the author acknowledges that the results of such scholarly spadework might be misused by “confused contemporaries” (220). He states unequivocally that both movements were “designs of an alternative modernity” that “fortunately failed” (221). It will not escape a careful reader that this is *not* tantamount to saying that any and all alternatives *should* or *must* fail.

Michael Rupprecht’s look back at the “literary civil war” in twentieth-century Germany bears the subtitle “On the Politics of the Nonpolitical in Germany.”⁶ Thomas Mann’s self-description is thus applied to an entire group of intellectuals. Like Breuer, Rupprecht believes that the time has come for an objective reappraisal of the Conservative Revolution. His own purported objectivity is contrasted with “old and new ideologists” (10) who have a distorted view of the past. Even though he clearly rejects such New Rightists as France’s Alain de Benoist or Russia’s Vladimir Shirinovskiy, he claims that figures like Jünger, Spengler, and Schmitt stood “between all ideologies” during the Weimar Republic, although it is admitted that these figures (for no apparent reason, Thomas Mann is included in this group) did contribute to the catastrophic course of German history (9–10). Taking as his point of departure the highly charged German debates regarding the nature of the Gulf War, Rupprecht calls upon his fellow intellectuals to make political discourse more disinterested (“*versachlichen*”) than it has been in the past (29). On the surface, this is laudable enough, given the German proclivity for polemics. Unfortunately, Rupprecht is not an impartial observer himself. Anyone who can compare Ernst Jünger’s relationship with democracy to that of Thomas Mann (199), claim that Jünger cleansed the cultural criticism of Spengler and others of “unpleasant antidemocratic overtones” (207) or argue that it is “inappropriate” to compare Botho Strauß with the Conservative Revolution (25) clearly cultivates more than exclusively scholarly interests. His concluding remarks, in which he emphasizes the necessity of reexamining the actions of all intellectuals, both left and right, in our “century of civil wars” (211), suggest that Ernst Nolte’s revisionist history is one of his guideposts. In words reminiscent of Sieferle, he describes the Conservative Revolution as one of the projects of “an alternative modernity” (43). He obviously believes that current projects can learn from those predecessors who had difficulty comprehending the dangers of Nazism.

It is noteworthy that those scholars who dedicate their energies to prevent just such “learning” refrain, unlike the three figures just discussed, from declaring their disinterestedness. In their 1997 volume *Vordenker der Neuen Rechten* (Intellectual mentors of the new right),⁷ Kurt Lenk and his co-authors introduce the thought of Georges Sorel, Oswald Spengler, Hans Freyer, Carl Schmitt, Martin Heidegger, and Ernst Jünger to a general readership. This is not done as part of the current “philosophical café” fad, but rather to the end of making the German public aware of trends that the authors consider disturbing. It is not disputed that the works of the six intellectuals have been—and continue to be—read and reflected upon by a diverse group of people, but the focus in this case is on the “young-conservative intellectuals who have been trying for some years to make positions to the *right* of the established politics of the large broadly based parties socially acceptable again.” What is found disturbing is the attempt to revive the tradition of an “anti-Western, antiliberal, and antiparliamentary right” that had long remained peripheral in West Germany (11). The representatives of the Conservative Revolution are now, in the authors’ view, portrayed either as martyrs or as misunderstood loners whose ideas were misused. It is apparently Lenk, a professor emeritus, who is amazed that the younger generation seeks to emancipate itself from a “politically correct” culture by turning to the “weapons of [their] grandfathers” (12). Among these weapons, as described here, are a belief in the power of fate, apocalyptic presentiments, service and discipline, nationalism, heroism, antibourgeois feelings, xenophobia, and many others. (Jürgen Habermas’s rather hyperbolic term for all this is “intellectual junk.”⁸) The authors see in this arsenal “a declaration of war against civil and bourgeois values” (16), and the international community as a whole will certainly be relieved to know that these values find defenders in today’s Germany. In the long term, however, one of the positions taken by these particular defenders is not unproblematic. It is the subliminal tendency to take the alienation characteristic of our modern age less than seriously.

Another 1997 publication⁹ is cut from the same cloth, although it is more openly political and less scholarly. (This is not to say that the two areas cannot coexist. It is an author’s denial that the former influences the latter that is problematic.) The author, Iris Weber, begins by referring to the 1995 report of the German Constitutional Police, in which the intellectual New Right is given attention for the first time. She wishes to inform her fellow

citizens about the “potential danger” to democracy posed by this grouping (7). Her emphasis is somewhat different from that of Lenk et al. A number of pages are devoted to Carl Schmitt and his theory of the state, but Freyer, Jünger, and Spengler are marginal figures. (Heidegger is not mentioned at all.) Instead of concentrating on earlier manifestations of rightist thought, the author discusses more contemporary figures, like Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt, Arthur Jensen, Hans Jürgen Eysenck, and Alain de Benoist. Her differentiation between the various camps within the New Right helps to explain some of the contradictions found in *Die selbstbewußte Nation*. In the context of this study, one aspect that does not interest Weber should be pointed out. Although she provides a detailed presentation of the New Right’s plan to gradually achieve “cultural hegemony” (87–90), the role of literature is not considered at all. This was also true of the Lenk volume—with the exception of the chapter on Jünger—and it appears to be characteristic of most observers who are drawn to the topic.¹⁰ Was Botho Strauß’s brief encounter with right-wing politics both the beginning and end of the literary right?

At least one critic—like Herzinger, a disciple of Karl Popper—says this and much more. In a breathtaking survey of “two hundred years of the German religion of art,” Dirk von Petersdorff equates the end of Soviet socialism with the disappearance of “the last of those counter-modern worlds . . . that had been entwined with bourgeois society since the late eighteenth century.”¹¹ He distances himself from Stefan Breuer, who has analyzed anti-Westernization and a critique of democracy as a phenomenon of the literary right.¹² For Petersdorff, both rightist and leftist German artists (he uses this term to refer mainly to writers and estheticians) have opposed the “open society” and come under the spell of “totalitarian politics” (68). Such statements make his essay appear to be a belated postscript to the Literature Debate, especially since Christa Wolf is criticized for speaking of a “truly democratic society” different from the West German model (71). When Petersdorff portrays Novalis—including the novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*—as the beginning of German antimodernism, his comments are somewhat one-sided, but generally not off the mark. With respect to the twentieth century, however, his case is much less convincing. He hesitates to criticize Gottfried Benn, and he seems to forget that Thomas Mann—albeit not without inner conflicts—became an outspoken defender of the Weimar Republic. Worst of all, he sees no great difference between the role of important writers in the GDR (who “had the telephone number of the chairman of the state council”) and West German novelists

who campaigned for Willy Brandt and the SPD (76). Instead of using the term “novelists,” Petersdorff might have specifically mentioned Heinrich Böll and Günter Grass, but this would have undermined his entire argument, since neither Böll nor Grass, despite their often caustic criticism of West German democracy, could be accused of harboring a secret affinity with totalitarian systems. The ongoing interventions of Günter Grass¹³ demonstrate that it is possible to envision an incrementally better society without opposing modernity. Petersdorff’s plea for an “aesthetics that does justice to the freedoms of modernity” (86) is praiseworthy, but his support of Karl-Heinz Bohrer’s desire to “free” esthetic modernism from “social criticism, the temptations of totality, [and] the slag of the philosophy of history” (83) is not only a dead end but also a dangerous path for today’s Germany.

Why is this so? Imaginative writers (and to a certain extent all true intellectuals) possess a sensitivity that enables them to perceive the normally imperceptible. They are certainly not the only human beings who are capable of this, but they are (almost) the only ones whose main activity consists of observing human actions in the microcosm of everyday life and contextualizing them in the macrocosm of long-term developments. Some would say that this is merely one aspect of literary pursuits, and that is indisputable. There is no dearth of writers who are greatly interested in or even exclusively concerned with the microcosm of their inner selves. In times when cultural and political upheaval is the order of the day (e.g., during the Weimar Republic or the 1960s), the “inner self” is of necessity set upon by external reality and forced to come to terms with that reality. Writers living in such times often produce works that juxtapose the inner and outer worlds, and the reception of such works by contemporary readers can, over time, affect the perception of social reality. In relatively stable or stagnant times (Hegel’s description of happiness as the “empty pages of history” comes to mind), few people can discern the currents beneath the calm surface. To accomplish this, one must have an educational background that equips one with the facility to see parallels between the present and past epochs. In Wilhelminian Germany, and even until the 1960s, this background was provided to the extremely small elite that attended the humanistic *Gymnasium*. The postwar democratization and modernization of the German school system has had as one result the virtual disappearance of this background, even among the elite. There can be no doubt that Humboldt’s ideal of the well-rounded person is doomed when an intellectual like Stefan Breuer characterizes the traditional *Gymnasium* as

“not preparation *for* the world,” but instead “*against* the world.”¹⁴ Although this preparation is by no means sufficient, it is crucial for the development of an educated citizenry and the survival of civil society. If public support for the humanities (taken to mean critical thinking, esthetic sensitivity, and historical consciousness) continues to wane, there will be only one small cohort of people in a position to perceive the difference between illusion and reality, namely writers and artists. Since the German example has shown that the occupation of such an exclusive position can lead to an unhealthy self-exaltation, the struggles to maintain a critical literature and a critical public are ultimately inseparable.

This is my own subjective judgment, but it is hardly unique. To my own amazement, I have found similar views—albeit from a very different perspective—in the first monograph on the Conservative Revolution, which appeared in 1941. Former Nazi functionary Hermann Rauschning, who, previous and subsequent to his involvement with National Socialism, was a Christian monarchist, had hoped to preserve “human substance” in the face of the destruction caused by the “great secular emancipation movement” that began in the Enlightenment.¹⁵ He lamented the turning away from German idealism (“Weimar and humanism,” 180) rejected the stance of both Nietzsche and George, and described Jünger as an “extremist intellect” who played into the hands of the Nazis (72). (The reference to Hofmannsthal at the beginning of the preface set the stage for an alternative vision of culture.) Rauschning saw German literature in the hands of the left, but rather than attacking this camp for monopolizing it, he examined the attitudes of the German elite. His analysis ran as follows: Already before the First World War, the elite had failed in its duty to preserve the “continuity” of “intellectual and political tradition.” Even worse, this group had “no real relationship with culture,” and this failing had a negative influence on the German people, especially on the middle class, for whom life revolved exclusively around economic success. An untenable situation obtained long before the rise of the NSDAP: “In our political elite, any occupation with intellectual matters was considered to be more or less suspect” (194). The solution, as proposed by Rauschning, is a new kind of elite:

[W]ithout a stratum that carries the historical, intellectual, and political creativity of the people, even the greatest people falls back onto the level of semi-conscious vegetating. Such a stratum should not be confused with any societal upper class based on the nobility of birth or property. (209)

This is tantamount to an elevation of culture, manifested as both a knowledge of tradition and a cultivation of creativity in the present, to equal status with the political and economic system. Equal status does not imply the superiority flaunted by the prophets and seers discussed above, but it does mean that we cannot allow the shape of the future to be determined by forces either unknown to or beyond the reach of the majority of the human race. To do so would be to abdicate all responsibility to coming generations. The realization that such a position might lead to a dialogue between non-fundamentalist elements of the right and the left—not to be confused with the ongoing battle for a middle void of definable characteristics—should not be a hindrance.¹⁶

Rauschnig unwittingly (?) provided the model for such dialogue, even though he was unrelentingly critical of the left as a force for secularization. The model is to be found in his portrayal of the Jews and their role in German society. According to Rauschnig, the essence of Jewishness is the combination of critical, dialectical thinking and a conservatism that respects the law, the family, tradition, and a rootedness in the “divine calling” of human beings. As long as the Jew can maintain the creative tension inherent in this constellation, he is “the greatest enrichment within any people (Volk)” (239). (In the case of his own country, Rauschnig does not hesitate to characterize the last one hundred and fifty years of German intellectual history as German-Jewish intellectual history¹⁷ [240]!) The antiassimilatory implication of the word “within” is problematic, but one might consider what the future relevance of the model might be if the word “Jew” were replaced by “intellectual.” In the twentieth century, most intellectuals on the left have seen tradition as an enemy, whereas most of their counterparts on the right have attempted to defend it or even reinstitute parts of it that had been cast off over time. Leftist critical thinkers have all too frequently been remiss with regard to criticism of their own projects, and their rightist opponents have as a rule viewed tradition as beyond questioning. Certain representatives of the Conservative Revolution attempted to fuse “traditional” concepts such as authority, military virtues, and service with mass society and the use of technology both in industry and as an organizational model for society (i.e., function rather than identity). This alternative failed between the world wars, and there is little reason to believe that it would be more successful now, despite the efforts of such latter-day advocates as Botho Strauß and Heimo Schwillk.

In 1933, some of the ideas of Heidegger, Jünger, Schmitt, et al. were plundered by the Nazis and forced into the Procrustean bed of National Socialist ideology. The contemporary New Right has yet to reach a mass audience,¹⁸ but the relatively sophisticated language in *Die selbstbewußte Nation* has a trivialized counterpart in youth culture (e.g., neo-Nazi racist rock bands, nationalist/xenophobic websites on the Internet,¹⁹ etc.). Until recently, the flurry of intellectual activity and waves of rightist popular culture had not translated into success at the ballot box comparable to that of Jean-Marie Le Pen in France, Jörg Haider in Austria, Gianfranco Fini in Italy, or even Pia Kjærsgaard in Denmark.²⁰ The right-wing Republikaner have been on the wane, and they have often been involved in turf battles with the German Peoples Union (DVU). In April 1998, the latter unexpectedly won a victory that sent tremors through the entire German political establishment. The DVU captured 13 percent of the vote in the Sachsen-Anhalt state elections. Despite the fact that this impressive figure (about 154,000 votes) was garnered by a “phantom party” with almost no members in the area and made possible by the millions of its founder, Gerhard Frey, there was no ignoring the calculation that a full one-third of male voters between eighteen and twenty-five chose Frey’s party.²¹ The party program of the DVU, disseminated via the Internet (<www.dvu.net/programm.htm>), demonstrates how the ruminations of intellectuals and the mail-order distribution of CDs with extremist content can be transformed into practical politics. An analysis of the DVU’s Twelve Points shows not only how a rightist party attempts to sound like the voice of reason; it also highlights the distance between the German Right and American ultraconservatives.

The preface to the program contains a commitment (“without any reservation”) to the German constitution. The individual points begin with a moderate tone, often slipping into right-wing rhetoric at the end. Under “Preservation of the German Identity,” for example, there is talk of serving the cause of world peace, but the specific contribution to this noble project is a policy aimed at limiting the number of foreigners in Germany, stopping the abuse of the right to political asylum, and deporting “foreign criminals.” The language of Alain de Benoist’s ethnopluralism²² is borrowed here, and France is also set up as a model for stopping the “distortion” of German: the state is called upon to stop the influx of foreign words by means of an institution like the “Académie française.”²³ “Self-determination” and the German mark are defended against the bureaucracy of the European Union—a

position not unknown even in liberal European Union members like Denmark — but this point is linked to the loss of German territories after World War II. This loss, it is asserted, contradicts the principles of international law. This situation, we are assured, can only be changed by peaceful cooperation, not violence. (One can imagine that the Poles will not be soothed by this addendum.) Collective guilt as a discriminatory measure supposedly used against the German people is rejected, although the crimes of the Nazis are not disputed. It does not inspire confidence, however, when these crimes are depicted as no different than the actions of the Communists,²⁴ and it is also maintained that “serious war crimes” were also perpetrated by the Allies. German suffering must not be forgotten, and the German soldier (both in his incarnation as a member of the Wehrmacht and today) is to be given due respect. The historical dimension in the first three points yields to questions of social and economic policy in the rest of the document. Subsidies for “German families and mothers,” expansion of day care, equality for women, and better health care for all citizens are grouped together with an attack on abortion as both immoral and detrimental to the “preservation of the German people and the securing of the future.” Revenues saved by contributing less to international organizations²⁵ are to be used to guarantee pensions and social programs. Housing and transportation policies are to take the needs of children and youth into account, especially in urban areas. The educational system should offer equal chances to all without promoting pseudo-equality (“Gleichmacherei”). The goals of education are “respect for human dignity and religious conviction, courage, a sense of responsibility, democratic spirit and international understanding, and love for the homeland and the German people.” Stricter laws against polluters are called for, and the state is to make the protection of the environment one of its “primary tasks.” Experiments using animals are to be kept to a minimum, and those who abuse animals are to be punished more severely. Foreign influences on German culture are to be held to a “reasonable level,” whereas German artists are to be supported (according to their “achievements”). The mass media are to reflect the “values of the constitution” and the morality of the “majority of the people” and refrain from exerting a negative influence on German rights and concerns. The authors of the program are not unaware of the effects of globalization. They appear to support a limited policy of autarky, one that includes preferential treatment for German firms and farmers (in light of “excessive foreign competition”), a program to renew key domestic industries

like shipbuilding and steel, and the use of the “native” energy source, namely coal. All of this is to be accomplished by increased political awareness and participation on the part of the citizenry, channeled through political parties (including new small ones, like the DVU) and referendums.

This vision of a self-aware/self-confident nation contains passages that could have been lifted from speeches by Patrick Buchanan, Jesse Helms, Ross Perot, and many others.²⁶ It is not surprising to find German versions of isolationism, the V-chip, and “English First,” but in the American context, such ideas would hardly be merged with the goal of a strong state that intervenes in the economy, provides myriad forms of social welfare, and lends financial support to artists and writers. The campaign to limit immigration is of course not a unique exercise in the industrialized West. The one aspect of the program that is rooted in the German experience is the effort to restore national pride and patriotism, an effort that must of necessity include a revisionist look at the Third Reich and a plea for the return of lost territories. As was mentioned above, many of the voters who opted for the DVU in Sachsen-Anhalt were young males. They live in one of the “new states” of the Federal Republic, where unemployment is rampant and job security practically nonexistent. Such people could hardly be expected to view globalization as an opportunity or “flexibility” as a virtue.²⁷ Groups like the DVU may have nothing to offer beyond the tired old recipes of the past, but they are reacting to real social phenomena as well as the perceptions of individuals, as skewed as they may be. If political parties from other segments of the political spectrum in Germany continue to act as if globalization and the gradual disappearance of national identity are not only inevitable but also beneficial, disaffected youth and others may choose to once again follow the “special path.” This could have catastrophic consequences for both the Germans themselves and the other residents of the global village.

There are signs that a new type of thinking is emerging in Germany, although it is too early to tell where it might lead. At a meeting of German Catholics, the audience hears criticism of the “uninhibited and shameless egotism” in German society. Delegates also attend a forum about the ecological responsibility of business that includes then Christian Democrat Environmental Minister Angela Merkel and Joschka Fischer, the prominent Green politician.²⁸ Jürgen Habermas engages in a dialogue with then SPD chancellor candidate Gerhard Schröder and uses the occasion as an opportunity

to call for the development of transnational democracy as a reaction to globalization and the “strained frivolity of . . . neoliberal politics.”²⁹ Sociologist and legal scholar Sibylle Tönnies (granddaughter of Ferdinand Tönnies, who described the transition from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*) strives to separate Romanticism from the anti-Enlightenment stance of neo-Romanticism and advocates a return to “metaphysically motivated Enlightenment” with an emotional component.³⁰ She also attempts to come to terms with American communitarianism as a possible method for revitalizing the notion of community (“*Gemeinschaft*”) long shunned in postwar Germany.³¹ Political scientist Antonia Grunenberg supports a concept of freedom that is not equated with material prosperity or social welfare programs. Using the political philosophy of Hannah Arendt as her point of departure, she envisions a society in which individuals see themselves in the first instance not as receivers of services provided by the state, but rather as citizens concerned with using and preserving freedom. Knowing that the Germans panic when security and stability are threatened, Grunenberg adds that the stemming of increasing poverty is the *conditio sine qua non* of this model.³² She has of course read Benjamin Barber, who has issued a trenchant indictment of both “Jihad” (represented in Germany by the xenophobic skinhead, and, on another plane, by the elitist intellectual) and “McWorld:”

Each eschews civil society and belittles democratic citizenship, neither seeks *alternative* democratic institutions. . . . Jihad pursues a bloody politics of identity, McWorld a bloodless economics of profit. Belonging by default to McWorld, everyone is a consumer; seeking a repository for identity, everyone belongs to some tribe. But no one is a citizen. Without citizens, how can there be a democracy?³³

This kind of American export to Germany will one day, one hopes, be as widely accepted as the franchises of McDonald’s restaurants, Toys “R” Us or Blockbuster Video found in many cities between the Rhine and the Oder-Neiße.

What of the role of literature in this contemporary constellation? Sibylle Tönnies offers Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (whose drama of tolerance, *Nathan der Weise* [Nathan the wise], was the first play performed in post-fascist Germany) as a model worthy of emulation.³⁴ Lessing was indeed an exemplary embodiment of intellectual rigor, bourgeois virtues, and human empathy. He was also the product of an era of great upheaval, one far removed from our own barely surveyable terrain. Writers like Günter Grass and Christa Wolf are nearing the end of their long—and not uncontroversial

—careers, and the following generation, represented by the now-tainted figures of Botho Strauß and Peter Handke, offers no promising candidates for succession.³⁵ Few authors desire, or dare, to transcend their own personal concerns, offering a portrait of modern life that might have some impact on more than private life or group identity. Endless debates about whether this is the result of a conscious decision or simply a sign of the (postutopian) times are not likely to be fruitful. Beyond global formulas, the small-scale alternative offered by writer Matthias Altenburg (b. 1958) should perhaps be considered. Unwilling to accept the retreat into elitism and cultural pessimism undertaken by some members of the generation of 1968, Altenburg asks us to at least attempt to resist the “daily evil”:

[A]t least it is possible that this attempt is both the least that must be done and the most that can be done. That would be: an Enlightenment that would not again succumb to the illusion that everything can be illuminated, one that would be aware of the non-enlightenability of most of what exists and would, despite this, doggedly do what it can, knowing that otherwise, only tyranny and resistance would remain.³⁶

One cultural figure who apparently thinks along these lines is Hans Jürgen Syberberg (b. 1935). His provocative public statements³⁷ have made him a favorite target of the cultural left, and his presence in the table of contents of *Die selbstbewusste Nation* has only reinforced his image as a rightist. This is an oversimplification, as a reader of Syberberg’s 1981 book *Die freudlose Gesellschaft* (The joyless society)³⁸ can attest. Many passages of this work appear to be source material for Botho Strauß’s essay “Impending Tragedy.” The author laments the lack of respect and interest given to culture in democratic society (39), despises television (“Gradual stultification: Television as a drug” [176]), bemoans a youth that has no time to listen and will thus never become wise in old age (190), and values myth as a repository of the “secrets, wishes and the subconscious” of the people (317). At the same time, he does not hesitate to give expression to the contradictions within himself. Although he attacks the “leftist establishment of the intellectuals” (220), he does not conceal his own sometime association with it (231). He is saddened by a loss of German traditions and values (240), but he does not portray these as a racially pure phenomenon:

Germany without Jews: Loss of intellectual curiosity and the clumsiness of fashions as an inadequate replacement (“Ersatz”). The Jews were our most intellectually vital partners in the modern symbiosis of our culture. This loss is now making its impact felt. We are alone (“unter uns”). (55)

He can laud Ernst Jünger as a writer who dared to be different (221) but go on to compose a list of German cultural icons that includes not only Strauß and Handke, but also leftists and left-liberals like Wolf Biermann, Alexander Kluge, Günter Grass, Heinrich Böll, Bertolt Brecht, Hans Mayer, and Alexander Mitscherlich (381–383). It is not coincidental that Syberberg often emphasizes the human qualities of the people on his list. His main concern, which is reflected in the title of his book, is that the limitless production of material goods in the “consumer society” (he uses the English term) and the removal of obstacles have not yielded a better quality of life: “Are we happier today? Are there more celebrations? Is there more art? Are marriages, social life, living and dying better (190)? These are questions that the left should also be asking, both when analyzing contemporary conditions and proposing alternatives.³⁹ Once Syberberg’s generation of Germans, the last to have consciously experienced both everyday happiness and profound horror, have left the scene, there may be few people disposed to ask such questions, whether in literature or in life. That is a disconcerting prospect.

When Ernst Jünger died on February 17, 1998, at the age of 102, the German print and visual media reacted with an outpouring of appraisals of his life and works.⁴⁰ On the evening news (ARD’s “Tagesschau”), the one formulation used by many commentators made its debut: “With his voluminous literary oeuvre, Jünger evoked great admiration, but also clear rejection.” Federal President Herzog was quoted as saying that literature had lost “a unique witness to our time,” and Chancellor Kohl added that Jünger had been “an independent and indomitable intellect.” (The fact that the two highest representatives of the state would make statements about the passing of a literary figure illustrates the — at least residual — status of high culture in Germany.⁴¹) The still-controversial discussion of the author’s relationship to war and National Socialism was also touched upon during the news broadcast. This was a relatively even-handed portrait provided in a short time slot, and it was probably the one that reached the greatest number of Germans. The many assessments offered by literary scholars, critics, and politicians were actually much more problematic. One would expect a conservative CSU leader like Theo Waigel to call Jünger a “great German” and transform him into an anti-Nazi resistance fighter, but then SPD chairman Oskar Lafontaine’s praise of the “stimuli” found in Jünger’s works was an example of cynical pandering to the conservative electorate, given the author’s dis-

taste for everything that Social Democracy stands (stood?) for.⁴² Philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer characterized Jünger's life as "an irrefutable witnessing," granting the author instant status as a monument.⁴³ (Does "irrefutable" mean "beyond assessment"?) The French—with the exception of Sartre—always more appreciative of Jünger than the Germans, compared the deceased with Hugo and Valéry (*Libération*), asserted that he represented "intellectual freedom" vis-à-vis "subjugation and barbarism" (*Le Figaro*), saw him as a latter-day Roman—"proud, unpretentious, unshakable" (François Mitterand—not from the grave, but in an earlier statement), someone capable of "deciphering" the secrets of modern man (Jack Lang), a writer who sought not military, but rather "literary" salvation (Michel Tournier).⁴⁴ Even Jean-Marie Le Pen praised Jünger's patriotism and "chivalrous conduct."⁴⁵ It is one thing for outside observers (including former Spanish premier Felipe González, who memorialized Jünger's "human sensitivity"⁴⁶) to make such pronouncements, but quite another for today's Germans to accept an antidemocratic (or at least democratically disinterested) intellectual as a figure worthy of emulation. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* published articles that contributed to such acceptance, but at least that newspaper also offered a selection of Jünger's own thoughts—from 1982—about subjects like democracy: "I do not advocate any one constitutional form. . . . In Venice, in Greece, in Rome, in various German principalities, there were various forms of human existence. Some succeeded, some did not"; or anti-Semitism: "Who didn't say something against the Jews from time to time back then? Especially the Jews themselves. Take Heine, take Marx."⁴⁷ Such details are reduced to insignificance by the eulogizers who wish to exalt Jünger. Writer and essayist Curt Hohoff, who sees Jünger misinterpreted by "politically fanatical ideologists," claims that the author's cultural criticism was on the level of Hegel, Nietzsche, Jacob Burkhardt, and Karl Jaspers.⁴⁸ Germanist Harro Segeberg begins his portrait of Jünger with a list of the various manifestations of the centenarian, a list so long that no one phrase stands out. (Strangely enough, the first item on the list is not "enthusiastic soldier," but rather "author of military analyses of the First World War.") Segeberg finds Jünger's purported resistance to "ideological-political" seduction—at least until his final years—admirable, but he is more fascinated with than concerned about the "dangers" inherent in his world view.⁴⁹ Critic Wolfram Schütte does not attempt to transform Jünger into a democrat or a humanist, calling him "the only contemporary reactionary

with true literary merits,” but he in the end describes him as a “fearlessly curious intellectual.”⁵⁰ Thomas Assheuer finds Jünger’s “tirades” against the Weimar Republic “incomprehensible,” but he calls him a “genius of perception” who undertook a moral—if not democratic—“turn” (Kehre) during World War II. If Jünger was in fact the “biographer and chronicler of the century,”⁵¹ how would one categorize those figures like Anna Seghers or Heinrich Mann, who experienced a very different *saeculum*? The best advice comes from East German writer Rolf Schneider, who suggests that we use Jünger’s diaries as one—not *the*—documentary source on the history of our times.⁵² In general, the reactions to Jünger’s death are not the expression of a vibrant democratic culture⁵³ in Germany (at least in my view). They are also not merely a heeding of the old custom of not speaking disparagingly about the dead (*De mortuis nil nisi bene*). The willingness on the part of intellectuals (quite surprising, in some cases) to divorce esthetic sensitivity and sophisticated—if skewed—perception from life in society and the lot of the majority could once again be manipulated in times of crisis. No one should wish that such a test will come.

For the past few years, the Munich publishing house C. H. Beck has offered a series of small paperbacks under the title “The Most Important Knowledge.” Three of the recent additions to this series, *The Era of Enlightenment*, *Romanticism*, and *Good and Evil*, delineate the general context of the present study. Gerhard Schulz, the author of the *Romanticism* survey (which, flouting chronology, came out first), tells the intended general readership that the Romantic is “not a German characteristic and especially not a German fate.”⁵⁴ Although he does not mention Goldhagen (whose book was yet to come), he sharply criticizes historian Gordon Craig for emphasizing an alleged German affinity with Romanticism’s more pathological facets and denies that the discussion of national character has any scientific basis (134). Werner Schneiders, who is responsible for presenting the Enlightenment, has a much easier time of it, since he is not confronted with a primarily German phenomenon (logically enough, the chapter on Germany follows those on England and France). To the probable dismay of the New Right, Schneiders does not refrain from emphasizing that the German version of the Enlightenment had a strong religious dimension.⁵⁵ Lessing’s juxtaposition of religious conviction with an optimistic philosophy of history is also given its due. On the negative side, the author does not omit a reference to the “long alliance between [German] Enlightenment and absolutism”⁵⁶

and the reluctance of the *Aufklärer* to push for political reforms (114). Schneiders discusses many critiques of the Enlightenment, but asks in the end: “What is the alternative?” (133). (*Die selbstbewußte Nation* is not included in the selections for further reading.) Annemarie Pieper, who traces the scientific and philosophical attempts to explain the existence of good and evil, cannot find any one explanation that could claim universal validity.⁵⁷ As might be expected in a book written for a German audience, Hitler, Eichmann, and Goldhagen appear on the first pages of the introduction. Pieper is convinced that evil is often more attractive than good, but she tends to side with Hannah Arendt rather than Goldhagen with regard to the crimes of the Holocaust (9). Good and evil remain a “puzzle” to her (119), but she does not hesitate to advocate a “freedom-based constitution” (120) as an absolute necessity. In a passage analyzing utopian dreams, she presents her own personal view of humanity. Her words are a fitting expression of the motivation behind my own investigations:

[I]n the end, the humanity project always seems to be endangered when one of the basic human capacities — sensuality, common sense, reason, rationality — is deemed absolute and elevated to the sole measure of good and evil. The consequence is an inner disruption of humaneness that leads to brutalization. (113)