The Public's View of Neurasthenia in Germany: Looking for a New Rhythm of Life

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Introduction

Around 1900, neurasthenia was not only a widely accepted medical entity, but it also represented particular social and cultural features of the 'nervous age'. This phenomenon was found in all modern industrialised countries, although there were some differences according to national and cultural peculiarities. Not surprisingly, authors paid a lot of attention to nervousness and neurasthenia.

In some cases they themselves became afflicted with the very disorder they were writing about. Two famous German examples of such an affliction are the brothers Thomas and Heinrich Mann. In 1890, Heinrich wrote the short novel *Haltlos* in which he worked out the nature of a neurasthenic male person. Thomas Mann followed his brother. In 1897, he made some self-observational reflections in his diary and diagnosed himself with a lack of sufficient 'nerve-power'. There is no doubt that these and many other literary works and personal speculations reflect the mood and the cultural attitude of the age, and that they, to some extent, convey an impression of the public's view of neurasthenia. However, this chapter aims to focus on another kind of public source that probably offers a more trivial view on nervousness and neurasthenia, far away from literary erudition.

Reading through the two most important contemporary German weekly magazines, *Gartenlaube* and *Simplicissimus*, one can find articles and advertisements dealing with neurasthenia and nervousness, hysteria and hypochondriasis. The articles in *Gartenlaube* were written by doctors and it is the doctor's view that we find in these articles. So the question is raised whether those articles provide us with evidence of the public's view. It is obvious that the doctor's articles influenced the reader's view on that theme. So we have to question whether we actually can assess the public's view independently of the doctor's opinion on this topic.
Another point must be considered: who or what is or was the public. The magazines read through were more-or-less middle-class oriented. Therefore we find an emphasis on brain-work as an important cause for the emergence of neurasthenia. Brain-work is connected with middle-class culture and work. Therefore it is only a confined middle-class view considered in this chapter.

Despite the fact that both magazines were middle-class oriented they showed a totally different nature concerning contents and rhetorical style. While Gartenlaube emphasised a more cultural, academic, and literary side, and provided information on health care,¹ hygiene and scientific progress, Simplicissimus was more politically and satirically-oriented. These two magazines were the most widespread of their kind. Gartenlaube was founded in 1853 and reached its peak circulation with 382,000 in 1875. Similar contemporary magazines could not achieve that high a circulation. The magazine Die Welt der Frau which was founded in 1904 was aimed primarily at a female reading public. Only a few years after 1904 it became a supplement to Gartenlaube and in 1920 it was entirely integrated into Gartenlaube. Simplicissimus became very soon after its foundation in 1896 the leading magazine in the field of the few satirically-oriented magazines. It reached a circulation of between 80,000 and 100,000. Its biting derision of authority-oriented mentality and its mockery of the Kaiser which brought a charge of lose majesté against Simplicissimus¹ resulted in a circulation figure of 100,000. Both magazines existed until 1944, but underwent some political shifts. From their inception on they showed a national orientation,¹ but more or less as a kind of liberal patriotism without aggressive hostility towards other nations. Simplicissimus argued against chauvinism, imperialism and militarism that were seen as the main dangers of European peace.² But after the beginning of World War I, both Simplicissimus and Gartenlaube struggled for the national affair and supported the German warfare.

Issues of Gartenlaube from 1880 to 1919 and of Simplicissimus from 1896 to 1919, including the time covering World War I, shall be concentrated on here. In the years previous to the war Gartenlaube presented two to four articles a year on nervousness and neurasthenia in an educational and enlightening tone. During the wartime, from 1914 to 1918 Gartenlaube published only one article on nervousness. Simplicissimus published only a very few short remarks referring to the nerves or nervousness. The majority of the articles published in Gartenlaube were written by doctors specialising in the field of psychiatry or neurology. In their articles they avoided a professional