

February 1976

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Recommended Citation

Hermand, Jost (1976) "The Agrarian Ideology: Fascism as Utopia and Hypocrisy," *University of Dayton Review*. Vol. 12: No. 2, Article 13.

Available at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/udr/vol12/iss2/13>

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The Agrarian Ideology: Fascism as Utopia and Hypocrisy¹

by Jost Hermand

The Third Reich will be a Reich of farmers, or it will pass away as did the empires of the Hohenstaufens and Hohenzollerns.

—Adolf Hitler

Whoever speaks of fascism cannot remain silent about capitalism.

—Max Horkheimer

In the eyes of Marxist theorists fascism is seen as the most immediate and brutal manifestation of imperialism; that is, it is a form of capitalism which seizes upon right-radical elements of society during times of economic and social upheaval in an effort to maintain a system of total suppression and control of public opinion. Internally, fascism is evoked to dissolve the opposition of leftist labor organizations; externally, it launches an aggressive mobilization of the interests of "big business" by creating new colonies, outlets for manufactured goods, sources of raw materials and areas of market manipulation. Thus viewed, Hitler ought to be considered the logical successor to the throne of Kaiser Wilhelm II. For it was the ambitious policies of this last German Kaiser, including repressive acts against the Social Democrats in the sphere of internal politics and an accelerated rearmament with an expansionist foreign policy seeking the conquest of new colonies, which all culminated in open conflict with other imperialist nations in the First World War. Serving this brand of German imperialism foremost as propaganda machines were numerous political organizations, especially the "German Naval Union" (*Deutscher Flottenverein*), the "National Union for the Founding of Colonies" (*Nationaler Kolonialverein*) and the "League for Protection from Social Democracy" (*Schutzverband gegen die Sozialdemokratie*). They all beat their chauvinist drums to the tune of imperialist expansion of German power in the areas of Central Africa, the Pacific, the Balkan States, the Ukraine and in the direction of Belgium and France.

But these ideological precursors are misleading: by no means did Hitler or the ideologues of the Third Reich glorify Wilhelm II or his Second Reich. These National Socialists considered the imperialist maneuvers of the Wilhelminian era to be much too bold, too direct, and too heavy-handed. Accordingly, the imperialist engineers

of public opinion in the Nazi camp proceeded in a manner much more adept, more indirect and underhanded. Because of their methods their true ideological precursors are actually found in those groups designated as the "National Opposition" of the Second Reich—groups such as the "Pan-German Union," the "Werdandi Society," the "Guido-von-List Society," the "Teutonic Orders" and similar organizations whose programs hardly seem imperialist at first glance.² Their adherents were mostly middle-class idealists and dreamers who advocated preserving pre-industrial, even agrarian conditions. Charged with a passion directed against the big-city life, the industrial complex and the reality of a proletariat, they longed for a past with all its good: the Biedermeier, the sixteenth century with its old German character, the folk culture of the Gothic era, or for even more distant periods. In so doing, the German "spirit" became identified with terms like the "eternal," "consciousness of tradition," "ties to the distant past"—in short, equated with nearly everything in which some sort of "organic" unity of thought seemed to be proclaimed. The image of a mystical union of the Germanic people was offered against a wide spectrum of "Western" tendencies leading to the breakdown and compartmentalization of society: political parties, parliamentarianism, urbanization and class divisions, all of which were phenomena considered typical of the democratically controlled industrial states in the West. In the nationalistic circles of Germany "being German" was taken to mean "being unified," sharing a naive spirit, being mystical and soulful, tending to the beyond, oriented to the idealistic. These features, when compared to the materialist decadence of the West, and its decline into old age, were used to characterize the Germans as a youthful folk, one with vigorous blood and unconsumed powers.

For each of the above mentioned movements and currents the ideological basis was found principally in three works: Paul de Lagarde's *German Writings* (*Deutsche Schriften* [1877-1884]), Julius Langbehn's *Rembrandt as Educator* (*Rembrandt als Erzieher* [1891]) and Ferdinand Tönnies' *Community and Society* (*Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* [1887]). From these works was extracted a new "German ideology," in fact, almost a "German Mission." Thus Germany—the land of community, culture, idealism, spirit and consciousness of the nordic tradition—was frequently shown in contrast to England, the land of materialism, industrialism and business morality³ and to France, the land of decadence, rationalism and egoism.⁴ Basing themselves on such reasoning the "true" Germans of this era saw in the Second Reich with its Parliament and powerfully advancing industrialization and urbanization only an "intermediate" Reich. Their hopes and longings were already intended for a coming Third Reich that would nullify these "Western" tendencies and return the German folk once more to a genuine blood-and-soil ideology.

Clearly the most important, influential group within the growing complex of romantic-utopian anticapitalist and antisocialist societies was the "Pan-German Union," an organization circulating the notion of a vast peasant Reich, one reaching from the Maas to the Old Reich of the Goths on the Crimea and arising out of German tribes composed of farmers tied to the soil. It was to be a Reich without cities, with-

out industries, without political parties, without a proletariat. Thus, instead of submitting themselves to the Red, Black and Gold International—to socialism, papal loyalty and capitalism—these blood-and-soil defenders longed for a “Reich of Germans,” as Heinrich Class, leader of the “Pan-German Union,” summed up the ideal in *If I Were Kaiser* (*Wenn ich Kaiser wär* [1912]). Consequently the Pan-Germans, rather than adhering to the Western-Judaean-capitalist principle of trade and industry—as they called it—advocated an agrarian state drawing upon the “spirit” of the folk, thereby considering themselves a “National Opposition” against Kaiser Wilhelm II, collaborator of the Krupps and initiator of an imperialist naval policy held in alliance with Tirpitz. The Pan-Germans rejected all this. They wanted nothing of colonies, emigration or German industrial expansion. What they envisioned was a greater Pan-German Reich of farmers in Central and Eastern Europe, creating as in the age of the great folk migrations a necessary *Lebensraum* by means of a Germanic seizure of land carried out by the peasants themselves.

We ask the question: Who really financed such an organization and backed its ideas?—Clearly it was the bourgeoisie and not the farmers; and specifically it was those of the bourgeoisie who had no idea of abandoning the big-city life to return to the countryside. Theirs was all a highly adventurous dream turned sentimental by nationalistic literati and racist outsiders who, in their idealistic blindness, saw the city as the “creeping death of the populace,” and the countryside as the Germanic “fountain of youth.” Yet literati and professors alone do not determine the course of politics, even if they would like to do so. For that, money is needed—much money. And this “big money” did not flow out of the pockets of the educators. On the contrary, it came from the very same heavy industry which the Pan-Germans had opposed so vehemently. But how was that possible? Why did the manufacturing and defense sectors of industry finance an organization which called for doing away with those very industries? Why was a fanatical peasant cult of interest to industrialists in a time of general rural exodus and rapid urbanization?—These people were cynical *Realpolitiker* and were simply asking the question: Whose interests does such a cult benefit? In the long run the prosperity of the Pan-German Union benefited principally the industrialists, and in three different ways. 1) The peasant cult allowed them to support the German territorial claims to the Ukraine, the Balkan States and the ore deposits of Longwy-Briey in that it disguised the act of Teutonic land seizure as a historic deed cloaked in the nationalistic concept of *Lebensraum*. 2) At the same time it served the forces of internal repression by portraying the proletariat arising from the process of industrialization as decadent, inferior and degenerate. 3) And together with its condemnation of technology and the city, it allowed these industrialists to support all regressive ideologies by playing off myth against utopian goals and the German community against the ideal of a classless society. By pumping money into this propaganda mission business interests received dividends on their investments, for through this act a genuine anticapitalist spirit was diverted into false paths, thus becoming disarmed.

Since the Pan-German movement proceeded above all from the educated mid-

dle class, it is no surprise that it also extended itself to the areas of painting and literature. In fact the high point of this propaganda crusade occurred during the same years as the "Free-us-from-Berlin Movement" (Friedrich Lienhard) and the so-called "Native Art Movement" (Paul Schultze-Naumburg, Adolf Bartels).⁵ In the works of these two movements the peasant cult can be seen most clearly in the paintings of Fritz Mackensen, Fritz Boehle and Albin Egger-Lienz. They often portrayed their peasants wearing "Nibelungen boots"; that is, they presented their figures ready for military service: for heroic, monumental, imperialist deeds—their peasants were no longer the tranquil, typical farmers found in nineteenth century Poetic Realism. In place of the international trends of Naturalism, Impressionism and Art Nouveau, these painters consciously demanded, in accord with their folk ideology, a pure German art with themes from Germanic traditions. Through such an emphasis they expected to become culturally independent from all other styles. They reasoned: If all of Germany were to be a Reich of farmers, then the Reich would need to have a flourishing peasant genre in its painting. Similar statements hold also for the literature of the Pan-German campaign. Here the simple life of a better, earlier, pre-industrial age is praised.⁶ Writers such as Adolf Bartels, Gustaf Frenssen or Gorch Fock glorified above all the strenuous life of the Frisians and the Dithmarschers on the North Sea, for there farm life could be shown as a struggle for existence in the light of both greatness and challenge. Rather than having heroes who were decadent weaklings or aestheticized intellectuals, these writers employed figures who were taciturn men, quietly introspective and fully self-sufficient, who had sealed themselves off totally from every influence of the world around them. This type of character came into play most readily in Hermann Löns' *Wehrwolf* (1910), a novel depicting the successful defense of a German village from foreign marauders during the Thirty Years' War.

But during these years, from 1900 to 1914, the celebration of the peasant myth as the inexhaustible source of life for the nordic race took place on an even broader front. From everywhere the blood-and-soil ideology was heard: from the *Wandervögel*, the country schoolhouses and the health clubs. All over and in every domain the old Germanic customs and practices were once more taken up; there were folk dances, campfires and feasts proclaiming the advent of the summer solstice. This movement in search for the Germanic spirit reached its high point in 1913 on the Hohen Meißner on the occasion of the hundredth anniversary of the so-called "wars of liberation" fought by German forces against France, an event marking the first instance of freeing the German "soul" from all foreign domination. A feeling of brotherhood with the folk grew in the minds of the bourgeois youth, and this feeling of community rapidly paid off for Kaiser Wilhelm II and big business—for it was these very youths who, with eyes filled with the tantalizing glow of the "German Mission," shed their blood on the battlefield of Langemark. They trusted in this cause sold to them as a true idealism set against a false materialism, having no idea themselves that they were simply sent out to the front for the advancement of the Krupps and the industrial trusts, for the seizure of ore deposits in Longwy-Briey and the Ukraine.

And it was to this "experience at the front" that Hitler returned time and again in his speeches of the twenties. He also repeatedly made reference to "farming as the source of life of the nordic race," to the nation's need of *Lebensraum* and to the physical superiority of the Teutonic race over all other races in the world. With these tactics he was repeatedly successful in encouraging the fainthearted petty bourgeoisie to become interested in the "spirit" of Germany, and in shifting interest away from what really determined the course of German life, the activities of the giant corporations. For these reasons, after 1933 Hitler no longer thought about the goal of transforming the fatherland into an agrarian Reich of German tribes, although he never gave up in the least the slogans of farming and agriculture. Writers such as Löns, Bartels, Frenssen, Fock and Hans Grimm once again had great success. Similarly, Hans Friedrich Blunck's stories of the Vandal tribes and Josefa Behrens-Totenohl's mystical representations of the peasant milieu won great acceptance. The same is true for the reputations earned by those painters of the peasant genre, such as Sepp Hiltz, Adolf Wissel, Hermann Triebert, Oskar Martin-Amorbach and many others.⁷ Even the German peasants' advocate R. Walter Darré was not ashamed of depicting the whole of German history as the history of German farming.⁸ But the ideology lurking behind these paintings, novels and cultish affirmations was becoming increasingly more threadbare with the passage of time. As long as this ideology was still able to appear as the "National Opposition," it was still possible to share a halfhearted belief in it. But now its representatives were in power and yet its program was not carried out, thus forcing its proponents to show their true colors. Until 1933 mostly naive, misguided idealists had believed in the peasant cult. After 1933 it was the cold-blooded opportunists who took this ideology and used it for their own aims.⁹

Hence, the true fascism was not an idealism, rather it was an opportunism for which every means—even agrarian ideology—was justifiable to enlarge the spread of German power. Seen in this light, the Morgenthau plan of 1945, which once more foresaw turning Germany into a land of farmers and village guildsmen, would have been the true realization of fascism. As paradoxical as it all sounds, directly through the Morgenthau Plan this fascism was demasked as a false and hypocritical ideology, but one which had certainly appeared for a long time as the true utopia to millions of Germans in their misled anticapitalism and antisocialism.

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—Translated from the German by James Brewer

NOTES

1. The following paper was read as a brief statement in the section "Irrationality in Literature" at the MLA Convention in New York, 1974.
2. Cf. Wilfried Daim, *Der Mann, der Hitler die Ideen gab* (Munich, 1958); George L. Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology* (New York, 1964), p. 149 ff.; and the chapter "Der Gedankenkreis der 'fortschrittlichen Reaktion'" in Richard Hamann and Jost Hermund, *Stilkunst um 1900* (Berlin, 1967), pp. 24-203.

3. Werner Sombart, *Händler und Helden* (1915).
4. Eduard Wechßler, *Esprit und Geist* (1927).
5. Cf. the chapter "*Heimatkunst*" in *Stilkunst um 1900*, p. 364 ff.
6. Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology*, pp. 25-28.
7. Cf. Dieter Bartetzko, Stefan Glossmann and Gabriele Voigtländer-Tetzner, "Die Darstellung des Bauern" in *Kunst im Dritten Reich. Dokumente der Unterwerfung* (Frankfurt, 1974), p. 144-161. Cf. also Friedrich Wilhelm Runge, ed., *Das Buch des deutschen Bauern* (Berlin, 1935).
8. Cf. George L. Mosse, *Nazi Culture* (New York, 1966), pp. 147-151.
9. The proportion of farmers in the total population remained constant at 10% in the Third Reich.