

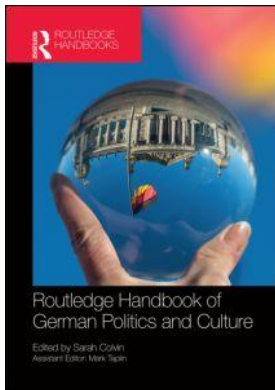
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Humanität, Bildung, Kultur

Germany's civilising values

Ritchie Robertson

Present-day Germany is a society in which culture enjoys high status: theatres and libraries are generously (even if with difficulty) subsidised by governments; the utterances of Günter Grass receive far more attention than those of any British or American writer could expect in their countries. It can also claim to be one of the world's most successful democracies and economies, with a prudent foreign policy that has largely avoided the military involvements of some other Western nations. *Kultur* and associated concepts provide a set of threads linking the Germany of today to its conflicted past.

Although the terms *Humanität*, *Bildung*, and *Kultur* are notoriously hard to translate, together they denote, very broadly, a conception of humanity that can be developed by education (*Bildung*) and finds expression in culture. This cluster of ideas emerges from the Enlightenment, and may be called the legacy of the specifically German Enlightenment (Reed 2009). Their spokesmen, often grouped together under the label 'Weimar Classicism', include Johann Wolfgang Goethe (1749–1832), Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805), Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), and Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835).

The value of this legacy, however, has been challenged, especially in the light of German history between 1914 and 1945. In the 1930s the concentration camp Buchenwald was set up just outside Weimar. When some woods were being cleared to put up camp buildings, care was taken to preserve an oak tree under which Goethe used to sit with his friend Charlotte von Stein (Roth 1939). Was this not proof that the values of Weimar Classicism were ineffectual against 20th-century inhumanity? Worse still, that they could even on occasion license inhumanity? Hence the critique to which the legacy of Weimar Classicism has been subjected (Wilson and Holub 1993; Dörr and Hofmann 2008).

It has, further, been claimed that the concept of 'Enlightenment' – and hence the others that emerge from it – is corrupted by an inbuilt dialectic, so that innovations designed to benefit humanity end in devastation (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002). The conquest of nature, it is said, leads inexorably to the massacre of conquered populations, whether in European colonies or in the mid-20th-century Europe that witnessed the Holocaust and the gulags. However, this thesis not only rests on very slight historical knowledge about the Enlightenment, but identifies it narrowly with scientific progress. The thesis denies human agency and sees life as subject to an inexorable logic. Against this, I assume historical contingency, not philosophical necessity.

History results from the intersection and clashing of people's actions, and there is always room for the unexpected. Horkheimer and Adorno illustrate a version of the cultural pessimism which flourished in Germany – understandably – in the early and mid-20th century, and of which we shall presently meet a representative in Oswald Spengler (1880–1936).

Weimar values do indeed have weaknesses, which will be acknowledged in the following account. But they also form a valuable and still living tradition. Their proponents' rich and diverse body of thought and literature cannot be reduced to a formula. Nevertheless, the following principles can be distinguished:

- 1 Humanity is deeply embedded in nature, though it may still have a divine or supersensible component.
- 2 Immanent in nature is a plan whereby all beings are to realise their potential.
- 3 Humanity's purpose is to move ever closer to perfection – the realisation of its full potential (*Humanität*) – albeit over an unimaginably long period and with innumerable setbacks.
- 4 It does so through education, which is an active, creative process of *Bildung*: self-formation or self-cultivation (Bruford 1975).
- 5 Crucial to *Bildung* are the aesthetic categories of unity and harmony.

Further: the development of *Humanität* entails an ongoing critique of one's own current culture, in the light of ideals pointing towards a better future. In this sense, the cultural critiques delivered by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his two *Discourses* of the 1750s can be seen as landmarks in the exploration of *Humanität*. 'Rousseau deserves the place at the gateway to the new intellectual world', wrote one of *Humanität*'s classic expositors, 'because he first reflects on what we may call the *self-criticism of modern culture*' (Spranger 1928: 11).

Herder and *Humanität*

Among his many achievements as scholar, theologian, literary and cultural critic, and philosopher, Herder formulated conceptions of *Humanität*, *Bildung*, and *Kultur* that had a lasting impact on the Weimar Classicism that centred on Goethe and Schiller. He presented them most comprehensively in his *Ideas for a Philosophy of the History of Mankind* (*Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, 1784–91). He presupposes that the organic world forms a great unity, powered by a single vital energy, with no sharp distinction between spirit and matter, mind and body, humans and animals. All are linked in the chain of being, a recurrent image that Herder borrows especially from Leibniz. The analogy between the growth of a human being from an embryo, and of a plant from a seed, illustrates this unity.

Human life has a purpose: the realisation of our *Humanität*, our full humanity. This may sound tautologous, but is not, for *Humanität* comprehends seven main human attributes (Herder 1989: 154–64). The first is peacefulness, for our physical form is not designed for aggression. Second comes the sexual urge, which finds its best expression in marriage based on mutual consent. Third, our ability to hear what other people say grounds our sympathy with others. Fourth, maternal love, combined with a child's long period of dependence on parents, is the foundation of social life. Fifth, our relations with others are kept on an equal footing by our sense of fairness (Herder prefers the tolerant-sounding *Billigkeit* to the severe *Gerechtigkeit* [justice]). Sixth comes *Wohlanständigkeit* (decency and comeliness of appearance), which brings out the beauty and shapeliness of the human body, instead of disfiguring it with the elaborate hairdos of some members of the upper classes or the piercings and mutilations reported by travellers beyond Europe. Finally, true humanity includes religion, which is essentially the hope for immortality.

Humanität can only be realised in the individual; otherwise it would be a meaningless abstraction. Each individual is situated in a particular place, connected via the family with a wider people (*Volk*), whose national character is expressed in its language. The individual is further connected with the rest of humanity through the chain of cultural transmission. This cultural chain enables us to be rational. For Herder, reason is not, as for early Enlightenment rationalism, a timeless, quasi-logical faculty; it means refining and applying the sedimented wisdom of previous generations ('das fortgehende Werk der Bildung des menschlichen Lebens') (Herder 1989: 144). Chains of tradition and sympathy always converge here and now in the unique individual: 'What each person is and can be, must be the purpose of the human race; and what is this? *Humanität* and happiness in this place, to this degree, as this particular link in the chain of *Bildung* that stretches through the entire race' ('Was also jeder Mensch ist und sein kann, das muß Zweck des Menschengeschlechts sein; und was ist dies? *Humanität* und Glückseligkeit auf dieser Stelle, in diesem Grad, als dies und kein anderes Glied der Kette von Bildung, die durchs ganze Geschlecht reicher') (Herder 1989: 342).

In history, each people makes its own contribution to *Humanität* through its distinctive culture. No people is wholly without culture. Herder writes about 'primitive' people with sympathy and defends them against their detractors. Cultural diversity expresses the richness of *Humanität*. History recounts the progress, even the perfectibility, of our species. Herder is no cloudy-headed optimist: he acknowledges atrocities, massacres, long periods of despotism in history, calling them 'errors and failures' (Herder 1989: 633). But, like storms in the atmosphere, violent passions and conflicts are necessary in history and spur us on. Even war generates new inventions. The increased deadliness of weapons means that only potentates, not marauding chieftains, can now wage war, and increases the chances of peace. Thus progress is indirect, irregular, like a mountain torrent, or even like humanity's basic action of walking:

The whole course of culture on our earth, with its broken corners and rough edges, hardly ever resembles a gentle stream, but rather a torrent plunging down the mountains. [. . .] As our gait is a constant falling to right and left, and yet we advance with each step, so also is the progress of culture in human generations and entire peoples.

(Überhaupt zeigt der ganze Gang der Kultur auf unsrer Erde mit seinen abgerissenen Ecken, mit seinen aus- und einspringenden Winkeln fast nie einen sanften Strom, sondern vielmehr den Sturz eines Wildwassers von den Gebürgen. [. . .] Wie unser Gang ein beständiges Fallen ist zur Rechten und zur Linken und dennoch kommen wir mit jedem Schritt weiter: so ist der Fortschritt der Kultur in Menschengeschlechtern und in ganzen Völkern.)

(Herder 1989: 655)

These ideas, expressed with Herder's infectious enthusiasm, are inspiring, but also liberal and generous. Since he finds some value in every culture, Herder is no nationalist, although his ideas may subsequently have been misused by 19th- and 20th-century upholders of German supremacy. Nor is he a complete relativist for whom different cultures are incommensurable (Berlin 1976: 153; see also Sikka 2011; Maurer 2012). His conception of *Humanität* offers normative standards by which cultures may be judged. All cultures contribute something, but not all are equally valuable: Herder praises the peaceful Egyptians, the inventive Greeks, and the industrious Phoenicians, but deplores the Romans' urge for conquest. Yet Herder's standards are also very broad: monogamy, for example, may take a variety of institutional forms. *Humanität* is a work in progress that cannot be defined in a narrow, restrictive way.

Some incoherence arises from Herder's concern for the individual. He opposes the idea, put forward by Kant in 'Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose' (1784), that while individuals must fail, in a greater or lesser degree, to fulfil their potential, the potential unrealised in the individual would ultimately be realised in the species; thus hope was transferred to future earthly history (Kant 1991: 41–53). Herder objects to having *Humanität* deferred to a remote future, and claims that each individual realises *Humanität* in a unique way. Yet since clearly many lives are blighted and wasted, the theologian Herder falls back on the unprovable claim that our potential will be fully realised in a future existence – a claim surprisingly often made in late 18th-century Germany, when orthodox Christianity had become largely incredible to critical thinkers (Kurth-Voigt 1999). While Herder attacked Kant, Kant criticised the *Ideen* in two reviews for relying on dubious analogies and mixing natural science with metaphysics. Their public controversy embittered both thinkers.

Goethe and *Bildung*

Goethe worked closely with Herder, first as a student at Strasbourg in 1770, later from 1783 to 1786 in Weimar, where Herder was superintendent of the Lutheran clergy. Both were fascinated by natural science, conceived of nature as an organic unity, and believed in continuous development, not revolutionary disruption, in both geology and politics. Thus Goethe preferred the 'Neptunian' theory that minerals originated from a slow process of sedimentation and from the gradual withdrawal of the oceans, to the 'Plutonian' theory of volcanic catastrophes; and he was among the few German intellectuals who (like Edmund Burke in Britain) rejected the French Revolution from its very outset. Goethe himself perceived the analogy between geological and political cataclysms (David 1974).

Goethe's conception of development, or *Bildung*, found expression in his novel *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (*Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, 1795–6). This is commonly considered the exemplary *Bildungsroman*, or novel of development, though the term *Bildungsroman* was not used till the 1870s, when the cultural needs of the new German Empire required a specifically 'German' type of novel, focused on the hero's inner life (Steinecke 1991). Although the concept of the *Bildungsroman* screens out the large body of realistic fiction produced in 19th-century Germany, it reminds us how widely *Meister* was read as a pedagogical work showing how a young man matures into a useful member of society. In retrospect, however, such a reading seems inadequate to the complexities of Goethe's novel.

Discussion of *Meister* as *Bildungsroman* often starts from the letter Wilhelm writes to his friend Werner, declaring that his middle-class status denies him the 'harmonious development of my personality' (Goethe 1989: 175) ('harmonischen Ausbildung meiner Natur') (Goethe 1986–2000: 9, 659) for which he longs, and that since in his Germany only aristocrats can develop a rounded personality, he as a born *Bürger* can develop himself only by acting as a nobleman on the stage. By this time, Wilhelm and his travelling theatrical troupe have spent time at a noble mansion, where the nobility have cut distinctly unimpressive figures, and his own acting talents have been shown to be limited. So his letter can hardly express his real goal. Soon afterwards, Wilhelm visits another mansion that turns out to be the seat of the Society of the Tower (*Turmgesellschaft*), which has been monitoring his progress through life. His apprenticeship over, he is admitted to a society where each individual's talents contribute to a greater whole. 'All men make up mankind and all forces together make up the world. These are often in conflict with each other, and while trying to destroy each other they are held together and reproduced by Nature' (Goethe 1989: 338) ('Nur alle Menschen machen die Menschheit aus, nur alle Kräfte zusammengenommen die Welt. Diese sind unter sich oft im Widerstreit, und indem sie sich zu zerstören suchen, hält

sie die Natur zusammen und bringt sie wieder hervor') (Goethe 1986–2000: 9, 932–3). Here again we see the influence of Kant's 'Idea for a Universal History', particularly of Kant's idea that society progresses through conflict. Man is a social animal, but also seeks to develop his individuality. Hence our social life is always conflicted, but our conflicts press us to develop our natural capacities. We therefore need 'a society which has not only the greatest freedom, and therefore a continual antagonism among its members, but also the most precise specification and preservation of the limits of this freedom in order that it can coexist with the freedom of others' (Kant 1991: 45).

The Society of the Tower may be seen as foreshadowing such a society. To get there, Wilhelm has himself developed. But his *Bildung* has not been smooth. His psychological course veers between depression and ecstasy. He has fathered an illegitimate child, whose mother Mariane has, unknown to him, died in misery. He has misused his father's money to finance an acting troupe in hopes of a theatrical career for which he is ill suited. Was this a waste of time? Or worse? Yet without his theatrical adventure he would not have met Natalie, his perfect partner, to whom he finally becomes engaged. Nor would he have met the strange child Mignon, who first arouses his paternal emotions. And in assuming responsibility for his own child, he acquires all the virtues of a good citizen, not through instruction, but through the promptings of nature. Hence the Society declares his misguided actions to be not crimes or sins, but necessary aberrations, and tells him not to torment himself with futile guilt: 'You will not regret any of your follies, and will not wish to repeat any of them. No man could have a happier fate' (Goethe 1989: 303) ('Du wirst keine deiner Torheiten bereuen und keine zurück wünschen, kein glücklicheres Schicksal kann einem Menschen werden') (Goethe 1986–2000: 9, 873–4).

This is an optimistic message. It recalls Herder's view that the horrors of history are mere 'errors and failures'. Goethe and Herder, accordingly, both rejected Kant's belief, expressed in his *Religion within the Bounds of Mere Reason* (1793), in 'a radical innate evil in human nature' (Kant 1996: 80; emphasis in original). Yet the novel, with the honesty of fiction, shows that Wilhelm's path, despite his good intentions, is strewn with corpses (Mariane's and Mignon's). Narrative irony exposes Wilhelm, not as a criminal, but as emotionally unstable, a blunderer, and even a bore. Although Wilhelm is nominally integrated into society, Goethe, even in the sequel, *Wilhelm Meister's Journeyman Years* (*Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*, 1829), never got round to showing Wilhelm and Natalie as a married couple. Goethe's confidence in nature is undercut by darker suggestions that only a determinedly upbeat reading could ignore.

Schiller: freedom through art

The progressive optimism favoured by many intellectuals was challenged by the French Revolution. The fall of the Bastille, the formation of the National Assembly, and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen aroused enthusiasm abroad. But the subsequent execution of the king and queen, and the reign of terror in which, executions aside, some 10 per cent of the French adult population spent time in prison, aroused horror like that produced by the Chinese Cultural Revolution in the 1960s. What had gone wrong?

This question prompted Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Mankind* (*Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen in einer Reihe von Briefen*, 1795–6). There had, in Schiller's view, been a brief opportunity to replace traditional authority with law, reason, and freedom. But it was not taken, because the people to whom it was offered were morally unprepared for it.

The lack of moral freedom reflects a wider problem of modern society, of deep concern to Weimar Classicism: that of the division of labour (Pascal 1962). Schiller notes that there are thinkers who know nothing of practical life, and practical men, men of affairs, who despise

ideas. Up to a point this antagonism of opposing forces is a necessary conflict, an instrument of *Kultur*. Like Kant and Herder, Schiller thinks that progress happens through productive conflict. But such conflict is not itself *Kultur*. The development of culture requires that these antagonisms be softened and eventually overcome.

To explain how, Schiller resorts to anthropology in its late 18th-century sense – the study of human nature. Having in his youth studied medicine, he posits three psycho-physical drives in humanity. The ‘sensuous drive’ (‘*Stofftrieb*’ or ‘*sinnlicher Trieb*’; Schiller 1967: 79) springs from our physical, sensual nature and enables us to deal with particular objects. A person dominated by the *Stofftrieb* lives from moment to moment. The ‘formal drive’ (*Formtrieb*) springs from our rational nature and is concerned with abstractions, with principles, with what is timelessly true. These two principles are not in direct conflict. We need both. But they have to be held in balance, and to do so is the task of culture (*Kultur*). Life should not be dominated either by sensuality or by rationality.

The balance between the formal drive and the sensual drive is maintained by the *Spieltrieb* or urge to play. This drive is basic to humanity. It shows itself as soon as primitive people begin to decorate their bodies, to practise rituals, to organise their spontaneous movements into rhythmic dances. When people imagine their gods not as terrible tyrants who need to be propitiated, but as beautiful beings, the aesthetic sense opens the way for further intellectual and moral development, as with the Greeks, who, as the most civilised society, idealised their gods by imagining them as constantly at play, enjoying leisure on Mount Olympus. The experience of beauty, which may take various forms, brings the sensual person closer to abstraction, and brings the abstract thinker closer to the sensory world. Schiller then argues that there is an intermediate state between matter and form, between passivity and activity. In this state, the mind is active, yet not under constraint; it is a state of free activity. Schiller calls it the aesthetic condition. In this condition, all our faculties are called into play, but by an object that is not real.

Schiller is not here talking about the external effect that art may have on us. He is describing how the play-drive and the experience of beauty can modify human nature by bringing about the aesthetic condition within us. Through the aesthetic condition, humanity moves from a subjection to physical needs and to brute force towards a condition of freedom in which people can voluntarily obey the demands of morality and reason. The aesthetic condition is a psychological one that also corresponds to a stage in the development of society. At this stage, our dealings with one another acquire an aesthetic element; roughness yields to politeness; kindness and consideration become the social norm. Schiller attacks those critics of culture (meaning mainly Rousseau) who deplore modern politeness as mere insincerity. Beauty is essential to sociability: it shapes the way we live together in society.

And here the *Aesthetic Letters* are revealed as a profoundly political text. The French Revolution failed because people tried to leap straight from a condition of coercion to a society based on reason. Yet neither coercion nor reason can make people good. The state should not try to educate people morally, because it merely limits their freedom. Only aesthetic experience, by transforming human nature and making people capable of freedom, can open the way to true sociability and to the civic virtue that Schiller, following the republican tradition, thought the best foundation for the state (Beiser 2005: 125).

Schiller’s *Letters* exercised an immense influence not only on the social critique offered by his contemporaries and by the Romantic generation that immediately followed, but also on the Marxist tradition. Karl Marx, like Schiller, saw the division of labour as a social evil that forced each person into a single sphere of activity. Only in communist society, Marx thought, could this confinement be overcome, because there ‘society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning,

fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, cowherd or critic' (Marx 1977: 169). The Western Marxists of the Frankfurt School drew from Schiller a different utopian conception in which art provided a realm of freedom and a vantage-point from which to reveal the alienation of capitalist society (Jameson 1971: 83–116).

The Greeks

The ideal of harmony that runs from Schiller to Marx and beyond was often thought to have been best embodied in the ancient Greeks. While the Renaissance concentrated on rediscovering Latin literature, 18th-century Germany exalted Greece above Rome, Homer above Virgil, Sophocles above Seneca. The art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–68) held up Greek art as an unsurpassable ideal that the moderns should imitate. Goethe took the Greeks, especially in his classical drama *Iphigenie auf Tauris*, as the model for his human-centred worldview: 'The Greeks sought not to render the gods human, but to render humankind divine' (Goethe 1986–2000: 20, 293). Schiller's poem 'The Gods of Greece' ('Die Götter Griechenlands') contrasted the Greek view of nature as populated by divine beings with the disenchanted, mechanical universe of modern science. Friedrich Schlegel extolled the Greek achievement in poetry, politics, social life, and science:

Only the development of pure humanity is true *Bildung*. Where has free humanity attained such pervasive dominance in the mass of the population as among the Greeks? Where else was *Bildung* so genuine, and genuine *Bildung* so public?

(Nur Entwicklung der reinen Menschheit ist wahre Bildung. Wo hat freie Menschheit in der Masse des Volks ein so durchgängiges Übergewicht erhalten als bei den Griechen? Wo war die Bildung so echt, und echte Bildung so öffentlich?)

(Schlegel 1970: 174)

Friedrich Hölderlin's mature poetry celebrates Greek civilisation as inspired by the gods. In his novel *Hyperion* (1797) the hero denounces, by contrast, the fragmentation of the modern Germans, who may be artisans, thinkers, priests, but never 'Menschen', whole human beings (Hölderlin 1969: 1, 433). Marx struggled to explain how Greek art could still provide unattainable models when Greek society had been at such an early stage of development, and concluded, implausibly, that though the Greeks inhabited the childhood of society, they were normal and hence delightful children (Prawer 1976: 278–88).

This Graecomania was occasionally qualified. Herder, in the chapter of *Ideen* celebrating the Greeks, also criticises them for their constant internecine wars and their harsh treatment of defeated enemies (Herder 1989: 535). Although Goethe read Homer constantly and made a close study of the *Iliad*, he also said, presumably with its atmosphere of perpetual warfare in mind, that it helped one to imagine hell (letter to Schiller, 13 December 1803). Late in the 19th century, the Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt presented a critical picture of Greek civilisation, bringing out the Greeks' cultivation but also their pessimism, malevolence, and misogyny, and finding in the shortcomings of Athenian democracy a warning for his own day (Burckhardt 1998). However, a conception of ancient Greece as both exemplary and culturally homogeneous, underplaying the Greeks' debts to Egypt and Asia (Bernal 1987), was to be institutionalised in the educational system.

The institutions of *Bildung*

Herder is suspicious of the state, considering it at best a necessary evil. The institution required by nature is the family. The state closest to nature is therefore an extended family whose members all belong to the same *Volk*. Large states, in which different peoples are mingled, are therefore contrary to nature, and so are all established social ranks, since they hamper people's freedom to develop. Rulers, who all owe their power originally to war and conquest, offend nature as soon as they try to regulate their subjects' lives. 'As soon as a ruler seeks to occupy the place of the Creator and, whether from caprice or passion, make the creature into something God did not intend, this heaven-defying despotism becomes the father of disorder and inevitable misfortune' (Herder 1989: 370).

In a similar spirit, the young Wilhelm von Humboldt argued in *A Proposal to Determine the Limits of State Action (Idee zu einem Versuch, die Grenzen der Wirksamkeit des Staates zu bestimmen, 1792)* for a conception of the state that now seems astonishingly minimalist. The state should require no positive duties from its citizens. It should limit their liberty only by forbidding such actions as might reduce the freedom of others. It should permit no hindrance to the free development of the individual. 'The true end of Man, or that which is prescribed by the eternal and immutable dictates of reason, and not suggested by vague and transient desires, is the highest and most harmonious development of his powers to a complete and consistent whole' (Humboldt 1969: 16) – a passage later quoted admiringly by John Stuart Mill in *On Liberty* (1859). The individual needs not only freedom, however, but also variety, for monotony impedes one's development. Yet if one follows a variety of pursuits, one may dissipate one's energies and achieve little. The answer to this problem is first, that each person should combine his diverse faculties in order to reach his goal; and second, that he should join together with other people, each of whom is developing his particular abilities, in a common endeavour. The basic form of such a union is the alliance between a man and a woman; beyond that, the associations and societies, founded on personal friendship, which we find especially among the ancient Greeks. The state cannot legislate for such endeavours, but should leave them to voluntary associations. It should not even institute a national system of education, but should leave education to parents and to private schools. For any national system of education will impose some uniformity on the pupils and thus hinder their free development. This ideal conception of the minimalist state ignores the fact that the German principalities all had large bureaucracies ensuring public order and amenities in the name of the *Polizeistaat* or 'police state', a term that had not yet acquired its 20th-century authoritarian meaning (Raef 1983); the state apparatus would grow throughout the 19th century in all European countries. It may be considered a weakness of Weimar Classicist thought that it failed to address the relation between the individual and the actually existing state.

Ironically, Humboldt in 1809 found himself in charge of Prussia's schools and universities when, in the wake of Prussia's defeat by Napoleon, the ministers leading the Reform movement got him appointed director of the Section for Religion and Public Instruction within the newly reorganised Ministry of the Interior. He sought to institutionalise the principle of free *Bildung*. Vocational education, while necessary, should be strictly separated from the teaching that sought to enlarge people's humanity by arousing their intellect and imagination, and that should be available to all classes. For young children Humboldt prescribed the teaching methods of the Swiss Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746–1827), who encouraged children to learn actively, to deal with realities rather than abstractions, and to develop their individuality. At secondary level, the 'Latin schools' with their dreary and ineffectual teaching should be replaced by *Bürgerschulen* whose pupils should study Latin, history, mathematics, and technical subjects, specialising

according to their talents, and by Humboldt's great innovation, the humanistic *Gymnasium*, which prepared pupils for university. The *Gymnasium* centred on classical languages, together with history and mathematics, and aimed – though practice often fell short of precept – to teach those languages not in a dry-as-dust way, but as a means of understanding both the form of a language (Humboldt was among the founders of linguistics) and the spirit of the ancient world.

Humboldt's best-known achievement was founding the university at Berlin that now bears his name. In planning a university, Humboldt shared the conviction, first formulated in the inaugural lecture delivered by Schiller at Jena 20 years earlier, that university study was not for the 'Brotgelehrte' (scholar earning his bread) who simply sought a professional qualification, but for the 'philosophical mind' selflessly devoted to knowledge and to seeking its underlying principles (Schiller 1958: 4, 750–3; Ziolkowski 1990: 237–52). In contrast to the specialised *grandes écoles* established by Napoleon, the university should form the pinnacle of the nation's 'moral culture' ('moralische Cultur') and provide its denizens with *Bildung* in both intellectual matters and social ethics (Humboldt 1964: 4, 255). While the school presents its students with already established knowledge, university students and faculty together should pursue knowledge as something not fixed but always in the process of being discovered and elaborated. The school should develop all its students' abilities harmoniously, so that those impelled towards higher study can discover their vocation and pursue it at university, both through solitary study and through cooperation. For this, the institution of the seminar, pioneered by the classical philologist Christian Gottlob Heyne at Göttingen from 1764, permitted an ideal union of teaching and research (Clark 2006: 158–79). Humboldt admitted that only a few students would devote themselves to the highest intellectual ideals, but expected them to exert a wide influence. Although reality was inevitably more mundane, he established a model for the university that had wide influence, especially in the United States, and contrasts both with the long-established view of the university as a means of professional training and its more recent assimilation to a business model.

***Bildung* and *Kultur* from the Napoleonic Wars to World War I**

In the repressive political climate that followed the defeat of Napoleon, when the Karlsbad Decrees of 1819 required even university lectures to be submitted to censorship, the *Bildung* envisaged by Humboldt had little chance to transform public life. *Bildung* was a possession of many individuals, and sometimes primarily a sign of social status, embodied in editions of Goethe and Schiller that gathered dust in glass-fronted bookcases but attested to their owners' membership of the *Bildungsbürgertum* or educated middle class. Humboldt's conception of the state as confined to safeguarding individual freedom was contradicted by the steady growth of administration and government in Germany's numerous states and, from 1871, in the German Empire.

The new Empire's appropriation of *Kultur* and *Bildung* was most vehemently opposed by Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), who also demanded a reinterpretation and revaluation of these concepts. He attacked the chauvinist illusion that Prussia's victory over France had resulted from the supposed superiority of German *Kultur*. In fact, Nietzsche charged, the triumphalist new Empire threatened to destroy the German spirit (*Geist*). The new Germany had produced the cultivated philistine (*Bildungsphilister*), who trumpeted the excellence of 'German culture' but had no idea what culture really meant. Culture, according to Nietzsche, is not book-learning, but a way of life, characterised by 'unity of artistic style in all the expressions of the life of a people' (Nietzsche 1982: 5). It could be found in Renaissance Italy or among the ancient Greeks, but not in present-day Germany, which offered only a hotchpotch of different styles from diverse periods and countries. The Greeks could no longer provide a model, because the German

universities did not supply *Bildung*, but only knowledge about *Bildung*. To a modern student, the Greeks would probably seem uneducated, while to them, with his head stuffed full of knowledge, his awkward body and ugly clothes, he would appear like a walking encyclopaedia, bearing the title ‘Handbook of inward culture for outward barbarians’ (‘Handbuch innerlicher Bildung für äußerliche Barbaren’) (Nietzsche 1982: 79). To the degraded versions of *Bildung* and *Kultur* that he found all around him, Nietzsche opposed a heroic ideal of self-development towards what he defined as the basic idea of *Kultur*: ‘to promote the production of the philosopher, the artist and the saint within us and without us and thereby to work at the perfecting of nature’ (Nietzsche 1982: 160).

The broad tendency of Nietzsche’s later writing is to separate aesthetics firmly from morality and politics. ‘Nietzsche’, wrote Thomas Mann in 1947, ‘is the most uncompromisingly perfect aesthete in the history of thought’ (Mann 1958: 172). In *Also sprach Zarathustra* (*Thus spoke Zarathustra*, 1883–5) *Bildung* is again mocked as a sterile conglomeration of incompatible fragments, while the state is denounced as ‘the coldest of all cold monsters’ (Nietzsche 1969: 75). By inquiring, especially in *The Genealogy of Morals* (*Zur Genealogie der Moral*, 1887), how morality itself came into being, Nietzsche seeks to inaugurate a world without morality, beyond good and evil, governed by ‘the innocence of becoming’ (Nietzsche 1968: 65). In his heady visions of humanity’s future, two figures can roughly be discerned. One is Zarathustra, the solitary prophet, mocked by the shallow populace, who denies the supernatural, affirms life on this earth, loves humanity for its potential, and practises a noble self-discipline unknown to the hypocritical moralists of the present. Zarathustra foretells the advent of the *Übermensch* (Superman or Overhuman), a terrifyingly strong-willed, dominating figure, generous, warlike, and cruel, who rejects compassion and is prepared to shape humanity through violence, like a sculptor working on recalcitrant material. Here again the world is seen as an aesthetic phenomenon. Humanity will be reshaped with the ruthless detachment of the artist. *Kultur* has been made absolute.

In the less exalted discourse of late 19th-century Germany, *Kultur* became a heavily charged word. In contrast to the universal implications of French ‘civilisation’ and to Matthew Arnold’s insistence that ‘the expansion of our humanity, to suit the idea of perfection which culture forms, must be a general expansion’ (Arnold 1969: 48), *Kultur* retained the implication of personal development. To liberals, it offered an alternative to a nationalist politics that claimed support from biology for doctrines of racial superiority. In this liberal, anti-biological sense, the German-Jewish anthropologist Franz Boas, who emigrated to the USA in 1886, took the concept of *Kultur* with him (Kuper 1999: 60–2). Resisting the biological and racial paradigms that still dominated their discipline, Boas and his followers, especially Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict, analysed distinct ‘cultures’ (in the plural), and ‘culture’ in this sense – a body of social practices based on implicit shared assumptions – survives in diluted form whenever we talk about ‘dependency culture’ or ‘research cultures’.

Back in Germany, *Kultur* was increasingly played off against *Zivilisation* (Elias 1964: 3–9, 1976: 1–7). *Zivilisation* was material, technical, external, and associated with Britain and especially with France. While the material progress of *Zivilisation* threatened to make the world boringly uniform, *Kultur* expressed the specific character of a nation, and Germany’s *Kultur* was inward, profound, artistic, and philosophical.

Kultur was mobilised as a slogan in World War I. While British and French publicists proclaimed a war for civilisation, their German counterparts called it a war for *Kultur* (Kramer 2007: 159). In September 1914, 93 eminent German intellectuals, describing themselves as representatives of German scholarship and *Kultur*, published an ‘Appeal to the Cultured World’ (‘Aufruf an die Kulturwelt’), denying German responsibility for the war and protesting against allegations

of German atrocities in Belgium. Yet, as historians have confirmed, the German invaders not only treated civilians with deliberate brutality, but also destroyed monuments of culture, notably Louvain University Library and Rheims Cathedral (Horne and Kramer 2001). In a much-read patriotic pamphlet, the distinguished economist Werner Sombart took the glorification of *Kultur* to extremes by identifying militarism with the pinnacles of German culture: 'Militarism is *Faust* and *Zarathustra* and a Beethoven score in the trenches' (Sombart 1915, 84–5).

This discrepancy resulted not from some fault implicit in the concept of *Kultur*, but from historical contingencies. The cultural achievements of the age of Goethe were appropriated to help legitimise the German Empire. At the same time, Germany had a military system that was more self-contained, immune to intervention by civilian politicians, than in Britain or France (Hull 2005). Military methods became ends in themselves, and were pursued to extremes without political, practical, or humanitarian considerations. The insistence on total victory, which was achieved in the Franco-Prussian War, let soldiers discard all restraints when fighting rebellions in Germany's African colonies. In World War I, rigid military thinking encouraged troops to continue fighting futilely long after the war was lost, and also to terrorise the populations of occupied territories by shooting suspected resisters indiscriminately, mercilessly requisitioning food and possessions, deporting many for forced labour, and treating prisoners of war with extreme harshness. To point this out is not to demonise Germany, nor to revive the obsolete thesis of a German 'special path' ('Sonderweg') (Blackbourn and Eley 1984), but to draw attention to unpalatable but well-attested historical facts that cast a long and dark shadow over succeeding decades.

Thomas Mann

Welcoming war in 1914, Thomas Mann played off a full-bodied though often bloody *Kultur* against a bloodless *Zivilisation*:

Culture is unity, style, form, attitude, taste, is some spiritual organization of the world, however eccentric, grotesque, savage, bloody and frightful it may be. Culture can include oracles, magic, pederasty, Vitzliputzli [an Aztec god], human sacrifice, orgiastic cults, Inquisitions, *autos da fé*, St Vitus' dance, witch-trials, poisoning, and the most colourful atrocities. Civilization, however, is reason, enlightenment, mildness, morality, scepticism, dissolution – spirit.

(Kultur ist Geschlossenheit, Stil, Form, Haltung, Geschmack, ist irgendeine gewisse geistige Organization der Welt, und sei das alles auch noch so abenteuerlich, skurril, wild, blutig und furchtbar. Kultur kann Orakel, Magie, Päderastie, Vitzliputzli, Menschenopfer, orgiastische Kultformen, Inquisition, Autodafés, Veitstanz, Hexenprozesse, Blüte des Giftmordes und die buntesten Greuel umfassen. Zivilisation aber ist Vernunft, Aufklärung, Sänftigung, Sittigung, Skeptisierung, Auflösung, – Geist.)

(Mann 2002b: 27)

Thus the ancient Greeks, the Aztecs, the Middle Ages, the Italian Renaissance, whatever their excesses, possessed culture, whereas modern civilisation by comparison was safe, bland, and dull.

In his self-justifying book *Reflections of an Unpolitical Man* (*Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen*, 1918) Mann still upheld a German *Kultur*, represented especially by the trinity of Schopenhauer, Wagner, and Nietzsche, against French and Italian *Zivilisation* associated with the un-German values of democracy and socialism, and embodied in his left-wing brother Heinrich. Reading

Oswald Spengler's huge treatise on world history, *The Decline of the West* (*Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, 1918–22), Mann was pleased to learn that history was a succession of mutually independent cultures ('Kulturen'), each including *Zivilisation* as a phase of decline. The decline of the West, in Spengler's view, had set in with the technical, philistine, commercial *Zivilisation* of the 19th century (Spengler 1972: 44). Spengler's cultural pessimism matched the mood of a defeated Germany.

In the aftermath of the war, Mann painfully rethought his position. The outcome was his great novel *The Magic Mountain* (*Der Zauberberg*, 1924), arguably a *Bildungsroman* whose covert subject is the author's own education (Reed 1974: 226–74). It dramatises a debate between *Kultur* and *Zivilisation* in which *Kultur* narrowly gains the victory. But this cannot be simply the benevolent but shallow, enlightened, progressivist worldview professed by Mann's fictional Italian humanist Settembrini. A modern conception of *Humanität* must acknowledge the undeniable facts of illness, bodily decay, and mortality. Hence Mann sets his novel in a Swiss sanatorium, where death is constantly present. And though *Bildung* may have degenerated into superficial book-learning, as Nietzsche charged, Mann puts his hero through a course of scientific reading, especially in biology and physiology, and thus provides a modern counterpart to Herder's concept of humanity as embedded in organic nature.

Although *The Magic Mountain* is a novel of ideas, the ideas are embodied in colourful characters and in fictional experiences. Settembrini's vision of 'homo humanus', inspired by the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the French Revolution, is contrasted with the image of 'homo Dei' put forward by his antagonist Naphta, a Jesuit who foretells that the unity of the Christian Middle Ages will soon be restored by a communist autocracy. While the trained dialectician Naphta scores many points and exposes the hypocrisy mixed in Settembrini's liberalism, the values that he lives, as opposed to those he professes, are clearly animated by hatred, and inferior to the kindness apparent in Settembrini. Thus Mann, without moralising, responds to Nietzsche's aestheticism by discreetly reintroducing the question how we are to live with one another.

The most problematic part of the novel is the symbolic hallucination that the protagonist, Hans Castorp, experiences when lost in the Alpine snow. First he envisions a Mediterranean coast where good-looking young people are playing sports and showing civilised respect for a nursing mother. From this paradise of healthy bodily culture and friendly intercourse – Mann's homage to German Graecophilia – his gaze turns to a grim temple, in whose recesses he finds two hags conducting a human sacrifice. This vision seems to reconcile the antithesis Mann had presented ten years earlier between *Kultur* and *Zivilisation*: the dark side of humanity, denied by *Zivilisation* but acknowledged by *Kultur*, must somehow be incorporated into a fully human way of life, without impairing the kindly sociability shown by the young people in the vision. Castorp draws the (typographically emphasised) conclusion: '*For the sake of goodness and love, man shall grant death no dominion over his thoughts*' (Mann 1995: 588) ('*Der Mensch soll um der Liebe und Güte willen dem Tode keine Herrschaft einräumen über seine Gedanken*'; Mann 2002a: 748). Death must be faced – the whole novel is an exploration of death – but it must not be allowed to dominate our lives as it would in the Christian theocracy extolled by Naphta.

Thomas Mann remains a probing commentator on German culture and politics. His famous statement on emigrating to the USA – 'German culture is where I am' ('Wo ich bin ist die deutsche Kultur') (quoted Reed 1974: 1) – was not a boast, but a denial that the Third Reich could lay any claim to the German cultural tradition. His novel *Doktor Faustus* (1947) addresses this issue in a more nuanced way, suggesting an analogy between the barbarism of the Nazis (and of proto-Nazi intellectuals) and the single-minded devotion to *Kultur* at the expense of *Zivilisation* shown by the transgressive modernist composer Leverkühn, who is observed with partial comprehension by the 'good German' Zeitblom.

Present-day Germany may be called Zeitblom's Germany. Zeitblom's narrative can be seen as the first step in the complex and painful process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the past) that, after some delay, began properly in the 1960s; Günter Grass's *Die Blechtrommel* (*The Tin Drum*, 1959) was an important landmark. In examining its past, modern liberal Germany has much to confront, but it can also draw on the values expressed by the concept of *Humanität*.

Note

With quotations from German sources, the original is given for literary passages or those including important uses of the words *Humanität*, *Bildung*, or *Kultur*. Translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

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