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# Heroism and Modernity

The history of heroism is more than just the reconstruction of hero stories. The ways in which heroes (and less frequently heroines) are conceptualized provide information about the meanings, normative orders, and historical images of the social fabric that brought them forth. Theories of the heroic thus always represent a particular perspective: they document the societal challenges and needs that particular types of heroes respond to, what values heroes embody, what boundaries heroes transgress, and what demands heroes place upon their fans and admirers. For modernity and the patriotic hero cults that dominate it, this means that heroisms and the theoretical reflections upon them are always tinged by national aspects. This is also true of the critical thoughts on the relationship between heroism and modernity presented here. The journey through theorizations of the heroic follows a mainly German perspective: starting with Hegel, Marx, and the Marxist tradition, to the 'heroic realism' of Ernst Jünger and other nationalist revolutionary authors of the inter-war period, and ending with Hans Magnus Enzensberger's ironic farewell to heroic attitudes that anticipates contemporary assessments of Germany as a 'post-heroic' society. Other threads of the theoretical discourse on heroes – for example, Thomas Carlyle's influential lectures *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and The Heroic in History* (London 1841) or Ralph Waldo Emerson's portraits of historical *Representative Men* (Boston 1850) – are omitted.

The choice of this perspective has its reasons: in German-language discussions, the philosophy of history plays a central role in the investigation of the relationship between heroism and modernity. Hegel and Marx, whose explanatory

power and reception have had a historical impact that has resonated far beyond the national context, particularly represent this approach. At the same time, the Nazis' unparalleled crimes against humanity were possible largely due to their mobilization of a militant heroism that preached fighting unconditionally unto death as heroic self-sacrifice. Until 1945, the history of modernity in Germany was thus the history of a 'heroic modernity', to use the terminology of historian Heinz-Dieter Kittsteiner, whose thesis is picked up in the reflections presented here. For this reason, the constitutive connection between modern heroism and collective violence can be shown particularly clearly in relation to the discursive processing of the First World War in Germany.

This essay traces the ways in which heroes have been thematized, problematized, and theorized in Germany from the era of the Napoleonic Wars to the end of the Cold War. In addition, this essay maps the tensions and links between the deheroizing dynamics of modernity on the one hand and its hypertrophic hero cults on the other.

## Hegel's Heroes<sup>1</sup>

While the term 'post-heroic' only established itself in the final decades of the last century, the diagnosis is in fact much older: "In the State there can be heroes no more. They appear only in uncivilized communities", Hegel asserted categorically in 1820 in his *Philosophy of Right* (33). The more mediated the conditions of society are, the less space is left for autonomous, self-directed figures of unmediated existence. Where the sum of real historical conditions produced the rational system that Hegel attempted to derive from the process of history, he considered heroes to be both impossible and superfluous. Elsewhere in his writing, however, this same Hegel enthusiastically celebrates the "world-historical men – the Heroes of an epoch" whose

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deeds have produced a condition of things and a complex of historical relations which appear to be only their interest, and their work. (Hegel, *History* 30)

He finds examples of this not only in the past, but also in his own era: the hero towering above all others in his time was unquestionably Napoleon. Hegel personally witnessed Napoleon's arrival in Jena on 13 October 1806 and he wrote effusively about it to his friend Friedrich Immanuel Niethammer on the same day. He described the "wonderful sensation" of "see[ing] such an individual, who, concentrated here at a single point, astride a horse, reaches out over the world and masters it" (Hegel, *Letters* 114; on Hegel's view of Napoleon in general, cf. Broussard).

Hegel's comments on the heroic are contradictory: heroes, for him, are at once anachronistic, present and indispensable. Under the "prosaic states of affairs in the present", every individual

belongs to an established social order and does not appear himself as the independent, total, and at the same time individual living embodiment of this society, but only as a restricted member of it. (Hegel, *Aesthetics* 193-194)

Thus, an individual cannot be a hero. At the same time, the hunger for heroes remains: "But the interest in and need for such an actual individual totality and living independence we will not and cannot sacrifice" (195). The World Spirit continues to make use of heroic "agents" in order to set the "necessary next stage of their world" into motion. Without choosing it, and usually without deriving happiness from their role, these "great historical individuals" whose "own particular purposes contain the substantial will of the World Spirit" serve as midwives of progress. They are heroes because they do not merely perpetuate the "calm, regular course of things, sanctioned by the existing order". Instead, their actions derive sustenance from a spirit that is

still hidden beneath the surface but already knocking against the outer world as against a shell, in order, finally, to burst forth and break it into pieces; for it is a kernel different from that which belongs to the shell. (Hegel, *History* 30)

Thus, on the one hand, Hegel diagnoses the subject as having been thoroughly socialized and thereby deheroized; on the other, he invokes exceptional heroic individuals. He does

not resolve this contradiction dialectically; instead, the opposing statements stand beside each other – scattered across various writings and lectures – but are never brought together. In so doing, Hegel erects the argumentative framework in which the discussions on the fate of the heroic in modernity have taken place until today.

For his thesis on the outdatedness of the hero, Hegel contrasts "individual independence" (Hegel, *Aesthetics* 179) in the stateless existence of the Heroic Age – by which he means the era of the mythical heroes of ancient Greece – with the "subordinate position of the individual subject [...] in developed states". In developed states, "each individual acquires only an entirely specific and always restricted share in the whole" (183; on the topos of the 'age of heroes' cf. Brandmeyer 264-279). The 'state' here refers to the entirety of social institutions that bind individuals in a net of reciprocal obligations and dependencies, thereby ensuring their freedom. In other words, the 'state' represents – to use Hegel's terminology – the system of social mores (*Sittlichkeit*) and includes civil society.

Hegel demonstrates the obsolescence of heroes under such conditions with the example of the institution of law: in a society mediated by law, individual action is always embedded in the legal order. Regardless of whether the individual obeys the law or transgresses it, the particular qualities of an action always come second to the universal qualities of the rule. No deed, however marvellous or horrific, is exempt from judgement about its lawfulness; misdeeds thus lose their transgressive quality. Under the power of the legal code, deeds are transformed into criminal offences, subjected to orderly procedures, and sanctioned.

Heroes, on the other hand, are individuals who undertake and accomplish the entirety of an action, actuated by the independence of their character and caprice; and in their case, therefore, it appears as the effect of individual disposition when they carry out what is right and moral. (Hegel, *Aesthetics* 185)

Heroes are their own moral authority and therefore assume sole responsibility for their actions. Hegel describes them as borderline figures situated on the threshold between nature and culture. Rather than being subject to laws, heroes become the founders of laws. Their violence is justified, because

on the one hand there is not yet any established order to which one could appeal,

and on the other because it represents the de facto radical shift, by means of which it is possible for the realm of the political to be established and enter into force at all. (Senigaglia 137)

The despotism of the hero is the origin of the law, the beginnings of right and justice are rooted in wrong and injustice. But once the rule of law has become established, the heroic overstepping of boundaries becomes an ordinary criminal offence.

Hegel's argument here is a sociological one *avant la lettre*: translating his thesis on the incompatibility of heroism and modernity into contemporary terms, heroes have lost their right to exist because in the course of social evolution, institutional problem-solving strategies have developed, which accomplish more reliably and more efficiently what was once the concern of exceptional hero figures. In this view, individual heroism and societal institutions are functional equivalents. It comes down to a simple formula: more social integration means less heroism. Either societal challenges are mastered through the sovereign action of individuals, or they are worked through with the help of procedural rules, administrative arrangements, and professional competencies, which replace "the deed with the assignment, the impulse with organization, and valour with teamwork" (Wagner). Institutionalization means not least the division of labour:

The hero shoulders the burden of the collective whole; the citizen, by contrast, distributes it among others of his kind. He unburdens himself in manifold ways, but also makes himself dependent and loses the autonomy that distinguishes the hero. (Früchtel 71)

Not only the division of labour, but also the very character of these tasks undergoes a fundamental change: heroes prove themselves in the face of danger. If, however, it is a matter of managing calculable risks, the role of the hero is replaced by the insurance agent and the accident prevention specialist, and for everyone else there is the disaster protection service. One only need wish for a heroic rescuer when there is no effective emergency service.

Complex problems require more complex response strategies than the dauntless intervention of valiant individuals. At the same time, institutional webs hinder exceptional events from being attributed to individual actions and also prevent the heroization of the actors. Even the monarchs of Hegel's world are anything but

sovereign in their actions. A king who merely governs but does not reign is not hero material. In a "completely organised state", the monarch is reduced to a mere functionary who simply "says 'Yes' and so puts the dot upon the 'i'" (Hegel, *Right* 167). This is even more true for elected representatives in a democracy, one might continue Hegel's line of reasoning, for their autonomy and power to act are not only curtailed by the constitution, budgetary demands, and matters of state, but also depend on unstable party alliances and changing majorities.

What remains are hero stories. In the ancient tragedies and Shakespeare's dramas, Hegel finds the mythical figures of "the perfect freedom of will and production" (Hegel, *Aesthetics* 192) who embody in their persons the ideals that have long since become embedded in social institutions and have thereby forfeited their illustrative power. In the realm of art, heroes can continue to make themselves felt, because here the universal "is still immediately one with particular individuals and their life" (185). A common characteristic of both artists and heroes, artworks and heroic deeds, is that they give vivid form to something that gestures to a greater meaning. This formal relationship leads Hegel to conceptualize the heroic as an aesthetic phenomenon and, in this way, to admit some remnant of the heroic even in modern society. Even if the real world is no longer capable of bringing forth hero stories, the old myths can continue to have an effect on the stage, in literature and the visual arts (today we could add films, comic books, and computer games). What we have historically outlived is at least preserved in the aesthetic imagination. A very different view of the heroic can be found in his paeans to the world-historic individuals who "willed and accomplished something great; not a mere fancy, a mere intention" (Hegel, *History* 31). Here the heroic does not bear the stamp of something of a past era, but rather is a rare event that helps history along its course. Counter to his implicit modernization theory in which the time of heroes has passed, Hegel proffers another narrative in which heroes are the vanguard of "that for which the time [is] ripe" (30). Heroes appear as a personification of the sign of the times, an analogue to the sublime in art and as the pole of a force field, towards which all others are drawn. One may revere or fear them, admire or hate them, but it is impossible to *not* be affected by them. Their charisma has its roots in a spontaneous identification: by the sheer force of their presence, their greatness is immediately obvious to all. They embody "the inmost soul of all individuals" and bring it to consciousness. "[Others], therefore, follow these

soul-leaders; for they feel the irresistible power of their own inner Spirit thus embodied" (30-31).

Hegel is sharply critical of "the so-called 'psychological' view" of historical individuals. He suggests that envious, small-spirited people attempt to bring the heroes down to their own level and take pleasure in pointing out their idiosyncrasies and explaining all their heroic deeds as taking place "under the impulse of some passion, mean or grand, – some morbid craving". From this servant or schoolmaster's perspective, the world-historical individuals appear as inconsiderate, reckless individuals without any moral legitimacy. Hegel had little patience with those who force everyone down to the same level. The heroes' all-too-human weaknesses, their narrow-mindedness, escapades, and excesses are irrelevant in comparison to the task of actualizing the universal. The historical mission must be measured according to exceptional standards: "[S]o mighty a form must trample down many an innocent flower – crush to pieces many an object in its path" (Hegel, *History* 32). Often enough, heroes pay for this with their lives or are toppled from their pedestals. However, for Hegel, Napoleon's military defeat and exile do not in the least diminish his glory; they only show how Napoleon was ultimately swept away along with the progress that he and his Grande Armée made a reality. In this view, great individuals act merely as instruments of a far greater power: history.

Here is the point where Hegel's otherwise antithetical positions on the heroic come into contact: the mythical heroes of the heroic age are also liminal figures and fulfil a historical mission. In the face of resistance and generally with the help of violence, they create a new order in which, through its institutions, heroic action becomes superfluous. Modern heroes are catalysts under conditions of a difficult transition, expression of a crisis and simultaneously the element that overcomes it. They only appear when the development is ripe for it.

Delivery may be forced, but the child must be ready to enter the world. A heaven-storming Promethean will is doomed to fail unless what it wills is already alive in germ in the conditions of the present. (Hook 65-66)

Heroes require times that need a hero; history must have prepared the ground for them. Once the historical moment has arrived, it is certain that a hero will be found.

This valuation of heroes within Hegel's philosophy of history is also connected to their close

association with war. According to Hegel, war awakens heroic forces because it stimulates the historical process. In periods of peace, by contrast,

civic life becomes more and more extended. Each separate sphere walls itself in and becomes exclusive, and at last there is a stagnation of mankind. Their particularity becomes more and more fixed and ossified. (Hegel, *Right* 193)

In short, peace leads to a post-heroic lethargy, while war begets heroes. War dissolves, at least partially, the institutional bounds that prevent heroic challenges and successes in modernity. This applies to military heroes like Napoleon, but Hegel also implicitly heroizes the common soldiers who put their lives at risk for the sovereignty of the nation. The bravery of the soldier does not serve personal aims like that of the adventurer, who seeks intensity of experience, nor that of the knight, who seeks glory, nor that of the villain, who seeks material benefit. Rather, soldiers "make real the ideality implicit within [themselves]" because in the fulfilment of their military duty they are prepared to deny their individual "possessions, pleasure, and life". In the soldier's obedience unto death, the specific and the universal reach their highest form of mediation:

True bravery in civilized peoples consists in a readiness to offer up oneself in the service of the state, so that the individual counts only as one amongst many. Not personal fearlessness, but the taking of one's place in a universal cause, is the valuable feature of it. (195)

Even if Hegel does not award this title to those fallen in battle, the dead hero is the true hero of his philosophy of right.

This form of heroism is modern for at least two reasons: first, the obligation to fight for one's country is generally extended to include all male citizens following the introduction of universal compulsory military service – like Napoleon, this, too, is a product of the French Revolution. The "[s]acrifice on behalf of the individuality of the state" becomes the "substantial tie between the state and all its members". Second, progress in armament technology means that soldiers fight as a disciplined collective body; consequently, "personal bravery appears impersonal". In the era of the gun, military heroism is "the act not of a particular person, but of a member of the whole" and this, in turn, is directed "not against separate persons, but against a hostile whole"



(195). The heroism of the common soldier is characterized by the courageous fulfilment of duty in the face of death. However, the common soldier lacks the transgressive obstinacy, the autonomous agency and the charisma of both the ancient heroes and the contemporary “great individuals”. He does not loom above the masses; he takes his place as a member of the ranks.

But can this really be considered heroic? Tellingly, although Hegel endows the conscripts in the national army with heroic attributes – readiness to make sacrifices, the will to fight, virtuousness – he does not expressly acclaim them as heroes in the same way he glorifies Napoleon. Hegel does not resolve this contradiction of claiming that heroes are impossible in modernity on the one hand, while on the other hand also granting them an essential role in the processes of modernization. Instead, he attempts to mask this contradiction with the paradoxical figure of a deindividualized hero who has been stripped of his potency and embedded in an all-encompassing organization – in short, a post-heroic hero whom Hegel does not even call a ‘hero’.

## Socialist Heroism

Hegel's idea that heroes are agents of change who must relinquish their place on the stage once their task has been completed was also adopted by his student Marx. Napoleon, and before him the heroes of the Revolution of 1789, “performed the task of their time in Roman costume and with Roman phrases, the task of unchaining and setting up modern *bourgeois* society”, wrote Marx in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* (16). “But unheroic as bourgeois society is, it nevertheless took heroism, sacrifice, terror, civil war and battles of peoples to bring into being” (ibid.). However, the models from antiquity that were meant to guarantee the engagement of the bourgeois revolutionaries in the service of history produced at best ridiculous caricatures. The heroic scenes appeared as parodies insofar as the struggle against the pre-bourgeois feudal order was finished and the bourgeoisie itself had become an impediment to progress.

The imminent, historically expected “social revolution of the nineteenth century” (Marx, *Brumaire* 18), in which Marx saw the proletariat functioning as the collective hero, would no longer require such reference to historical pre-figurations. The revolution's protagonists could dispense with imaginative exaltation for the purpose of self-authorization because they were

not defending traditional one-sided interests. Instead, their emancipation as a class would coincide with the emancipation of humanity as a whole. In a historical moment that saw the class struggle escalating to open war against the proletariat, however, Marx found no lack of historical pathos: “The working class”, he comments regarding the uprising of the Paris Commune,

[...] know that in order to work out their own emancipation, and along with it that higher form to which present society is irresistibly tending by its own economical agencies, they will have to pass through long struggles, through a series of historic processes, transforming circumstances and men. They have no ideals to realize, but to set free the elements of the new society with which old collapsing bourgeois society itself is pregnant. In the full consciousness of their historic mission, and with the heroic resolve to act up to it [...]. (Marx, *Civil War* 61-62)

Where fighting and sacrifice were called for, the appeal for revolutionary heroism was not far behind. However, this heroism was different from its bourgeois counterpart in more than just its political and economic goals; it also did not require a personality cult, for it was a heroism not of great men, but of the little people, many of whom paid with their lives when the Commune was brought down. The “self-sacrificing heroism with which the population of Paris – men, women, and children – fought for eight days after the entrance of the Versaillese” revealed the “grandeur of their cause” (75).

Meanwhile, Marx had nothing but scorn for the heroic costumes of the bourgeoisie. Through his gaze, the nineteenth century's enthusiasm for great men can be understood as a story of compensation – a symptom of crisis, rather than evidence of strength. The inflated value of the hero thus appears as a final, desperate attempt by the bourgeoisie, who drew upon feudal disguises in order to arm themselves with past greatness and defend themselves against the threats of the present, and who celebrated heroic individuals in order to conceal their insignificance in the face of historical forces. The idea of the nation provided a focus for bourgeois heroisms, which subsequently mobilised large parts of the working class and distracted them from their historical mission, as would become clear at the very latest with the outbreak of the First World War.

However, the historical idealization of great individuals was also able to take root in the

socialist movement, as is documented in Georgi Plekhanov's 1898 *On the Role of the Individual in History*. In this text, the Marxist philosopher, following in Hegel's footsteps, attempts to draw a connection between heroic deeds and the laws of history:

A great man is great not because his personal qualities give individual features to great historical events, but because he possesses qualities which make him most capable of serving the great social needs of his time, needs which arose as a result of general and particular causes. [...] He solves the scientific problems brought up by the preceding process of intellectual development of society; he points to the new social needs created by the preceding development of social relationships; he takes the initiative in satisfying these needs. He is a hero. (Plekhanov 59-60)

The challenge for the historical materialist lay in finding a way to acknowledge the supra-individual power of the historical process and simultaneously defend the importance of individual action. What role could the individual play when "we cannot make history and must wait while it is being made" (60)? This is a question with direct political implications: how can people who were the product of the conditions of society be able to overturn these conditions? If the development of productive powers progresses inexorably, what need is there for exceptional individuals? How can one prevent confidence in progress from turning into complacency and inaction, paralysing the revolutionary energy? Plekhanov attempted to resolve these dilemmas by identifying an instinct for what is possible and historically due as a crucial quality of the revolutionary hero. Such a person must know not only in which direction the wind is blowing, but also whether the force of the wind is sufficient, and they must remain active even during lulls when there is no wind:

But if I know in what direction social relations are changing owing to given changes in the social-economic process of production, I also know in what direction social mentality is changing; consequently, I am able to influence it. [...] Hence, in a certain sense, I *can make history*, and there is no need for me to wait while "it is being made". (61)

According to this logic, historical greatness is not expressed only in revolutionary situations:

The Enlightenment was heroism in the waiting room of history. Accordingly, any person could advance to become a historically significant individual, so long as they recognized the signs of the times and fought on the side of progress. This was a question of moral choice, rather than one of intellectual capability.

To borrow a phrase from Karl Löwith, Plekhanov regarded "history as a history of fulfilment and salvation [*Heilsgeschehen*]" (Löwith 1). This is evident, among other things, in the way that he imbues the protagonists of history with religious sanctification. Plekhanov concludes:

And it is [...] not only for 'great' men that a broad field of activity is open [...] It is open for all those who have eyes to see, ears to hear and hearts to love their neighbours. The concept great is a relative concept. In the ethical sense every man is great who, to use the Biblical phrase, 'lays down his life for his friend'. (Plekhanov 62)

Once again, it is ultimately sacrifice that makes one a hero: for Hegel, it was the figure of the dead soldier; for Marx, the murdered workers of the Paris Commune, and so, too, for Plekhanov, the socialist hero has the traits of a Christian martyr.

Here again, two opposing views of the fate of the heroic in modernity contend with one another. On the one hand, there is an analytical view based on the philosophy of history in which the development of society obeys knowable laws and which relegates heroic narratives to the realm of romantic mythology. On the other hand, there is a political view that appeals to the heroic individual and heroic collective as the advance guard of historical progress and tasks them with bringing the imperfectly realized modernity to completion. However, the heroes of both Plekhanov and Marx have dwindled in their roles as catalysts and have instead been degraded to mere assistants of the materialist world spirit, carrying out what the state of the productive forces requires. They are only transgressive with respect to the powers of the old world, their autonomy is limited to recognizing what is necessary, and their political task is above all to ward off fatalistic passivity. Heroizations require a certain amount of voluntarism. When history strides forward according to inexorable laws, the individual cannot demonstrate heroic prowess. Plekhanov attempts to tap into the subjective factor as a source of energy for the revolutionary struggle, but the tug of the deterministic and thus deheroizing current proves to be stronger. While he attempts to rescue the prominent individual

as an entity capable of making history, he is only able to do so if this individual acknowledges the power of history and harmonizes their activity with its movement. If post-heroic means the problematization of heroism, then the heroes of historical materialism are also post-heroic.

Several decades later, a despairing echo of socialist heroism can be heard in Ernst Bloch's apotheosis of the 'red hero' – a hero whose undaunted atheistic courage in the fight against Fascism surpasses even that of the Christian martyr: "His Good Friday is not mitigated or even cancelled out by an Easter Sunday on which he personally will be re-awakened to life" (Bloch 1172). The Communist resistance fighters are not driven by the prospect of eternal life, nor of undying fame, but rather a solidarity "extending most presently to the victims of the past, to the victors of the future" (1174). Their self-negation extends even to the public memory of them, but their death acquires meaning through its service to the collective goal. The personal consciousness merges to such a degree with the class consciousness that "to the person it is not even decisive whether he is remembered or not on the way to victory, on the day of victory" (1173). Bloch's materialist hero myth marks a position of retreat: just as confidence in progress had become diluted to the "principle of hope", so, too, it was necessary for individual fortitude to compensate for what the class had been denied. The philosopher at least paid tribute to the victims; at the end of socialist heroism, by contrast, was a disciplining programme: wherever the communist cadre took over state power, they praised their "heroes of work" as a way – they mistakenly hoped – to increase productivity norms (cf. Satjukow/Gries).

## Heroic modernity

The "synergism" of the philosophy of history of Hegel and the Left Hegelians, which delegated to the rationality of historical totality those things that "actors in their limited interaction" could not accomplish even with heroic effort (Kittsteiner, *Form der Geschichte* 149), proved to be fragile. Totality, as became evident during the total warfare of the years 1914 to 1918, existed only as the reign of utter irrationality. A few decades previously, Nietzsche had already rejected the "historical optimism" and its "idolization of the necessary": "If one looks for a plan in history", he wrote in 1875, "one must look for it in the intentions of a mighty person, or perhaps of a race,

a party. Everything else is turmoil." Any attempt to teleologically order this chaotic collection of happenings is doomed to failure. Reliance on the impetus of historical forces was only an illusory hope of holding back the storm, a super-human task. In associating the absent historical telos with the "mighty person", Nietzsche hints at the following conclusion: when it is no longer possible to assume that there is such a thing as progress in an emphatic sense and that history itself assists in achieving it, then only two possible attitudes remain – "a nihilistic confrontation with the meaningless world events, a heroically and sufferingly standing firm – or a last attempt at taming it with heroic might" (Kittsteiner, *Stufen der Moderne* 46).

Heinz Dieter Kittsteiner distinguishes an epoch that he refers to as 'heroic modernity', in which this alternative dominated the historical consciousness in Germany; he dates it as lasting from ca. 1880 to 1945 (West Germany) or 1989 (East Germany) (44-45; id., *Heroische Moderne*). Kittsteiner distinguishes this period from 'stabilizing modernity', which started in the mid-seventeenth century, and 'evolutive modernity', which started around 1770 and continues to the present, but was superseded for a time by heroic modernity. While Hegel and his successors' philosophy of history had weakened the position of the hero, in spite of their enthusiasm for great men and heroic collectives, the radicalized experience of the non-directionality and arbitrariness of history as expressed by Nietzsche incited a downright inflationary demand for heroes. History was no longer a partner and ally; rather, it became an adversary, and this left a void that was susceptible for imaginings of exceptional greatness and mythical missions, of proving oneself in battle and tragic downfall. Heroic modernity meant either facing a problematic present heroically, or transcending that present heroically. In other words, heroic modernity meant stoic endurance *in* or a radical exit *from* modernity (cf. Eßbach).

Representative of the first version is Max Weber's ascetic "heroism of realism" (*Heroismus der Sachlichkeit*, Weber, *A Biography* 662-663)<sup>2</sup>. Here, there is no escape from the "iron cage" (*stahlhartes Gehäuse*) that the spirit of capitalism had solidified into (Weber, *Protestant Ethic* 181), but one can derive the demand to bear "like a man" the "fate of our times" with its "rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, [...] 'disenchantment of the world'", and to soberly "set to work and meet the 'demands of the day'" (Weber, *Science as a Vocation* 155-156). Weber, like others, found it difficult to accept the insight that an exodus from modernity

was impossible or only conceivable in the form of regression. His ethos of sociology as a reality-based science that “cannot tell anyone what he *should* do – but rather what he *can* do – and under certain circumstances – what he wishes to do” (Weber, *Objectivity* 54) made it impossible for him to relinquish the rigour of empirical research in favour of a discourse of empowerment that was not supported by the facts (as consoling as it may have been). Apart from the unacceptable options (for him) of apologist whitewashing, revolutionary illusion, avowal of an ethics of conviction, or critical lamentations about the decline of culture, the only path that remained was to calmly face the unalterable without allowing oneself to be shattered by it. “[F]or it is weakness”, he claimed in his lecture *Science as a Vocation*, “not to be able to countenance the stern seriousness of our fateful times” (Weber, *Science as a Vocation* 149). This ascetic pathos also includes the recognition of the irreversible specialization of modern science that distorted any access to the whole. The greatness of the historical researcher was therefore measured by his readiness to passionately immerse himself in the smallest details:

And whoever lacks the capacity to put on blinders, so to speak, and to come up to the idea that the fate of his soul depends upon whether or not he makes the correct conjecture at this passage of this manuscript may as well stay away from science. (135; cf. Thomé)

More powerful than Weber’s heroism of endurance, particularly after the First World War, was a militant heroism that both decisively embraced modernity and simultaneously hoped to leave behind its contradictions once and for all. To this end, this militant heroism demanded an unfettered will to power and unreserved readiness for self-sacrifice. In a book of reflections entitled *Dämmerung: Notizen in Deutschland*,<sup>3</sup> composed between 1926 and 1931 and published in 1934, Max Horkheimer identifies a cult of brutality as the ideological centre of the “heroic world view”, even while – symptomatic, perhaps, of the discursive power of the heroic code in the inter-war period – he affirmed a positive counter-model of “real” heroism:

The fight against individualism, the belief that the individual must sacrifice himself so that the totality may live fits in perfectly with the current situation. In contrast to the real hero, this generation is not filled with enthusiasm for a clear goal, but it is

enthusiastic in its determination to attain it. The ruling class in Germany could hardly have wished for anything better than that the strata is ruined would constitute its own vanguard and aspire not even to the sparse pay but to sacrifice, or at least to devotion and discipline. True heroism is unmindful of its own interests but passionately concerned with a socially significant value. The heroic world view, on the other hand, is ready to sacrifice its own life, but takes that life as its most important theme. (Horkheimer 37-38)

An example of this worldview, whose adherents “in practice generally are more concerned with killing than being killed” (345), can be found in Ernst Jünger’s writings from the 1920s and early 1930s, which in the name of “heroic realism” (Jünger, *Heroischer Realismus*)<sup>4</sup> invoked “total mobilization” (Jünger, *Totale Mobilmachung* [1930]).<sup>5</sup> Jünger imagined the emergence of unlimited state power, cleansed of all dissonances, in which military destruction and industrial production become one. Even if, semantically, the terms ‘heroism of realism’ and ‘heroic realism’ seem related – both utilize a dramatic rhetoric of inevitability – Jünger’s calls for an expansion of the battle zone that had already been widened during the war have little in common with Weber’s stoic outlook on a world dominated by occidental rationalization processes. Where Weber advocates for an ethos of responsibility instead of moral principled politics, Jünger postulates an avowedly amoral military ethos. Weber’s heroes are virtuosos of sober endurance, while Jünger’s are cold enthusiasts of a general battle that has become the sole source of meaning in life.

Jünger’s heroic realism stems from his interpretation that the First World War was the first instance of total war. However, his heroic realism also blames Germany’s defeat in the war on society’s lack of sufficient focus on the war effort – in other words, the failure of all forces of society to totalize. The logical contradiction of a war that is simultaneously total and not total constitutes the ideological driving force of Jünger’s mobilization prose: what he declares to be a symptom of the present was meant to win over his contemporaries to an unconditional and unlimited preparedness to serve, obey and sacrifice in future wars. The attribute ‘total’ marked an absolute reference point that endowed all expectations with the quality of something incontrovertible and interminable. The total mobilization was, in his view, obligatory because it gave voice to the character of the era. It was “expression of a mysterious and compulsory requirement to



which this life subjects us in the age of masses and machines" and therefore was "much less [something that was] carried out than [something that] enacts itself" (Jünger, *Totale Mobilmachung* [1930] 15). Following the postulate of completely charting, logically arranging, and exhaustively exploiting all social and technological resources, the soldier and worker could be amalgamated into a single entity. It was no longer enough to merely "equip the sword arm"; rather, there was a need for "arming into the very marrow, into the deepest lifeblood" (14). The nation was to transform into an engine, and every individual was to contribute the greatest possible quantum of energy to it. No one, not even "the child in the cradle", was exempt from this (id., *Totale Mobilmachung* [1934] 131).<sup>6</sup> Whether the mobilization of society took place in the name of total warfare or total work was ultimately unimportant, because the reign of machines meant that the two would become indistinguishable.

Jünger was by no means blind to the crisis of traditional military heroism. In the mechanized battles of the First World War, technology and organization trumped personal courage, the fighting strength of the soldier was no longer an "individual, but rather a functional value", and, even in death, the individual was interchangeable – "one no longer falls, one falls out of service" (id., *Arbeiter* 106). With the contempt of the trench soldier for those safe behind the lines, Jünger derided "the foolish drivel of the papers, the tired phrases about heroes and heroic death" (id., *In Stahlgewittern* 9);<sup>7</sup> however, he responded to this devaluing of the hero not by rejecting the concept, but by radicalizing and generalizing the heroic. A heroism appropriate for the times could no longer be limited to the exceptional greatness of a few; it required total exertion by all. It was not an honour bestowed for extraordinary accomplishments, but a perpetual duty for everyone. Nevertheless, this heroism was anything but egalitarian. It manifested itself either in the form of the leader-figure who deployed himself and others, or in the anonymity of the deployed masses (cf. von Martin). At the edges of the lines of the trenches, in the mobile war zones and the attacks of assault troops, there were opportunities, particularly for officers, to distinguish themselves as military role models. The heroism of the trench warfare, by contrast, demanded unflinching endurance in the death zone and subordination to the machines.

The prototype of the new hero was the figure of the front-line fighter. Jünger elevated him to the most authentic form of a humanity that had overcome the fractures of pre-war modernity. The front-line fighter had experienced hell in

the trenches: "very well, it is in the nature of the Faustian man to not even return from Hell with empty hands", and thus he "fully recognized the value of man [...] for the first time in the terrible-ness of the sacrifice" (Jünger, *Vorwort* X). His heroism consisted of mimesis of the machinery of war – a process of assimilation that extended into one's very physiognomy. In this incarnation of militarized masculinity, futuristic modernity merged with mythical archaism. During the course of the war, the visage of the man beneath the steel helmet, Jünger suggested, had gained in clarity and resoluteness what it had lost in individuality:

It has become more metallic, the surface galvanized, the bone structure is more prominent, the features are sharply defined and tense. The gaze is calm and fixed, trained through viewing objects that must be assessed while in states of high velocity. (id., *Arbeiter* 107-108)

The technologization of warfare – that is, the substitution of human workers and fighters with machines – as well as the unfettered, depersonalized violence that came with this, did not, in Jünger's view, create a deheroizing dynamic that precluded individual heroic deeds; rather, the technology provided a model and framework for the new form of heroism that was required. To mobilize oneself meant, on the one hand, becoming a machine-like instrument of mechanized armament; on the other, it meant directing the apparatus as a general commands his troops. In the fusion of man and machine, the loss of human agency is reversed and, instead, human agency appears immeasurably heightened:

The war of the machines is so mighty that man nearly disappears before it. [...] And yet: behind it all is man. He gives the machines their direction and meaning. He sends shells, explosives, and poison shooting from them. He ascends in them as a raptor above the enemy. He crouches in their bellies when they pound across the battlefield breathing fire. He is the most dangerous, most blood-thirsty, and most determined being that the Earth is to carry. (id., *Kampf* 112)

This monstrous new hero not only placed his own life at risk – whether charging forward or holding the line – he was also distinguished by his ability to destroy the lives of others with great efficiency.

Such self-abnegation in the form of pure fighting energy was impossible without religious pathos. And since every person was only important to the degree that they killed without mercy and sacrificed themselves unreservedly, at the centre of this hero cult was a glorification of death. More important than the goal of the battle was the unconditional pursuing of the cause. While Hegel had declared the fallen soldier an embodiment of the highest morality because he had given his life for “the independence and sovereignty of the state” (Hegel, *Recht* 192), the sacrifice of Jünger’s worker and soldier heroes was no more than decisionist radicality of subjective will. As Jünger concludes his essay on total mobilization, the hero’s death is both a journey of self-discovery and a realization of national collectivity:

[D]eep below the regions in which the dialectic of the war’s goals is of importance [...] the German meets a more powerful force: he meets himself. Thus, this war was also and especially a means for him to realize himself. And therefore the new armament, in which we have already long been involved, must be a mobilization of the German – and nothing beyond that. (Jünger, *Totale Mobilmachung* [1934] 30)

Here, the heroic individual and the heroic collective stand in a relationship of mutual reinforcement: individual duty and the determination of the nature of the nation had become one, for “then as today to be German means: to be in battle” (id., *Heroischer Realismus* 557). Only through plunging into this battle and sacrificing themselves did individuals come to be the apotheosis of the *Volk* that their sacrifice was to serve and justify.

Among the protagonists of heroic modernity, Jünger’s essayistic writings from the 1920s and early 1930s show most clearly the corollary that whoever calls for heroes does so in order to mobilize, and whoever mobilizes requires heroes. The imperative mode dominates all other aspects. Heroism is seen as a power reserve that gains its energy by activating individuals’ readiness to die and kill, in order to “infinitely draw out the perspective of utility” (id., *Totale Mobilmachung* [1934] 13). In the same way that all desire to ascend to the status of heroes, they are also degraded to mere human material. In Jünger’s radicalized logic of maximal exploitation, the universalized syndrome of battle-as-work or work-as-battle is hypermodern. His heroic modernity has no *telos* and does not offer any promise; it is highly threatening to the individual, for it erases individuality and replaces it with a depersonalized type. He describes history not just

as a force that is as inevitable as destiny and that would be fruitless to oppose, he also calls for placing oneself unconditionally in its service. Heroic realism is nothing other than this anticipatory obedience of the modern subject, which attempts to compensate for its disempowerment by helping to foster that which threatens to destroy it. Interpreted psychoanalytically, it is an identification with the overpowering aggressor. Jünger preaches a heroism of the absurd, with its objective impossibility being the very thing that demonstrates the subjective greatness of the hero, who, as Harald Müller suggests, is to prove himself in battle situations

which cannot be understood in terms of any heroic interpretive formula, because the death that could happen at any time does not provide any meaning: not in terms of the outcome of the battle, not in terms of the opponent, not in terms of the immortalization of one’s name, not in terms of the homeland which does not take note of it. (Müller 232)

There are echoes here of Nietzsche’s *amor fati*, hardened into a duty to say yes unconditionally. However, Jünger’s “new race of heroes” (Koslowski 56) has little in common with its celebration of the “sovereign individual” that has freed itself from the “morality of custom” (*Sittlichkeit der Sitte*) (Nietzsche, *Genealogy* 36; cf. Kittsteiner, *Nietzsches souveränes Individuum*) and it resists the “herd instinct” of the masses. Like Nietzsche, Jünger abhors the liberal idea of progress and its deheroizing urge to bring all down to the same level. However, Jünger does not offer the alternative of “the sense of being noble, of willing to be for oneself, of being able to be different, of standing alone, and of having to live by one’s own initiative” (Nietzsche, *Good and Evil* §212) – in short, an aristocratic “pathos of distance” (id., *Genealogy* 91). Instead, he goes one step further than the liberal myth of modernity and offers an extremist one, in which the heroic sacrifice is generalized as a sign of unlimited readiness to work and fight.

Jünger’s writings from *In Stahlgewittern* to *Der Arbeiter* represent the nationalist version of heroic modernity. He distanced himself from the National Socialists from 1929 onwards, claiming that the mass movement was not radical enough for him (Berggötz 859). Consequently, scholars debate whether he should be considered an adherent of a “conservative revolution” (Breuer, *Konservative Revolution*), “martial nationalism” (Prümm), “planetary imperialism” (Breuer, *Deutsche Rechte* 127–129), “militarism of

conviction" (*Gesinnungsmilitarismus*, Schwarz 59), "militant modernism" (Brennecke), or "Prussian Leninism" (Schwarz 78-79). Despite this, there is no doubt that his programme of total mobilization was fascist. His invocation of heroic existence differed from the Nazi hero cult mostly in its position regarding race. Hitler and his followers derived the German people's calling to collective heroism from their supposed racial superiority, and they made the contrast with the enemy, 'the Jew', a central element of their propaganda. Jünger, however, rejected the idea of a biologically based racial hierarchy, and anti-Semitism did not play a prominent role in his writings (Breuer 89-90; for a detailed study of the National Socialist concept of heroism see Behrenbeck). However, in their focus on death as a way of demonstrating heroism, which included both the justification of ruthless killing and the call for willingness to sacrifice oneself unconditionally, Jünger and the Nazis were in agreement.

While the effects of Jünger's heroic prose were largely in the journalistic sphere, the Nazis made their version of heroic realism into a bloody reality. Hannah Arendt has observed how totalitarian regimes are not characterized by any specific ideology, but rather by the way in which their ideological claims are taken seriously and followed to their logical conclusions; they are embedded into a "stringent logicity as a guide to action" (Arendt 472). Following this thesis, Jünger's polemics, notwithstanding their divergences from the ideology of Hitler and his disciples, can be read *ex post* as a script for the formation and functioning of the total state, which preceded the implementation of the National Socialist government apparatus and their concrete rearmament and militarization measures but, in a general sense, anticipated their trajectory.

The Nazi hero cult as death cult fuelled imaginings of German greatness; it helped to reframe the nation's defeat in 1918 as a historical responsibility and drew on the yearning for devotion to a heroic leader. With its glorification of battle and its exaggerated image of the enemy, the hero cult also functioned as a perception filter that neutralized possible doubts. This filter prepared the way for the unparalleled brutality perpetrated in the war of extermination and the murder of the Jews, and in the treatment of war prisoners and the civilian population of the conquered regions (Behrenbeck 596). Becoming heroic was not least a matter of becoming hardened.

As the war continued and the likelihood of German defeat became more and more evident, the self-destructive dynamics of the Nazi hero myth also manifested themselves all the more

clearly. Not *in spite of* the fact that the final victory – and with it, the fulfilment of the historical mission – remained unattainable, but precisely *because of this*, the German people were supposed to keep fighting according to the will of their Führer so that they might at least prove their heroism in defeat. For the National Socialists, other than Hegel and Marx, history did not have a fixed trajectory that could be accelerated by the heroic action of 'world historical individuals' or a revolutionary class. Rather, the National Socialists saw history as an endless battle without ceasefire or peace treaties, in which the only alternatives were victory or death, and in which the heroes who had already fallen in battle served to inspire the living to imitate their example. Because heroism was the highest duty for the Germans and was characterized by unconditional willingness to die and kill, any attempt to save one's own skin was considered an undermining of military morale (*Wehrkraftzersetzung*).

However, the meaning that this hero cult was meant to create lost much of its compelling power in the end phase of the war:

The heroic myth of self-sacrifice for the collective was forcibly extended *ad absurdum* to its logical conclusion, without tying the sacrificed to a value that was unavailable. As an interpretation of the meaning of life experiences it became unattractive, as an aid for dealing with death experiences it appeared unsuitable. The paradigm of the heroic individual death did not prove successful in the face of a sustained, mass-scale life-threatening situation. Absolutization as collective sacrifice went against the pragmatic desire of the people to survive. (597)

With the victory of the Allied forces, this heroism, which was already stretched to its limits, collapsed; the only element that was preserved in the post-war period was the idea of sacrifice, which transformed from a heroic demand into a plaintive self-description (the sacrificial victim). Post-war Germans did not want to be heroes any more, and instead they saw themselves as the victims of the victorious powers as well as of the Nazis, whom they felt had deceived them and who, of course, were always the other, never oneself or one's family.

According to Kittsteiner's epochal categorization, heroic modernity ended in West Germany in 1945, apart from the occasional attempts to revive it that lasted into the 1950s. In East Germany by contrast, as in the other states of the Soviet bloc, it persisted, though deeply fractured, until

1989. The realization of socialism also required the mobilization of heroic forces, with the help of terrorist means when necessary. However, the socialist hero cult stood not under the auspices of a final battle declared historically necessary. Instead, it reacted to the forced industrialization within the global economic and ideological rivalry between East and West. In spite of the forcibly accelerated armament production and a degree of militarization of everyday life that was considerably rife in the East than in the West, the prototypical hero of Real Socialism during the Cold War years was not the soldier, but the worker. Heroic modernity of the Eastern variety was fractured insofar as it coupled heroic voluntarism with historical determinism:

On the one hand history was hostile, and it was necessary to confront it heroically. On the other hand its conformity to rules – only recognizable through Marxist-Leninist science – filled the heroes with devout assurance. (Kittsteiner, *Gebrochene Heroisierung* 455)

In East Germany, the historical break created by Nazism could not be completely smoothed over, even if the official historiography attempted to dialectically categorize it as a precondition for the foundation of the socialist state on German soil.

Kittsteiner's periodization, drawing on the philosophy of history, interprets heroic modernity above all as a response to the collapse of teleological concepts of the future. The radicalized experience of the contingency of a meaningless historical process elicited either stoic-enduring or militant heroisms, which after the First World War were met with particular resonance in Germany and became radicalized into a totalitarian syndrome of fighting and sacrifice. This 'heroism gone haywire', which summoned each and every German to military heroism in order to set in motion a racist politics of destruction, could not be halted by its own power even when the military superiority of the Allied powers was unmistakable and any attempt to continue the fight was paramount to self-destruction. This logic of escalation and one-upmanship is what made the Nazi mobilization of the heroic a modern phenomenon, rather than a pre or anti-modern behaviour pattern. Kittsteiner then interprets heroic modernity as a temporary deviation from the "evolutive modernity" that preceded it and emerged once again after its demise – a modernity sustained by a belief in progress based on the economic dynamics of the world market (id., *Stufen der Moderne* 53).

The limitation of this model stems from its narrow focus on German history, which ignores

the temporal disparities and contrary developments in other countries and parts of the world. In the victorious nations of the Western Bloc, there was no sign of an abandonment of military heroism after the end of World War II. The fallen soldiers and the veterans of the 'good war' could be counted among the nation's heroes and included in an unbroken military tradition without any difficulty. In the USA, the UK and France, heroic modernity had not assumed as excessive a form as in Germany, but it also ended in these countries much less abruptly and it lives on in a diluted fashion today. For the former colonies, on the other hand, heroic modernity only entered into play with the national struggles for independence in the 1950s and 1960s, as is reflected in the numerous anti-colonial hero figures from this time.

## Deheroizing modernity

It is hardly surprising that there was initially little desire for hero stories in West Germany in the early post-war period. After the collapse of Nazism and its ideology in 1945, the idea of the heroic in general seemed contaminated. Even the remembrance of those who had died in the war and the mass extermination campaigns could hardly be integrated into a hero cult: a retroactive heroization of those killed by the Nazis was improbable in Germany in any case. The former perpetrators, in turn, had been so morally discredited as faithful servants of a criminal regime that they were not suitable material for becoming posthumous heroes. Instead, they were recognized under a generalized category of "victims of war and dictatorship" and the Day of Commemoration of Heroes (*Heldengedenktage*) of the Nazi period was renamed the People's Day of Mourning (*Volkstrauertag*; cf. Kaiser). Any contention revolved around the issue of how to honour the men and women who had been executed for their participation in the resistance. To some, they were symbolic of the survival of moral integrity, and yet, as heroes who had tragically failed, they seemed at the same time to demonstrate the futility of acting against the regime and to reaffirm the choice of the ordinary German to go along with it passively. Others flatly condemned them as traitors to their country (cf. Baur). In general, during the economic miracle and the manic eagerness to rebuild, there was little enthusiasm for hearing about the past war and its heroes. More appealing were civilian forms of proving oneself, such as sports, with



the most prominent example being the ‘heroes of Bern’, the members of the national football team who secured the 1954 World Cup victory for West Germany.

Opposing these symbols of national greatness (at first deeply yearned for, and later reclaimed) were the ambiguous, contradictory hero figures that Georg Baselitz presented in a series of large-format artworks in the 1960s, which seemed like the phantoms of the past that had been so painstakingly buried. The series, which was exhibited for the first time in Hamburg in 1973 as a group of works entitled *Ein neuer Typ* (A New type), evokes in a provocative fashion the brokenness of the old type of hero:

Their figures, always male, claim a clear position of dominance in the image, but the sparse formats force them into the restriction of narrow boundaries; the costumes, attributes, and landscapes suggest historical events, but compositionally they are completely dehistoricized; their bodies, frequently endowed with too-small heads, are of powerful vitality, yet swaying and with awkward unease the figures seem trapped within themselves; their bearing is martial only at the first glance, ultimately their visual existence is defined by woundedness, uncertainty, and powerlessness. (Fleckner 51)

Such damaged heroes are not suitable for memorial calendars and representative spaces of remembrance, nor for serving as icons of political protest. In Baselitz’s forceful images, heroic modernity reaches its aesthetic end point. The task of breaking free of this was left to another aesthetic vision, where, in the medium of literature, heroes and their injuries could be left behind with ironic ease.

No one has observed the post-war German abandonment of the excesses of heroism more acutely or welcomed it more emphatically than Hans Magnus Enzensberger. In his essays, he sketches another modernity that is unlike the one that Weber calls us to endure heroically, and unlike the imperative of mobilization that Jünger heeds. To describe the aggregate condition of the present, Enzensberger chooses not the metallic hardness of the “steel-hard casing” or the “Storm of Steel”, but the metaphor of “purée” (Enzensberger, *Konsequenz*).<sup>8</sup> While this produces a notable “yearning for the definite”, the amorphous consistency cannot be mastered with perseverance and a “pathos of decisiveness”: “One cannot fight the porridge to the bitter end – it is too yielding; one cannot refute it – it

is too tough; one cannot get rid of it – it is too voluminous. But one does not die from porridge.” There is thus no more a call for self-sacrifice than there is for other rigid principles. Enzensberger recommends to his compatriots instead the “joys of inconsistency”, and he defends normality and praises mediocrity and opportunism as civilizational accomplishments (13, 11, 15, 27, 18; id., *Normality*; id., *Mediocrity and Delusion*). As written by Enzensberger in the early 1980s, uncompromising heroes, unable and unwilling to do anything by half measures, led the world to the brink of the abyss, and the “only chance to survive” henceforth consists of a completely unheroic practice of muddling through:

Bad times for charismatic hero-patriarchs and true Führer figures. Fortunately Really Great Men are nowhere to be found. World politics increasingly resemble a repair shop in which worried mechanics, bent over sputtering engines, scratch their heads and ponder how they could make their clunkers roadworthy again. (The bills are correspondingly high.) Alexander the Great would be as out of place here as Napoleon or Stalin. (id., *Konsequenz* 19–20)

At the end of his programmatic essay on the *Stages of Modernity* (*Stufen der Moderne*) from 2003, Kittsteiner leaves open the question of whether deheroization will be permanent, or whether “a new ‘heroism’ unfolding in the framework of other cultures and religions” is coming into being after 9/11, possibly as a reaction to the subjectless violence of the unfettered world market (Kittsteiner, *Stufen der Moderne* 53). In any case, the end of heroic modernity is not, for him, synonymous with the beginning of a post-heroic era; one would search in vain for the descriptor ‘post-heroic’ in the writings of this historian who died in 2008 (the same is true, as it happens, for the writings of Enzensberger). He makes it clear that there have always been heroes and that they continue to exist, even outside of his epochal category that is based only on Germany. Kittsteiner vehemently disagrees with the idea that not just the heroic version of modernity, but modernity as a whole has worn itself out. Against those who proclaim the era of fragmented postmodernity, he holds fast to the vision of the unity of history and argues for a new “great narrative”, in which capital is the automatic subject (the world market as a restored world spirit). Because it makes do without teleological backing, this narrative should, he thinks, also be able to do without the justification of human sacrifice

as collateral damage of progress and without the heroic appeals connected to it (id., *Fragmentierung der Geschichte*).

By understanding heroic modernity as a deviation, Kittsteiner implicitly draws on the line of argument created by Hegel, which starts from the fundamental antiquatedness of heroes in modern society and sees them as unavoidable only in periods of war and crisis. Hegel demonstrated this in the context of the institution of law, which embeds the actions of the individual within a comprehensive system of rules. The deheroizing dynamics can, however, also be shown for other processes that are constitutive of modernity, such as democratic participation, marketization, mechanization, the weakening of the individual in mass society, and the erosion of traditional models of masculinity.

But this does not mean that heroes disappear. Quite the contrary: they may intrude into the present erratically as relics of bygone eras, but the heroic formula has proven flexible enough to hold its own today. The figures change and there continues to be no lack of replacements. They may disturb the post-heroic order, but it is precisely the excessive demands of this order that maintain the need for hero stories.

Hero figures, new and revived, populate the worlds of comics, films, and computer games, and competitive sports also deliver a constant supply of new personnel. Rescuers during catastrophes are declared heroes, as are peace and human-rights activists and whistle-blowers. Admirers revere political freedom fighters such as Nelson Mandela, Václav Havel, Mahatma Gandhi and the anonymous Tank Man who stood alone against the approaching tanks in Tiananmen Square in Beijing in 1989. What is notable about this new humanist heroism is the way that it is no longer linked to fulfilment of duty or loyalty; rather, the new heroes are characterized by nonconformity and insubordination. Heroic courage becomes civic courage. This is paralleled with the democratization and banalization of the heroic. In the end, anyone can become a hero – even if only for the brief “fifteen minutes of fame” conjured up by Andy Warhol to describe the possibilities of the era of mass media. One can view this critically as a trivialization, but one can also see in it a healing detoxification of the heroic: letting some of the air out of overinflated hero figures and ironically playing with their symbols is a more humane approach than dispensing exhortations to heroically “stay the course”.

However, with the rise of populist leaders, another heroic type is returning to the political stage: the loud-mouthed lout who takes the spotlight in order to rally the establishment to clean

out the national Augean stables and lead the country to new greatness. Not a father figure who embodies the authority of the law, but the ring-leader of a horde of brothers who rise up against the legally established authorities because they are not authoritarian enough for him. This figure invokes a violent world in which strength is all that matters and only those who show no mercy have a chance to come out on top. To his adherents, he promises not safety and prosperity, but emotional venting: whoever follows him can let out their feelings with impunity on those who are weaker. The posturing of these folk heroes draws its inspiration from the mafia film: the offensive display of one's own wealth, a habitus somewhere between that of a business tycoon, a people's tribune, and a military commander, as well as aggressive machismo with sexualized masculine posturing meant to signal – not just to women – that the patron can do whatever he wants.

These figures cannot be dismissed as anachronisms any more than the heroes of civic courage can. Rather, it is in such antagonistic hero models, and even more in the collision of heroic and post-heroic principles, that the conflicts and fault lines of contemporary modernity are rendered visible.

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<sup>1</sup> The subheading is borrowed from Früchtli, *Das unver-schämte Ich* 67. Additionally, the following discussion has been greatly enriched by Früchtli's readings of Hegel.

<sup>2</sup> Marianne Weber quotes Jörg von Kapher, a student of Weber's: “He was realistic [*sachlich*] through and through. The full heroism of realism which presumably is the heroism of our age, came alive in him. And that is why his *Sachlichkeit* was such an inexhaustible experience. That is why his practical discussions, his lectures were like works of art – not in form, but in their essence. [...] The important thing was not what he said about a subject, but the subject itself seemed to come before us in its inexhaustibility, and he was its interpreter” (Weber, *A Biography* 662–663).

<sup>3</sup> Published in English as part of the collection *Dawn and Decline* (1978), from which the passage below is quoted.

<sup>4</sup> The term can be traced back to Werner Best, who defines the corresponding attitude as “affirmation of fighting a lost battle for a lost cause”: “What counts is fighting well, not the ‘good cause’ and the success” (Best 152). For more on this trope, see Merlio.

<sup>5</sup> The following discussion draws on reflections that I have previously published elsewhere; see Bröckling.

6 The cited passage is not included in the original version of the mobilization essay published in 1930.

7 On Jünger's transformation of the image of the hero, see also Gamper.

8 Enzensberger's essay "Das Ende der Konsequenz" was first published in the 1982 collection *Politische Brosamen*. The central metaphor of the original German essay is the image of 'purée' (*Püree*) respectively 'porridge' (*Brei*), describing a general state of intellectual mediocrity and complacency in 1980s Germany. While the collection has been translated into English as *Political Crumbs* (1990), the English volume does not contain a direct translation of this particular essay but replaces it with a revised version entitled "Second Thoughts on Consistency". This version conveys the core idea of the original but drops the metaphor of 'purée' entirely. Passages from the original 1982 essay which are not included in the 1990 translation are therefore quoted here in a translation by the author.

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