

Wagner, Richard: Deutsche Kunst und Deutsche Politik (1868)

Wagner's long essay *German Art and German Politics* (*Deutsche Kunst und Deutsche Politik*) was published by J. J. Weber of Leipzig in 1868. It was subsequently reprinted in vol. 8 of the *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen* (1871/1883) – the citations are given here from the authoritative edition: Richard Wagner, *Sämtliche Schriften und Dichtungen* (= SSD) (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1914), vol. 8. The original edition came to 112 pages in fifteen chapters, of which the first twelve had previously been published in article form in the *Süddeutsche Presse* (partly financed by Ludwig II of Bavaria) between 24 September and 19 December 1867. Their publication had been halted at the express demand of Ludwig II, whom the editor, Julius Fröbel, had led to believe that Cosima von Bülow was the true author. The precise reasons for this interruption have not come to light, but probably have to do with the political content of the articles.

The sole French translation appears in the eighth volume of *Œuvres en prose*, trans. J.-G. Prod'homme (Paris: Delagrave, 1910). The French version published in Brussels under the titled *Art et politique* (Éditions J. Sannes) contains only the first nine chapters.

Although touching on a variety of subjects, whose common denominator is the notion of a national German culture, the fifteen articles revolve around a few main ideas: fostering a renewal of German art, in particular of the (musical) theatre; critique of the supposed hegemony of French civilisation, judged to be artificial and prosaically realist; a parallel between the evolution of German art and the political situation; critique of the role of the German princes, in thrall to French culture; praise for the Wittelsbach dynasty, expected to stimulate a renewal of dramatic art. Wagner's text contains numerous more or less explicit allusions to signal events in nineteenth-century German history, which the reader must bear in mind in order to understand the arguments developed in the course of the fifteen chapters: in particular, the emergence of political contestation within the student societies (*Burschenschaften*) in the wake of the Wars of Liberation (1813-15); the symbolism of the "Old German" costume (*Altdeutsche Tracht*), inspired by the sixteenth century, that the students wore as a sign of resistance until forbidden by the Carlsbad decrees of 1820 (and from which Wagner took his black velvet beret); the assassination in 1819, by the student Ludwig Sand, of the conservative writer August von Kotzebue, considered a traitor to the fatherland for having offered his services to the czar—the Restoration authorities took the event as pretext for instituting a particularly severe police repression; the battle of Sadowa (Königgrätz in German) in 1866, which marked the end of the German Confederation and

enabled the unification of “Lesser Germany” (without Austria) under Prussian leadership, at the expense of the idea of a “Greater Germany” to have included, at least in part, the Habsburg Empire.

Chapter 1 expounds the thesis, borrowed from the philosopher Constantin Frantz (*Untersuchungen über das europäische Gleichgewicht*, 1859), of an antipathy between German culture (*Bildung*), in need of revival, and the dominant model of French civilisation (*Zivilisation*). France’s cultural supremacy in Europe thinly conceals its declining intellectual productivity: this civilisation, cut off from its people, represents the triumph of artifice and convention, transforming beauty into elegance, grace into propriety (pg. 32). In the Germanic world, the French model has a particularly deleterious influence in alienating the German princes from the spirit of the German people: they constantly seek to imitate whatever comes from the court of the French kings. Wagner foresees the aristocracy’s disappearance unless it manages to channel the people’s aspirations.

The composer next narrates (**Chapter 2**) the difficult renaissance of German culture. He credits Winckelmann, Lessing, Goethe, and Schiller with having reconnected German art to the Ancient Greek ideal of beauty even while affirming the originality of its own genius. Here the composer takes up the trope, so dear to the early Romantics, of the Germans as the Greeks of the modern age. Unfortunately, this cultural renewal has totally bypassed the German princes, according to Wagner: whereas the Viennese court remained under Spanish and Roman cultural influence, that of Berlin fell under the yoke of French civilisation. The composer then describes the emergence of a youth resistance movement symbolised by the archetypal “German youth” (*deutscher Jüngling*) in “Old German” costume. Often mistaken for a Jacobin, in reality this youth wanted not to get involved in politics but only to free the people from arbitrary, constraining rules and to re-establish individual and social morality—an allusion, no doubt, to the *Burschenschaften*, the student societies that, in the years following the Congress of Vienna, demanded both freedom of expression and German unification. Wagner nevertheless sees one bright spot in recent history: the rise of a Prussian army (*Volksheer*) capable of binding together the German people, and, with the battle of Sadowa, rescuing “the last scrap of the German spirit, otherwise totally exterminated” (note that Wagner would later adopt a much more critical, indeed openly hostile attitude towards Prussian militarism).

Chapter 3 revisits what Wagner sees as the disastrous consequences of the Napoleonic occupation, which supplanted Goethe and Schiller with Rossini and Spontini in the German theatrical landscape. Despite the happy exception of Weber’s *Freischütz* (whose triumphal premiere in Berlin in 1821 was indeed greeted by a part of the press as a victory for German nationalism over the international culture of the court, represented by Spontini), German theatre continued to feed off of French influences and ended up surpassing the Parisian theatre in flightiness and superficiality.

Wagner next draws a parallel (**Chapter 4**) between the creativity and inventiveness of the German people and the tradition of federalism, which the centralising tendencies favoured by the Austrian Habsburgs had not managed to contain

indefinitely; this apology for federalism clearly reflects the influence of Constantin Frantz (*Von der deutschen Föderation*, 1851), who was very sceptical of any German national state dominated by Prussia. For Wagner, the upshot of federalism is the development of a rich civic life. **Chapter 5** amounts to a critical ode to the Wittelsbach dynasty: Wagner compliments Ludwig I and his successor Maximilian II for having embraced the renaissance of German art and understood that it must sink its roots into the life of the people, but regrets that both overlooked the essential thing, i.e. dramatic art. It would therefore fall to their successor to promote German theatre.

Chapters 6 to 11 are essentially devoted to the theatre. Wagner insists on the need for a thorough reform of German theatres (**Chapter 6**), assuming that not only the other arts but also the moral life of the whole nation depend on dramatic art. In **Chapter 7**, he distinguishes between two complementary artistic principles: the art of the poet (the creator) and that of the mime (or actor). The latter, following an imitative instinct (*Nachahmungstrieb*), interacts dialectically with the poet, who works according to a recreative instinct (*Nachbildungstrieb*). The poet, starting from observation of life and its vagaries, creates an ideal model destined for the mime, who is tasked with bringing it to life. **Chapter 8** analyses at a more fundamental level the dialectical relation between the realist element, embodied by the mime, and the ideal, represented by the poet. True drama must involve the interaction of two, a union of the real and the ideal. Wagner then uses this theoretical basis to deepen his critique of French theatre, allegedly characterised by a realism disconnected from any ideal and leading logically to the triumph of empty virtuosity. French theatre contents itself with imitating the real—all the more facile, according to Wagner, since life itself has become a spectacle: French civilisation consists of nothing but theatre, in the pejorative sense of the word, and virtuosity, with no reference to the ideal (the quest for the ideal remains the special province of the German spirit). The influence of this French civilisation explains (**Chapter 9**) the decline of German theatre, unable to make good on the renaissance effected by Goethe and Schiller. This decadence is symbolised by the melodramas (*Rührstücke*) of August von Kotzebue, an author whose assassination by the nationalist student Ludwig Sand is greeted by Wagner as a salutary event; the composer takes the occasion to snipe in passing at two writers of Jewish origin, Ludwig Börne and Heinrich Heine, who had supposedly tried to ridicule Sand's act.

Chapter 10 returns to the conflicting attempts to revive German theatre—with an homage to the emperor Joseph II, who instituted the first national German theatre in 1776—before once again castigating the insidious influence of France, manifested in the tyranny of fashion, the reign of utilitarianism, and the omnipresent spectre of finance in the organisation of German theatres. This abasement reached its nadir, for Wagner, when the German public preferred, over Schiller's *William Tell* and Goethe's *Faust*, the eponymous operas by Rossini and Gounod. If Wagner grants Rossini's last opera a few "musical numbers of ravishing effectiveness" ("bei vielen hinreißend wirkungsollen Musikstücken", pg. 90), he qualifies Gounod's work (not cited by name) as a "repulsive concoction, of a sickly vulgarity and sluttish affectation" ("ein widerliches, süßlich gemeines, lorettenhaft affektirtes Machwerk", *ibid.*). In **Chapter 11**, Wagner proffers some definitions of

what is German, certainly marked by the Protestant tradition and Kantian philosophy: it is “that which is cultivated for its own sake and for the joy that it yields; by contrast, utilitarianism, the principle according to which something is cultivated for personal ends, exterior to the thing itself, proves alien to the German spirit” (“die Sache die man treibt, um ihrer selbst und der Freude an ihr willen treiben; wogegen das Nützlichkeitswesen, d.h. das Prinzip, nach welchem eine Sache des außerhalb liegenden persönlichen Zweckes wegen betrieben wird, sich als undeutsch herausstellte”, pg. 97). The composer thus underlines the kinship between the German spirit and the fundamental principles of aesthetics (referring to Kant without citing him)—no surprise when we recall the virulence with which he had rejected the notion of “absolute art”, i.e. art with no end but itself, in the so-called Zürich writings. This furnishes him with the occasion for criticising (**Chapter 12**) attempts by state and religious institutions to instrumentalise schools for their own purposes.

In **Chapters 13-15**, Wagner defines the State as the absolute incarnation of a utilitarianism and a mechanism of social organisation that lead to man’s alienation. He then chastises Frederick II of Prussia, in whom he sees the founder of the modern German State, for a profound misunderstanding of the German spirit, which would explain why he never managed to impose his will on the south of the German-speaking zone (and therefore in Bavaria). In attacking an iconic figure of Prussian mythology, Wagner distances himself from the hegemonic politics of Bismarck and the Hohenzollerns, whose military organisation he had nevertheless just vaunted. But if Wagner does not believe in the State, he does pronounce a vibrant apology for monarchy, whose deep significance he finds in the king’s capacity to grant his grace (*Begnadigung*), of a purely gratuitous character at antipodes to utilitarianism: it is in extending his grace that a king rises above the impersonal State and its inflexible laws. He will therefore have, in virtue of this power, to institute a new “order” (*Orden*) destined to replace the aristocracy, by recompensing and calling to his service citizens having distinguished themselves by their creations and capacity to transcend utilitarianism. Delivered from all commercial and self-interested activity, the members of this new order will be able to devote themselves to totally disinterested activities, especially science and art. Here the composer comes round again at last to his initial concern, sketching out a social utopia in which the theatre (financed exclusively by the king’s civil list) will achieve a mediation between this new “order” released from material concerns, and the needs of the people and bourgeoisie. He insists once again on the need for a reform of the theatre in order to lay the foundations of a new society.

The essay *German Art and German Politics* would not achieve its immediate aim of influencing the cultural policy of Ludwig II of Bavaria, who had firmly distanced himself from Wagner’s proposals. As for the project of sending the text to Bismarck’s wife in order to influence her husband, mentioned in Cosima’s journal in January 1869, it would come to nothing.

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