

Sociability and Its Enemies

German Political Theory After 1945



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Introduction



Sociability and Its Enemies

In the fall of 1946, the young Swedish writer Stig Dagerman traveled through the British- and American-occupied zones of Germany and filed journalistic reports for the Stockholm-based tabloid *Expressen*. In his accounts, he kept his eyes on the immediately visible devastation. The series of articles, which came out in book form in 1947, portrays starving and freezing Germans inhabiting water-filled basements in destroyed and desolate cities. Dagerman describes Germany as one continuous “cold, rainy, and ruinous hell,” its train stations chock-full of unceasing streams of refugees from the East.¹

These vivid observations of the material conditions also inform Dagerman’s evaluation of the Germans’ postwar political beliefs. Unlike fellow journalists primarily concerned with whether Germans were still “infected by Nazism,” Dagerman argues that it would be unrealistic to expect a population plagued by constant hunger to examine the causes of their plight and confront their own participation in “Hitler’s politics.”² Hunger is, he writes, a “very bad teacher.”³ This particular kind of realism earned him criticism from contemporary reviewers, many of whom felt that Dagerman’s literary skill in evoking concrete details came at the cost of a responsible discussion of how to best reorient Germany and reeducate the Germans.

But despite Dagerman’s sensitivity to the dreariness of day-to-day struggles, the people depicted in *German Autumn* do not disappear in a haze of equalizing suffering. Dagerman had ties to Syndicalist groups, had published in left-wing journals in Sweden, and, in his encounters with Germans, was particularly keen to point out the persistence of class differences. For all his attention to the effects of material destruction, he contests the idea that widespread shortage of food and shelter would have eroded distinctions among classes, a claim he attributes to “bourgeois ideologists.”⁴ It is wrong, he writes, to confuse poverty and classlessness, because there are still significant differences between the most and the least poor; the general economic collapse may even have “sharpened

rather than blurred” the differences.⁵ He makes this point most clearly in an article that describes a visit to a lawyer fortunate enough to live in a spared villa on the outskirts of Hamburg, a city that is otherwise nothing but an enormous wasteland.

Dagerman’s account of his visit is something of a study in the careful maintenance of a class identity with a checkered past and an uncertain future. First he enters the hallway and the lounge and takes note of the typical, and intact, signs of wealth and cultivation, such as an umbrella stand, “metres of gold-edged morocco-bound volumes in the bookshelves,” a dense carpet, and leather armchairs.⁶ Sitting down for a conversation, his host offers him tea and cake, in keeping with social conventions in better-class households. And finally, he listens to the unnamed lawyer and his friend, apparently a writer of picaresque novels, voice worked-out opinions about the various aspects of Germany’s current state. They speak about how disappointed they are in the English after an initial phase of enthusiastic welcome, or the obscure character of the emerging political parties, whose election meetings are virtually indistinguishable from one another. Dagerman’s main host seeks to present himself as generous and concerned with the protocols of correct interaction, but also as a man of considered opinions, one who is able to offer comments on current political developments and life chances in Germany. Dagerman conveys how fine objects such as furniture and fragile porcelain cups, rituals of hospitality, and the articulation of viewpoints belie the notion that all the demarcations of class have been dissolved through war and defeat.

Dagerman also notices, however, that the Hamburg lawyer is under some strain to put on this display. The tea is served without sugar, and “beneath the layers of carefully counterfeited cream” the cake turns out to be “the usual bad German *ersatz* bread.”⁷ The cake, the visiting reporter concludes, is more a “symbolic cake” than a real one, a feat of presentation designed to indicate the distance between people with a solid background and good breeding and the poor, who would not consume their bread that way.⁸

In his portrayal of his Hamburg hosts, Dagerman shows how the lack of commodities—sugar, cream, bread—makes itself felt in the salon of the educated upper-middle class. This puts the lifestyle into crisis. If the members of this class cannot remain relatively well maintained and relatively well dressed, it will perhaps cease to exist altogether. At the same time, Dagerman indicates how this lifestyle can be upheld, at least for the time being, with the help of symbols and practices. Even when the tea is bad and there is no sugar, a visitor is invited to tea. The general state of deprivation may have penetrated the once-affluent residential areas, but its

inhabitants can at least try to foreground their knowledge about how to welcome guests, their sense of what entertaining people would typically entail, and their skills of conversation. The state of reduced resources does not compel them to relinquish their sense of what circles they belong to; rather, it intensifies their efforts to maintain appearances. Under dire economic circumstances, the burden of performing an already established class identity, of persuading others of one's continued membership in the German *Bürgertum* as a stratum of continued relevance, shifts away from actual wealth toward proper social and discursive conduct, from goods toward learned behaviors. Socializing, knowing how to engage in the style of behavior that the Germans call *Geselligkeit*, is an immaterial resource that can be deployed in a time of material desolation.

In her book on the networks of mining and manufacturing executives, bankers, and daring entrepreneurs in the era of the German economic miracle, Nina Grunenberg presents a couple of *Urszenen*, or "originary scenes," of the postwar market economy.⁹ Days after the currency reform in June 1948, for instance, a fish trader from Braunschweig traveled to the restored Volkswagen plant in Wolfsburg with a carton of fresh bills collected from his customers in order to buy one of the new cars, most of which until then had been made and delivered to the administration of the British-controlled zone. Moments such as these, Grunenberg states, epitomize the reemergence of a strong domestic economy based on the revival of industrial production and a mass of consumers eager to purchase durable goods such as cars, refrigerators, stoves, and radios.

In a similar way, one can perhaps speak of Dagerman's encounter with relatively well-to-do, well-informed, and slightly pretentious members of upper-middle-class circles as an *Urszene* of postwar sociability. After the war was over and the Nazi regime removed, new or old acquaintances greeted each other, invited others into their drawing room for a light lunch or tea and cake, and began to articulate their very own personal opinions on the state of the world while being (somewhat) mindful of what could blatantly offend their interlocutors. Or, to phrase it a little more abstractly, people began again to engage in polite face-to-face interactions in spaces beyond those reserved exclusively for intimate, familial life on the one hand, and goal-oriented professional or political interactions on the other, often in a conscious effort to return to or symbolically enact the resumption of a genuinely civil life.

What we are seeing in Dagerman's article, through the eyes of the skeptical observer with left-wing commitments, is the somewhat nervous demonstration of an intact upper-middle-class identity through the medium of *Geselligkeit*, or sociability. The trivial nature of the encounters

around the coffee tables may seem to prohibit further explorations of their meaning, but, as we shall see, quite a few writers, intellectuals, and theorists in the postwar period would invoke the spaces and behaviors that constitute sociability in their attempts to envision a possible future for Germany. Not infrequently, they would speak of the special significance of small networks of friends or regularly convening discussion groups, and above all, they would look back at an idealized history of nonprofessional academies and sophisticated salons for people who wanted to gather and enjoy each other's company while relieving themselves of the burdens of clearly purposive (administrative, economic, or political) activities in structured and stratified organizations, enterprises, bureaucracies, and parties.

But what could be the appeal of scenes of sociability or performances of politeness to those engaged in the earnest business of reforming the political culture of Germany? Only a much-abbreviated answer can be offered here, an answer to be explored and expanded upon throughout the entire book. Implicitly disputing the idea that sociable interaction is merely a means to bourgeois self-presentation and impression management, intellectuals and engaged theorists looked to how sociability draws together and coordinates individuals in shared activities that could be presented as civil rather than martial, voluntary rather than coercive, sustained by self-monitoring individuals rather than imposed by an external agency, tied to quiet and peaceful circumstances rather than emergency and war, and based on reciprocity rather than narrow self-interested pursuits.

Sociability with roots in a bourgeois context of life, then, represented a nonmilitaristic and nonhierarchical sphere of action, for it depends on each participant's supple and circumspect attunement to others in a placid setting. As such, it could be reintroduced and welcomed after 1945 as a much-needed contrast to Nazi rule and world war, and even as a key strategy in the simultaneous recuperation and reformation of German (upper-middle-class) culture at a time when an identity defined by material possessions was under threat. The immediate postwar period was, among many other things, an era of revived sociability.

Sociability and Postwar Political Thought

By focusing on different, and indeed conflicting, conceptions and interpretations of bourgeois forms of sociability in postwar Germany, this book offers readings of works by thinkers such as Hannah Arendt, Jürgen Habermas, and Carl Schmitt in order to present a new interpretation of