

[2] Faculty Proposals

Sammy Basu: *Heroic Laughter and Nazi Ethics*

Does democracy need citizens whose heroism consists in having a sense of humor? My ongoing research (for a projected book) is on the communicative possibilities and perils of political humor during the Weimar Republic and Nazi Third Reich. It proceeds along two tracks. First, I argue that certain Weimar liberals, social democrats, and further left activists exhibited and used a humorous sensibility both to demystify and level various nationalist and authoritarian cultural pathologies [See image 1] but also, and perhaps more importantly, to articulate a positive vision of an inclusively pluralistic democratic polity (Canning et al, 2010; Grange, 2008; Schumann, 2009) [See image 2]. My larger claim here is that democracy actually needs enough of its citizens to have a sense of humor so that they can tolerate and even appreciate their own contingent place within the recurring absurdities of mutual difference. Second, I have discovered that the Nazis cultivated a quite specific sense of humor, one predicated on their racial *Weltanschauung* (worldview) and attendant ethics. In brief, drawing on Catholic and Protestant sources, Kant, and neo-paganism, as well as developments within evolutionary and eugenic sciences (Baumgardt, 1947; Weikart, 2009), the Nazis converted evil (inhumane acts) into virtue (deemed right) through a process of racial fundamentalism, differentiation, struggle, and power positivism, culminating with celebration (Koonz, 2005; Lambert, 2007; Lindenfeld, 1997; Reicher et al., 2008; Roche, 1992). Humor figures here as an outcome of injunctions to do one's racial duty by manifesting and celebrating racial superiority in two respects: the strenuous struggle against and repudiation of the mockery of Aryan Germany (as well as of Hitler, Nazism, etc), and the active differentiation from and mockery of one's domestic and foreign racial inferiors. The

former is epitomized in the Nazi rhetorical preoccupation with Jewish laughter (allegedly always against the Aryans) [See image 3], and the latter, as the collective heroic effort to make the Jews and other aliens look ridiculous, and thereby have the last laugh, through activities including the Degenerate Art Show (1937), films such as *The Eternal Jew* (1939), victory in war [See image 4], and ultimately, the Concentration Camps.

In this LARC project I will be continuing to refine my analysis of the relationship of German humor (Brandt, 2005) to liberal-democratic and authoritarian political thinking and ethics. I am especially keen to distinguish the laughing citizen from the laughing soldier (Grady, 2008; Verhey, 2000), i.e., the liberal-democratic model of heroic and pleasurable citizenship that Weimar theorists were attempting to articulate from the hierarchical conception of belligerent yet gratifying decisionism affirmed by the Nazis in the form of the *Führerprinzip* (leadership-principle). In the opening pages of *Lingua Tertii Imperii* (1947, *The language of the Third Reich*), on 'Heroism (Instead of an Introduction),' Victor Klemperer points appositely and acutely to just this contrast between real heroism (*Heroismus*) and romanticized hero-worship (*Heldentum*).

The primary materials in the projects of my two student associates, chosen in consultation with me, will also figure as exemplars in my LARC research. That is, I intend to read and locate them within the two argumentative tracks identified above. Happily, their thematic approaches overlap with mine, while also taking the material in new directions. Katie has taken two political philosophy courses with me, including my course on Democracy and Nazism, and Jon took a political philosophy class with me and subsequent ones with Prof. Duvall. Both have distinguished themselves. Hence, I am confident about their abilities and excited about the opportunity to work with them in more sustained and intensive ways.

1.



2.



3.



4.



References

Baumgardt, David. 1947. 'Rationalism and the Philosophy of Despair: Pre-Nazi German Ethics, 1913-1933.' *The Sewanee Review* 55.2: 223-237.

Brandt, Bettina. 2005. 'German Comedy,' in *Comedy: A Geographic and Historical Guide. Volume II.* (Ed.) Maurice Charney. Westport, CT: Praeger, 350-360.

Canning, Kathleen and Kerstin Barndt, Kristin McGuire. (Eds.) 2010. *Weimar Publics/Weimar Subjects: Rethinking the Political Culture of Germany in the 1920s.* Berghahn Books.

Grady, Tim. 2008. 'Laughing about death? : "German humor" in the two world wars,' in *Between mass death and individual loss: the place of the dead in twentieth-century Germany.* (Eds.) Confino, Alon, Paul Betts, and Dirk Schumann. New York: Berghahn Books.

Grange, William. 2008. *Cultural Chronicle of the Weimar Republic.* Scarecrow Press.

Koonz, Claudia. 2005. *The Nazi Conscience.* Cambridge: Belknap.

Lambert, Peter. 2007. 'Heroisation and Demonisation in the Third Reich: The Consensus-building Value of a Nazi Pantheon of Heroes.' *Totalitarian Movements & Political Religions*, 8.3/4: 523-546.

Lindenfeld, David F. 1997. 'The Prevalence of Irrational Thinking in the Third Reich: Notes toward the Reconstruction of Modern Value Rationality.' *Central European History*, 30.3:365-385.

George Mosse. 2003. *Nazi Culture: Intellectual, Cultural, and Social Life in the Third Reich.* Madison: U of Wisconsin P.

Reicher, Stephen and S. Alexander Haslam, Rakshi Rath. 2008. 'Making a Virtue of Evil: A Five-Step Social Identity Model of the Development of Collective Hate.' *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 2.3:1313-1344.

Roche, Mark W. 1992. 'National Socialism and the disintegration of values: Reflections on Nietzsche, Rosenberg, and Broch.' *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 26: 367-380.

Schumann, Dirk. 2009. *Political Violence in the Weimar Republic, 1918-1933: Fight for the Streets and Fear of Civil War.* Berghahn Books.

Verhey, Jeffrey. 2000. *The Spirit of 1914: Militarism, Myth, and Mobilization in Germany.* NY: Cambridge UP.

Weikart, Richard. 2009. *Hitler's Ethic: The Nazi Pursuit of Evolutionary Progress.* Palgrave Macmillan.