

**THE STRANGE AFTERLIFE OF THEODOR LESSING,
OR: THE PERILS OF PHILO-SEMITISM IN GERMAN ACADEMIA**

Yascha Mounk

Abstract:

Over the last decades, Theodor Lessing has enjoyed an extraordinary revival. Most of his contemporaries considered Lessing a mediocre intellect and a “fierce anti-Semite.” Today, by contrast, most scholars hail him as a significant philosopher who was outspoken in his defence of the Weimar Republic and prophetic in his warnings about the rise of National Socialism. In this paper, I argue that Lessing’s recent hagiographers are seriously misguided. Though Lessing’s philosophy was eclectic, and even confused, his basic ideas were largely derivative. Similarly, though Lessing claimed to oppose the Nazis, his politics were deeply influenced by völkisch, racist, eugenicist and even anti-Semitic discourses. So why has the largely German scholarship on Lessing adopted him as a hero? The answer, I suggest, lies in the fact that many Lessing scholars explicitly aimed to make a contribution to the process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*: in their minds, to rediscover the thought of a Jewish philosopher who had been murdered by the Nazis was a way of making amends for Germany’s past. This may be a noble motivation for scholarly research; as Lessing’s strange afterlife reminds us, however, it has, in some instances, significantly deformed our understanding of the intellectual history of the Weimar Republic.

· All translations of quotes from Theodor Lessing and other German sources by the author, unless otherwise indicated.

**THE STRANGE AFTERLIFE OF THEODOR LESSING,
OR: THE PERILS OF PHILO-SEMITISM IN GERMAN ACADEMIA**

In the eyes of his contemporaries, Theodor Lessing was an untalented philosopher and an irresponsible loudmouth. In fact, for most of his life and much of his death, intellectual historians only took note of Lessing thanks to the lasting fame of his detractors. Thomas Mann, for example, recorded in his diaries that Lessing's work consisted of "insipid and pseudo-lyrical inconsequentialities."¹ He was no more flattering about Lessing's character: "I find it revolting to breathe the same air as this person: may they tolerate the ageing good-for-nothing as a *Privatdozent* in Hannover until he is finally put away to a madhouse."² The rector of Lessing's university wrote to the ministry of science in Berlin to argue that Lessing did not have the essential intellectual foundations for an academic career. Eduard Spranger and Max Scheler, among others, seconded his judgment.³ Edmund Husserl, under whose guidance Lessing had hoped to attain his habilitation, even went so far as to affirm that he knew "Theodor Lessing's personality very well – unfortunately only too well. Lessing is a philosophizing poetaster of extraordinary baseness."⁴

¹ Thomas Mann, *Tagebücher: 1933 - 1934* (Frankfurt a. M.: S. Fischer Verlag, 1977), entry from 07/15/1934, 474.

² Quoted in: Ursula Homann, "Die Waffe der Kritik vortrefflich genutzt," <http://www.ursulahomann.de/DieWaffeDerKritikVortrefflichGenutztVorSiebzigJahrenWurdeTheodorLessingErmordet/kap001.html> (accessed 02/03/2013)

³ Rainer Alich, "Historiker der eigenen Zukunft?" *Freitag*, 10/24/2003. Theodor Lessing himself acknowledged the predominantly negative opinions about one of his main works, *Geschichte als Sinngebung des Sinnlosen*: "Nur wenige Werke der Philosophie dürften bei ihrem Erscheinen so herabgewürdigt und so verkannt worden sein." See Theodor Lessing, *Geschichte als Sinngebung des Sinnlosen, Die Geburt der Geschichte aus dem Mythos*, 4. völlig umgearbeitete Ausgabe (Leipzig: Reinicke, 1927), 4.

⁴ Cited in A. Schmitt, "Ein Januskopf der Moderne," http://www.literaturkritik.de/public/rezension.php?rez_id=6637 &ausgabe=200312 (accessed 06/01/2008)

But, starting in the 1970s, Theodor Lessing's fortunes reversed in spectacular fashion. In stark contrast to the opinions of their predecessors, a new generation of scholars hailed Lessing as an insightful and rationalist defender of the Weimar Republic. Diligently, they readied ever-new editions of Lessing's oeuvre for publication.⁵ Even a comprehensive *Werkausgabe* is now in the works.⁶

The newfound – and still persisting – love for Lessing extends even beyond the academy. In Hannover, Lessing's native city, local politicians recently saw fit to inaugurate a Theodor-Lessing-Platz, a Theodor-Lessing-Stiftung and a Theodor-Lessing-Volkshochschule. A few years ago, the student union of Hannover's university campaigned to rename their institution "Theodor Lessing Universität." And when ZDF, one of Germany's public broadcasting corporations, produced "Unsere Besten" (Our Best), a wildly popular contest to determine who was the greatest German who had ever lived, there were nineteen philosophers among the acceptable candidates. Sandwiched between Immanuel Kant and Gotthold Wilhelm Leibniz on the one hand, and Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche on the other hand, appeared no

⁵ Recent editions of Lessing's work include: Theodor Lessing, *Die verfluchte Kultur. Gedanken über den Gegensatz von Leben und Geist*, (Munich: Matthes & Seitz, 1981), Theodor Lessing, *Geschichte als Sinngebung des Sinnlosen*, re-print of the 1st ed. (Munich: Matthes & Seitz, 1983), Theodor Lessing, *Der jüdische Selbsthaß* (Munich: Matthes & Seitz, 1984), Theodor Lessing, *Nietzsche*, (Munich: Matthes & Seitz, 1985), Theodor Lessing: *Ich warf eine Flaschenpost ins Eismeer der Geschichte. Essays und Feuilletons*, ed. Rainer Marwedel (Darmstadt: Edition Luchterhand, 1986), Theodor Lessing: *Wortmeldungen eines Unerschrockenen*, ed. H Stern (Leipzig: Gustav Kiepenheuer Verlag, 1987), Theodor Lessing: *Haarmann. Die Geschichte eines Werwolfs und andere Gerichtsreportagen*, ed. R Marwedel, (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1995), Theodor Lessing, *Ausgewählte Schriften. Band 1: Bildung ist Schönheit. Ausgewählte Zeugnisse und Schriften zur Bildungsreform*, ed. J Wollenberg (Bremen: Donat, 1995), Theodor Lessing, *Ausgewählte Schriften, Band 2: „Wir machen nicht mit“. Schriften gegen den Nationalismus und zur Judenfrage*, ed. J Wollenberg (Bremen: Donat, 1997), Theodor Lessing: *Der Lärm. Eine Kampfschrift gegen die Geräusche unseres Lebens*, (Stuttgart: Mayer, 1999), Theodor Lessing: *Blumen*, (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2004), Theodor Lessing: *Meine Tiere* (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2004), Theodor Lessing: *Nachkritiken. Kleine Schriften 1906-1907*, ed. R Marwedel, (Darmstadt: Wallstein, 2006 and Theodor Lessing *Geschichte als Sinngebung des Sinnlosen*, re-print of the 2nd edition (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2012), Theodor Lessing, *Europa und Asien. Untergang der Erde am Geist* (Leipzig: Superbia, 2007)

⁶ "Edition des Werks von Theodor Lessing: Nach Ossietzky und Tucholsky die dritte grosse Werkausgabe," Carl von Ossietzky Universität Oldenburg, <http://www.presse.uni-oldenburg.de/f-aktuell/24680.html> (accessed 02/18/2013).

other than Theodor Lessing. Hailed as one of the most “farsighted thinkers of his time,” he evidently had the public’s blessing as one of Germany’s most significant philosophers.⁷

In this paper, I propose to examine the reasons for Lessing’s extraordinary revival. My conclusion is simple enough: While Lessing may be of relevance to intellectual historians interested in the reception of Friedrich Nietzsche, Henri Bergson and especially vitalist philosophers like Ludwig Klages, he has no lasting philosophical insights to offer. Nor was Lessing a courageous defender of the Weimar Republic. On the contrary: his politics had deep affinities with *völkisch*, racist and even anti-Semitic modes of thought. In fact, far from turning into an unequivocal supporter of democracy in the last months of his life, as some of his recent hagiographers have assumed, Lessing continued to flirt with fascist currents of thought until the bitter end.

This raises a real puzzle. What, if not the inherent interest to be found in Lessing’s work, could possibly explain his strange afterlife? On my view, only the peculiar confluence of a number of factors can begin to do so. Most of Lessing’s recent interpreters self-consciously saw their research as a way to contribute to the process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coping with the past). So it helped immensely that Lessing was himself Jewish; that he had published an incisive attack on General Paul von Hindenburg in the mid-1920s that earned him the lasting enmity of the National Socialists; and that he was murdered on 30 August 1933 in the Czech city of Marienbad on behalf of Josef Goebbels.⁸

⁷ “Unsere Besten” was the title of the adapted German format. See ZDF: “Unsere Besten – Philosophie,” <http://www.zdf.de/ZDFde/inhalt/13/0,1872,2055661,00.html> (accessed 04/25/2008)

⁸ Lessing’s German citizenship had been terminated a few days before his death, in August 1933. The National Socialist government encouraged Lessing’s assassination and helped his murderers escape

In fact, it is perfectly understandable that, in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, a generation of German historians rightly determined to remedy the failings of earlier scholarship might have found it difficult to pass up the opportunity of lionizing a misunderstood Jew who had duly been assassinated by the Nazis. As it happens, however, the result of their conscientious endeavors was an overly positive picture of Lessing that downplayed or even expunged the deeply problematic aspects of his thought. The case of Theodor Lessing, in other words, is a particularly striking example of the unscholarly distortions which German academics intent on righting the wrongs of the past are capable of committing in the pursuit of their well-meaning agenda.

This paper, then, has two goals. First, it aims to provide a frank and honest re-assessment of Lessing by means of a more thorough investigation of his ambiguous work. And second, it aims to explain how Lessing's recent hagiographers could have gone so wrong in their own assessments of his thought. This is thus at the same time a paper about Weimer intellectual history and a paper about Germany's relationship towards the Nazi era since the 1960s.

To this end, I will offer a very brief *Rezeptionsgeschichte* in Section I; in it, I aim to demonstrate how radically the reception of Lessing transformed once Germany's attitude towards its past had changed. In Section II, I provide a brief introduction to Lessing's philosophy; while an earlier view of Lessing as an unmitigated irrationalist may have been exaggerated, I argue that the more recent view of Lessing as a

punishment by the Czech authorities. Before Lessing's assassination, newspapers reported that 80.000 Reichsmark would be paid to his murderers – though this turned out to be no more than a rumor. Cf. Hans Mayer, "Der unzeitgemäße Theodor Lessing," in: Theodor Lessing: *Einmal und nie wieder. Lebenserinnerungen* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Sachbuch Verlag, 1969), 7-9.

rationalist is equally misleading. Last, in Section III, I show that Lessing's politics was deeply indebted to *völkisch*, eugenicist and even racist discourses, retaining an unpalatable proximity to National Socialist ideas even as late as 1933. In the conclusion, I draw out the implications of this new view of Lessing's work both for a re-evaluation of his place within the Weimar Republic and for our understanding of recent historiographical trends in Germany.

I A brief *Rezeptionsgeschichte*

The secondary literature on Lessing divides into two, roughly distinct, phases. In an earlier phase, Lessing was read as a proponent of *Lebensphilosophie* (vitalist philosophy) who retained many of its irrationalist and racist commitments. In a later phase, by contrast, German scholars re-invented Lessing as a defender of reason and a principled opponent of National Socialist ideology. As we will see, this white-washing was motivated by the hope of remedying the perceived anti-Semitic biases of earlier secondary literature – an attempt at academic *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* which, in the case of Lessing, on examination turns out to be as wrong-headed as it is well-meaning.

Lessing, an unsalaried *Privatdozent* in the small philosophy department of the *Technische Hochschule* Hannover from 1907 until his forced departure in 1926, first attracted attention for his essayistic output rather than his philosophy. Though he himself was of Jewish extraction, he heavily drew on anti-Semitic discourse in an

attack on Samuel Lublinski, a contemporary literary critic, in 1910.⁹ Thomas Mann's lasting enmity with Lessing was provoked by this incident¹⁰ – and leading German intellectuals including Ferdinand Avenarius, Stefan Zweig, Walter Bloem, Will Vesper and Theodor Heuss signed a petition against Lessing.¹¹

But it is because of a short article on General Paul von Hindenburg, written in the run-up to the 1925 Presidential elections, that Lessing found a place in the history of the Weimar Republic. In this article, he portrayed Hindenburg as a likeable “zero” who was dangerous to democracy because his political incompetence might open the way for a future “Nero.”¹² Such irreverent treatment of a war hero provoked violent student protests and ultimately forced Lessing to resign from his position.¹³ The controversy surrounding Lessing's article set the extreme right against him and was ultimately responsible for the Nazi regime's decision to commission his assassination. At the Nuremberg Party Conference of 1933, Joseph Goebbels, referring to Lessing's death a few days earlier, could triumphantly announce that he had “cast off that yoke.”¹⁴

⁹ Theodor Lessing, “Samuel zieht Bilanz,” *Schaubühne* 6 (3), 1910. Compare also Lessing's continued hostility after Lublinski's death in Theodor Lessing, “Samuel Lublinski. Gedenkworte,” re-printed in Theodor Lessing: *Philosophie als Tat* (Göttingen: Otto Hapke Verlag, 1914), 343-52.

¹⁰ Thomas Mann: “Der Doktor Lessing. Ein Pamphlet” in *Literarisches Echo*, 1 March 1910, re-printed in: Thomas Mann: *Reden und Aufsätze* 3, Vol. XI of *Gesammelte Werke*, (Frankfurt a. M.: S. Fischer Verlag, 1974), 719-25. See further Lessing's reply: “Wider Thomas Mann,” in: *Schaubühne* 6 (10), 1910, and Mann's rejoinder: “Berichtigungen,” in Mann, *Reden und Aufsätze*, 725-30.

¹¹ See Bernward Baule: *Kulturerkenntnis und Kulturbewertung bei Theodor Lessing*, (Hildesheim: A. Lax, 1992), 8.

¹² “Man kann sagen: ‘Besser ein Zero als ein Nero.’ Leider zeigt die Geschichte, daß hinter einem Zero immer ein künftiger Nero verborgen steht.” Theodor Lessing, “Hindenburg,” *Prager Tageblatt*, 04/25/1925, re-printed in Lessing, *Flaschenpost*, 65-69.

¹³ For the controversy surrounding the protests against Lessing and his forced resignation, see for example: Hans Mayer, *Der Repräsentant und der Märtyrer: Konstellationen der Literatur*, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1971), 98-116; August Messer, *Der Fall Lessing. Eine objektive Darstellung und kritische Würdigung*, (Bielefeld: G. Witter, 1926) and M. S. Steinberg, “Sabres, Books, and Brown Shirts: The Radicalization of the German Student, 1918-1935,” (PhD diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1971) 373-95.

¹⁴ Homann, “Waffe der Kritik.”

For a long time, Lessing's limited significance seemed to rest on his journalistic fame in the Weimar Republic and his brutal assassination at the hands of the National Socialist regime. Intellectually, he was dismissed as a second-rate philosopher with dubious political views. This, as we have seen, was certainly the opinion that held sway among his contemporaries. Sigmund Freud, for instance, complained about Lessing's "offensive" attack on psychoanalysis.¹⁵ Thomas Mann, upon hearing of Lessing's death, recorded in his diaries that such a violent end "was appropriate for one of Lessing's ilk."¹⁶ "In the main," Mann insisted, Lessing "shared his ideology with his murderers."¹⁷ In the 1926 edition of the Brockhaus encyclopedia, Lessing was known, simply, as a "fierce anti-Semite."¹⁸

In the years up to the early 1980s, the sparse scholarship on Lessing merely echoed the views of Lessing's hostile contemporaries. Georg Lukács, in *The Destruction of Reason*, insisted that Lessing exhibited a "striking similarity" to thinkers like Ludwig Klages – a close friend of Lessing's during their school days – who had initiated the "open fight against reason and culture" which paved the way for the Third Reich.¹⁹ Lukács was not the only commentator to assess Lessing's philosophy as being of a kind with the outright irrationalism of Klages and other protagonists of vitalist philosophy. This view has proven particularly persistent in early research on Lessing;

¹⁵ Letter by Sigmund Freud to Kurt Hiller on the 9th of February 1936. Cited in: M. I. Siegrist, *Theodor Lessing. Die entropische Philosophie. Freilegung und Rekonstruktion eines verdrängten Denkers*, (Bern: Europäischer Verlag der Wissenschaften, 1995) 19.

¹⁶ Thomas Mann, *Tagebücher*, entry on 09/01/1933, 165.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, entry on 07/15/1934, 474.

¹⁸ This interpretation of Theodor Lessing persisted until the 1970 edition: *Brockhaus Enzyklopädie Bd. II*, "Theodor Lessing" (Wiesbaden: F. A. Brockhaus, 1970).

¹⁹ Georg Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason*, P. Palmer [Transl], (London: The Merlin Press, 1980, 523. See also *ibid.*, 12.

today, vestiges of it are still apparent in some general accounts of early twentieth-century intellectual history in which Lessing is discussed in passing.²⁰

Only in the 1970s, when a new generation of German academics became increasingly determined to confront the Nazi past, did interest in Lessing's work spike, and assessments of his work improve. As these scholars set out to rectify the real injustices that decades of silence about problematic facets of German intellectual history had created, they hoped, explicitly enough, that to defend Lessing could at the same time be an exercise in *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. Rainer Marwedel, the driving force behind the Lessing renaissance, for example, was convinced that "the history of his public reputation is, above all else, to be understood as the history of his persecution, which has continued throughout the secondary literature virtually without fail."²¹ This prompted Marwedel to dismiss wholesale the hitherto critical scholarship on Lessing. In his opinion, only a completely new beginning could remedy earlier misrepresentations of Lessing's thought.²² As Alexander Kosenina, a co-editor of the

²⁰ See particularly the misleading references to Lessing as an outright anti-rationalist in Herbert Schnädelbach, *Philosophy in Germany 1831-1933*, E. Matthews [Transl.], (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 145. Much of the secondary literature which is concerned with Lessing only in passing focuses primarily on his critique of the writing of history, which is similarly conceived of as anti-rationalist. See for example David Midgley, *Writing Weimar. Critical Realism in German Literature, 1918 – 1933*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 142; Reinhart Koselleck: "Vom Sinn und Unsinn der Geschichte," in: K E Müller & J Rüsen [Eds.], *Historische Sinnbildung. Problemstellungen, Zeitkonzepte, Wahrnehmungshorizonte, Darstellungsstrategien*, (Reinbeck: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 1997), 74; and J. Stückrath, "'Der Sinn der Geschichte.' Eine moderne Wortverbindung und Vorstellung?" in: *ibid.*, 87-89.

²¹ Rainer Marwedel, *Theodor Lessing. 1872 – 1933. Eine Biographie*, (Darmstadt: Edition Luchterhand, 1987), 10. This is also evident in Marwedel's formulation of his goal as "die Rekonstruktion eines jüdischen Philosophenlebens und die Vergegenwärtigung der jüngeren deutschen Geschichte," *ibid* (original emphasis). Compare further *ibid*, p. 15. How widespread the motivation of serving some form of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* is in Lessing scholarship at large is also evident in the proceedings of the largest academic conference on Theodor Lessing to date, which was convened by the Moses Mendelssohn Zentrum in Potsdam in 2003: Elke-Vera Kotowski [Ed.], *Sinngebung des Sinnlosen. Zum Leben und Werken des Kulturkritikers Theodor Lessing (1872 – 1933)*, (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 2006). Notice also the telling allusion to the supposed repression of Lessing's memory in the subtitle of Siegrist's monograph on Lessing: *Freilegung und Rekonstruktion eines verdrängten Denkers*, (Siegrist, *Theodor Lessing*.)

²² Once again, Marwedel's view was readily echoed in the secondary literature. Rita Bischof, for example, displays a certain naivety in suggesting that it must have been Lessing's innocence that so

Lessing *Werkausgabe*, stresses, this positive reevaluation of Lessing's work could then serve as a form of *Wiedergutmachung* (making amends for the past).²³

As a result, since the 1980s, scholarly assessments of Lessing, by over-emphasizing his opposition both to Hindenburg and later to National Socialism, have suggested that he came to be an outspoken defender of the Weimar Republic. His reputation as a formidable opponent of nationalism and Nazism, in turn, seems to have put the soundness of his philosophizing beyond doubt. In this vein, Marwedel's intellectual biography of Lessing credited him not only with a rationalist distancing from vitalist philosophy and a courageous political stance, but even with significant philosophical achievements that placed him in a direct line of descent from Immanuel Kant.²⁴

In short, the predominantly German scholarship has found it difficult to separate its assessment of Lessing's philosophy and politics from its concern with Lessing's biography. As a result, both Lessing's early detractors and his recent hagiographers have failed to give a balanced interpretation of Lessing's works. To remedy this deficiency, we need to develop a more nuanced and critical interpretation of Lessing's philosophy than has hitherto been accomplished. In Section II, I make a first contribution to this undertaking.

enraged his contemporaries: Rita Bischof: "Entzauberte Geschichte (Nachwort)," in: Lessing, *Geschichte als Sinngebung des Sinnlosen*, 1st ed., 1983.

²³ Simon Benne, "Monumentale Theodor-Lessing-Werkausgabe geplant," *Hannoversche Allgemeine*, 07/17/2010. Other scholarship on Lessing that is noticeably influenced by this hope includes Karl Albert, *Philosophie im Schatten von Auschwitz: Edith Stein – Theodor Lessing – Walter Benjamin – Paul Ludwig Landsberg*, (Dettelbach: J. H. Röhl Verlag, 1994), and the somewhat more subtle treatment in Julius H. Schoeps, "Der ungeliebte Außenseiter. Zum Leben und Werk des Schriftstellers Theodor Lessing," in: Walter Grab & Julius H. Schoeps [Eds.], *Juden in der Weimarer Republik*, (Köln: Dumont Literatur und Kunst, 1989).

²⁴ See Marwedel, *Lessing*. Compare also Elke-Vera Kotowski: "'Nun ist auch dieser unselige Spuk weggewischt' – Theodor Lessing im Geiste seiner Zeitgenossen," *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte*, Nr. 50(3), 1998, 195-218 and Peter Böhm, *Theodor Lessings Versuch einer erkenntnistheoretischen Grundlegung von Welt. Ein kritischer Beitrag zur Aporetik der Lebensphilosophie*, (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi B.V., 1986).

II Lessing's philosophy

Despite being diametrically opposed in most respects, the earlier and the later phases of Lessing scholarship do have one important commonality: they both assume that whether Lessing ultimately endorsed or rejected reason would have straightforward interpretative consequences, both for our understanding of his philosophy and for our understanding of his political positioning in the Weimar Republic. Thus, the account of earlier scholars who assumed that Lessing had unambiguously rejected reason, and therefore gone astray politically, was inverted rather than abandoned when later scholars came to Lessing's defense: they now argued that Lessing had come to be a rationalist in his mature work, and must therefore also have turned into a consistent defender of the Weimar Republic.

Trying to escape this unhelpful dualism, I shall, in this section, outline the many ambiguities and inconsistencies in Lessing's philosophy; as a result of these complications, I argue, Lessing remained highly ambivalent about what he considered the rationalism of contemporary society in general, and the Weimar Republic in particular. It is, then, only an understanding of the *unresolved* status of reason in Lessing's philosophy – rather than either his supposed rationalism or his supposed anti-rationalism – that can help to set the stage for the examination of his peculiarly elusive politics that follows in Section III.²⁵

²⁵ It will not be possible, in the present context, to discuss the chronological development of Lessing's philosophy. This shortcoming may, however, be somewhat mitigated by the fact that his main ideas changed relatively little over time. *Philosophie als Tat*, published in 1914, already charted out the route

II.1 *Vitalité*, or: Lessing's attack on rationality

Lessing's philosophy rests on an all-pervasive juxtaposition: life and *Geist*, he argued, are irreconcilable adversaries. Before *Geist* (often rendered as "spirit" in English) existed, human beings had appertained to a sphere he named *vitalité*: Borrowing heavily from Henri Bergson's discussion of *durée*,²⁶ Lessing argued that man had originally experienced nature as an immediate and timeless presence.²⁷ Before the rise of *Geist* or reason, man thus perceived himself as part of an "all-encompassing unity" with nature.²⁸ Only when man acquired reason was he alienated from this harmonious communion with the world around him.

Lessing contrasted this pre-rational sphere of *vitalité* to what he named the sphere of *réalité*: our ordinary, mechanistic perception of the world, which we mistakenly believe to be real.²⁹ The human mind, on this view, can only process the information

for the subsequent development of his philosophy; by the end of the First World War, Lessing had written the first drafts of both his main works, *Geschichte als Sinngebung des Sinnlosen* and *Europa und Asien*. Though later editions fundamentally altered the form and text of these works, the central arguments remained the same. Section III, on Lessing's politics, explicitly rebuts the views of Lessing scholars who claim that Lessing's political views changed significantly in the last years of his life.

²⁶ See especially Chapter 2 of Henri Bergson, *Zeit und Freiheit. Eine Abhandlung über die unmittelbaren Bewusstseins-Tatsachen*, (Jena: Eugen Diederichs, 1911). See also Henri Bergson, *Schöpferische Entwicklung*, (Jena: Eugen Diederichs, 1912), where Bergson emphasizes the "élan vital." The fact that Lessing's terms for the different spheres including *vitalité* are French in itself hints at his use of Bergsonian ideas.

²⁷ The similarity between Lessing's general discussion of *vitalité* and his Bergsonian discussion of time is particularly evident in Lessing, *Europa und Asien*, 1st ed., 97ff. See further Lessing's most expansive discussion of time in Lessing, *Geschichte*, 4th ed., pp. 123-60 and *Europa und Asien*, 5th ed., 6-8 as well as 19-36. Lessing's discussion of the rational conception of time as spatial on 29ff., in particular, is clearly owed to Bergson's considerations in *Les données immédiates de la conscience*.

²⁸ Lessing, *Geschichte*, 4th ed., 132. See also the earlier formulation of the same point in Lessing, *Europa und Asien*, 1st ed., 30.

²⁹ See e.g. Lessing, *Europa und Asien*, 1st ed., 41-43, where Lessing juxtaposed his description of *vitalité* with illusory reality, which he called the "big lie of mankind." He considered this falsehood to be inherent to rational man's "calculating intelligence."

gained from its senses in a rational manner by arresting continuous nature in a series of distinct mental representations.³⁰ For Lessing, the rise of reason and our concomitant alienation from nature thus resulted in an artificially mechanical understanding not only of time, as Bergson had argued, but of reality as a whole.³¹ The world we seemingly inhabit, he warned, is a distorted invention of our own minds.³² That's why, as he put the point with his characteristic lack of understatement, "we no longer understand that what we call 'reality' is in fact our deed or even our instrument, by means of which we kill off and rape life."³³

Like Ludwig Klages, Alfred Schuler, and other proponents of vitalist philosophy, Lessing thus stressed that mankind's alienation from what he called *vitalité* created a degenerate culture opposed to life. This degenerate culture, he argued, would become increasingly unstable as it eradicated all organic forms of life and subjugated the whole of nature to the demands of human reason. The rise of *Geist* was irresistible. As the title of one of Lessing's major works proclaimed, we were inexorably headed towards the *Untergang der Erde am Geist* (Earth's Demise, Brought About by Geist).³⁴

In these respects, then, it is clear that Lessing's thought was deeply shaped by vitalist philosophy. Klages, for example, had thought that "life and *Geist* are two completely primary and essentially adversarial powers," and expressly sided with life.³⁵ Lessing's

³⁰ On the conversion from flowing nature into distinct pictures, see for example Lessing, *Europa und Asien*, 5th ed., 4-5.

³¹ See for example Lessing, *Geschichte*, 4th ed., 88 and 132-6.

³² See Lessing, *Europa und Asien*, 1st ed., 25. Compare *ibid.*, 90-91.

³³ *Ibid.*, 92-3.

³⁴ This apocalyptic prediction was also the subtitle of the 1924 edition of *Europa und Asien*.

³⁵ Ludwig Klages, *Der Geist als Widersacher der Seele*, Vol. 1, (Leipzig: Barth, 1929), 7. See also Alfred Schuler: *Fragmente und Vorträge aus dem Nachlass*, (Leipzig: Barth, 1940). Further, compare Alfred Seidel, *Bewußtsein als Verhängnis*, (Bonn, 1927).

consistent use the same terminology suggests that his treatment of the issue, even if not a straightforward endorsement of every aspect of vitalist philosophy, must certainly be considered in light of that movement's hostility to contemporary "rationalist" society.

II.2 *Realité*, or: Lessing's defense of rationality

All of this is evidence of the anti-rationalist elements in Lessing's thought. But it would be a mistake to conclude, as the earlier phase of Lessing scholarship did without much hesitation, that he rejected reason outright. In fact, Lessing was neither an unambiguous proponent nor an unambiguous opponent of either *Geist* or reason. Though he thought that *Geist* is destructive of life, he also believed that it was necessary to accept its existence in various ways. To the extent that he did so, he appears to have adopted a less expressly hostile attitude towards reason than other proponents of vitalist philosophy.

In contrast to Klages, for example, Lessing did not think of *Geist* as an "extraterrestrial invader."³⁶ Rather, he argued that human beings acquired reason and consciousness when they experienced a heightened form of suffering.³⁷ On this view, a kind of existential pain woke mankind's mental capacities and alienated us from our

³⁶ Lessing explicitly distanced himself from Klages' position in the preface to the 4th edition of *Europa und Asien* (re-printed in Lessing, *Europa und Asien*, 5th ed., 358). See also *ibid.*, 42.

³⁷ The German word, "*Not*," refers not only to the concepts entailed in the English "suffering," but also to more straightforward material "needs" as well as to physical "pain." On Lessing's view about *Not*, see also his dissertation: Theodor Lessing, *Afrikan Spir's Erkenntnislehre*, (Inaugural-Dissertation, Universität Erlangen), Gießen, 1900, esp. 50. Compare also Lessing, *Philosophie als Tat*, 80 and Theodor Lessing, *Deutschland und seine Juden*, (Neumann, 1933), 7.

earlier, all-encompassing harmony with nature.³⁸ Human history began at this moment of awakening and individuation.³⁹ Lessing's stress on the historical mission of *Geist* therefore entailed the belief that it alone could overcome the human suffering that had brought *Geist* into being in the first place.

In fact, Lessing thought not only that human suffering was the root cause of *Geist*, but also that it was the only reason why *Geist* continued to exist.⁴⁰ Influenced by the physical laws of thermodynamics formulated by Robert Mayer and applied to philosophy by Wilhelm Ostwald, Lessing believed that all human consciousness would be extinguished when *Geist* had fully come to predominate: consciousness having arisen from suffering, humans would cease to be rational beings once all suffering had been overcome.⁴¹ Only the complete predominance of *Geist* could therefore free all human beings from their individuated consciousness and allow mankind to return to the original harmony with nature that prevailed in the sphere of *vitalité*.

³⁸ See for example the chapter "Die Geburt des Bewußtseins aus der Not," in: Lessing, *Europa und Asien*, 4th ed., 121-9. See also Lessing, *Geschichte*, 4th ed., 115 and *ibid.*, 123 ff, as well as Lessing, *Europa und Asien*, 1st ed., 13-4. On the connection between mental capacities and suffering see for example Lessing's postulation of a "wechselseitige Abhängigkeit von Wissen und Schmerz" and his assertion "daß Bewußtsein unwandelbar Funktion von Not ist," in: Lessing, *Europa und Asien*, 1st ed., 73.

³⁹ See the chapter "Der Mensch erwacht" in Lessing, *Europa und Asien*, 5th ed., 19ff. See also his assertion that the human world began at the same time as suffering in: Lessing, *Philosophie als Tat*, 100 and compare his speculation that this must have taken place about 500 BC in *Geschichte*, 4th ed., 36. It's worth noting that, in Lessing's thought, consciousness of our individuality appears to be both the prerequisite for, and the result of, suffering. Lessing thus never satisfactorily explained how this heightened form of suffering could have been possible before the rise of consciousness and individuality - simply asserting that various "Stauungen und Spannungen" gave rise to suffering.

⁴⁰ "Nirgends also dürfte Bewußtsein vorhanden sein ohne Not," Lessing, *Europa und Asien*, 5th ed., 36. See also Lessing, *Geschichte*, 4th ed., 156.

⁴¹ On Lessing's view, the physical laws he drew upon were important in two respects. First, in a closed system the increase of one gas will continue uninhibited until it completely takes over. And second, the system will revert to its original condition once this final state of complete entropy had been reached. The rise of *Geist* and mankind's eventual return to the sphere of *vitalité*, for Lessing, paralleled these thermodynamic laws. See e.g. his discussion of entropy in Lessing, *Philosophie als Tat*, 9-10; Lessing, *Europa und Asien*, 1st ed., 73; and Lessing, *Geschichte*, re-print of the 1st ed., 209.

Because only the rational faculties bestowed upon mankind by *Geist* seemed adept at reducing suffering, Lessing thus grudgingly accepted the futility of opposing *Geist*. He now described *Geist* as a giant detour of nature.⁴² To some extent, he even promised to further its cause: it is for this reason that Lessing preached political activism,⁴³ the purpose of which, on his account, was precisely “to eradicate all suffering” and restore our ability to commune with nature.⁴⁴

In arguing that Lessing was a rationalist defender of the Weimar Republic, recent scholars have emphasized his grudging acceptance of *Geist*, as well as his imperative to eradicate all suffering.⁴⁵ This view contains an important grain of truth. But it is equally clear that Lessing only welcomed *Geist* insofar as it had a necessary historical mission to fulfill. It would therefore be wrong to conclude that Lessing had given up the normative preference for the sphere of *vitalité*, or life, which was so typical of vitalist philosophy. Lessing’s recent defenders, then, have only told half the story. Lessing’s view may be a far cry from the outright rejection of all rationality which early interpreters of Lessing had wrongly suspected – but it is equally far from the unqualified acceptance of reason assumed in more recent scholarship.

This conclusion gains further support from the myriad tensions within Lessing’s philosophy – tensions that have so far received inadequate attention. It is to the

⁴² See for example Lessing, *Europa und Asien*, 5th ed., p. 36, and Lessing, *Geschichte*, 4th ed., pp. 320-1

⁴³ This is what Lessing was hoping to express in the following rhyme, which he repeated frequently throughout his writings: “Es muß die Menschheit ringen nach dem Ziele, / Bei welchem angelangt die Welt zerfiele.” See for example: Lessing, *Einmal*, 252.

⁴⁴ The exhortation to eradicate suffering recurs very frequently throughout Lessing’s writings. For an early formulation, see Lessing, *Philosophie als Tat*, 61.

⁴⁵ See for example Uwe Kemmler, *Not und Notwendigkeit. Der Primat der Ethik in der Philosophie Theodor Lessings* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 2004).

arduous task of casting light on these, the most obscure, confusing and underexplored elements of Lessing's philosophy, that we must now turn.

II.3 *Verité*, or: Ambiguity

One reason why Lessing's philosophy is less rationalist than his recent interpreters have claimed is that his defense of *Geist* is more qualified and instrumental than they usually acknowledge. Another, even more important, reason is that his defense of *Geist* never actually committed him to a parallel defense of reason. This is because Lessing did not, as the secondary literature has assumed, equate *Geist* with rationality. On the contrary, his account of the contrast between *vitalité* and *réalité* suggests that *Geist* is best described as the whole of human consciousness. While rationality, being a faculty that we can only exercise as conscious beings, did not exist before *Geist*, the converse does not follow: not all conscious human life is governed by reason. On the contrary, according to Lessing, individuation itself was brought about by the rise of *Geist*. Every action of every individual therefore belongs to *réalité* – the world of *Geist* – rather than to *vitalité*. Crucially, this includes all assertions of individual will, emotional *or* rational.⁴⁶

The secondary literature is therefore wrong to claim that Lessing countered Nietzsche's suggestion – central to later *Lebensphilosophie* – that assertions of

⁴⁶ Cf. Ferdinand Fellmann, who claims that Lessing had a narrow definition of *Geist* in: Ferdinand Fellmann, *Lebensphilosophie. Elemente einer Theorie der Selbsterfahrung*, (Rowohlt Taschenbuch: Reinbek, 1993), 128-9.

individual life should take precedence over the conventions of morality.⁴⁷ According to post-Nietzschean vitalist philosophers like Klages, Spengler and Schuler, humanity could only escape a world dominated by reason if each individual, or race, gave ruthless expression to its vital forces. It would be tempting to see Lessing's acceptance of *Geist* as a form of distancing from these views. But in Lessing's conceptual framework, Dionysian self-assertion and Apollonian reason, which Nietzsche had thought to be opposites, are both products of *Geist*.⁴⁸ If Lessing was to favor the moral imperative to eradicate suffering over thoughtless abandon to the instincts of life, he would therefore need to distinguish between various manifestations of *Geist*.⁴⁹ But it was unclear on what possible philosophical foundation he might be able to do so. So, despite the central role that the juxtaposition between *Geist* and *vitalité* played in his thought, Lessing's philosophy, as yet, advocated no clear stand on the major debates of contemporary vitalist philosophy.

In order to try and explain why an obligation to eradicate suffering might exist, Lessing took up Edmund Husserl's attempts to develop "axioms about moral values which would be analogues to those of logic and mathematics."⁵⁰ But these laws were

⁴⁷ See for example Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Utility and Liability of History for Life," in: *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, E. Behler [Ed.], Vol. 2, *Unfashionable Observations*, R T Grey [Transl.], (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1995), 85. For a monograph on Friedrich Nietzsche's influence on Theodor Lessing, consult: Johannes Henrich, *Friedrich Nietzsche und Theodor Lessing. Ein Vergleich*, (Marburg: Tectum – Der Wissenschaftsverlag, 2011).

⁴⁸ Lessing himself saw his contrasting of Europe and Asia as, in some sense, identical to the distinction between the Apollonian and Dionysian which he drew from Jakob Burckhardt and Friedrich Nietzsche. See Lessing, *Geschichte*, 4th ed., 6. See also Jacob Burckhardt, *Griechische Kulturgeschichte*, 2nd ed., J Oeri [Ed.], (Berlin & Stuttgart: Spemann, 1898) and Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and other writings*, R Geuss & R Speirs [eds.], (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

Puzzlingly, Lessing also claimed that the juxtaposition between Europe and Asia was synonymous to Schopenhauer's distinction between will and representation. See the preface to the 2nd edition of *Europa und Asien*, re-printed in the 5th edition, 353. Regarding Schopenhauer's influence on Lessing, see Kurt Mager: "Subjekt und Geschichte bei Arthur Schopenhauer und Theodor Lessing," *Perspektiven der Philosophie*, 24, 125-48.

⁴⁹ Compare for example Lessing, *Europa und Asien*, 1st ed., 118-20.

⁵⁰ Lawrence Baron, "Discipleship and Dissent: Theodor Lessing and Edmund Husserl," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 127 (1983): 32-49, and esp. 40-41. Compare also Lawrence

still too formal to constitute the practical moral basis for political action that Lessing was hoping to derive from them. Lessing's innovation, therefore, was to draw more concrete results from Husserl's approach than Husserl himself had thought possible.⁵¹ In an article about Husserl's influence on Lessing – incidentally, one of the few English-language publications on Lessing to date and far more critical of his work than the German secondary literature – Lawrence Baron rightly concludes that this undertaking created serious weaknesses at the heart of Lessing's *Studien zur Wertaxiomatik* (Studies on Value Axiomatics).⁵²

In that work, Lessing suggested that, in the absence of absolute value certainty, one had to act according to what one had adequate reason to believe was the most morally desirable action.⁵³ Then, without much further argument, he concluded that this intuitively implied a moral imperative to reduce all suffering. Despite his own earlier reservations, Lessing therefore claimed that this somewhat *ad hoc* conclusion was “logomathic,” i.e. equivalent to the evidently demonstrable truths of logics and mathematics.⁵⁴

Baron: “Theodor Lessing: Between Jewish self-hatred and Zionism,” *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook*, 26 (1), 1981, 323-340; and the rather less critical Lawrence Baron, “Noise and Degeneration: Theodor Lessing's Crusade for Quiet,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, 1982, 165-78.

⁵¹ Ibid. Lessing reacted to Husserl's dismissal of his work by writing a satirical account of his former teacher: Lessing, *Flaschenpost*, 179-84. Note that other contemporary philosophers with links to the vitalist movement were similarly interested in adapting Husserl's value theory for their own purposes. See for example Max Scheler: *Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Values. A New Attempt Toward the Foundation of an Ethical Personalism*, M S Frings & R L Funk [Transl.], (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

⁵² Theodor Lessing, *Studien zur Wertaxiomatik. Untersuchungen über Reine Ethik und Reines Recht*, 2nd, expanded, ed., (Leipzig: Felix Meiner, 1914). Compare also Theodor Lessing, “Moralische Noten. Fragmente einer Ethik, aus den Jahren 1900-1913,” re-printed in Lessing, *Philosophie als Tat*, 74-110.

⁵³ See “Make the best of it,” re-printed in: Lessing, *Philosophie als Tat*, 18. Compare also *ibid.*, 61.

⁵⁴ See Lessing, *Wertaxiomatik* and Lessing, *Philosophie als Tat*, 60, where Lessing states that all valuations must relate back to “richtige Rangierungsvollzüge [...], die ein System reiner Wertgesetze voraussetzen, gleich Gesetzen der reinen Logik.” In this context, Lessing's insistence on the objectivity of these values was particularly puzzling (“Es gibt entweder eine objective, nicht empirische, von aller Psychologie freie Ethik oder es gibt überhaupt keine Ethik!” Lessing, *Philosophie als Tat*, 84.)

Thanks to this innovation, Lessing's picture of the world now comprised three spheres: *vitalité*; *réalité*; and the sphere of truth, *vérité*. *Vérité*, on this view, comprised not only logical principles of pure reason but also ethical guidelines. Together with *vitalité* and *réalité*, it completed his epistemological system, which he drew upon in all his mature works.⁵⁵

As Lessing himself recognized, however, it is difficult to reconcile his commitment to the demonstrable truth of his ethical values with his distrust of all human perception in the sphere of *réalité*. We have seen earlier that human beings, after the rise of consciousness, ceased to have direct epistemological access to *vitalité*. As a result, their perception was constrained to an apparent reality that was a creation of their distorting rational faculties. But on Lessing's own premises, values could have validity only insofar as they are given to human cognition – that is, on the basis of their apprehension by man's rational faculties. In other words, the sphere of *vérité* could not exist independently of artificial human *réalité*. Given that Lessing thought of human rationality and the sphere of *réalité* as misleading inventions, there seemingly was no way to be sure that his ethical guidelines were anything other than an illusion.⁵⁶

Lessing, in short, insisted both that humanity needed to adhere to rational moral laws and that it needed to recognize all demands of reason as mere chimeras. Though he himself acknowledged that these two claims were mutually exclusive,⁵⁷ he

⁵⁵ On the “3-Sphären-Theorie” see Lessing, *Europa und Asien*, 1st ed., 121ff.; Lessing, *Geschichte*, 1st ed., 14-5; Lessing, *Dämonen*; Lessing, *Geschichte*, 4th ed., 75-77 and 111-20; as well as Lessing, *Europa und Asien*, 5th ed., VI and 3–18.

⁵⁶ Lessing seems to acknowledge as much in *Geschichte*, 4th ed., 94-95.

⁵⁷ See for example Lessing's allegory beginning “Zwei Bäume blühten im Garten des Paradieses. Nur von ihrer einem durfte der Mensch essen [...]” in Lessing, *Europa und Asien*, 1st ed., 121.

nonetheless continued to argue that they were equally valid. In order to justify this baffling claim, Lessing introduced yet another distinction. In all his philosophical works, he now distinguished between two different viewpoints: the human and the cosmic.⁵⁸

In describing the human viewpoint, Lessing insisted that rational truths should serve as a guide to human action, even for those who grasped reality's illusory nature. He thus exhorted mankind to make *réalité* conform to the ethical laws discovered by reason in the sphere of *vérité*. But even as he insisted on the importance of these rational truths, Lessing, from the cosmic viewpoint, recapitulated his criticisms of *Geist* and his nostalgia for *vitalité*. It is from this perspective that he complained that *Geist*, "born from suffering, is the opponent of life!!"⁵⁹ Expanding on such observations, he consistently used the standard notions and terminology of contemporary vitalist philosophy. Like Klages and Schuler, Lessing, in this mode, rejected contemporary civilization root and branch, instead praising life forces, the superiority of nature, and mythical speculation.

"What is the ultimate objective of life?" Lessing asked. "Not truth, not justice! But rather: dream, abandon, chaos."⁶⁰ In this vein, he emphasized not only that rationality was far from being the ultimate objective of life, but also that it was actively destructive. "For all that is living our human order and all its culture is: *pure madness*."⁶¹ Like other proponents of vitalist philosophy, Lessing even thought that he could deduce historical predictions about the impending downfall of all civilization

⁵⁸ See e.g. Lessing, *Einmal*, 252 and Lessing, *Geschichte*, 4th ed., 94ff.

⁵⁹ Lessing, *Verfluchte Kultur*, 34-35 (original emphasis).

⁶⁰ Theodor Lessing, "Irrende Helden," *Prager Tagblatt*, 11/27/1930.

⁶¹ Lessing, *Meine Tiere*, 124 (original emphasis).

from these thoughts: “a race of educated men, precisely *because of* its knowledge and analytical skill, will no longer be capable of living.”⁶²

In short, the multi-layered confusion spread through Lessing’s work by his unwillingness to choose between the cosmic and the human viewpoint is rather extraordinary. The secondary literature has, as we’ve seen, largely posited recent scholars like Marwedel, who defend Lessing as a rationalist, against older scholars like Lukács, who rejected him out of hand as an anti-rationalist. But, confronted with Lessing’s persistent ambiguity about reason, neither of these interpretations seems adequate. Indeed, a better understanding of his work casts serious doubt on the very idea that the question should have been posed in terms of “rationalism” or “anti-rationalism” in the first place. Ultimately, Lessing’s philosophy failed to take a clear stance, both about reason and about the desirability of contemporary civilization. Hence, the question of reason is only relevant insofar as Lessing’s inability to resolve his ambivalence about it made his philosophy such an eclectic and opaque basis for a theory of political action.

In this context, it is important to note that Lessing always emphasized that his philosophy formed the intellectual foundation for his politics. The human viewpoint, he maintained, was decisive for all practical intents and purposes: the goal of politics was to eradicate all suffering.⁶³ But in fact, even when writing about political topics, Lessing just as often reverted to the cosmic point of view – and from that perspective,

⁶² This quote stems from Lessing’s comments on the work of Carl Gustav Carus. See: Carl Gustav Carus, *Symbolik der menschlichen Gestalt. Ein Handbuch zur Menschenkenntnis. Neu bearbeitet und erweitert von Theodor Lessing*, Theodor Lessing [Ed.], (Celle: Kampmann, 1925), 75 (original emphasis).

⁶³ This is why, in the first edition of *Europa und Asien*, Lessing concluded his exposition of the human viewpoint with a sudden transition towards politics: “so for these reasons do we, too, want politics, nothing other than politics.” See: Lessing, *Europa und Asien*, 1st ed., 124.

of course, he emphasized that all rational civilization should be opposed (including even Lessing's own political stance).⁶⁴ As I shall show in Section III, Lessing therefore perpetuated the deep ambivalence between his two viewpoints in his discussion of politics.

III Lessing's politics

Recent scholarship on Lessing has argued that the supposed turn towards rationality in his philosophy ultimately made him an advocate of all the right political causes: an opponent of World War I; a staunch defender of the Weimar Republic; and of course a mortal enemy of National Socialism. The truth, as I shall argue in this brief, broadly chronological account of his political development, is rather messier.

Lessing's willingness to stand apart from the mainstream of contemporary political opinion did lead him to advocate some courageous, and even some admirable, causes. But, insofar as any red thread can make sense of the highly eclectic jumble of political positions to which he declared his allegiance over the years, it is his deep and lasting ambivalence about whether to accept what he perceived as the rationalism of contemporary civilization, or to reject the political order of his day wholesale. In part for that reason, the lip service Lessing paid to high-minded ideals, like the abolition of all suffering, was all too often belied – sometimes on the very same page – by his ongoing flirtation with *völkisch*, racialist, mysticist, eugenicist and even anti-Semitic ideas. It is, then, hardly surprising that, by the end of his life, Lessing's

⁶⁴ Compare Lessing, *Europa und Asien*, 1st ed., 51.

contemporaries associated him with the enemies of the Weimar Republic as much as with its defenders.

III.1 Europe, Asia & World War I

In his autobiography, *Einmal und nie wieder* (Once and never again), Lessing emphasized that his hostility to contemporary society had been kindled very early in life. On this account, Germany's antiquated educational system, which required him to learn off by heart and then regurgitate what he considered to be useless facts, stood at the root of his intellectual rebellion. By the time he graduated from high school, he had already formed the main tenets of his mature political outlook. (While this is of course an exaggeration, ample evidence of Lessing's early cultural criticism can indeed be found both in poems he wrote as an adolescent in the 1880s,⁶⁵ and in letters to his best school friend – Ludwig Klages.⁶⁶)

As a young man, Lessing's disdain for traditional education drew him to various experiments in alternative pedagogy, and especially the Youth Movement.⁶⁷ Lessing's stance towards the Youth Movement, of which he considered himself a member in the early 1900s, was characteristically ambivalent. He claimed to reject the movement's anti-Semitism, and criticized its leaders for raising young students to hate

⁶⁵ See, among many others, those re-printed in Lessing, *Einmal*, 102-3.

⁶⁶ Elke-Vera Kotowski has devoted a whole book to exploring the relationship between Lessing and Klages. On the content of the surviving letters between them, see Kotowski, *Feindliche Dioskuren*, 115-58. But compare the very different account in Hans Eggert Schröder, *Ludwig Klages. Die Geschichte seines Lebens. Erster Teil: Die Jugend*, (Bonn: H. Bouvier u. Co. Verlag, 1966), 56ff. and 202ff.; as well as Hans Eggert Schröder, *Theodor Lessings autobiographische Schriften. Ein Kommentar*, Bonn: Bouvier, 1970.

⁶⁷ The Youth Movement itself had strong links to vitalist philosophy. See for example Bollnow, Otto Friedrich Bollnow, *Die Lebensphilosophie*, (Berlin: Springer Verlag, 1958), 9.

contemporary urban civilisation even though they would inevitably have to engage with it. But even after he formally broke with the Youth Movement, Lessing continued to speak of its emphasis on the harmony with nature in the most ecstatic terms, and to cast his own critique of contemporary society in strikingly similar vocabulary. What's more, he retained the movement's characteristic belief that Jews differed from Aryans in being the quintessential carriers of *Geist*.⁶⁸ All in all, then, Lessing was deeply influenced by the Youth Movement: this helps to explain, or at least to foreshadow, his receptivity to the *völkisch* and racist modes of argument that he was to endorse until the very end of his life.

The rejection of contemporary European civilization that Lessing shared with the Youth Movement also constituted the principal theme of his first major work: *Europa und Asien* (Europe and Asia), which he wrote in 1914. Most of the book consisted in a kind of panegyric on Asian religion, morality, and customs.⁶⁹ According to Lessing, life in Asia remained instinctive. Indeed, he admired Hinduism precisely because he thought that it embodied a form of anti-rationalism.⁷⁰ In principle, his preference for instinctive Asia over rationalist Europe was therefore clear. And yet, in the last few pages of the book, Lessing maintained that mankind could return “neither to Dionysus, nor to nirvana. And because of this only the *third way, Europe's way*” was a realistic path towards the future. After defending the cosmic viewpoint in the bulk of the book, in other words, Lessing closed with a brief exhortation of the human (or “European”) viewpoint.

⁶⁸ The ascription of *Geist* to Jews is a continual theme of Lessing's writings on Judaism. See for example Lessing, *Jüdischer Selbsthaß*, 33-36 and 76.

⁶⁹ Compare also Lessing, *Philosophie als Tat*, 374-95.

⁷⁰ See for example: Lessing, *Europa und Asien*, 1st ed., 17 – 20, and particularly Lessing's labeling of Hinduism as a “Lebensreligion” (ibid., 17). See also Lessing, *Europa und Asien*, 4th ed., 129 – 42.

Just as, in Lessing's philosophy, his grudging endorsement of *Geist* did not easily translate into a straightforward rejection of vitalist philosophy, however, so too in his politics his ultimate acceptance of the human viewpoint did not entail a distancing from some of the radical right's favored policies, such as eugenics. This is illustrated by the highly eclectic – and, in Lessing's opinion, comprehensive – list of policies which were supposedly needed to instill meaning in human life:

Conscious control of all births on earth. Breeding of all that has been born to achieve the highest fulfillment of all its inherent possibilities. A conscious *ideal*, which should be realized in the fabric and the body of human beings. Breaking with history; breaking with nature – as realms of the allogical, merely coincidental. – Much rather: socialization to closer and closest commune in the interest of both practicality and life. Women's freedom. Support of all sectarian aristocracies as a counterbalance to Europe's future conscious *socialization*. Support of all particularism [*Kleinstaaterei*] and self-government. Finally: conscious annihilation of all irremediably diseased, rotten, criminal, parasitical existences; be it by means of killing them, be it by means of castrating them. Laws governing marriages. Breeding of ever higher intellectual needs and ever deeper refinement of the soul. Struggle against capital and the worshipping of Mammon in every, yes really every practically realizable form. That was, that remains our politics, *European* politics.⁷¹

To add further complexity, Lessing, even in parts of the book in which he claimed to be speaking from the human viewpoint, continued to attack contemporary European civilization. "We as Germans," he wrote towards the end of the first edition of *Europa und Asien*, "will gravely atone for the two great crimes for which we are guilty to mankind: for the inventions of gunpowder and of the printing of books."⁷² As should by now be clear, it is by no means coincidental that Lessing, in these kinds of passages, saw fit to reject printing presses alongside with guns: though these may

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 124-5 (original emphases). There appears to be a deliberate Nietzschean ring to the political measures suggested by Lessing. Also note that Lessing's eugenic program clearly demonstrates that Lawrence Baron – despite providing what is probably the best discussion of Lessing's thought written in English to date – is wrong to suggest that Lessing, unlike Klages, "urged that a reverence for all forms of life be made the basis for reorganising society, (Baron, "Theodor Lessing and Edmund Husserl," 33.)

⁷² *Europa und Asien*, 1st ed., 125.

belong to two radically different categories in the imagination of his most recent interpreters, Lessing evidently considered both an equally ambivalent aspect of rationalist society.

It is this very ambivalence about the modern world that helps to elucidate Lessing's opposition to World War I. Recent commentators have often assumed that Lessing's opposition to the war must have stemmed from his supposed championing of reason – and have thereby overlooked that critics of reason like Ludwig Klages and Stefan George were equally hostile to the war. In truth, a closer reading of the works Lessing wrote in the 1910s reveals that, far from criticizing World War I as a collapse of reason, he actually joined with contemporary vitalist philosophers (as well as some Marxists) in seeing it as the logical consequence of rationalist civilization.

As Lessing explains in the first edition of *Geschichte als Sinngebung des Sinnlosen* (History as Giving Sense to the Senseless), World War I was a product of reason. On this view, it is one of the characteristic features of *Geist* that it allows the demands of instrumental reason to transform all of nature.⁷³ The more *Geist* dominates mankind, the more human beings will use instrumental reason as a tool for subjugating nature to serve their desires.⁷⁴ It is, he argued, because rational man is inescapably caught up in this means-ends logic that he will necessarily wreak havoc throughout the world.⁷⁵ For Lessing, then, politics couldn't be a question of accepting some elements of the contemporary world, like democracy or the notion of rights, even as we reject war. On

⁷³ See for example Lessing, *Europa und Asien*, 1st ed., 34. Compare also Lessing, *Europa und Asien*, 5th ed., 33 and Lessing, *Geschichte*, 4th ed., 59.

⁷⁴ "Was denn auch könnte *Ziel* eines individuell-abgesonderten Lebens sein, wenn nicht die Übermächtigung und Einschlingung alles *anders* gesonderten Lebens?" Lessing, *Europa und Asien*, 5th ed., 32 (original emphasis).

⁷⁵ See for example Lessing, *Europa und Asien*, 1st ed., 126-7, as well as 10-11. Compare also Lessing's later restatement of this position in *Deutschland und seine Juden*, p. 8.

the contrary: just as guns and the printing press pertained to the same category, so too he concluded that war and democracy stood or fell together.

III.2 For or against the Weimar Republic?

The ambivalence about contemporary civilization that shaped Lessing's view of World War I was also formative of his view of the Weimar Republic. The extent to which he criticized Weimar society for divorcing an artificial world of reason from *vitalité* became clear in his writings on Fritz Haarmann, a serial killer who sexually abused and murdered twenty-four boys and young men between 1918 and 1924.⁷⁶ Lessing's coverage of the Haarmann trial attracted controversy because he emphasized the culpability of Hannover's authorities, which had occasionally employed Haarmann as a police spy. Lessing's contention that all of society, not just one individual, was to blame for Haarmann's murders went far beyond accusing the municipal authorities of incompetence or collusion. On his view, the roots of Haarmann's crimes lay in the very nature of a modern society that had created a monster only by adding societal perversion to a naturally unstable character. To symbolize their guilt, Lessing suggested, the inhabitants of Hannover should erect a large tomb for Haarmann in the city's central square. Its inscription was to read: "we all are guilty for this."⁷⁷

Lessing's writings about the Haarmann trial had already made him a *bête noire* for Hannover's establishment. A year later, his article on General von Hindenburg

⁷⁶ See Lessing, *Haarmann*.

⁷⁷ On the Haarmann case, see also Kotowski, *Feindliche Dioskuren*, 29-30.

provoked even greater controversy. Lessing described Hindenburg as a political amateur who “childishly marches, with all the beauty of the blissfully unaware, through seas of blood [and] streams of gall.” He was, Lessing argued, no more than a vacuous representative symbol behind whom a real tyrant might one day emerge.⁷⁸ Published originally in the *Prager Tagblatt*, his article made Lessing the target of fierce nationwide protests upon its re-publication in the *Hannoverscher Kurier*.⁷⁹ Under threat, Lessing was forced to resign from his teaching post at the *Technische Hochschule* Hannover.

Lessing’s criticism of Hindenburg, as well as the sorry events that ensued, are at the root of his fame in the Weimar Republic. As a result, recent scholars have been tempted to portray Lessing’s worries about the future rise of a “real tyrant” as a form of “prophetic” wisdom that emanated from the very center of his political thought. This partially explains how Lessing has come to be perceived as a “democratic” or even “liberal” defender of the Weimar Republic in recent scholarship. But whether Lessing’s attack on Hindenburg, as well as his later criticisms of the National Socialists, made him a defender of the Weimar Republic is a question that needs to be investigated, not an inference that can be assumed without evidence. As it happens, in light of the whole of his oeuvre the answer is clear enough: most of the articles Lessing published in the 1920s and early 1930s were highly critical of the Weimar political system.

“Liberalismus” (Liberalism), an article Lessing published in 1932, is a particularly good example of his less than stellar democratic credentials. At the article’s outset, he

⁷⁸ Lessing, “Hindenburg.”

⁷⁹ Lessing’s article had been published in the *Prager Tagblatt* on 25 April 1925, and was re-published in the *Hannoverscher Kurier* on 7 May.

declared his sympathy for individualism and liberalism.⁸⁰ But he then pronounced both of these to be irrevocably dead. “Human beings being wolves,” Lessing wrote, liberalism and individualism could never survive in practice. “To preach ‘liberalism’ to such a race – or, to take it outside of the bourgeois vocabulary: to preach the absence of rule, free anarchy to them – that would have as much point as to introduce self-government and self-control of the maniacs in a lunatic asylum.”⁸¹

Insofar as liberalism and individualism were viable at all, Lessing concluded, only a rationalist dictatorship could partially resurrect them. “Just one consolation remains: the all-encompassing dictatorship of *Geist*, the complete homogeneity [*Gleichbedingtheit*] of all life, will at the very end again amount to the absolute freedom of every individual, will amount to ‘anarchy.’”⁸² As a result of this reasoning, Lessing now pronounced himself a supporter of more or less any kind of authoritarian regime: “socialism, communism, Bolshevism, rationalism or however else one might call [it].” Indeed, casting authoritarian rule as a necessary evil, Lessing even concluded that “it is completely irrelevant whether this violence emanates from the spirit of fascism or communism.”⁸³

Lessing’s political writings, then, were characterized not only by an ill-defined, self-avowed sympathy with the anti-Weimar left, but also with a persistent rhetorical and ideological affinity with the anti-Weimar right. As a matter of fact, Lessing never

⁸⁰ Theodor Lessing, “Der Liberalismus,” re-printed in: Lessing, *Flaschenpost*, 87-91. Compare also the similarly ambiguous discussion of “Individualismus und Kollektivismus” (Individualism and Collectivism) in Lessing, *Europa und Asien*, 1st ed., 61-68.

⁸¹ Lessing, “Liberalismus.”

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.* Lessing is implicitly referring to Jacob Burckhardt’s dictum: “Jede Macht ist böse,” which he quotes verbatim in Theodor Lessing, “Konservative Tendenzen in der Sozialdemokratie?” re-printed in *Flaschenpost*, 97. Compare also Burckhardt’s argument that power is in and of itself evil in: Jacob Burckhardt, *Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen* J Oeri & E Dürr (Eds.), (Basel: Schwabe, 1978).

denied to what degree his own ideas stood in dialogue with the far right. On the contrary, he repeatedly complained that proponents of vitalist philosophy, including Ludwig Klages and Oswald Spengler, had never acknowledged the great intellectual debt they supposedly owed to his work. And though he maintained that Paul de Lagarde, Heinrich von Treitschke and Houston Stewart Chamberlain had drawn the wrong conclusions from their observations, he insisted that they too had been right about many things.⁸⁴

Lessing's outright racialism is on even more prominent display in his extensive writings about the Jewish question.⁸⁵ In *Der jüdische Selbsthaß* (Jewish Self-Hatred), he expressed an astonishing degree of sympathy for violently anti-Semitic Jews including Arthur Trebitsch and Max Steiner.⁸⁶ More broadly, he emphasized throughout his writings that Jews, as a race, were the natural carriers of reason.⁸⁷ His advice to Jews was therefore a Nietzschean directive: "become who you are."⁸⁸ But Lessing was less than clear about what this might entail. On the one hand, by racially characterizing Jews as the carriers of *Geist*, he seemed to be suggesting that learning was the natural occupation of Jews. But on the other hand, he emphasized that no

⁸⁴ Lessing, *Philosophie als Tat*, 309.

⁸⁵ See especially: Lessing, *Selbsthaß*; but compare also the collection in Lessing, *Schriften gegen den Nationalismus*. For a recent English-language analysis of Lessing's writings about Jewish topics, see: Jacob Golomb, "Jewish Self-hatred: Nietzsche, Freud and the Case of Theodor Lessing," *The Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 50 (1), 2005, 233 – 245.

⁸⁶ For Lessing's discussion of Trebitsch, see *Selbsthaß*, 101-31. For his discussion of Max Steiner see *ibid.*, 132-51. Compare also his discussion of Eugen Dühring in Lessing, *Philosophie als Tat*, 263-302 as well as Lessing, *Europa und Asien*, 1st ed., 109-15.

⁸⁷ In this respect, Lessing juxtaposed Jews to Aryans, whom he saw as naturally adapted to action. See for example Lessing, *Deutschland und seine Juden*, 11. Note that Lessing also invoked this supposed fact to explain what individual Jews were, or were not, capable of achieving. See for example: Lessing, *Selbsthaß*, p. 76.

⁸⁸ See for example Lessing, *Philosophie als Tat*, 310; Lessing, *Selbsthaß*, 41 and Lessing, *Deutschland und seine Juden*, 21. For comparison, see Nietzsche's dictum "Werde der du bist" in Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra. Ein Buch für Alle und Keinen*, 2nd ed., (Leipzig: C. G. Naumann, 1893). The parallel is also pointed out in Golomb, "Jewish Self-Hatred," p. 238 ff.

people would be genuinely distinct from another until it had acquired its own land, and was tilling its own soil.

It is this latter, *völkisch* position which prompted Lessing to call himself a Zionist. On his view, the over-intellectualized Jews of contemporary Germany should return to Palestine to reconnect with the earth: “Shame on all sons who prefer to ‘devote themselves to literature’ or ‘choose to go into academia’ in the service of the luxurious world of Western metropolises instead of carrying stones on the road to Jeruschalajim.”⁸⁹ But if some such lines might resemble more straightforwardly agrarian-Zionist writings, at other moments it is painfully obvious that Lessing had crossed the line towards outright anti-Semitism – such as when he wrote: “And so I think that if ever there was a healthy motivation for the persecution of Jews, then this probably was blood’s instinctual drive against the city and its commerce.”⁹⁰

III.3 Lessing in 1933

Did Lessing’s views change radically in the last years of his life? Some recent scholars have acknowledged that Lessing, in his major works, at times gave in to extreme forms of cultural pessimism, or even flirted with some less than admirable contemporaries. But in the crucial period when the threat of Nazism was most evident, they argue, Lessing turned himself into a staunch defender of democracy. In this vein, Bernward Baule claims that “much indicates that it was also his bitter personal experiences as a Jew in Nazi Germany” which shaped Lessing’s thought in

⁸⁹ Lessing, *Selbsthaß*, 26.

⁹⁰ Lessing, *Deutschland und seine Juden*, 12.

the last years of his life. “This also explains why Lessing, even more so as he grew older than when he had been young, turned *towards Geist* and the human viewpoint.”⁹¹

Since Lessing was murdered in August of 1933, it is difficult to see how his “bitter personal experiences as a Jew in Nazi Germany” could have had an influence on the bulk of his work. But even if we overlook such basic spatio-temporal quibbles, the underlying interpretation is far off the mark. As a matter of fact, in the last important publication to appear before his death, Lessing’s affinity with racialist and *völkisch* discourses remained as painfully evident as it had been all along.

Deutschland und seine Juden (Germany and Her Jews) is of crucial importance in understanding the development of Lessing’s politics – or rather: the lack thereof. In a pamphlet written between March and May 1933, one would expect any defender of the Weimar Republic to attack the National Socialist government in the most unambiguous terms. But even in this last work, Lessing continued to draw on discourses associated with National Socialist ideology.⁹² The lip-service he paid to his opposition to Nazism, for example, is significantly undermined by his affirmation that the National Socialists “announce to the world the well-known teachings about the improvement of peoples [*Volksertüchtigung*] and the breeding of a nobler race. These are my own teachings. I have laid them down again and again in many works.”⁹³

⁹¹ Baule, *Kulturerkenntnis*, 175.

⁹² For Lessing’s criticisms of National Socialism, see for example Lessing’s articles: “Wie es kommen wird,” “Über einen Ausspruch von Doktor Goebbels,” “Die deutsche Universität,” and “Kleines Lexikon fürs Deutsche Reich,” all re-printed in Lessing, *Flaschenpost*. See also Lessing, *Deutschland und seine Juden*, 13.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 15.

Lessing always remained clear on one point: unlike the Nazis, he did not consider the Germanic race to be inherently superior. But his discussions of race are eerily reminiscent of Nazi rhetoric even at moments when he makes it clear that he has stood the “traditional” hierarchy of races on its head:

One of the few certain laws about racial eugenics is the following one: for a lineage whose nature is still uncertain and devoid of over-intellectualization what needs to be avoided is universal mixing (panmixing). For strong races come into being through incest. But, on the reverse, a lineage which already is over-intellectualized, bred to its maximum potential, yes perhaps even over-bred, is in need of being mixed with an equally high and ancient variation which should yet be of different lineage. [...] A mixing of Jews with any random “Aryans” would by no means elevate the Aryans to the racial age of Jews, but rather merely make the acquired racial values of Jews disappear. Indiscriminate mixed race marriages would therefore be detrimental marriages; not for the Germans, but rather for the Jews.⁹⁴

Even though his particular valuations may have diverged from those of many of his contemporaries, then, there is no doubting the central role of *völkisch*, eugenicist and even racist discourse in Lessing’s thought. As he himself avowed, he believed that the “*Reichskanzler*” – Adolf Hitler – had been absolutely right to say that “it is impossible for a human being to be alone. He is always an expression of the community whence he came.” Hitting yet another far-right note, Lessing even connects these thoughts to a critique of capitalism that contains strong verbal echoes of his earlier attacks on contemporary Jews: “there is indeed no doubt that nature and whole peoples will be destroyed to the same extent to which they become creatures shaped by the cities and commerce.”⁹⁵ In light of all this, Lessing avowed months before being murdered by Nazi assassins, he even had a certain amount of sympathy for National Socialism’s radical rejection of the contemporary order: “I too can understand this rebellion of

⁹⁴ Ibid., 15-16.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 12.

nature against *Geist!* For I myself have started it with my two works: *Der Untergang der Erde am Geist* and *Geschichte als Sinngebung des Sinnlosen.*”⁹⁶

Conclusion

Two conclusions seem incontrovertible, then. First, the high praise that has been lavished on Theodor Lessing for the last decades is largely misplaced. Whereas much of the extant literature celebrates Lessing as a philosophical figure of the first rung, or hails him as a prophet, a more sober account of Lessing’s work paints the portrait of a much more contradictory figure. It is possible that some contemporaries may have condemned Lessing for personal, political or even anti-Semitic reasons. But Lessing’s anti-rationalist sympathies, the inconsistencies of his philosophy, and his highly ambiguous political stance provided more than adequate reason for his unpopularity among contemporary defenders of the Weimar Republic. In light of all this, Lessing, rather than being an unexplained genius, now emerges as an explained mediocrity.

Second, the case of Theodor Lessing is as interesting for what it can tell us about the intellectual history of the Federal Republic as it is in deepening our understanding of the Weimar period. It is by now a very familiar story how, after years of silence in the immediate postwar era, a significant part of Germany’s establishment slowly grew determined to face up to the horrors of the Third Reich in an honest manner. Ever since then, the desire for *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* has exerted a strong influence on German intellectual and cultural life; for many decades now, it has also helped to

⁹⁶ Ibid., 11 (original emphasis).

set the agenda for many researchers in fields from history to literature, political science, and beyond.⁹⁷

I do not mean to undermine the importance of this intellectual movement, much less to suggest – as a growing part of the German population, and even some scholars, seem to wish today⁹⁸ – that we should abandon it in favor of a so-called “*Schlussstrich*” (a “finish line” designed to impose a moratorium on serious engagement with Germany’s past). Quite on the contrary: it is beyond doubt that some of the most important contributions to recent intellectual history have been made by German scholars who self-consciously took themselves to be serving the goal of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. But precisely for those of us who do see genuine value in the pursuit of an honest and unflinching account of Germany’s past it is important to have an equally honest and unflinching account of the occasional failings of that research program.

That’s where Lessing’s strange afterlife comes in. All in all, it seems clear that the well-meaning revisionism evident in virtually all recent German publications on Lessing has merely reversed an earlier cultural and political agenda, substituting the unfounded presuppositions that had originally shaped assessments of his thought with equally unfounded ones. In the changed intellectual climate, anti-Semitic passages in Lessing’s work were ignored or deemed inoffensive simply because he was of Jewish descent himself. Similarly, it now seemed preposterous to suggest that someone who was murdered by the Nazi regime might himself have propagated some aspects of

⁹⁷ Of the many books on the state of Germany’s debate about the past, Charles S. Maier: *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust and German National Identity*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), and A. Dirk Moses, *German Intellectuals and the Nazi Past*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) are still among the most relevant.

⁹⁸ XX.

National Socialist ideology. The ultimate result is somewhere between tragic and comic: precisely because they were so determined to atone for the past, some Lessing scholars cheered on at the sidelines as public squares, streets and educational institutions were renamed in honor of a man who considered “blood’s instinctual drive against the city and its commerce” to be a “healthy motivation for the persecution of Jews.”

Writing about broader trends in the German study of intellectual history, A. Dirk Moses has recently argued that the state of the German historiography is slowly changing.⁹⁹ While the telos of all explanation had once been 1933, it is now starting to be “1949 and beyond.”¹⁰⁰ In part as a result, Moses argues, a new “generation of German historians has been able to distance itself from the cultural civil war” waged between “‘45ers’ and the ‘68ers.”¹⁰¹ On this view, then, the long-standing debate about what the role of the past should be in Germany’s present is becoming less ideological, even as German historians are carving out new spaces to continue appreciating the significant contribution of German Jews to the cultural life of both the Weimar and the Federal Republic. It remains to be seen whether Moses’ optimism will be borne out. What is already clear, however, is quite how deeply the cultural civil war he references has deformed a whole host of historical debates – not only the more obvious ones, like those that gave rise to the *Historikerstreit*, but even comparatively peripheral ones, like Theodor Lessing’s unlikely revival.

⁹⁹ A. Dirk Moses, “Forum: Intellectual History In and Of the Federal Republic of Germany,” *Modern Intellectual History* 9 (3), 2012, 625-39.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 635.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 636.