A NOBLE SUBSTITUTE FOR POLITICS*

WOLF LEPENIES is one of Germany's most influential academic administrators and public intellectuals. From 1986 until 2001, he was rector of the *Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin*, that country's equivalent of the Institute for Advanced Studies, and after 1989 he was engaged in founding similar institutions across post-Soviet east central Europe. He is the author of, among other works, a four volume history of sociology and several books on European intellectuals. In November 1999, Lepenies delivered the Tanner Lectures on Human Values at Harvard under the title *The End of "German Culture"*. This monograph elaborates further on the ideas found in those lectures and appears to be a condensed version of the author's *Kultur und Politik. Deutsche Geschichten*, published in Germany in July of 2006.

The starting point for Lepenies' book is a familiar claim: "I argue that an overestimation of cultural achievements and a 'strange indifference to politics' (G. P. Gooch) nowhere played a greater role than in Germany and nowhere have survived to the same degree'' (p. 6). He readily and disarmingly admits that many prominent historians, including Peter Gay, George Mosse, Fritz Ringer and Fritz Stern, have already "explored this specific German attitude towards culture and politics. I am revisiting their arguments and try to offer new insights into an old problem'' (p. 6). Rather disappointingly, Lepenies chooses to generate these insights not by confronting the path breaking contributions of this older generation of scholars with the results of the voluminous research on the social and political history of 19th and 20th century Germany of the past few decades. Instead, he adopts a traditional "history-of-ideas approach'', a decision rooted perhaps in the book's origin in a series of public lectures. In practice, this means that Lepenies provides an anecdote-rich survey of German thinking on culture and politics beginning with the traditional view that, in response to geographic fragmentation and disunity, culture came to be seen "as a noble substitute for politics'' (p. 9) in Germany during the 18th and first half of the 19th century. The author then outlines two contrasting responses to the emergence of a powerful, unified *Kaiserreich* after 1871. On the one hand, Nietzsche warned that Prussian-dominated political unity would in fact lead to cultural decline, and that only military defeat could reverse this process. On the other, the majority of "mandarins'' (Fritz Ringer) rejected this pessimistic stance and instead came to see the state as a protector of German cultural values, as a *Kulturstaat*. Indeed, as Lepenies recounts, ninety three of them signed an open letter dated October 4, 1914 which claimed that "the fate not only of German but of European culture depended on the victory of German militarism'' (p. 17).

* About Wolf LEPENIES, *The Seduction of Culture in German History* (Princeton University Press, 2006).

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This was a position initially espoused as well by Thomas Mann, the intellectual figure whose changing views on culture and politics provide a unifying framework for Lepenies' analysis. Thus in 1918, as Germany faced defeat in World War I, Mann could still argue in the massive *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man* that the high value placed in Germany on intellectual and artistic achievement precluded the active interest in political life required for democracy, and hence that authoritarianism represented the country's natural form of government. Yet less than four years later, in his speech "The German Republic", Mann would, in Lepenies' words, "set himself the daunting task of winning an authoritarian German youth [...] to the cause of the Weimar Republic and of German democracy" (pp. 63-64). In one of this book's most intriguing chapters, the author argues that it was Mann's discovery of the romantic – and homoerotic – writings of the New York poet Walt Whitman which convinced him that the highest aesthetic values could in fact be compatible with democracy.

If American culture played a small but crucial role in transforming the thinking of a key German artistic figure during the 1920's, the lines of influence ran principally in the other direction during the 1930's and 1940's as a result of the massive intellectual exodus to the United States provoked by the triumph of Nazism. In another intriguing chapter, Lepenies points out that while Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind* was above all an attack on the supposedly pernicious effects of German habits of mind on American values, it was one inspired by a German émigré, namely Leo Strauss (pp. 91-92). He also hints at curious parallels in the intellectual relationship between Germany and the United States on the one hand and Germany and France on the other during the interwar and postwar periods. As in the former case, the interwar years saw the increased penetration of German thought into French intellectual circles, and with it a precocious attack on this trend that anticipated the arguments of Strauss and Bloom by many decades: Julien Benda's *Le trahison des clercs* (1927). Yet despite Benda's efforts, and the terrible fate suffered by a "mediator" between France and Germany like Maurice Halbwachs – movingly eulogized here – at the hands of the Nazis, German influence on the post-1945 *maîtres penseurs* Sartres (Husserl, Heidegger) and Foucault (Nietzsche) remained substantial.

Lepenies' interpretation of the cultural dynamics in post-1945 and especially post-1989 Germany itself is perhaps the book's most controversial feature. In West Germany, he argues, failed denazification combined with an imposed western integration furthered an open conflict among collaborationist elites, self-righteous "inner exiles", returning émigrés, and a younger generation influenced by foreign (especially American) intellectual trends that "led to the production of works of art and scholarly books that were provocative and full of innovative energy. West German culture, both in the arts and the sciences, blossomed because a moral failure turned into an intellectual advantage" (p. 147). No such advantage emerged, according to

Lepenies, in the East, where the cultural elite "learned better than anything [...] the art of being ruled" (p. 169) and Weimar classicism was used, in the best tradition of German non-democratic regimes, to add a cultivated veneer to authoritarianism. As a result of what Lepenies terms the "intellectual disaster in the East" (p. 167), the GDR's writers and artists were not able to play the political role, either in 1989 or thereafter, of their counterparts in Czechoslovakia and Poland, and also were incapable of generating in their encounters with their West German confrères the kind of "creative tension" characteristic of the old Federal Republic (p. 174). Whatever the merits of this volume – and they are many – this judgment hardly does justice to the complexities of intellectual and social life in eastern Germany as revealed in an increasingly rich and varied body of literary, biographical and social science works.

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