

**Dominic Boyer.**

**Spirit and System: Media, Intellectuals, and the Dialectic in Modern German Culture.**

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Dominic Boyer has sought a distinctive path to a much sought-after destination. He wants to solve the mystery of German political pathology. Using the resources of the sociology of knowledge (from Gramsci and Mannheim to Bourdieu) as well as ethnographic strategies allied to newer anthropological “trope theory,” he proposes a thick description of German intellectual life, beginning in the eighteenth century, to explicate if not to explain the inner tensions that manifest themselves variously not only in totalitarian but also, he argues, in critical modes of social knowledge and the attendant cultural practices.

Marx’s *German Ideology* is a noted precursor, but the bulk of the writings in the genre dates from the two world wars of the twentieth century, in the attempts to account, first, for “Prussianism” and, later, for the Nazi variant of Fascism. Unsurprisingly, however, notwithstanding the wide acceptance of “totalitarianism” in post-1945 scholarship as a characterization of Nazism and Communism alike, the attempt to find common sources for German susceptibility to both is a more recent development. This broader question heightens the uncertainty that afflicts these explorations, whether the phenomena have to be understood wholly in the context of exceptional German qualities and experiences or whether the special conditions in Germany merely bring to exemplary crisis the trends and capabilities common to modern societies.

*Antifascism—A German Myth* (Hamburg: Rohwolt, 1993) by Antonia Grunenberg is an interesting but somewhat paradoxical effort along these lines. Working through a style of intellectual history and political commentary inspired by Hanna Arendt’s less philosophically ambitious writings, Grunenberg likens the ideology of Antifascism (both as state ideology of the GDR and as rationale for anti-parliamentary leftism in the West) to Fascism itself, deriving both from a supposed German disposition for starkly “dualistic” thinking epitomized by Romantic hostility to Modernity, as well as hostility to “mixture, consensus-building, and compromise.” Grunenberg is troubled above all by the “myth” of a Golden Age of Antifascism during the first years of the GDR, as well as by regret among some West German intellectuals that the rapid unification of 1989 denied the Opposition in the GDR sufficient time or space to renew the “genuine” antifascist impulse. Her thesis aims above all to discredit that objective, and she considers this Opposition in any case too damaged by precisely this myth for any independent constructive political undertaking. Her own “compromise” with the style of thinking she is exposing is limited to a certain openness to the Frankfurt critical theorists of the 1960s, and even considerable tolerance for their militant students, on the grounds that their susceptibility to elements of the myth did not prevent them from injecting democratic energies into the sclerotic West German institutions of the time. Grunenberg’s concerns are clearly political, as the polemical title indicates, and her thesis is focused on a pattern she takes to be nowhere as marked as in Germany.

As noted above, Boyer is much more oriented to issues in academic social science, but he is also responding to questions posed by the 1989 *Wende*, albeit from a later perspective and in quite a different spirit, notably through his interesting (if sometimes stereotypically chummy) ethnographic reports on journalists working in the “new states” of the former GDR, almost all with experience under the former regime. At one level, this ethnography—with its comradely subtext—is the text

for which the rest of the book serves as context. Boyer's method, in any case, precludes Grunenberg's categorical deprecation of intellectuals raised under the Communist hegemony. The focus on journalists is central to his overall theoretical design as well, whose principal motifs are assembled in the title and subtitle of the book.

The antithesis between "system" and "spirit" (*Geist*) is the central motif, Boyer contends, in a dualistic style of thinking, which he, like Grunenberg, considers to be a characteristic feature of German intellectual culture. "System" on this view is a complex of mandatory constraints—mechanical or organic—rigidly ordered to instrumental purposes, while "Spirit" represents human creativity. Boyer differs from Grunenberg not only in that he attempts to specify the terms of the duality but also in that he finds her stringent "either-or" to be only a limiting case of what he designates as a "dialectical" mode, which may vary between a "negative" blanket rejection of one or the other pole and a "positive" affirmation of various possible reconciliations between them. The latter possibility represents precisely that "mixture, consensus-building, and compromise" that Grunenberg considers unacceptable to German thought.

Boyer's deepening of the inquiry beneath the ideological surface helps him to recognize these more nuanced possibilities, as well as transitions along a continuum between the poles. Most important is his two-dimensional sociological-anthropological focus. He maintains, first, that styles of thought are best understood as a function of the social experiences of intellectuals, and, second, that of all kinds of intellectuals the structures of experience of journalists render them especially responsive to the various organizations of cultural life, in times of rigidity as well as times of flux. As with other intellectuals, Boyer insists, these structural conditions must be seen more as starting points than as determinants, and every study must recognize moreover the play of innovation and choice in the intellectual practices of cultural actors, a dimension enhanced by the reflexivity Boyer sees as a prime attribute of intellectuals as a social type.

It hardly seems fair simply to catalogue a number of disagreements, when Boyer's energetic and ambitious effort clearly merits serious discussion on all points, but even short reviews should pose some challenges to both authors and readers. Accordingly, then, I will list my principal difficulties with Boyer's ingenious and lively effort. Above all, I think that the categories of "system" and "spirit" in the metaphorical senses common in ordinary language are too general to make the needed discriminations, but that when taken in any of the more technical senses in German intellectual usage, they are too specialized to comprehend the complex field of interpretive categories. If it is the case that the counterposing of System and *Geist* has been a recurrent feature of some two hundred years of German intellectual discussion, it is no less true that they, like *Wissenschaft* and *Bildung* with which they are often conjoined—as they are by Boyer—have been intensely contested concepts, variously defined and deployed by competing intellectual tendencies whose contrasting deep structures led Karl Mannheim, one of the older authors Boyer treats with refreshing respect, to shift his own inquiries from the "interpretation of *Weltanschauung*" to the structural analysis of ideologies. "System" as a mere attribute of didactic instruction is quite different from theoretizations of organic systems, which are very different again from accounts of mechanically designed agencies of instrumental rationality—and German cultural history is full of intense quarrels among these alternative conceptions. And when Boyer characterizes *Geist*, for example, he neglects the postulate of a profound conflict between soul and spirit (*Seele* and *Geist*) which obsessed the generation that came of age before the First World War, as documented by Georg Simmel's thesis of the tragedy of culture. Similarly, *Bildung* and *Wissenschaft* are posed against one another, most strikingly in the social sciences during the decades after Max Weber's methodological *demarche*. These conflicts were by no means limited to academic settings: they were the stuff of public intellectual life.

Although Boyer's concept of dialectics permits him to recognize different and changing modulations of his two key motifs, the attempt to work with a continuum on a single dimension too often renders the categories either vague or arbitrary. This fault, although ingeniously counterworked in many passages, undermines not a few of the sweeping characterizations of German cultural history in Boyer's first "case," and—more serious because more central to his primary concern—the attempt to render the two totalitarian eras parallel in these terms substantially weakens the accounts of both. Then too, the research in this second "case" gets a little thin, especially in its over-reliance on some self-serving memoirs of journalists active during the Nazi period. The "third" case, the ethnographic core of Boyer's work, is least affected by these difficulties, since the polar concepts do not have to do work that cannot be done by extrapolation from the colloquial usage of Boyer and his informants. Of course, this difference also highlights the heterogeneity of Boyer's evidence and weakens the ties among the three "cases."

This is not a book, in short, to be used as a overview for beginners. As a contribution to a dense, ongoing discussion, however, it is well worthwhile, on methodological as well as substantive grounds, and it is full of interesting—and occasionally brilliant—insights, to go with some bloopers and blunders. The book of a promising, ambitious, young scholar in short, and an addition that should be welcomed by both sociologists and anthropologists working on problems of social knowledge. A sign of the author's admirable willingness to reflect critically on his own undertaking is the recognition at the end that the method of the work exhibits the same kind of "dialectic" that he imputes to German culture and leaves quite unresolved the question of exceptionalism or exemplarity. Grunenberg lacks such exemplary self-questioning. She does, however, unlike Boyer, seemingly catch herself at the very end in the act of writing on Nazism and other matters without having attended to anti-Semitism, not to speak of the Holocaust. Her chapter does read like an add-on, but the absence of even a token counterpart in Boyer's book (see pages 109-114, which the index identifies as the section devoted *passim* to anti-Semitism) underlines the need for caution against the pitfalls of comparative study.

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