

Reactionary modernism

Technology, culture, and politics in
Weimar and the Third Reich

JEFFREY HERF



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The paradox of reactionary modernism

There is no such thing as modernity in general. There are only national societies, each of which becomes modern in its own fashion. This study examines a cultural paradox of German modernity, namely, the embrace of modern technology by German thinkers who rejected Enlightenment reason. Dichotomies – tradition or modernity, progress or reaction, community or society, rationalization or charisma – predominate in sociological theories of the development of European modernity. When applied to modern German history, such dichotomies suggest that German nationalism, and subsequently National Socialism, was primarily motivated by rejections of modernity – the political values of the French Revolution and the economic and social realities created by the Industrial Revolution. Romantic Germany, we are told, rejected scientific modernity. Had the pastoral vision vanquished technological advance, German modernity would not have led to the German catastrophe. In this study of a cultural tradition I have called reactionary modernism, I am advocating a more nuanced view of German ideology in the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich.

My basic point is the following: Before and after the Nazi seizure of power, an important current within conservative and subsequently Nazi ideology was a reconciliation between the antimodernist, romantic, and irrationalist ideas present in German nationalism and the most obvious manifestation of means–ends rationality, that is, modern technology. Reactionary modernism is an ideal typical construct. The thinkers I am calling reactionary modernists never described themselves in precisely these terms. But this tradition consisted of a coherent and meaningful set of metaphors, familiar words, and emotionally laden expressions that had the effect of converting technology from a component of alien, Western *Zivilisation* into an organic part of German *Kultur*. They combined political reaction with tech-

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nological advance. Where German conservatives had spoken of technology *or* culture, the reactionary modernists taught the German Right to speak of technology *and* culture. Reactionary modernism was not primarily a pragmatic or tactical reorientation, which is not to deny that it transformed military-industrial necessities into national virtues. Rather, it incorporated modern technology into the cultural system of modern German nationalism, without diminishing the latter's romantic and antirational aspects. The reactionary modernists were nationalists who turned the romantic anticapitalism of the German Right away from backward-looking pastoralism, pointing instead to the outlines of a beautiful new order replacing the formless chaos due to capitalism in a united, technologically advanced nation. In so doing, they contributed to the persistence of Nazi ideology throughout the Hitler regime. They called for a revolution from the Right that would restore the primacy of politics and the state over economics and the market, and thereby restore the ties between romanticism and rearmament in Germany.

Though I call them reactionary modernists, these thinkers viewed themselves as cultural revolutionaries seeking to consign materialism to the past. In their view, materialism and technology were by no means identical. Thomas Mann captured the essence of reactionary modernism when he wrote that "the really characteristic and dangerous aspect of National Socialism was its mixture of robust modernity and an affirmative stance toward progress combined with dreams of the past: a highly technological romanticism."¹ This book presents what Mann grasped as the interpenetration of German *Innerlichkeit* (inwardness) and modern technology.

The German reconciliation of technology and unreason began in German technical universities around the turn of the century, was first advocated by the nontechnical intellectuals in Weimar's conservative revolution, found a home in the Nazi party in the 1920s and among the propagandists of the Hitler regime in the 1930s, and became a contributing factor in the triumph of totalitarian ideology up to 1945. The bearers of this tradition were numerous professors of engineering as well as contributors to journals published by the na-

¹Thomas Mann, "Deutschland und die Deutschen," in *Thomas Mann: Essays*, Band 2, *Politik*, ed. Herman Kunzke (Frankfurt, 1977), p. 294. For a critique of dichotomous theories of the development of "industrial society," see Anthony Giddens, "Classical Social Theory and the Origins of Modern Sociology," *American Journal of Sociology* 81 (1976), pp. 703-29. Also see John Norr's essay, "German Social Theory and the Hidden Face of Technology," *European Journal of Sociology* XV (1974), pp. 312-36.

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tional engineering associations. In Weimar's conservative revolution the irrationalist embrace of technology was advocated by Hans Freyer, Ernest Jünger, Carl Schmitt, Werner Sombart, and Oswald Spengler, with Martin Heidegger adding a more ambivalent voice to the reactionary modernist chorus. Within the Nazi party, Gottfried Feder's theories of the threat of Jewish finance to German productivity were eventually supplemented by a more subtle diction of romanticism and modern technics under the direction of Joseph Goebbels and Fritz Todt, the administrator of the construction of the *Autobahnen* and Hitler's first armaments minister. Throughout, the reactionary modernists contributed to the coexistence of political irrationalism alongside rearmament and industrial rationalization. By the end of the war, for example, the SS research station in Peenemünde developing V-1 and V-2 rockets was engaged in a desperate search for a weapon that would miraculously turn the tide of the now obviously lost war.

It is not paradoxical to reject technology as well as Enlightenment reason or to embrace technology while celebrating reason. These pairings are the customary outcomes of choosing between scientism and pastoralism. But it is paradoxical to reject the Enlightenment and embrace technology at the same time, as did the reactionary modernists in Germany. Their claim was that Germany could be *both* technologically advanced *and* true to its soul. The whole anti-Western legacy of German nationalism suggested that such a reconciliation between soul and technology was out of the question, for nothing could be more at odds with German culture. But the reactionary modernists recognized that antitechnological views were formulas for national impotence. The state could not be simultaneously strong and technologically backward. The reactionary modernists insisted that the *Kulturnation* could be both powerful and true to its soul. As Joseph Goebbels repeatedly insisted, this was to be the century of *stählernde Romantik*, steellike romanticism.

A fundamental point to be made about National Socialism is that Hitler's ideology was the decisive political fact of the Nazi regime up to the catastrophic end. Very few of Hitler's conservative allies and left-wing opponents expected this would be the case. Some argued that Hitler was a cynical opportunist who would abandon principle for the sake of power. Others simply could not accept the idea that anyone or any large number of people would take such a contemptible blend of irrationality and inhumanity seriously. And still others, at the time and since, argued that National Socialism was fundamentally a complete rejection of the modern world and its values. As such, its

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ideological dynamism would be broken apart in the course of actually governing and administering the most advanced industrial society in Europe. Why this did not happen has been the focus of a scholarly debate ever since.²

In this book, I am bringing interpretive sociology to bear on this problem. As Max Weber put it, sociology is an interpretive endeavor because it can offer causal explanations of social action only to the degree to which such analyses are simultaneously adequate on the level of meaning. Hence, in order to contribute to a causal explanation of the primacy of politics and ideology in Nazi Germany, I have focused on motives, meanings, intentions, and symbolism and have depicted an ideal typical world view I am calling reactionary modernism. In the last decade, a split has opened up between analysts of politics and analysts of meaning and intentionality. On the one hand, militant structuralists have told us that human intentions count for little in the larger scheme determined by classes, states, and the international system. On the other hand, equally militant phenomenologists have abandoned the field of political and historical analysis. This split expresses itself in a linguistic barbarism: “macro-” versus “micro-” sociology. Of late, the militants seem to be a bit less bellicose, and the idea of paying attention to what people actually think and believe has become respectable again. This has nothing to do with social science going “soft” in the head but rather with Weber’s point that explanation of social and political events requires careful examination of the meaning and intentionality of actors in a particular historical and social context. In this sense his works on the emergence of the modern state, bureaucracy, or the spirit of capitalism from the psychological anxieties fostered by the Protestant sects are “structural” analyses. This project is elusive and difficult for it calls for examination of the links between socioeconomic structure, cultural trends, and politics. This is, or ought to be, one of the sociologist’s main tasks, and it is one of my aims to proceed along these lines in this study. In the remainder of this chapter, I will situate this work in past efforts to grapple with National Socialism and modernity and will define the terms of discussion.

Interpreters of National Socialism have placed the cultural and political revolt against modernity at the center of discussions of Nazi ideology. Georg Lukács called Germany the “classic nation of irra-

² For an overview of the current debate, see Karl Dietrich Bracher, “The Role of Hitler: The Problem of Underestimation,” pp. 211–25, and Hans Mommsen, “National Socialism – Continuity and Change,” pp. 179–210, both in *Fascism: A Reader’s Guide*, ed. Walter Laqueur (Berkeley, 1976).

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tionalism." Helmut Plessner's view of the "belated nation," George Mosse's studies of "völkisch ideology," Karl Mannheim's work on "conservative thought," and Fritz Stern's analysis of "the politics of cultural despair" all stressed the connection between right-wing ideology and protest against the Enlightenment, modern science, liberalism, the market, Marxism, and the Jews. Talcott Parsons argued that "at least one critically important aspect of the National Socialist movement" was "a mobilization of the extremely deep-seated romantic tendencies of German society in the service of a violently aggressive political movement, incorporating a 'fundamentalist' revolt against the whole tendency of the rationalization of the Western world."³ Henry J. Turner has recently summarized the analysis presented by modernization theorists. National Socialism, he writes, was the product of a "crisis of modernization." Ideologically it stood for "utopian antimodernism . . . an extreme revolt against the modern industrial world and an attempt to recapture a distant mythic past." National Socialist antimodernism contrasted with Italian fascism, with its Futurist fascination with speed and the beauty of machines.⁴

Germany's path to modernity lay behind the intensity of its antimodernist revolt. Compared with England and France, industrialization was late, quick, and thorough. Economic units were large and state intervention extensive. Most important, capitalist industrializa-

³ Georg Lukács, *Die Zerstörung der Vernunft* (Darmstadt, 1962); Helmut Plessner, *Die verspätete Nation* (Frankfurt, 1974); George Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology* (New York, 1964); Karl Mannheim, "Conservative Thought," in *From Karl Mannheim*, ed. Kurt Wolff (New York, 1971), p. 132; Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair* (New York, 1961); Talcott Parsons, "Democracy and Social Structure in Pre-Nazi Germany," in *Essays in Sociological Theory* (New York, 1964), p. 123. Also see his "Some Sociological Aspects of Fascist Movements," pp. 124–41 in the same volume. Fritz Ringer documented antimodernist views among German university professors in the humanities and social sciences in *The Decline of the German Mandarins* (Cambridge, Mass., 1969).

⁴ Henry J. Turner, "Fascism and Modernization," in *Reappraisals of Fascism* (New York, 1975), pp. 117–39. James Gregor, who focuses on Italy, interprets fascism as an industrializing and modernizing movement, as well as a developmental dictatorship. See James Gregor, "Fascism and Modernization: Some Addenda," *World Politics* 26 (1974), pp. 382–4; *Interpretations of Fascism* (Morristown, N.J., 1974); and *The Fascist Persuasion in Radical Politics* (Princeton, N.J., 1974). On the shared antiindustrialism of the far Left and far Right in Weimar see Helga Grebing, *Linksradikalismus gleich Rechtsradikalismus: Eine falsche Gleichung* (Stuttgart, 1969), esp. ch. 3, "Antiindustrie gesellschaftliche Kultur-, Zivilisations-, und Kapitalismuskritik," pp. 37–50; René König, "Zur Soziologie der Zwanziger Jahre: oder Ein Epilog zu zwei Revolutionen, die niemals stattgefunden haben, und was daraus für unsere Gegenwart resultiert," in *Die Zeit ohne Eigenschaften: Eine Bilanz der Zwanziger Jahre*, ed. Leonard Rheinisch (Stuttgart, 1961), pp. 82–118; Claus Offe, "Technik und Eindimensionalität: Eine Version der Technokratie-These?" in *Antworten auf Herbert Marcuse*, ed. Jürgen Habermas (Frankfurt, 1968), pp. 73–88.

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tion took place without a successful bourgeois revolution. The bourgeoisie, political liberalism, and the Enlightenment remained weak.⁵ Whereas the concept of the state in England and France was associated with democracy and equality, in Germany it remained authoritarian and illiberal.⁶ In Ralf Dahrendorf's words, the "explosive potential of recent German social development" lay in the "encounter and combination" of rapid industrialization and the "inherited structures of the dynastic state of Prussia," an encounter that left little space for political and economic liberalism.⁷ German nationalism was largely a countermovement expressing longings for a simpler, preindustrial life. The *Volk* needed to be protected from the corrupting influences of Western *Zivilisation*.

How then did German nationalism, and subsequently National Socialism, become reconciled to modern technology? Barrington Moore, Jr., drew the reasonable conclusion that "the basic limitation" of this "Catonist" rural imagery lay in its uncompromising hostility to industrialism as a result of which it would develop into rural nostalgia.⁸ Dahrendorf and David Schoenbaum further developed the idea that Nazi ideology was incompatible with industrial society. Dahrendorf argued that despite their antimodernist ideology, the demands of totalitarian power made the Nazis radical innovators. The "strong push to modernity" was National Socialism's decisive feature resulting in a striking conflict between Nazi ideology and practice. The "veil of ideology should not deceive us," for the gap between ideology and practice was so striking that "one is almost tempted to believe that the ideology was simply an effort to mislead people deliberately."⁹ Along similar lines, Schoenbaum described National Socialism as a "double revolution," that is, an ideological war against bourgeois and industrial society waged with bourgeois and industrial means. In his view, the conflict between the antiindustrial outlook of the Nazi ideologues and the modernizing practice of the Nazi regime was resolved through an "inevitable rapprochement" between the Nazi mass movement and the state and industrial elites the movement had promised to destroy. In Schoenbaum's view, the Nazis made their peace with modern tech-

⁵ On Germany's illiberal path to modernity, see Ralf Dahrendorf, *Society and Democracy in Germany* (New York, 1966).

⁶ Karl Dietrich Bracher, *The German Dictatorship*, trans. Jean Steinberg (New York, 1970).

⁷ Dahrendorf, *Society and Democracy in Germany*, p. 45.

⁸ Barrington Moore, Jr., *The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (Boston, 1966), esp. pp. 484–508. Thorstein Veblen made a similar argument in his classic work, *Imperial Germany and the Industrial Revolution* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1966).

⁹ Dahrendorf, *Society and Democracy in Germany*, pp. 381–6.

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nology because it was needed to carry out their antimodernist politics, but not because they could discern any intrinsic value in it.¹⁰

Dahrendorf's and Schoenbaum's views recall Hermann Rauschning's analysis of Hitlerism as a "revolution of nihilism" guided by an utterly cynical, opportunistic set of rationalizations passing themselves off as a world view.¹¹ The problem is that in too many very important instances, Hitler's practice coincided with his ideology. If ideology and practice were so at odds, how do we account for their terrifying unity during the war and the Holocaust? The thesis of a "double revolution" suggests ideological cynicism where ideological consistency and belief existed. The "strong push to modernity" or at least to certain aspects of modern society existed, but not at the expense of Nazi ideology. Both Dahrendorf and Schoenbaum underestimated the degree to which a selective embrace of modernity – especially modern technology – had already taken place within German nationalism both before and after the Nazi seizure of power in 1933.

The main problem with this approach has been its neglect of the modern aspects of Nazi ideology. Marxists have had little difficulty in this regard because they have examined the Hitler regime as one variant of fascism that, in turn, was a form of capitalism. At times, such analyses suggest that Hitler was merely a tool of the capitalists or that Nazi ideology actually declined in importance after the seizure of power.¹² And at their best, such as Franze Neumann's classic *Behemoth*, they employ a utilitarian concept of class and ideology that rules out the possibility that the Hitler regime could act against the interests of German capital – as indeed it did when it pursued racial utopia and genocide above all else.¹³ The route is different, but the

¹⁰ David Schoenbaum, *Hitler's Social Revolution* (New York, 1967), p. 276.

¹¹ Hermann Rauschning, *The Revolution of Nihilism* (London, 1939). For a critique of this view and a presentation of Hitler's ideas as a coherent world view, see Eberhard Jäckel, *Hitler's World View: A Blueprint for Power*, trans. Herbert Arnold (Middletown, Conn., 1972).

¹² As in Nicos Poulantzas, *Fascism and Dictatorship: The Third International and the Problem of Fascism* (London, 1974). Also see Jane Caplan, "Theories of Fascism: Nicos Poulantzas as Historian," *History Workshop Journal* (1977), pp. 83–100; and Anson Rabinbach, "Poulantzas and the Problem of Fascism," *New German Critique* (Spring 1976), pp. 157–70.

¹³ Franz Neumann, *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism* (New York, 1944). Neumann wrote that "the internal political value of anti-Semitism will . . . never allow a complete extermination of the Jews. The foe cannot and must not disappear; he must always be held in readiness as a scapegoat for all the evils originating in the socio-political system" (p. 125). Erich Goldhagen points out that the murder of the Jews was "the most striking refutation of the thesis that the National Socialists were disbelieving and cynical manipulators of anti-Semitism," in "Weltan-

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conclusion the same for Marxists and modernization theorists: Whether it was due to the antimodernist nature of the ideology or the overwhelming power of class interests, both suggest that Nazi ideology could not explain the actions of the Hitler regime. They are thus at a loss to explain the triumph of ideology in the Third Reich.¹⁴

During the 1930s, discussion of the synthesis of technics and unreason in German ideology took place among the critical theorists of the Frankfurt school, as well as in the work of the romantic Marxist, Ernst Bloch. Walter Benjamin's essays on the Weimar Right initiated a discussion of fascism and aesthetics that continues up to the present.¹⁵ Bloch's analysis of *Ungleichzeitigkeit*, roughly "noncontempor-

schauung und Endlösung," *Vierteljahresheft für Zeitgeschichte* (October 1976), pp. 379–405. Also see Andreas Hillgruber, *Hitlers Strategie: Politik und Kriegführung, 1940–1941* (Frankfurt, 1965) and "Die 'Endlösung' und das deutsche Ostimperium als Kernstück des rassenideologischen Programms des Nationalsozialismus," *Vierteljahresheft für Zeitgeschichte* (April 1972), pp. 133–53. Klaus Hildebrand in *The Foreign Policy of the Third Reich* (Berkeley, 1973) clearly distinguishes the points of common ground between Hitler and the traditional conservative elites as well as their points of divergence when Nazi racial ideology replaced "rational power politics" (pp. 106–7). On Marxist analyses of fascism and the avoidance of the Jewish catastrophe in postwar West Germany see Lucy Dawidowicz, *The Holocaust and the Historians* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981); Jeffrey Herf, "The 'Holocaust' Reception in West Germany: Right, Center and Left," *New German Critique* 19 (Winter 1980), pp. 30–52; Moishe Postone, "Anti-Semitism and National Socialism: Notes on the German Reaction to 'Holocaust,'" *New German Critique* 19 (Winter 1980), pp. 97–115; and Anson Rabinbach, "Anti-Semitism Reconsidered: Reply to Piccone and Berman," *New German Critique* 21 (Fall 1980), pp. 129–41.

¹⁴ Critics of the analysis of totalitarianism deny that National Socialism was a monolithic system of domination. For example, Hans Mommsen and Martin Broszat argue that nazism was a "polycracy" of conflicting authorities, which made possible the ascendancy of radicalized SS fanatics. See Broszat's *Der Staat Hitlers* (Munich, 1969), and Mommsen, "Continuity and Change in the Third Reich." The critics have destroyed a straw man. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Cleveland, 1958), Hannah Arendt wrote that the absence of clear hierarchies, the multiplication of offices, and confusion of bureaucratic responsibilities were crucial to totalitarianism in power because the resultant insecurity and fear enhanced the power of the leadership and served to preserve the dynamic of a "movement-state." See "The So-called Totalitarian State," pp. 392–419.

¹⁵ See his discussion of Ernst Jünger and other right-wing thinkers in "Theorien des deutschen Faschismus," in *Walter Benjamin: Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3 (Frankfurt, 1977), pp. 238–50; trans. by Jerold Wikoff as "Theories of German Fascism," *New German Critique* 17 (Spring 1979), pp. 120–8. See also *Links hätte noch alles sich zu enträtseln. Walter Benjamin im Kontext*, ed. Walter Burkhardt (Frankfurt, 1978), esp. Ansgar Hillach, "Die Ästhetisierung des politischen Lebens: Walter Benjamins faschismus theoretischer Ansatz – eine Rekonstruktion," pp. 126–67; George Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses* (New York, 1970). Rainer Stollman gives an overview of recent West German work in "Faschistische Politik als Gesamtkunstwerk: Tendenzen der Ästhetisierung des politischen Leben im Nationalsozialistischen 'Bewegung,'" in *Die deutsche Literatur im Dritten Reich*, ed. Horst Denkler and Karl Prumm (Stuttgart, 1976), pp. 83–101. Translated as "Fascist Politics as a Total Work of Art," in *New German Critique* 14 (Spring 1978), pp. 41–60.

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aneity,” drew attention to the fusion of German romanticism with a cult of technics in the journals of German engineers.¹⁶ Max Horkheimer argued that National Socialism organized a “revolt of nature” against modern capitalism and industrialism, which eschewed anti-technological themes.¹⁷

More than any other modern social theorists, Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno placed the intertwining of myth and rationalization at the center of attention in their classic work, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. They opened their book with the now well-known assertion that the “fully enlightened world” radiated “disaster triumphant.”¹⁸ If this was the case, understanding the relation between nazism and modernity was crucial. Part of their argument merely repeated standard Marxist views: “Bourgeois anti-Semitism has a specific economic reason: the concealment of domination in production.”¹⁹ Right-wing anticapitalists identified the Jews with the “unproductive” circulation sphere of banking, finance, and commerce and praised the sphere of production and technology as an integral part of the nation. German anticapitalism was anti-Semitic but not antitechnological. But it was a second, and more sweeping, analysis of the Enlightenment that made Horkheimer and Adorno’s work truly distinctive. They argued that the German disaster was the outcome of a link between reason, myth, and domination implicit in Enlightenment thought since Kant and Hegel. The Enlightenment’s true face of calculation and domination was evident in de Sade’s highly organized tortures and orgies. In Germany the Jews suffered from being identified with both abstract rationality and with backwardness and reluctance to conform to national community.²⁰ National Socialism telescoped in a particular place and time the awful potentialities of the Western domination of nature.

¹⁶ Ernst Bloch, *Erbschaft dieser Zeit* (Frankfurt, 1962), and “Technik und Geistererscheinungen,” in *Verfremdungen I* (Frankfurt, 1962), pp. 177–85.

¹⁷ In Max Horkheimer, *The Eclipse of Reason* (New York, 1974). Horkheimer also discussed the link between irrationalism and technology in “Zum Rationalismusstreit in der gegenwärtigen Philosophie,” *Kritische Theorie der Gesellschaft*, Band I (Frankfurt, 1968), pp. 123–4.

¹⁸ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York, 1972), p. 3.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 173. Herbert Marcuse also discussed the right-wing anticapitalist rhetorical assault on *Händlerturn* or the merchant in “The Struggle Against Liberalism in the Totalitarian View of the State,” *Negations*, trans. Jeremy Shapiro (Boston, 1968), pp. 3–42.

²⁰ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, pp. 168–208. On Horkheimer’s sociology of religion and his analysis of anti-Semitism, see Julius Carlebach, *Karl Marx and the Radical Critique of Judaism* (London, 1978), pp. 234–67; Martin Jay, “The Jews and the Frankfurt School: Critical Theory’s Analysis of Anti-Semitism,” *New German Critique* (Winter 1980), pp. 137–49; and Anson Rabinbach, “Anti-Semitism Reconsidered.”

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Horkheimer and Adorno were right to point out that reason and myth were intertwined in the German dictatorship. No doubt, the cultural paradoxes of reactionary modernism were less perplexing for these dialectical thinkers than for those more accustomed to dichotomous modes of thought. But if their perceptions were accurate, their theory of the Enlightenment and their view of modern German history were woefully mistaken.²¹ What proved so disastrous for Germany was the separation of the Enlightenment from German nationalism. German society remained partially – never “fully” – enlightened. Horkheimer and Adorno’s analysis overlooked this national context and generalized Germany’s miseries into dilemmas of modernity per se. Consequently they blamed the Enlightenment for what was really the result of its weakness. Although technology exerted a fascination for fascist intellectuals all over Europe, it was only in Germany that it became part of the national identity. The unique combination of industrial development and a weak liberal tradition was the social background for reactionary modernism. The thesis of the dialectic of enlightenment obscured this historical uniqueness. As a “critical theory,” it is strangely apologetic in regard to modern Germany history. It is one of the ironies of modern social theory that the critical theorists, who thought they were defending the unique against the general, contributed to obscuring the uniqueness of Germany’s illiberal path toward modernity.

This said, it is better to have been perceptive for the wrong reasons than to have neglected an important problem altogether. It would be less than generous of me not to acknowledge the role concepts such as reification, the aestheticization of politics, and the dialectic of enlightenment have had in directing my attention to the existence of a reactionary modernist tradition in Germany. Although some of the literature on National Socialism inspired by the critical theorists suffers from sloganeering about fascism and capitalism, some very fine reconsiderations of the interaction of modernist and antimodernist currents in National Socialism have also appeared. Karl-Heinz Bohrer’s study of Ernst Jünger, Anson Rabinbach’s work on Albert Speer’s Bureau of the Beauty of Labor, Klaus Theweleit’s massive compilation of the unconscious fantasy life of members of the *Freikorps*, Timothy Mason’s and Eike Hennig’s work on the uses of antimodernist rhetoric in the rationalization of German industry in the 1930s, and Karl-

²¹ See Ringer, *Decline of the German Mandarins*; Jürgen Habermas, “The Entwinement of Myth and Modernity: Re-reading *Dialectic of Enlightenment*,” *New German Critique* (Spring/Summer 1982), pp. 13–30.

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Heinz Ludwig's superbly researched study of engineers and politics before and during the Third Reich all present evidence that right-wing and then Nazi ideology was far more intertwined with modern technology than earlier work suggested.²² Recent work has also modified our view of the relation between anti-Semitism and antimodernism. Moishe Postone has attempted to explain why anti-Semitism attributes such enormous power to the Jews – they were supposed to be the source of both international finance capitalism and international communism. He turns to Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism to interpret anti-Semitism as a specifically modern form of anticapitalist ideology, despite its atavistic vocabulary.²³ Although some of this new literature suffers from blaming capitalism for the peculiarities of modern German history, it has contributed to a reconsideration of the larger problems of nazism and modernity. I am building on these and other reconsiderations of the problem of modernity and National Socialism while rejecting the implication that German modernity was only one example of a generalized sickness inherent in modern industrial societies.

It is time to clarify terms. I have called the tradition under examination a *reactionary* modernist one to emphasize that it was a tradition of the political Right. A figure such as Oswald Spengler straddled the border between traditional Prussian conservatives – the industrialists, Junkers, military, and civil service – and the postwar conservative revolutionaries. Both were illiberal and authoritarian but the latter reached into the lower middle class to create a mass movement. Like the *völkisch* ideologues of the nineteenth century, the conservative revolutionaries sought a cultural–political revolution that would re-

²² Karl-Heinz Bohrer, *Die Ästhetik des Schreckens: Die pessimistische Romantik und Ernst Jüngers Frühwerk* (Munich, 1978); Anson Rabinbach, "The Aesthetics of Production in the Third Reich," in *International Fascism*, ed. George Mosse (Beverly Hills, Calif., 1979), pp. 189–222; Klaus Theweleit, *Männerphantasien*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt, 1978); Timothy Mason, "Zur Entstehung des Gesetzes zur Ordnung der nationalen Arbeit, vom 20 Januar 1934: Ein Versuch über das Verhältnis 'archaischer' und 'moderner' Momente in der neuesten deutschen Geschichte," in *Industrielles System und politische Entwicklung in der Weimarer Republik*, ed. Hans Mommsen, Dieter Petzina, and Bernd Weisbrod (Düsseldorf, 1974), pp. 323–51; Eike Hennig, *Bürgerliche Gesellschaft und Faschismus in Deutschland: Ein Forschungsbericht* (Frankfurt, 1977); and Karl-Heinz Ludwig, *Technik und Ingenieure im Dritten Reich* (Königstein, TS./Düsseldorf, 1979).

²³ Moishe Postone, "Anti-Semitism and National Socialism: Notes on the German Reaction to 'Holocaust,'" Postone's point of departure is the idea that "the specific characteristics of the power attributed to the Jews by modern anti-Semitism – abstractness, intangibility, universality, mobility – are all characteristics of the value dimension of the social form analyzed by Marx," (p. 108). He interprets Auschwitz as the end point of fetishized anticapitalism in Germany. Postone suggests paradoxes in National Socialist views of technology similar to those I am describing.

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vitalize the nation. They were reactionaries in that they opposed the principles of 1789 yet found in nationalism a third force “beyond” capitalism and Marxism. Along with Hitler, they were cultural revolutionaries seeking to restore instinct and to reverse degeneration due to an excess of civilization. Like fascist intellectuals all over postwar Europe, the reactionary modernists in Germany viewed communism as merely the obverse of bourgeois materialism, a soulless world’s mirror image.²⁴

The reactionary modernists were *modernists* in two ways. First, and most obviously, they were technological modernizers; that is, they wanted Germany to be more rather than less industrialized, to have more rather than fewer radios, trains, highways, cars, and planes. They viewed themselves as liberators of technology’s slumbering powers, which were being repressed and misused by a capitalist economy linked to parliamentary democracy. Second, they articulated themes associated with the modernist vanguard: Jünger and Gottfried Benn in Germany, Gide and Malraux in France, Marinetti in Italy, Yeats, Pound, and Wyndham Lewis in England. Modernism was not a movement exclusively of the political Left or Right. Its central legend was of the free creative spirit at war with the bourgeoisie who refuses to accept any limits and who advocates what Daniel Bell has called the “megalomania of self-infinitezation,” the impulse to reach “beyond: beyond morality, tragedy, culture.” From Nietzsche to Jünger and then Goebbels, the modernist credo was the triumph of spirit and will over reason and the subsequent fusion of this will to an aesthetic mode. If aesthetic experience alone justifies life, morality is suspended and desire has no limits.²⁵ Modernism exalted the new and attacked traditions, including normative traditions. As aesthetic standards replaced moral norms, modernism indulged a fascination for horror and violence as a welcome relief to bourgeois boredom and decadence. Modernism also celebrated the self. When modernists turned to politics, they sought engagement, commitment, and authenticity, experiences the Fascists and Nazis promised to provide.²⁶ When the

²⁴ On fascism as a cultural revolution, see George Mosse, “Fascism and the Intellectuals,” in *The Nature of Fascism*, ed. S. J. Woolf (New York, 1969), pp. 205–25; and Joachim Fest, *Höller*, trans Richard Winston and Clara Winston (New York, 1974), pp. 104–6.

²⁵ Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York, 1976), pp. 49–52; Jürgen Habermas, “Modernity vs. Post-modernity,” *New German Critique* 22 (Winter 1981), pp. 3–14.

²⁶ See Karl-Heinz Bohrer, *Die Ästhetik des Schreckens*; J. P. Stern, *Hitler: The Führer and the People* (Berkeley, 1975), an excellent study of Hitler’s language, in particular of his appeals to the authentic self; and Theodor Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, trans. Knut Tarnowski and Frederic Will (Evanston, Ill., 1973).

The paradox of reactionary modernism

reactionary modernists discussed trains as embodiments of the will to power or saw the racial soul expressed in the *Autobahnen*, they were popularizing what had been the preserve of a cultural vanguard.

The reactionary modernists were *irrationalists*. They simply despised reason and denigrated its role in political and social affairs. Their rejection of reason went far beyond the thoughtful criticisms of positivism in philosophy and social science for which German sociology has become famous. Although Adorno and Horkheimer dissected what they took to be reason's inner tensions, they still looked to it as a court of last resort. But the reactionary modernists spoke what Adorno labeled the "jargon of authenticity" in which certain absolutes such as blood, race, and soul were placed beyond rational justification. In their view reason itself was *lebensfeindlich*, or "hostile to life."²⁷

Defenders of nineteenth-century German romanticism have made a simple but important point²⁸: There was no straight line between romanticism and nazism. Further, even in Germany the romantic tradition was not exclusively right-wing or antitechnological. On the contrary, romanticism touched all segments of the intellectual and political spectrum in Germany in Weimar from Lukács and Bloch on the far left, through Mann and Max Weber in the center, to Jünger and his conservative revolutionary comrades. Furthermore, as the Hungarian literary critic and sociologist, Ferenc Feher, has put it, World War I was a turning point for romantic anticapitalism among the literary intellectuals, after which right-wing romanticism expressed growing hostility to what had been considered typical romantic themes such as the critique of dehumanization at the hands of the machine. Michael Lowy and Feher attribute the predominance of "romantic anticapitalism" in Germany to the conflict between humanist culture and capitalist exchange relations. Bell points to a "disjunction of realms" between a culture focused on the self and a social-economic system based on efficiency to account for the cultural re-

²⁷ On the role of *Lebensphilosophie* and the meaning of irrationalism in the conservative revolution see Kurt Sontheimer, *Antidemokratisches Denken in der Weimarer Republik* (Munich, 1968); Georg Lukács, *Die Zerstörung der Vernunft*; and Helmut Plessner, *Die verspätete Nation*.

²⁸ For example, Jacques Barzun, *Classic, Romantic and Modern* (Chicago, 1934), Meyer Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* (New York, 1973), and Alvin Gouldner, "Romanticism and Classicism: Deep Structures in Social Science," in *For Sociology* (Middlesex, England, 1973), pp. 323–66, all stress the romantic contribution to twentieth-century liberal and socialist humanism. Gouldner's thesis is that nineteenth-century German romanticism decisively influenced early twentieth-century social theory – Max Weber, Georg Simmel, Lukács, and the Frankfurt school.