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Introduction: "Germany" and German philosophy

In 1763, one of the many contenders for the title "the first world war" – in this case, the "Seven Years War" – was concluded. Its worldwide effects were obvious – France, besides being saddled with enormous financial losses as a result of the war, was in effect driven out of North America and India by Britain, never to recover its territories there – but, curiously, the war had started and mostly been fought on "German" soil, and one of its major results was to transform (or perhaps just to confirm) the German *Land* of Prussia into a major European power. It is hard to say, though, what it meant for "Germany," since, at that point, "Germany," as so many historians have pointed out, did not exist except as a kind of shorthand for the German-speaking parts of the gradually expiring "Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation." Once a center of commerce and trade in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, "Germany," in that shorthand sense, had by the eighteenth century become only a bit player on the European scene, long since having lost much of its economic vitality as trade shifted to the North Atlantic following the voyages of discovery and the intensive colonization efforts in what Europeans described as the "New World." After suffering huge population losses in the Thirty Years War (1618–1648), "Germany" found itself divided by the terms of the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 into a series of principalities – some relatively large, some as small as a village – that were held together only by the more-or-less fiction of belonging to and being protected by the laws and powers of the Holy Roman Empire (which as the old joke had it was neither holy, nor Roman, nor an Empire, and which was for that matter neither a state, a confederation, or a treaty organization but a wholly *sui generis* political entity difficult to describe in any political terms familiar to us now). For a good bit of its early modern history, "Germany" did not even denote a cultural entity; if anything, its major feature was its intense religious division into Protestant and Catholic areas, with all the wars and rivalries that followed from that division. Neither Protestant

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nor Catholic "Germany" thought of themselves as sharing any kind of joint culture; at most they shared a language (of sorts) and a certain accidental geographical proximity.

"Germany" during that period must thus be put into quotation marks, since for all practical purposes there simply was no such thing as "Germany" at the time. "Germany" became Germany only in hindsight.

Yet, starting in 1781, "German" philosophy came for a while to dominate European philosophy and to change the shape of how not only Europeans but practically the whole world conceived of itself, of nature, of religion, of human history, of the nature of knowledge, of politics, and of the structure of the human mind in general. From its inception, it was controversial, always hard to understand, and almost always described as *German* – one thinks of William Hazlitt's opening line in his 1816 review of a book by Friedrich Schlegel: "The book is German" – and it is clear that the word, "German," sometimes was used to connote depth, sometimes to connote simply obscurity, and sometimes to accuse the author of attempting speciously to give "depth" to his works by burying it in obscurantist language.[1] Yet the fact that there was no "Germany" at the time indicates how little can be explained by appealing to its being "German," as if being "German" might independently explain the development of "German" philosophy during this period. If nothing else, what counted as "German" was itself up for grabs and was being developed and argued about by writers, politicians, publicists, and, of course, philosophers, during this period.

Nonetheless, the questions those "German" philosophers asked themselves during this period remain our own questions. We have in the interim become perhaps a bit more sophisticated as to how we pose them, and we have in the interim learned a good bit about what kinds of iterations or what kinds of answers to their problems carry what types of extra problems with them. Their questions, though, remain *our* questions, and thus "German" philosophy remains an essential part of *modern* philosophy. What, then, was the relation of "German" philosophy to "Germany"?

It is tempting to think of "Germany" becoming Germany because of the explosion in philosophical, literary, and scientific work that occurred at the end of the eighteenth century in that part of the world, such that "Germany" became a culturally unified Germany (or came to

[1] The line from Hazlitt is cited in Peter Gay, *The Naked Heart* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995), p. 40.

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acknowledge itself as a cultural unity) because of and through its literary and philosophical achievements. In 1810, Madame de Stael, in her book "On Germany," coined the idea of Germany as a land of poets and philosophers, living out in thought what they could not achieve in political reality. Thus the picture of the "apolitical" German fleeing into the ethereal world of poetry and philosophy became a staple of foreign perceptions of Germany, so much so that since that time even many Germans themselves have adopted that account of their culture.

That view is, however, seriously misleading, if not downright false. The Germans were by no means "apolitical" during this period, nor were they practically or politically apathetic.[2] In fact, they were experiencing a wrenching transition into modern life, and it affected how they conceived of everything. To understand German philosophy, we must remember, as Hegel said, that the truth is the whole, that ideas and social structure do not neatly separate into different compartments, and that they both belong together, sometimes fitting one another comfortably, sometimes grating against each other and instigating change – and change was indeed in the air in "Germany" at the time. To understand German philosophy is to understand, at least partially, this "whole" and why the contingent forms *it* took ended up having a universal significance for *us*. To see this, it is useful to canvas, even if only briefly, some of the problems facing "Germany" during this period, and the obvious tensions they were engendering.

At the middle of the eighteenth century, "Germany" was undergoing a sharp population increase, it was experiencing a changeover to commercialized agriculture, and its economy was beginning to feel the first faint tugs of the expansionist forces already at work in other parts of Europe. Its political and social reality was, however, something different and quite unstable at its core. The effects of the Thirty Years War had in some areas been devastating; for example, Württemberg (Hegel's birthplace) had declined from a population of 445,000 in 1622 to only 97,000 in 1639.[3] The effects on the economy of the region were even worse; already battered by the shift in trade to the North Atlantic, the German economy had simply withered under the effects of the war. The war had also shifted antagonisms away from purely Protestant/Catholic

[2] For accounts heavily critical of the myth of the "apolitical German," see Frederick Beiser, *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism: The Genesis of German Political Thought 1790–1800* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992); David Blackbourn, *The Long Nineteenth Century: A History of Germany, 1780–1918* (Oxford University Press, 1997).

[3] That figure is taken from Mary Fulbrook, *A Concise History of Germany* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 64.

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issues into more territorial concerns as various princes had allied against the emperor (thus throwing the efficacy and even the eventual existence of the Holy Roman Empire into question), with the result being a loss of authority for the Empire and an increase in the authority of local rulers.

During that period, local princes came to require more money to maintain the kinds of courtly life for which the French had set the model (in addition to taking on the military expenses they believed themselves required to do); many German princes tried their best to emulate the royal court at Versailles, demanding the right to sponsor balls, build lavish palaces, maintain a set of courtiers, subsidize courtly arts, and so forth. Courtly life came with a price, and those princes were thus led to look for more efficient ways to govern their domains, raise taxes, and promote economic growth. This resulted in the growing demand (at least at first) for a relatively efficient bureaucracy trained in the latest management techniques to administer princely affairs effectively. To that end, the rulers looked to their universities – of which Germany had many because of the number of different princes who each wished to be sure that his university was turning out the right clerics in the right orthodoxy and the right administrators to manage his domain.

Those pressures, in turn, helped to pave the way for the gradual introduction of Enlightenment thought into Germany, as princes became more and more convinced by their officials that only with the most modern, up-to-date ideas about society and government was it possible for them to pursue their new ends of absolutist, courtly rule. However, the same pressures also helped both to underwrite and intensify the tendencies for these rulers to govern without any regard to a rule of law, and to become increasingly hostile to all those elements of tradition and inherited right that their enlightened advisors were telling them inhibited their raising the ever-larger amounts of money required to run their many mini-courts of their many mini-Versailles. They were not, however, particularly interested in fostering economic growth that might set up independent centers of authority, nor were their officials particularly interested in other groups acquiring more social status or powers than themselves. That set of circumstances severely restricted the possibilities for economic growth and for the creation of an independent, entrepreneurial middle class. At the same time, therefore, that the new Enlightenment ideas were blowing in from Britain and France, the population was on the rise (for example, by 1740, Württemberg had risen back to a population of 472,000), and the economy, although steadily

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improving, was unable to cope with the rapidly expanding numbers.[4] Thus, the economy simply could not offer sufficient employment opportunities to all the young men who were going to university or seminary to train in those Enlightenment ideas, with the hopes of finding a suitable career afterwards for themselves.

This was made all the worse by the fact that, after the Thirty Years War, employment in any of the learned professions had in effect become state employment, which meant that all such employment came to depend virtually completely on patronage from above. (There was only a handful of non-aristocratic young men who could count on a family fortune or an independent career to sustain them outside of state employment.) However, since the Enlightenment doctrines themselves that these young men were taught and trained to implement, inherently favored bringing unity, order, and rationalization into the administration of things, the bureaucracy staffed by them found itself more and more inherently in tension with the arbitrariness of princely power, which, of course, remained the sole source of the patronage that employed the bureaucrats in the first place. The administrators were, in effect, being trained to bite the hand that fed them, and, no surprise, they generally preferred the food offered to whatever pleasures biting and subsequent unemployment might bring them. That did not remove the tension, but it made the choice fairly clear.

All of this was taking place within the completely fragmented series of political and cultural units of "Germany" at the time. To go from one area of "Germany" to another was to travel in all senses to a foreign place; as one traveled, the laws changed, the dialect changed, the clothes changed, and the mores changed; the roads were terrible, and communication between the various areas was difficult (and consequently infrequent); and one usually required a passport to make the journey. A "liberty" was still a liberty within the context of the *ancien régime*, that is, not a general "right" but a "privilege" to do something really quite particular – such as the privilege to use iron nails, or to collect wood from a particular preserve – and depended on the locality in which it was exercised. To be outside of a particular locale was thus to be without "rights" perhaps at all. That sense of "particularism," of belonging to a particular locale and being enclosed within it, clashed with the emerging Enlightenment sense

[4] For the Württemberg figure, see James Sheehan, *German History: 1770–1866* (Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 75.

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of rationalization and "universalism" being taught as the only means to provide the "particularist" princes with the funds needed to continue their patronage of the learned professions.

This was coupled with an equally strong sense of fragility that was underwritten on all sides of the life surrounding Germans at the time. At this time, men typically married at the age of twenty-eight and women at twenty-five, but only about half the population ever reached that age at all, and only 4 percent of the population was over sixty-five. Increasing poverty and the threat of real (and not just metaphorical) homelessness hung over a great many "Germans," especially the poor. In this context, local communities and families offered the only real protection from the dangers of the surrounding world, and the price was a social conformity that by the end of the eighteenth century had become stifling. The only way out seemed to be to get out, and emigration to the "New World" and to other areas of Europe (particularly, Eastern Europe or Turkey) grew during that century. In addition to all those who left for the "New World," many others migrated from one area of Germany or Europe to another, all during a time when being outside of one's locality made one especially vulnerable to all the various kinds of dangers that followed on being disenfranchised.

The period of the middle to the end of the eighteenth century in "Germany" was thus beset with some very fundamental tensions, if not outright contradictions, within itself. On the one hand, it was a fragmented social landscape, full of dangers, in which mortality rates were high, and which demanded a sharply delineated sense of conformity, which for many remained the only soothing presence in an otherwise precarious life, but which for others had gradually become suffocating rather than reassuring. For the aspiring bureaucrats and their children, new winds were blowing in, but little seemed to be changing in front of them. Not unsurprisingly, the old mores were breaking down even at the moment when they still seemed so firmly cemented in place; for example, both in Europe during this period and in North America, illegitimate births sharply rose as young people, frustrated with having to postpone marriage, often forced the issue by premarital pregnancy (and, as always, women ended up bearing the costs of all those pregnancies that did not effectively lead to the desired marriage). In America, the prospect of seemingly limitless new land often gave young people in that largely agrarian society a way out; a pregnancy requiring a marriage often settled the issue for reluctant parents, and the new couple could set out on

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their own land to make their own future together. In Germany, however, this simply was not possible, a fact that only heightened the social tensions already at work. For many, it meant dependence on family for long periods of young adulthood; for others, it gave presumed fiancés the excuse they were seeking to sidestep the responsibilities expected of them.

For the burgeoning class of administrators and those who hoped to join their ranks, "reading clubs" sprang up everywhere, even provoking some conservative observers to bemoan what they saw as a new illness, the "reading addiction," *Lesesucht*, to which certain types of people were supposedly especially vulnerable (typically, servants lacking the proper awe of their masters, women whose mores did not fit the morals of the time, and, of course, impressionable young students). Novels especially gave young people the means to imagine a life different from the one they were leading or were seemingly destined to lead, and gave older people a means to discuss in their lodges and reading societies material that attacked arbitrary princely authority and extolled the virtues of the learned professions in general. Travel literature – with its capacity to exercise the imagination about different ways of life – became a cult of its own. During that period, book publishing increased at a faster rate in the German-speaking areas of Europe than anywhere else – an indication not only that literacy was on the rise, but also that people were seeking *more* from their books. Book publishing had fallen drastically after the devastations of the Thirty Years War; however, as Robert Darnton has pointed out, by 1764, the Leipzig catalog of new books had reached its prewar figure of about 1,200 titles, by 1770 (the year, for example, of Hegel's and Hölderlin's births) it had grown to 1,600 titles, and by 1800 to 5,000 titles.[5]

The emerging culture of the reading clubs was not "court" culture, but it was also not "popular" culture. It was the culture of an emerging group that did not conceive of itself as bourgeois so much as it thought of itself as cultivated, learned, and, most importantly, *self-directing*. Its ideal was crystallized in the German term *Bildung*, denoting a kind of educated, cultivated, cultured grasp of things; a man or woman of *Bildung* was not merely learned, but was also a person of good taste, who had an overall educated grasp of the world around him or her and was thus capable of a "self-direction" that was at odds with the prevailing pressures for conformity. To acquire *Bildung* was also to be more than educated; one might become merely "educated," as it were, passively, by learning

[5] Robert Darnton, "History of Reading," in Peter Burke (ed.), *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 1992), p. 144.

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things by rote or by acquiring the ability to mimic the accepted opinions of the time. To be a person of *Bildung*, however, required that one *make* oneself into a cultivated man or woman of good taste and intelligence. The man or woman of *Bildung* was the ideal member of a reading club, and together they came to conceive of themselves as forming a "public," an *Öffentlichkeit*, a group of people collectively and freely arriving at judgments of goodness and badness about cultural, political, and social matters. In his prize-winning essay of 1784, Moses Mendelssohn (a key figure in the German Enlightenment) even identified Enlightenment itself with *Bildung*.

In that context, the ideal of *Bildung* easily meshed with other strains of emotionalist religion emerging in Germany and elsewhere in Europe. The Reformation had called for a questioning of ecclesiastical authority, but, by the time the dust had settled on the wars of religion and the Thirty Years War, it had in effect ended up only substituting one doctrinaire authority in favor of itself and several others. The resulting settlement in Germany after the wars, which allowed local princes to determine what would count as the established church in their domain, had then itself paradoxically both further undermined the kind of claim to absolute authority that the church had previously assumed for itself, and written that kind of authority even more firmly into the social fabric. The settlement that made a particular orthodoxy mandatory for each locality thereby only underlined the fragmentation of Christianity, making it abundantly clear that "Christianity" did not necessarily speak any longer with one voice. The obvious conclusion was that determining what Christianity really "meant" required further reflection, and, in light of that, many Christians took Augustine's advice and turned inward to find the "true" voice of Christianity that had been overlaid, if not silenced, by the fragmentation of the church. Many Protestant thinkers advised people that they would better find God's presence and his will by looking into their hearts, not into their theology books. (There was a corresponding movement in Catholic areas as well.) In many areas of Protestant Germany, this took the form of what came to be known as Pietism, which extolled group readings of the Bible, personal and group reflection on the deliverances of one's "heart" as a means of self-transformation, and a focus on reforming society now that the Reformation had been (partially) carried out within the church itself. Pietism also taught people to perform a kind of self-reflection that focused on keeping diaries, discussing one's experiences of faith with others, holding oneself to a principle, and, in short, learning to see whether one was *directing* one's life in accordance with God's wishes.

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In the previous century, Leibniz had argued that, because of God's perfection, this had to be the "best of all possible worlds," and the notion of perfection that was embedded in Leibniz's doctrine had itself become a bit of orthodoxy in its development and codification in Germany by Christian Wolff. The "perfections" of the world and its corresponding "harmonies" even led to the coinage of a new word – "optimism" – and, in 1755, the Berlin Academy of Sciences awarded a prize to an essay on the theme, "All is right." The great Lisbon earthquake that occurred shortly thereafter spurred Voltaire into lampooning the whole matter in his novel, *Candide*, and it became more and more difficult after that point to maintain that everything in the world was in the order it was supposed to be.

There was, however, more to that line of thought than mere smug assertions that the world was as it should be. Seeking God's perfection in the world meant reflecting on God's *love* for the world, which, in turn, gradually began to undermine the gloomy picture of human nature presented by some Christian thinkers (particularly, the Calvinists) in favor of a view that held that the world's imperfections were capable of a sort of redemption in the here and now, not in some afterlife. It was, on that line of emerging thought, therefore the duty of Christians to reform that world in light of God's love, and in order to do that, Christians had to turn away from orthodoxy, even from overly intellectualistic theological treatments of Christianity, and focus on the truth "within" their "hearts" in order to realize God's kingdom on earth. The secular Enlightenment emphases on sympathy and empathy thus fused well with the religious sense of enacting on our own God's love for the world by Pietist reflection, and both fit, although uncomfortably, into the notion that one should be directing one's life by becoming cultivated and by holding oneself to a moral principle. The educated young men and women of the "reading clubs" and the universities thus married the ideas of *Bildung* as self-direction and subjectivity as self-reflection into religious *feeling* as self-direction. The mixture resulted in a slightly confused but still assertive mode of self-understanding that fit at best only precariously with the fragmented, authoritarian, conformist world in which they were seemingly destined to live.

This was not simply a matter of rising expectations failing to be confirmed by social conditions, nor was it simply a matter of economic forces or class pressures compelling people to alter their ways to fit the new modes of production. Rather, young men and women in Germany in this period found themselves living in a practical, existential dilemma:

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many of them simply could no longer *be* the people that fit comfortably into that kind of social milieu, and thus for them the issue of what it meant for them to *be* any kind of person at all came more obviously to the fore. As the normative force of the old order slowly eroded away beneath them, those younger generations (roughly those coming of age in the 1770s and those born in the early 1770s) came to believe that they were leading unprecedented lives, and they went in search of a new set of meanings that would anchor their lives in that not yet so brave new world.

For completely contingent reasons, the Germans of this period thus squarely faced what we can now call "modern" problems. The force of tradition, of scripture, even of nature and religion in general, had been shaken for them, and whatever orientation such things had offered them in the past seemed either non-existent or at least up for grabs. They were, of course, by no means willing simply to abandon appeals to scripture or tradition; instead, they found that holding on to those things required some other evidence than those things themselves, that the authority of tradition and established religion was no longer self-evident or self-certifying. This was not simply a matter of the world becoming more complex for new generations so that they were being called to be more discriminating than their parents; it was that their social world itself had changed, and that *they* had changed, such that appeals to matters that in the past had settled things for the ancestors – the very old "German" particularistic, "hometown" notion of "a place for everyone and everyone in their place" – were no longer viable. What had seemed fixed had come to seem either a matter of changeable convention or at best something that humans had "placed" in the world, not part of the eternal structure of things. What they were left with was their "own lives," and what they found themselves "called" to do was lead their own lives. This, however, only raised the further issue for them: what kind of life counted as "one's own"?

Trying to interpret their world, they found that the institutions and practices surrounding them gave them little help, since they could not "find" themselves or "see" themselves reflected in those practices. They became thereby metaphorically "homeless"; the consolations of locality, which had structured life for so many of their ancestors, were not *immediately* there for them. Yet they also did not find themselves without direction or guidance; they still lived in an orderly, determined society that had carved out specific roles for them to play. They thus took on a

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