The Good Person of Germany as a Post-Unification Discursive Phenomenon

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“There must be something wrong with your world. Why
is wickedness so richly rewarded and why does such hard
punishment
Await the good?”

Shen Teh in Bertolt Brecht’s *The Good Person of Szechwan*¹

“The German, when he wants to be political,
believes that he has to throw all morality
and humanity out the window.”

Thomas Mann²

Among the most remarkable ideological developments in Germany since unification has been the emergence of a powerful and explicit argument against public morality. The good is the bad, goes this argument, and an excessive concern for morality is to be denounced. The argument rejects the good on both aesthetic and political grounds. In a country that once championed the Enlightenment unity of the good, the true, and the beautiful, and that is viewed at home and abroad as center of the twentieth century’s incarnation of absolute evil—Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party—, this explicit rejection of morality deserves attention and explanation. In what follows, I explore the roots of the critique, examine two instantiations of public debate on the subject, and attempt to draw preliminary conclusions about the meaning of the critique itself.

The roots of this discourse extend well beyond unification, of course. In German intellectual history, the critique of goodness can be traced at least as far back as Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals*; and in the twentieth century, it has acquired leftist legitimacy from the Marxist analysis of volunteerism and individual charity as deceptively affirmative pillars of an inhumane capitalist system. Such a critique acquired the power of literary imagination in Bertolt Brecht’s *Saint Joan of the Stockyards* and *The Good
Person of Szechwan. It is further supported by Theodor W. Adorno’s belief that in a capitalist, totally administered world, individual goodness is not possible, most famously articulated in Adorno’s declaration in *Minima Moralia* that there can be no truth in the midst of falsehood.3

Among contemporary German conservatives, the critique of moralism can be traced at least as far back as Arnold Gehlen’s 1969 critique of West German do-gooders, *Moral und Hypermoral*.4 The father of the more recent German discourse against goodness, however, is literary scholar Karl Heinz Bohrer, professor at the University of Bielefeld and editor of the influential journal *Merkur*, which identifies itself as a “German journal for European thought” (“*deutsche Zeitschrift für europäisches Denken*”). Because of his profound influence on contemporary aesthetic and political discourse in Germany, Bohrer and his critique of German public morality, developed during the late 1970s and 1980s, deserve serious exploration.

At the core of Bohrer’s aesthetic theory is the concept that what is morally good and what is aesthetically pleasing, far from forming an enlightened unity, directly contradict and negate each other. What is aesthetically pleasing is precisely not that which is good: on the contrary, evil and terror are aesthetically pleasing. Only in moments of terror and pain can the individual achieve the timeless, ahistorical, pure, self-negating contemplation of what Bohrer refers to as “the absolute present” of the aesthetic experience.5 This, for Bohrer, is the reason for the aesthetic triumph of Baudelaire’s *Flowers of Evil* and Flaubert’s *Salambo*. In celebrating evil, such works are also declaring the independence of the beautiful from the good and, hence, the triumph of aesthetics over morality.

Bohrer claims categorically that “the imagination of evil [is] the basis of a poetics of modernity.”6 According to him, novelist Ernst Jünger’s work of the 1920s is directly influenced by this tradition of aestheticism and decadence. As part of this European tradition, Jünger stands in stark contrast to what Bohrer sees as the dominant current of German aesthetic and moral thinking, which he characterizes as a relentlessly Protestant “permanent theodicy”: the justification of God’s ways to man via a celebration of the good and repression of any knowledge of the reality of evil.7 The dominance of this “permanent theodicy” in modern German culture is particularly evident in literature, Bohrer believes. He writes that the “characteristic symptom” of “the spiritual provincialization of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG)” is “the moralization of literature and literary theory.”8
German literature has been unwilling to address or even accept the problem of evil, Bohrer argues. "That German literature, with the exception of E. T. A. Hoffmann and several writers of the late Enlightenment, does not take part in this discourse of evil, is connected to the idealist repression..."

Bohrer’s critique of what he sees as German philosophical and aesthetic Pollyannas at times takes on the contours of Voltaire’s famous parody of the philosopher Leibnitz in Candide: the educated buffoon Pangloss who teaches “metaphysico-theologo-cosmolonigology” and insists that this is “the best of all possible worlds.”

The German Protestant and idealist tradition, Bohrer claims, has created a fateful German aesthetic Sonderweg (special path; unique development) in which German art and literature have been unable to participate in the “normal” European separation and differentiation between the good and the beautiful—a separation successfully completed, Bohrer claims, in France and England.

Bohrer argues that Hitler’s dictatorship and the German crimes against humanity associated with it have served only to strengthen and perpetuate the “permanent theodicy,” making evil and the aesthetic independence that evil guarantees an ongoing German taboo. The critic writes that “the entrance of real evil, National Socialism... created a situation in which the theodicy taken over from the eighteenth century was, so to speak, doubled: in the face of real evil, imaginary evil was made into a taboo.” Even worse, “real evil, fascism, created such favorable conditions for this strange dialectic that, since 1945, the long established taboo on literary evil has almost necessarily become the German method.”

According to Bohrer, the German “permanent theodicy” has prevented aesthetic modernism from ever fully establishing itself east of the Rhine, and this cultural Sonderweg has had consequences that reach beyond the aesthetic to the political. The negation of evil in Germany, he writes, “had general consequences for moral-spiritual consciousness that went beyond the aesthetic realm, with the result that German modernity, both between the world wars and after World War II, was never completely perfected.”

It is here that Bohrer’s literary and aesthetic criticism becomes politically relevant. In the political as in the aesthetic realm, Bohrer asserts, the taboo on evil has caused Germans to take on a self-righteous Protestant tone, making them unwilling to face difficult and disturbing questions of violence and evil. Instead, the pietistic quietism of German Innerlichkeit (interiority) has triumphed, rendering a genuine politics virtually impossible because all conflict, the stuff of politics, is avoided. Public debates are pri-
vativized, and the political is transformed into the moral. Germany today, Bohrer claims, is a "new civilization" in which "simplicity of the heart [is] the highest value." This "new civilization" is characterized by "a new state symbolism" of the "post-fascist era" in which Alexander and Margarethe Mitscherlich's renowned Unfähigkeit zu trauern (Inability to Mourn) is replaced by the "concerned visage of innocence that invented the word 'betroffen' [personally affected, emotionally implicated, moved]."

With its triadic roots in Nietzschean historical relativism, Marxist critique of ideology, and modernist aestheticism, Bohrer's critique of the good has exerted considerable influence both directly and indirectly on German debates since the opening of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, and it continues to play an important role in contemporary political and aesthetic discourse. The influence of this critique of morality is probably unique in the world today: it is doubtful that a theoretically justified attack on goodness could have such success anywhere else. It is, I suspect, another German anomaly, perhaps the logical contemporary version of the same kind of anti-idealistic impulse that created the concept of Realpolitik in the nineteenth century and real-existing socialism in the twentieth: the reverse side of the coin of German Panglossian idealism.

In a speech to the Library of Congress in 1943, Thomas Mann astutely noted that precisely because the German spirit was so fundamentally unpolitical, it misunderstood politics "as a world of absolute cynicism and Machiavellianism." The contemporary critique of morality in Germany strikes me as closely connected to this German tradition. Because the critique is so pervasive, I will focus my analysis on two crucial moments: the aesthetic demolition of goodness that emerged with the so-called Literaturstreit (literature debate) of 1990; and the critique of the peace movement that emerged shortly thereafter, during the 1991 Persian Gulf War. Finally, I will explore the basic contours of the critique of goodness as manifested in a number of recent books and articles on the subject. I contend that the two debates I analyze are stages in a discursive rejection of conventional notions of goodness and morality and, further, that this rejection is explicitly intended as part of a purported "normalization" of German aesthetic and political discourse.

The Literaturstreit of 1990 directly followed the publication of Christa Wolf's short prose work Was bleibt (What Remains). This Literaturstreit has been described exhaustively elsewhere, and hence there is no need here to analyze in detail the debate itself, large portions of which are
irrelevant to the argument at hand. Ultimately the debate revolved around the central question of the relationship between literature and morality, and it is this question that becomes important for my argument.

In his 1980s critique of German literature, Bohrer had written that West German authors “have all for decades been writing morally and politically engaged novels and stories whose function lies above all in a very specific, albeit metaphorically hidden, but nevertheless immediately recognizable form of secular uplift.” Bohrer was suggesting that postwar West German literature’s attempt to come to terms with the Nazi past—its Vergangenheitsbewältigung—had played a crucial role in the formation of public and private morality in the Federal Republic. In the 1990 Literaturstreit, Bohrer’s generalized critique of West German literature was, in the first instance, applied specifically to Christa Wolf’s antifascist and feminist œuvre as an example of excessive and sentimental moralism, and, in the second instance, broadened to include the entirety of Bohrer’s original target: postwar German literature in general, both East and West.

In Frank Schirrmacher’s critique of Wolf’s privatism and inwardness, it was easy to recognize the outlines of Bohrer’s earlier critique of the “permanent theodicy” of German Protestant morality. Schirrmacher, literary critic for the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, wrote that “like many other intellectuals of her generation, Christa Wolf has built up a familiar, almost intimate relationship with her state and its institutions,” and he criticized this privatization of politics as “family relationships from the beginning.” Even in his review of Wolf’s Was bleibt, Schirrmacher made it clear that he viewed Wolf more as a representative of her entire generation of postwar German writers than as an individual phenomenon. He argued that as a result of the collapse of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), “beloved legends of West German identity have also been destroyed.” Schirrmacher saw particular damage done to “the postwar legend of many German writers, artists, and scholars” that it would be possible, in the wake of the Nazi dictatorship, to create via their work “a stable, anti-authoritarian, critical consciousness” that would “prove itself in a time of need.” For Schirrmacher, the case of Wolf was “exemplary” for all of German postwar intellectual life, which was, as he saw it, governed by a profoundly moralistic antifascism.

That the criticism of Wolf’s work was intended as a more general attack on morality in literature was shown even more clearly in an article Schirrmacher published in October 1990 to coincide both with that year’s
Frankfurt book fair and with German unification on October 3. Entitled "Abschied von der Literatur der Bundesrepublik" ("Farewell to the Literature of the Federal Republic"), the article was a generalized attack on postwar West German literature and culture, criticizing what Schirrmacher saw as excessive political engagement and moralism.  

In an even more pointed attack on literary morality, Ulrich Greiner, cultural correspondent for the weekly newspaper Die Zeit, argued that "the really interesting debate that sheds light on the case of Christa Wolf concerns the connection between aesthetics and morality." Greiner argued "that from the beginning the literature of the Federal Republic suffered under an excessive weight of morality, which it was not allowed to throw off."

Referring specifically to Bohrer's arguments for aesthetic autonomy, Greiner borrowed and refashioned Max Weber's concept of a Gesinnungsethik (ethics of conviction), describing postwar German literature as a Gesinnungsästhetik, that is, an aesthetics of conviction overburdened and coarsened by moral and political engagement. "The aesthetics of conviction," Greiner claimed, "is the common component shared by the literatures of the FRG and the GDR, which have now fortunately met their ends. Fortunately: because writers in the two German halves were far too immersed in nonliterary themes, in the fight against restoration, fascism, clericalism, Stalinism, and so forth." Both Greiner's and Schirrmacher's arguments were predicated on the belief that literary morality had been what Schirrmacher grandly called a "production site of West German identity."

Bohrer himself took part in the debate by publishing, in the October/November 1990 issue of Merkur, an article entitled "Die Ästhetik am Ausgang ihrer Ummündigkeit" ("Aesthetics at the End of its Voicelessness"). In this article, Bohrer reaffirmed his commitment to aesthetic autonomy, declaring that the history of Western art had been the history of ever-increasing independence from the dictates of the non-aesthetic, especially the moral. In an implicit reference to Kant's famous definition of Enlightenment as "der Ausgang des Menschen aus seiner selbstverschuldeten Unmündigkeit" ("man's exit from the voicelessness he caused himself"), Bohrer suggested that the moment of emancipation had now arrived for art, which could go about its own intrinsic aesthetic concerns unencumbered by the authority of other considerations. Going one step further, Bohrer declared that in the postmodern, post-unification world, aesthetics as the absolute opponent of the moral had become the primary category of human—and
hence of political—existence.26

The debate about Christa Wolf and the relationship between aesthetics and morality aroused tremendous public interest in Germany, where authors have long been accorded, even by critics such as Schirrmacher, a political and moral status unthinkable in the United States, although by no means unheard of in France or Russia. It would probably not be an exaggeration to assert that during the year of German unification, 1990, the debate about literature and politics overshadowed all other intellectual debates, even those more specifically concerned with the modus operandi of unification itself.

This is probably because the debate about aesthetics and morality implicitly concerned the future of the united Germany by explicitly declaring the literature of the old Federal Republic and the old GDR to be dead and buried. The future of a united Germany, Bohrer and others seemed to imply, would, in direct contrast to the old, abnormal, divided, overly moralistic Germany be strong, modern, unified, amoral, and—therefore—normal. If literature was a “production site” of national identity, then a change in literature implied a change in national identity. In this way, a debate that appeared to focus exclusively on literary problems in fact touched central questions of German identity and self-understanding. That the critique of moralism had implications beyond the purely literary was demonstrated clearly by the 1991 debate about the Persian Gulf War.

To bring the Christa Wolf debate into close conjunction with the debate about the Gulf War may seem inappropriate, but it is my contention that underlying both debates was an explicit critique of pre-1989 German public morality. That the German debate about the Gulf War would move in this direction was not immediately apparent from the outset, but I believe that in hindsight it becomes clear.

While the beginning of the Gulf War came as no surprise for most of the world, it caused a major shock in the newly unified Germany. On August 2, 1990, when Iraqi troops had invaded Kuwait, the German Democratic Republic and the Federal Republic of Germany were still legally two sovereign, independent states. The treaty that was to bring about official legal unification two months later, on October 3, had not even been completed, let alone ratified yet.

One month previously, on July 1, the GDR had, from one day to the next,
eliminated its own currency and accepted the Deutschmark as legal tender for all transactions. The two Germanys were racked by a multitude of scandals and controversies, ranging from the aforementioned *Literaturstreit*, through the discovery during the summer that the GDR had been harboring Red Army terrorists for many years, to persistent accusations that the GDR's first and only freely elected Prime Minister, Lothar de Maizière of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), had, in the not-too-distant past, been a Stasi informer.

The months of July and August, moreover, were filled with electoral maneuvering and tactics by all the major political parties preparing for the upcoming October 14 elections in what would soon be called “the five new states” and the nationwide parliamentary elections to be held on December 2. This maneuvering consisted mainly of a seemingly endless debate about the precise timing of unification with respect to the elections themselves.

It is no wonder, given the rapid and confusing pace of events in Germany during summer and fall 1990, that German public opinion was slow to pick up on the seriousness of the situation in the Persian Gulf. The weekly newsmagazine *Der Spiegel* put it with characteristic verve: “The united German examination of our navel caused the crisis in the Gulf to appear secondary.”27 The debate that then emerged in Germany about the Gulf War represented the external side of what, internally, was the renewed debate about the possibility of German “normality” in the wake of unification. The normalizers argued for unhesitating German participation in the war itself on the side of the U.S.-led international coalition, while their opponents criticized not only the war itself but any attempt to suggest that German troops might in the future be used for other than narrowly limited defensive purposes.

At first glance, the debate about the Gulf War would seem to have been anything but an overt rejection of public morality. On the contrary, the heated debates about the war explicitly touched central questions of political morality. As Detlev Claussen has noted in a perceptive critique, in non-combatant Germany, “people took positions for or against the war with greater emotionality than in the combatant countries of the West.”28 The heated nature of these debates was in large part due to the intensely moral nature of the problems connected with the war.

Three factors made the debate about the war particularly bitter inside
Germany. The first was that many of the American soldiers being sent to
the Persian Gulf, originally stationed in Germany itself as a front line of
defense against a possible Soviet invasion, had now become available for
duty in the new war because of the end of the (C)old one. The second and
probably most important factor was that one of the background players
in the Gulf War was the state of Israel, which became subject to Iraqi SCUD
missile attacks shortly after the outbreak of the allied bombing campaign.
The third was that Iraq had acquired some of its potential chemical weap-
ons capability with the help of German companies. As the leftist critic
Klaus Bittermann put it in a typically polemical tirade that brought to-
gether the last two factors, “who among the survivors of Auschwitz who
fled to Israel could have dreamed before 1945 that they would have to
return to Germany because they were threatened in Israel by German
poison gas?”29

For both normalizers and their opponents, the implied participation of
Israel, a state whose founding was directly associated with the German
perpetration of the Holocaust, brought the questions of historical respon-
sibility always implicit in German political debates about war and peace
explicitly into public debate. At a fundamental level, these were moral
issues involving the relationship of the German past to the German pre-
sent and the problem of learning moral and political lessons from history.

The debate was aggravated further by the fact that Iraqi leader Saddam
Hussein was being compared in the world press to precisely the German
leader whom both political camps in Germany claimed as their negative
model: Adolf Hitler. The most celebrated such comparison was a promi-
nent essay by Hans Magnus Enzensberger in Der Spiegel, “Hitlers Wiedergänger” (“Hitler’s Revenants”) in which Enzensberger not only defended
a direct comparison between Hitler and Saddam Hussein but suggested
that Hussein was a kind of reincarnation of Hitler.30 This explosive mix-
ture of internal and external political considerations overdetermined the
frenzied German reaction to the outbreak of the Allied bombing cam-
paign against Iraq in mid-January of 1991 and intensified the potential
moral implications of the pro-war or the antiwar position.

On the antiwar (“abnormal”) side, the beginning of allied bombing caused
a spontaneous outburst of peace demonstrations the likes of which had
not been seen in Germany since the early 1980s during the debate about
the stationing of U.S. cruise and Pershing II missiles on German soil.
Unlike the earlier demonstrations, however, these new demonstrations
were led not by the political generation of 1968—the Greens and various leftist and citizens' activist groups—but by the ordinary German high school and university students who had been labeled apolitical and materialist, even politically conservative, by the earlier generation only a short time before.  

As Der Spiegel reported in the first issue after the outbreak of hostilities in the early morning hours of January 16, 1991, "Since the end of the UN ultimatum on Wednesday of last week it has been mostly young and very young people demonstrating against the machinery of war in the Middle East." In the midst of massive spontaneous demonstrations against the war, the western German political elite disappeared for a week: Chancellor Kohl and Foreign Minister Genscher had nothing to say about the Gulf War, while Hans Jochen Vogel, the leader of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), contented himself with vague declarations of horror. The Gulf War did not fit into any of the politicians' plans; it was an unpleasant, irritating occurrence, the malignant outbreak of a history that even a prominent American intellectual had only recently declared definitively over.

Since it was spearheaded by teenagers, not by intellectuals, resistance to the Gulf War in Germany was largely inarticulate. It rested not on arguments or on rational reasoning but on spontaneous, visceral rejection of the very idea of war by the younger generation: on a profound, instinctive pacifism. As Der Spiegel opined, "The lesson from the Nazi era, [the lesson] that war—especially for Germans—can no longer be a political tool, by now sits deeper than many politicians would like." The implication of this sentence was that the moral lesson learned by German youth from the nation's bitter past had been all too absolute, rendering contemporary Germany incapable of behaving in the "normal" way of a great European power. That German youth were indeed strongly influenced by pacifism became clear in the midst of the Gulf War itself. In January 1991, over twenty-two thousand young German men, required by law to serve in the armed forces, either refused to join the military or requested to be released from military service, a rise in resistance of 300 percent over the previous year in western Germany alone. "Never has there been so much pacifism," commented Der Spiegel in a cover story that featured tough-looking German soldiers and the pointed question: "Are the Germans shirkers (Drückeberger)?"

The reaction to the speechlessness of both the German government and
the German peace movement was quick to come. Unlike previous debates, in which most German intellectuals had taken the "abnormal" position, intellectuals in Germany tended to take the "normal" position in the Gulf War debate, strongly supporting German participation in the war effort along with the Western allies. Immediately after the beginning of the bombing campaign a series of articles and essays, written mostly by leftists and former leftists, began appearing in Germany's leading public opinion organs supporting the war in the Gulf and criticizing its opponents along familiar lines: Bittermann called them "the unbearably good persons of the peace movement." Bittermann's formulation elicited all the connotations of the critique of goodness developed during the Wolf debate and in Bohrer's critical demolition of aesthetic and political moralism. The most important aspect of the debate about the Gulf War for my purposes is precisely this critique: my concern is not so much the fact of support for or opposition to the war itself as the surprisingly unanimous way in which all parties to the debate in Germany viewed the Gulf War in the cynical terms of a power politics unleavened by moral concern.

Most striking about the arguments of Bittermann and others in favor of the war was their willingness, indeed eagerness to accept the peace movement's entirely negative interpretation of the war's justification. In their arguments, the war's German supporters rarely addressed the declared ethical justification for the war itself: Iraq's open violation of international law by invading and annexing Kuwait. The omission was striking, since it was precisely this justification that had led to the United Nations ultimatum against Iraq in the first place. The invasion of a sovereign country recognized by the international community is a serious breach of international law, and Iraq's invasion of Kuwait was treated as such by both the United Nations and the members of the anti-Iraq coalition that ultimately liberated Kuwait.

However in Germany the defense of international law was discounted by both supporters and opponents of the war as mere ideological sleight of hand, and instead the materialistic motivation of securing oil supplies was eagerly accepted by all parties to the debate as the dominant factor in triggering U.S. and allied involvement. Instead of seeking to refute the peace movement's inarticulate claims that the Gulf War was an immoral and greedy power grab on the part of the imperialist West, the war's German supporters actually accepted and even celebrated the perceived immorality and greed of the West as normal and desirable. That this extraordinary rhetoric was not only possible but actually gained widespread
acceptance and approval was, I claim, the result of the critique of moralism that had already been well developed by Bohrer and the participants in the Literaturstreit.

One of the war’s most prominent supporters in Germany was Wolf Biermann, the singer-songwriter and socialist dissident who had chosen to live in the GDR only to be denied re-entry into the country after a 1976 concert in Cologne. Biermann had been an important figure in the anti-Vietnam War movement of the 1960s and 1970s and the peace movement of the early 1980s. During the Persian Gulf War, however, he became a “realist” and supported the war enthusiastically. In criticizing what he saw as the “naïveté” of the peace movement’s purely moralist stance, Biermann nevertheless accepted his opponents’ negative view of American interests. He acknowledged the primacy of oil in American geostrategic thinking and even went so far as to suggest that the Gulf War was, in addition, a diabolical conspiracy on the part of the Pentagon and the American arms industry, which he believed was “hankering... for a chance to try out its weapons” and desperate to prove that “trillions of dollars of tax money” had not simply been “thrown away.” As Biermann argued, “the lucrative East-West conflict has been spoiled for” the American military-industrial complex, “but the stockholders of the war industry want the arms race to continue nevertheless.”

This was as negative a view of the war’s motivation as any member of the German peace movement could hope for. In complete agreement with the war’s German critics, Biermann frankly acknowledged that the United States was governed by “the worst kinds of motives.” It was only at this point in his argument that Biermann’s reasoning differed from that of his opponents in the peace movement. In a remarkable rhetorical move that was to become commonplace for German supporters of the war, Biermann, far from condemning the “worst kinds of motives,” actually celebrated the cold-heartedness of Realpolitik and criticized the empty impotence of mere moral principle: “If it were a question of the holy principles of humaneness, of freedom and democracy, then President Bush would not let his boys fight.”

Biermann suggested that the United States cared nothing for human suffering, for the “genocide of the Kurds,” or for “Saddam’s terrorization of his own people,” because, as he claimed, “the U.S. has already had so many unhappy fascist love affairs all over the world.” In a world of brutal Realpolitik, Biermann declared, “I am happy that there are such reliably evil
motivations." Mere moral principle, by implication, was neither a reliable nor a credible motivation for war. What mattered was greed.

It was not so much Biermann's support for the war that made his argument unusual and troubling. Rather, what was unusual and what separated German "bellicists"—as supporters of the Gulf War came to be known in Germany—from their counterparts in other countries was their open rejection of and scorn for the ideas of international law and morality.

Although less one-sided rhetorically, Klaus Bittermann argued along essentially similar lines when he argued that a Realpolitik of transparent material interest was preferable to a purely moral justification of war, because it allowed for a rational calculation of national self-interest, whereas morality ran the risk of culminating "in a call for 'holy war'." While Biermann had viewed morality as unreliable, Bittermann criticized it for being incalculably dangerous. But both were in agreement that moral principle was an insufficient motivation for war.

Journalist Cora Stephan went one step further in the condemnation of a supposedly dangerous morality by rhetorically connecting moral principle with the unhappy German past and, therefore, Nazism and racism, while suggesting that materialism was a tried-and-true principle of western capitalist democracy.

Castigating a Germany in which, as she claimed, material self-interest was viewed in entirely negative terms, Stephan defended Realpolitik as "a legitimate interest," while arguing that the moralist claims of the peace movement and the peace movement's critique of cold-blooded Realpolitik were strikingly similar to the self-righteous moralism of the German nationalist propagandists of World War I, who had condemned the materialist "society" of the West while celebrating the idealist "community" of Germany. "Even our forefathers couldn't stand the British 'shopkeeper souls'," declared Stephan, implying that the peace movement, in its moralistic condemnation of the war, was coming dangerously close to the Germanic self-righteousness of the unhappy past.

The peace movement's popular slogan "No Blood for Oil" also had ominously racist undertones for Stephan, since it bore, in her opinion, an uncanny resemblance to Nazi slogans of "Blut und Boden" ("Blood and Soil"). The peculiar logic of Stephan's argument was that in the nationalist past Germans had strayed from the path of Western normality by becoming overly moralistic and idealistic, and that they were now once again in
danger of going down that same well-intentioned but infernal path. It is
difficult to imagine that any significant number of English or Americans
could be brought to agree with Stephan that Germany's primary problem
during World Wars I and II was an overly strict adherence to moral prin-
ciple. Nevertheless, this was the peculiar logic of her argument.

Also striking about Stephan's and other bellicists' criticism of the "No
Blood for Oil" slogan was their apparent unawareness of the fact that the
slogan had originated with the peace movement in the United States. None
of the participants seemed to be aware of the U.S. origin of the supposedly
anti-American slogan, which demonstrated clearly that the debate was less
about foreign policy or the actual international justification for the Gulf
War than about the participants' vision of a unified Germany on the road
to a recently reclaimed "normality." As Russell Berman has aptly observed,
"in Germany the discussion slid quickly into a debate over the character
of the newly unified state." 40

The pinnacle of rhetorical celebration of cynical Realpolitik came, not
surprisingly, from Karl Heinz Bohrer. As always the intellectual leader of
the German "normalizers," Bohrer wrote in the March issue of Merkur to
celebrate what he believed to be the "political motivations of the war
leaders of the West:"

It is only among the Anglo-Saxons that one can still find an unproblem-
atic acceptance of the horror scenario (an acceptance that already al-
lowed them in 1944 to erase Dresden and later Hiroshima almost with-
out moral scruples). As the lords of the history of the twentieth century,
they have not developed a consciousness of pain and guilt, just as a
person who feels himself subjectively to be healthy does not go to a
psychiatrist.41

This is strong stuff. It is striking that in an explicitly pro-American article
Bohrer here implicitly accepts an anti-American picture of the United
States as a country "almost without moral scruples" and without "a
consciousness of pain and guilt." For him as for other bellicists, the
negative critique of the war by the German peace movement, rather than
being questioned factually—as it certainly could have been and was in
other countries—was simply turned positive. Remorselessness and lack
of principle were declared to be good rather than bad: they were the
praiseworthy qualities of the "lords of the history of the twentieth
century." Implicitly, guilt and remorse and moral scruple were therefore
bad; and, again implicitly, Germany was characterized by an excess of
such deleterious morality.

Bohrer—who like so many other German participants in an extraordinarily parochial debate about an international event, was evidently unaware of the antiwar movement in the purportedly normal United States, England, and France—seemed to suggest that Germans needed to stop having a guilty conscience about World War II and the Holocaust. They needed to learn, once again, to destroy cities and people without scruples, as, he claimed, the healthier Anglo-Saxons had cheerfully learned to do. A willingness to kill without scruples was thus interpreted as “health,” while unwillingness was seen as “sickness.”

It is difficult to see how U.S. policymakers could have found comfort in Bohrer’s, Bittermann’s, and Biermann’s apparent belief in American cynicism and their consequent conviction that anything less than cynical barbarity was unworthy of a superpower. Between the Scylla of an instinctive, unreflective pacifism represented by the German peace movement and the Charybdis of a brutal Realpolitik that seemed to view the United States as the new home of Nietzsche’s healthy and beastly Übermensch, German thinking on the Gulf War was lost in hysterical overreaction.

Moreover, the war’s status as media entertainment—summed up by French postmodern theorist Jean Baudrillard in the provocative declaration that “the Gulf War did not take place”—remained unexamined by German intellectuals. Baudrillard’s critique of the general Western discourse on the war is especially true for discourse in Germany: “To be for or against the war is idiotic if the question of the very probability of this war, its credibility or degree of reality has not been raised even for a moment.”

Of course, the debate about the Gulf War in Germany did not entirely exclude problems of morality. As I have already mentioned, Iraq’s use of SCUD missiles against Israeli targets led many German intellectuals, including Biermann and Bittermann, to argue for the war on explicitly moral grounds, as a defense of the state of Israel. But it is striking that even this important moral factor in their support of the United States’ prosecution of the Gulf War did not in the least change their negative assessment of U.S. motivation or lead them to consider seriously the international community’s avowed reason for condemning Iraq: the invasion of Kuwait.

In a perceptive critique of German public debate after the end of the war, Lothar Baier wrote that “no other country . . . allowed the marginal mili-
tary drama that Saddam Hussein opened with his deceitful missile attacks on Israel to be transformed into the actual main event.” Moreover, the centrality of Israel in the German public imagination of the war was in direct conflict not only with United Nations declarations but with Israel’s own explicit refusal to become involved in the war militarily. The centrality of Israel in the German imagination suggested not only the continuing importance of the Holocaust in ongoing debates within Germany but also the paradoxical need for a firm moral underpinning for the kind of amoral Realpolitik described and celebrated by the war’s German supporters. The United States may have been governed by “the worst kinds of motives,” as Biermann had claimed, but at least, by chance, those evil motives happened to coincide with the best interests of the (good) Israeli state; hence, German supporters of the war got to eat their moral cake and have it too. For them, the United States was a Mephistophelian “part of that power which still/Produceth good, whilst ever scheming ill” (“Teil von jener Kraft,/Die stets das Böse will und stets das Gute schafft”).

The critique of public morality in Germany that started with the Christa Wolf debate and then thrived throughout the debate over the Gulf War has continued. In both the aesthetic and political realms, moralism is seen as an unwanted and divisive force that interferes with the purity of the artistic experience on the one hand and with hard political thinking on the other. The critique of morality has found important manifestation in the debates over the civil war in Bosnia, political correctness, right-wing racism, German military deployments outside of NATO territory, and the restructuring of the German social market system toward increased competitiveness in the global economy.

The 1996 debate about the publication of Peter Handke’s book Gerechtigkeit für Serbien (Justice for Serbia) once again showed clearly how quickly and seamlessly the literary and the political can become intertwined in Germany. While the debate about Handke’s book centered primarily around the morality or immorality of Handke’s defense of Serbia and hence did not include the kind of explicit defense of amorality with which I have been dealing, there were aspects of the debate that nevertheless drew on motifs from the previous critique of morality. Handke himself was sometimes depicted by his opponents as an incarnation of Germanic Innerlichkeit and hence an example of Bittermann’s “unbearably good” person—as a Panglossian writer capable of traveling close to the worst European war since 1945 and nevertheless seeing only sweetness and light.
Such critiques of Handke’s approach bore a striking resemblance to Bohrer’s earlier critique of German privatism and inwardness and Schirrmacher’s critique of Christa Wolf. Meanwhile, Handke himself was fiercely critical of what he saw as the judgmental moralism implicit in Europe’s condemnation of Serbia, and his whole approach to Serbia was to disregard serious ethical questions and to aestheticize the concept of the national. For him, Serbia was more an aesthetic experience than a problematic and ethically endangered nation-state.

The debate surrounding the 1993 publication of Botho Strauß’s controversial essay “Anschwellender Bocksgesang” (“Goat-Song, Swelling Up”) was also at least tangentially connected to the critique of “old” Federal Republican morality. This became particularly clear in Strauß’s critique of what he saw as a “psychopathic antifascism” and of the “self-satisfied conventions of [German] intellectual Protestantism.” In Strauß’s view, Federal Republican culture was based on the repression of tragedy as both an art form and a way of life, and he viewed this repression as dangerous: “It is calamitous not to have a sense of doom, to be incapable of understanding the forms of the tragic.” The writer predicted in his essay that post-unification Germany would witness a rebirth of tragedy out of the spirit of dissatisfaction with West German conformism. One of Strauß’s defenders, Heimo Schwilck, an editor of the controversial 1994 anthology Die selbstbewusste Nation (The Self-Confident Nation) and an admirer of the conservative philosopher Arnold Gehlen, was even more explicit in his critique of a self-hating and self-destructive Federal Republican “hypermorality,” which he called “the most thorough-going neurosis . . . that Germany has ever experienced in its history.” Schwilck argued that “this hypermoral mistake to this day still governs the precarious relationship of the Germans to themselves as a people and a nation.” Strauß’s critique of a “pathological” antifascism points to many critics’ belief that it was the German response to the Nazi regime that subsequently led, in the Federal Republic, to a dictatorship of moralism. Such a critique was unintentionally assisted by Antonia Grunenberg’s thoughtful 1993 study of antifascist mythology, Antifaschismus—ein deutscher Mythos (Antifascism—a German Myth).

The titles of recent books against morality are highly suggestive of contours of the critique of moralism as it has developed since 1989. E. Geisel calls her attack on conventional German morality Die Banalität Guten (The Banality of the Good), for instance, while Klaus Bitterma and Gerhard Henschel call their volume of unconventional definition...
Das Wörterbuch des Gutmenschen (The Dictionary of the Goodperson). 49

Geisel’s title is an obvious reference to Hanna Arendt’s celebrated Eichmann in Jerusalem, which bears the subtitle A Report on the Banality of Evil. 50 Geisel’s title performs two functions: it reverses the force of Arendt’s concept, suggesting that it is the good, and not the evil, who are banal. At the same time, by placing “der Guten,” that is, “good people” in the same grammatical position occupied by “evil” in Arendt’s title, Geisel is also suggesting that it is the good who are, in fact, evil and infected by National Socialism. The “good” Germans seeking to atone for the crimes of National Socialism by being morally irreproachable have in fact succumbed to the very dangers they were trying to escape.

Bittermann’s and Henschel’s title performs a similar task. It directly alludes to the famous postwar definitions of Nazi vocabulary published in the journal Die Wandlung and collected in book form as Aus dem Wörterbuch des Unmenschen (From the Dictionary of the Human Beast) in order, as Dolf Sternberger wrote in his introduction, “to make this language alien to us.” 51 Once again, the final element in the earlier title, which had referred to the Nazis, has been replaced by a new element referring to the “good” German. Dolf Sternberger, Gerhard Storz, and Wilhelm Süskind’s “Unmensch” becomes Bittermann’s and Henschel’s “Gutmensch” with the implication that today’s anti-Nazis are the real Nazis, and that their attempt to achieve moral redemption is the real moral scandal.

Once again, as with Cora Stephan’s musings during the Gulf War, one is struck by the implicit and bizarre assumption that Germany’s problem in the past had been an excessively idealistic adherence to antiquated ideas of moral virtue: the view is of the Nazis not as cynical barbarians but rather as the victims of their own idealism. The filmmaker Hans Jürgen Syberberg had made this point explicit shortly before unification, when he wrote that the reason for the Nazi dictatorship and the Holocaust had been the German people’s “most ridiculous and clown-like” adherence to an idealistic artistic vision. 52

The debate on goodness has, since 1991, continued to touch on some of the most controversial topics in German culture and politics. During the wave of neo-Nazi violence that affected Germany in 1992 and 1993, critics argued that the public response, which included candlelight demonstrations against racism, was itself problematic and potentially racist, and they criticized what they saw as the self-righteous goodness of German anti-
racists. In the debates about the civil war in Bosnia, critics argued for aggressive German and NATO intervention on the side of the Bosnian Muslim central government, suggesting that such intervention would contribute to German normalization. In the public discussion about possibly restructuring Germany’s social market economy, critics argue that Germany should follow the American and British example of social “down-sizing.” In all instances, it is not so much the particular positions being argued that are significant but rather German critics’ explicit or implicit contentions that excessive political and cultural moralism is a specifically German phenomenon that has to cease in order for Germany to become a “normal” country.

Of course, criticism of hypocrisy and moralism is by no means new or unique to Germany. American, British, and French cultural history are replete with honorable examples of a healthy criticism of overblown and pompous moralism. However, in the German context such critiques risk veering into what the philosopher Peter Sloterdijk calls “cynical reason,” an acceptance of pure cynicism and negativity for their own sake. And in the context of the German twentieth century and German unification, such critiques take on a unique force and context, associating moralism with the “old” Bonn commonwealth and cool realism with the “new” Berlin Republic.

Such a framework is highly problematic. As Thomas Mann noted in 1943, “Ultimately, hypocrisy is a compliment made in the direction of virtue; it indicates the recognition of moral standards in principle. It makes a difference whether the ten commandments are not being kept, as is the case all over the world, or whether one declares them no longer valid”; Mann implied that this was the case in Germany under the Nazi dictatorship.

In light of Nazi crimes, Hermann Rauschning had already made a similar critique of brutal political cynicism seven years earlier, arguing that “even the most sober Realpolitik cannot do without a central core of ethical motives. When even the petit-bourgeois becomes cynical, it is time for superior people to acknowledge the reality of a spiritual and ethical cosmos.” Carl Gustav Jung even suggested that German cynical realism is a form of hysteria. Describing the figure of Goethe's Faust as a typical representative of such hysteria, Jung suggests that Faust “only speaks of” realism, “and specifically of an ‘ice-cold’ realism, and here one can easily recognize the hysteria: his realism is a pose. He plays at theatrical realism, but in reality he wants to conquer the world. . . .”
Such a well-documented cynically realist tradition, now emerging once again after a period of dormancy, suggests that in Germany today certain previously valid taboos are no longer universally accepted. At stake in all of the recent debates about political morality, I would argue, is the critics' fundamental belief that post-1989 unified Germany must become different from pre-1989 West Germany; that, as Cora Stephan in a typically pointed anti-moralist book with the Bohrer-like title Der Betroffenheitskult (The Cult of Emotionality) argues, the day of German unity meant the end not only of the GDR but also of "the old Federal Republic—a country whose existence seems, in retrospect, as fantastic as it was improbable."  

Michael Mertes and Hubertus von Morr, two intellectuals in Helmut Kohl's chancellery, have combined in the form of a parodic fairy tale the critique of a moralist stance and an assertion that the old Federal Republic is now dead. For them, the Federal Republic had been a calm, serene, all-too moralist paradise:

"Once upon a time there was a tiny island in the middle of the ocean of time, the ocean of blood and tears called Western Europe. On this island lived the tribe of the Germans. The Germans believed themselves to be something very special... Because the Germans were thorough people and left nothing to chance, they decided at their party and church conventions that war had been done away with, and that the ocean surrounding them consisted not of blood and tears but of ecologically correct fresh water."  

It is precisely that naively moralistic, insular Germany that the two intellectuals suggest is now gone, consigned to the fairy-tale province of the "once upon a time." The conservative historian Karlheinz Weißmann also speaks of the "decline of the Federal Republic"; meanwhile the influential political scientist Arnulf Baring characterizes the "old" Federal Republic as an "island of the blessed" out of touch with the hard realities of the political world. In all of these critiques, the "old" Federal Republic is naive, insular, and moralistic, while the "new" Germany is amoral and worldly and needs to be freed of illusions. 

Much in these critiques is no doubt correct. It seems self-evident that a democratic, unified Germany in a Europe no longer threatened by the Cold War will need to learn different modes of political behavior from the ones that were appropriate in the aftermath of World War II, in the context of Cold War threats and national division. And yet, as I have tried to show, critiques of moralism, particularly in Germany, always run the risk of
disintegrating into nihilistic cynicism. Surely one of the great strengths of the “old” Federal Republic was that it avoided this problem, even if that avoidance occasionally created a super-moralistic impression both at home and abroad. It is vitally important for German critics of moralism to seek to avoid the danger of nihilism and to seek a synthesis between an ethics of conviction and an ethics of responsibility. Likewise it is important for the advocates of needed change in Germany not to couch their arguments in a language that rejects morality altogether. In many instances, there are solid moral arguments in favor of change, but such arguments are all too rarely made.

Ultimately, the reason for the excessive political moralism that critics find in the “old” Federal Republic is the response to the Third Reich and the Holocaust. That awful history separates Germany from any specious “normality” and creates a profound moral burden, which Günter Grass has characterized controversially as the recognition that “now, finally, we know ourselves.” As Bohrer writes in a critique of Jürgen Habermas and the “Protestant” political moralism for which he stands:

I find hidden within it a kind of negative chiliastic, the idea of the one overriding event of our history: it is called the Holocaust. The Holocaust is the great, unavoidable fact of our modern history, and any hermeneutic of a new German self-understanding has to be developed from it.

The critics of moralism believe that at a fundamental level the “old” Federal Republic was based on a certain moral consensus about how to respond to the Third Reich. That moral consensus, however, went hand in hand with what Bohrer refers to as “the highly neurotic self-destruction of the Germans as a nation,” partly a result of West German acquiescence during forty years of German division. With the rebirth of the German nation as “the symbolic and reflexive constants of a collective historical and cultural ability to remember,” the excessive moralism of the all-too-good West Germany of the past is no longer necessary. Germany can once more take its place among the “normal” practitioners of a “real” politics of national self-interest.

Although this debate initially began with a criticism of Christa Wolf specifically and German postwar literature generally, such seemingly nonpolitical beginnings should not deceive cultural historians into believing that more is not at stake. What is at stake are public conceptions of national identity and the uniqueness of German history. However, in criticizing
moralism the critics are themselves sometimes forced into a version of the kind of moralism they deplore, and this very fact shows that the postwar moral consensus in Germany still exerts a profound power—that, as Ernst Nolte put it during the 1986 Historikerstreit (Historians’ Debate), the German past is still a “past that does not want to pass on.”


33. Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?" *The National Interest*, summer 1989, pp. 3–18. These ideas were later incorporated into Fukuyama’s book *The End of History*.
and the Last Man (New York: Free Press, 1992). Fukuyama’s ideas received a wide audience in Germany.


45. Peter Handke, Eine winterliche Reise zu den Flüssen Donau, Save, Morawa und Drina, oder, Gerechtigkeit für Serbien (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1996).

46. Botho Strauß, “Anschwellender Bocksgesang,” in Der Pfahl, vol. 7 (1993), pp. 9–25; here, pp. 14–16. The strange title of this article is an erudite reference to the etymology of the word “tragedy,” which refers to a goat- or satyr-song. Strauß is implying a future rebirth of tragedy.


60. Arnulf Baring, *Deutschland, was nun?* (Berlin: Siedler bei Goldmann, 1991).


62. Bohrer, "Why We Are Not a Nation," p. 82.

63. Bohrer, "Why We Are Not a Nation," pp. 79, 81.

64. Ernst Nolte, "Vergangenheit, die nicht vergehen will: Eine Rede, die geschrieben, aber nicht gehalten werden konnte," in Rudolf Augstein, et al., *"Historikerstreit": Die Dokumentation der Kontroverse um die Einzigartigkeit der nationalsozialistischen Judenvernichtung* (Munich: Piper, 1987), pp. 39–47.