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Westernisation, Europeanisation, and civil society: Has Thomas Mann’s vision of a European Germany come true?

In August 1949 the most famous German author of the 20th Century, Thomas Mann, travelled to Germany for the first time since 1933, the year he left Nazi Germany. It was a symbolic return to his fatherland, but he did not settle in Germany, choosing instead to stay in Zurich until the end of his life. In his speeches marking the Goethe anniversary Mann expressed his hope that a ‘European Germany’ would emerge from the ashes of the Third Reich. The analysis provided here of the development of a democratic political order in the Federal Republic during the era of division and then in reunified Germany since 1990 suggests that Mann’s vision is finally becoming a reality.

On the occasion of the 200th anniversary of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s birth, Thomas Mann had been invited to give a talk by the city of Frankfurt/Main, Goethe’s birthplace, which awarded the 1949 Goethe Prize to him, and by Weimar, the small residential town where Goethe spent most of his life as a poet and public servant of the Duke, making it into a Mecca of European cultural life. Weimar, situated in the Soviet Occupation Zone, wished to honour Mann with the Freedom of the City and he decided not only to accept, but to receive the honour in person, a decision fiercely criticised in the West. Only weeks after the Soviets had ended the Berlin blockade, such a move was widely perceived as either naïve or as justifying public reservations about emigrants from Nazi Germany.

West German press and public opinion erupted in a storm of protest. The American Consulate had to tell them that as an American citizen he could go, even though the matter was not well regarded – a relatively mild comment given the witch-hunt atmosphere in the U.S. at the time. Mann resisted the pressure and was welcomed by the East German authorities almost as if he were a head of state.

Both Germanys, the Federal Republic, founded on 23 May 1949 and the Eastern Zone which became the German Democratic Republic on 7 October 1949, intended to exploit Thomas Mann’s visit for their own purposes. Mann delivered the same speech, entitled ‘Goethe and
Democracy’, in Frankfurt and Weimar, as well as in Munich, the city in which he had lived until 1933.¹

In Frankfurt and Weimar, Mann talked about the eminent role Goethe had played for the Germans and for European intellectual thinking and the European and Universalist spirit in Goethe’s opus. What Mann found in Goethe and in other Germans like Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Wagner was, and I quote at some length:

the ultimate goals of my wishes and requirements – in contrast to a ‘German Europe’, the horrid aspiration of German Nationalism which always disgusted me and finally drove me from Germany. It need scarcely be said that these two concepts form the basis for the distinction which the world makes between a ‘good’ and a ‘bad’ Germany: a European Germany is in the broadest sense of the word a ‘democratic’ Germany, a country in which one can live, which does not inspire fear but sympathy throughout the world, because it shares in the democratic humanitarian religion that categorically determines the moral life of the Occident and that is meant when we use the word ‘Civilization’.²

He continued:

Most unfortunately, this European democracy never attained much political power in Germany, power never entered into a union with it as it did with other peoples, but this concept was historically almost synonymous with German impotence, ‘poor in deeds and rich in ideas’ was Hoelderlin’s characterization of the old, pious, philosophic, and impotent Germany…³

**Post-war Germany and the foundation of two German states**

If Thomas Mann had the chance to look at today’s Germany he would find a European Germany and a consolidated democracy and civic society. In 1949 this democratic Germany was not intended to be a state in the traditional manner, but a ‘Transitorium’, as the first president of the Federal Republic, Theodor Heuss, put it, or, in the words of one of the leading Social Democrats, Carlo Schmid, an ‘emergency formation’. After twelve years of National Socialist tyranny and four years of military occupation, the Germans in the western part of the country, with the agreement of the three occupying powers, were allowed to adopt a liberal democratic constitution which served to guarantee them a stable political future. German politicians allowed themselves with much hesitation to help bear the load of forming the new German state which was desired and forced upon them by the three Western Allies. It was feared that the formation of a separate state would prevent reunification of the nation, now divided into four