

German Forests as a National Institution: Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl, *Land und Leute* [*Land and People*] (1854/61)

Abstract

Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl (1832-1897) was a folklorist who felt that the German people and the land were intrinsically connected to each other. Between 1851 and 1863 he published three books that, together with an 1869 supplement, became known as *The Natural History of the German People*. This work was very popular in the last third of the nineteenth century. In this chapter from *Land and People* (1854) titled “Field and Forest,” Riehl explains how German authenticity can be found in the countryside. The text reflects Riehl’s accessible, journalistic style, and demonstrates his belief that the natural landscape, with its infinite variations, had to be preserved and protected in order for the German character to thrive. Also noteworthy is Riehl’s confidence that open access to the forests was one of the greatest freedoms Germans could enjoy. In the 6th edition of this work (1867), Riehl wrote: “Germany has a greater future of social freedom than England, because Germany has saved its open forests. ... From this German sylvan freedom, which stands out so strangely from our otherwise modern condition, pours forth a deep influence on the customs and character of all classes.”

Source

“Field and Forest”

The political observer who wishes to understand the intimate connection between a country and its people may well start with a superficial survey of the external aspects of a country. He sees before him mountain and valley, field and forest – such familiar contrasts that one scarcely notices them any longer; and yet they are the explanation of many subtle and intimate traits in the life of the people. A clever schoolmaster could string a whole system of folklore on the thread of mountain and valley, field and forest. I will be content to invite further meditation by some thoughts on field and forest, the *tame* and *wild* cultivation of our soil.

In Germany this contrast still exists in all its sharpness, as we still have a real forest. England, on the contrary, has practically no really free forest left – no forest which has any social significance. This, of necessity, occasions at the very outset a number of the clearest distinctions between German and English nationality.

In every decisive popular movement in Germany the forest is the first to suffer. A large part of the peasants live in continual secret feud with the masters of the forest and their privileges; no sooner is a spark of revolution lighted, then, before everything else, there flares up among these people “the war about the forest.” The insurgent rural proletariat can raise no barricades, can tear down no royal palaces, but, instead, lay waste the woodland of their masters; for in their eyes this forest is the fortress of the great lord in comparison with the little unprotected plot of ground of the small farmer. As soon as the power of the State has conquered the rebellious masses, the first thing it proceeds to do is to restore the forest to its former condition and again to put in force the forest charters which had been torn up. This spectacle, modified in accordance with the spirit of the age, repeats itself in every century of our history, and it will no doubt be of constant recurrence, always in new forms, for centuries to come.

The preservation, the protection of the forest, guaranteed anew by charter, is at present (1854) once

again a question of the day, and in German legislative assemblies in recent years weighty words have been uttered in favor of the forest from the point of view of the political economist. Thus it is again becoming popular to defend the poor much-abused forest. The forest, however, has not only an economic, but also a social-political value. He who from liberal political principles denies the distinction between city and country should also, after the English model, seek to do away with the distinction between the field and the forest. Wherever common possession of the forest continues to exist side by side with private possession of the field, there will never be any real social equality among the people. In the cultivation of the soil the forest represents the aristocracy; the field represents the middle class.

The concessions made by the different governments in the matter of forest-clearing, of the preservation of game, the free use of the forest, etc., form a pretty exact instrument with which to measure the triumphant advance of the aristocratic or the democratic spirit. In the year 1848 many a vast tract of forest was sacrificed in order to purchase therewith a small fraction of popularity. Every revolution does harm to the forest, but, provided it does not wish to strangle itself, it leaves the field untouched.

After December 2, 1851, the gathering of fallen leaves in the forest was countenanced in Alsace in order to make the Napoleonic *coup d'etat* popular. It was cleverly thought out; for the never-resting war about the forest can be for a government a mighty lever of influence on a class of the people which is, in general, hard enough to swing round. The concession permitting the gathering of leaves, and manhood suffrage, are one and the same act of shrewd Bonapartist policy, only aimed at different classes. Thus social politics lurks even behind the forest-trees and beneath the rustling red leaves of last autumn — a strange circle of cause and effect! The immoderate cultivation of potatoes contributes not a little to saddle the modern State with the proletariat, but this same cultivation of potatoes, which deprives the small peasant of straw, drives him into the forest to seek for withered leaves in place of straw for his cattle, and thus places again in the hands of the State authorities a means — based upon the strange historic ruin of our forest-franchises — of curbing a powerful part of the proletariat.

Popular sentiment in Germany considers the forest to be the one large piece of property which has not yet been completely portioned off. In contrast to field, meadow, and garden, every one has a certain right to the forest, even if it consists merely in being able to run about in it at pleasure. In the right, or the permission, to gather wood and dry leaves and to pasture cattle, in the distribution of the so-called “loose-wood” from the parish forests, and such acts, lie the historic foundation of an almost communist tradition. Where else has anything of the kind been perpetuated except in the case of the forest? The latter is the root of truly German social conditions. In very truth the forest, with us, has not yet been completely portioned off; therefore every political agitator who wishes to pay out in advance to the people a little bit of “prosperity” as earnest-money of the promised universal prosperity, immediately lays hands upon the forest. By means of the forest, and by no other, you can substantially preach communism to the German peasant. It is well known that the idea of the forest as private property was introduced at a late date and gained ground gradually among the German people.

Forest, pasturage, water, are, in accordance with a primitive German principle of jurisprudence, intended for the common use of all inhabitants of the same district. The old alliteration “wood, wold and water,” has not yet been entirely forgotten by the people. Thus a dim and feeble memory, a well-nigh forgotten legend, looking upon the common claim to general use of the forest as a natural right which had been in force since the beginning of time, confirms the conclusions of the historian, according to whom community of possession of the forest was a true old Germanic idea. Such a line of argument, however, could also bring us to the further conclusion that this community of possession has only once been fully realized — namely, by and in the primeval forest.

In times of excitement men have worked out on paper wonderful arithmetical problems concerning the partition of the soil of the forest into small plots of ground for the poor. Paper is very forbearing, and it looks very idyllic and comfortable to see, carefully calculated before our eyes, how many hundreds of

dear little estates could be made out of the meagre soil of the forest, on which the proletarian could settle down to the contented patriarchal existence of a farmer. Practical attempts along this line have not been wanting, but, instead of diminishing the proletariat, such an increase of small farms only served to augment it all the more; practice is ahead of theory. The people should have thanked God that the forest, almost alone, had not been parceled out; yet, instead, they were ready even to destroy the forest in order to assist the small farmer! In many parts of Germany the poor farmer would starve if the traditional free use of the forest did not form a steady annuity for him. The forest helps in a hundred ways to place the petty farms on a solid foundation; if, therefore, men destroy the forests in order to increase the number of petty farms, they are undermining firmly rooted existences in order, in their place, to plant new ones upon the sand.

It is a source of great comfort for the social politician that, in Germany, the contrast of forest and field yet remains so generally established that we still have a whole group of regular forest lands. A nation which still holds fast to the forest as a common public possession along with the field that is divided off into private property, has not only a present but also a future. Thus in Russia's impenetrable forests, whose inner thickets are, in the words of the poet Mickiewicz, such a deep mystery that they are as little known to the eye of the huntsman as the depths of the sea are known to the eye of the fisherman — in these forests is hidden the future of the great Slav Empire; while in the English and French provinces, where there is no longer a genuine forest, we are confronted by an already partially extinct national life. The United States of America whose society is permeated with materialism, and whose strange national life is made up of a mixture of youthful energy and of torpor, would rapidly hurry on to their destruction if they did not have in the background the primeval forest which is raising up a fresher, more vigorous, race to take the place of the rapidly degenerating inhabitants of the coast-lands. The wilderness is an immense dormant capital in ready cash, possessing which as a basis the North Americans may, for a long time to come, risk the most daring social and political stock-jobbing. But woe to them should they consume the capital itself!

The German forest and the privileges and compulsory service connected with it are a last surviving fragment of the Middle Ages. Nowhere are the ruins of the feudal elements more plainly visible than in the forest regulations; the forest alone assures the rural population — in true medieval style — a subsidy for its existence, untouched by the fury of competition and small-farming.

Therefore do the demagogues so often try to change the war “about” the forest into a war “against” the forest; they know that the forest must first be hewn down before the Middle Ages can be wiped out of Germany, and, on that account, the forest always fares worse than anything else in every popular uprising. For though in our rapidly moving century there is an average interval of fifteen years allowed between one revolution and another, yet a good forest tree requires a much longer time to reach full growth. At least the incalculable loss suffered by our forest property in the year 1848, through lavish waste, plundering, and wanton ruination, has certainly, up to the present time, not been made good by natural means.

In Anhalt-Dessau it was decided, in an ordinance of the year 1852, that all oak-trees standing on private ground should, in accordance with ancient custom, remain the property of the sovereign. In this conception the contrast between forest and field is an absolutely ideal one; even the separate forest tree is in itself still a forest and has forest-rights, just as in localities where all the forests have been cut down the peasants still frequently designate a single remaining tree by the title of their “parish forest.”

The political economists argue that the amount of wood which can be supplied by our present forests is by no means too great for the satisfaction of the demand — that, if anything, it is too small. Those, however, whose enmity to the forest is based on political principles detail to us the yearly increasing substitutes for wood, and point triumphantly to the not far distant time when forests will no longer be needed, when all forest land can be turned into cultivated land, so that every glebe of earth in civilized

Europe shall produce sufficient nourishment for a man. This idea of seeing every little patch of earth dug up by human hands strikes the imagination of every natural man as something appallingly uncanny; it is especially repugnant to the German spirit. When that comes to pass it will be high time for the day of judgment to dawn. Emmanuel Geibel, in his poem *Mythus*, has symbolized this natural aversion to the extreme measures of a civilization which would absorb every form of wild nature. He creates a legend about the demon of steam, who is chained and forced to do menial service. The latter will break his bonds again and with his primitive titanic strength, which has been slumbering in the heart of the world, he will destroy the very earth itself when once the whole ball has been covered with the magic network of the railroads. Before that time all the forests will have been turned into cultivated land.

The advocates of the forest resort to a feeble method of defense when they demand the preservation of the present moderate forest area solely on economic grounds. The social-political reasons certainly weigh quite as heavy. Hew down the forest and you will at the same time destroy the historic *bourgeois* society. In the destruction of the contrast between field and forest you are taking a vital element away from German nationality. Man does not live by bread alone; even if we no longer required any wood we should still demand the forest. The German people need the forest as a man needs wine, although for our mere necessities it might be quite sufficient if the apothecary alone stored away ten gallons in his cellar. If we do not require any longer the dry wood to warm our outer man, then all the more necessary will it be for the race to have the green wood, standing in all its life and vigor, to warm the inner man.

In our woodland villages — and whoever has wandered through the German mountains knows that there are still many genuine woodland villages in the German Fatherland — the remains of primitive civilization are still preserved to our national life, not only in their shadiness but also in their fresh and natural splendor. Not only the woodland, but likewise the sand dunes, the moors, the heath, the tracts of rock and glacier, all wildernesses and desert wastes, are a necessary supplement to the cultivated field lands. Let us rejoice that there is still so much wilderness left in Germany. In order for a nation to develop its power it must embrace at the same time the most varied phases of evolution. A nation over-refined by culture and satiated with prosperity is a dead nation, for whom nothing remains but, like Sardanapalus, to burn itself up together with all its magnificence. The *blasé* city man, the fat farmer of the rich corn-land, may be the men of the present; but the poverty-stricken peasant of the moors, the rough, hardy peasant of the forests, the lonely, self-reliant Alpine shepherd, full of legends and songs — these are the men of the future. Civil society is founded on the doctrine of the natural inequality of mankind.

Indeed, in this inequality of talents and of callings is rooted the highest glory of society, for it is the source of its inexhaustible vital energy. As the sea preserves the vigor of the people of the coast-lands by keeping them in a hardy natural state, so does the forest produce a similar effect on the people of the interior. Therefore since Germany has such a large expanse of interior country, it needs just that much more forest-land than does England. The genuine woodland villagers, the foresters, wood-cutters, and forest laborers are the strong, rude seamen among us landlubbers. Uproot the forests, level the mountains, and shut out the sea, if you want to equalize society in a closet-civilization where all will have the same polish and all be of the same color. We have seen that entire flourishing lands which have been robbed of the protecting forests have fallen prey to the devastating floods of the mountain streams and the scorching breath of the storms. A large part of Italy, the paradise of Europe, is a land which has ceased to live, because its soil no longer bears any forests under the protection of which it might become rejuvenated. And not only is the land exhausted, but the people are, likewise. A nation must die off when it can no longer have recourse to the back-woodsmen in order to gather from them the fresh strength of a natural, hardy, national life. A nation without considerable forest-property is worthy of the same consideration as a nation without requisite sea-coast. We must preserve our forests not only so that our stoves shall not be cold in winter, but also that the pulse of the nation's life shall continue to throb on warmly and cheerfully — in short, so that Germany shall remain German.

The inhabitants of the German woodland villages have almost always a far fresher, more individual, mental stamp than the inhabitants of the villages of the plain. In the latter we find more sleek prosperity side by side with greater degeneracy of morals, than in the former. The inhabitant of the woodland villages is often very poor, but the discontented proletarian dwells far more frequently in the villages of the plain. The latter is more important in an economic sense, the former in a social-political one. The forest peasant is rougher, more quarrelsome, but also merrier than the peasant of the field; the former often turns out a genial rascal, when the dull peasant of the field in like case would have turned into a heartless miser. The preservation or the extinction of ancient popular customs and costumes does not depend so much on the contrast between mountainous-country and flat-country as on that between the woodland and the field, if one includes in the former the heaths, moors, and other wild regions. The forest is the home of national art; the forest peasant still continues through many generations to sing his peculiar song along with the birds of the woods, when the neighboring villager of the plain has long ago entirely forgotten the folk-song. A village without woods is like a city without historical buildings, without monuments, without art-collections, without theatres and music — in short, without emotional or artistic stimulation. The forest is the gymnasium of youth and often the banqueting hall of the aged. Does not that weigh at least as heavy as the economic question of the timber? In the contrast between the forest and the field is manifest the most simple and natural preparatory stage of the multiformity and variety of German social life, that richness of peculiar national characteristics in which lies concealed the tenacious rejuvenating power of our nation.

The century of the pig-tail^[1] possessed no eye for the forest and, in consequence, no understanding of the natural life of the people. Everywhere in the German provinces they removed the princely pleasure-seats from the woody mountains to the woodless fiat country. But then, to be sure, the art of the pig-tail age was almost entirely un-German. For the artists of the pig-tail the forest was too irregular in design, too humpbacked in form, and too dark in color. It was shoved into the background as a flat accessory of the landscape, while, on the contrary, the landscape painters of the preceding great period of art drew the inspiration for their forest pictures from the very depths of the forest solitudes. No painter of Romance origin has ever painted the forest as Ruysdael and Everdingen did; they in their best pictures place themselves right in the midst of the deepest thickets. Poussin and Claude Lorraine have made magnificent studies of the forest, but Ruysdael knows the forest by heart from his childhood, as he knows the Lord's Prayer.

The Frenchified lyric poets of the school of Hagedom and Gleim sing forest-songs, as though they longed after the forest from hearsay. Then, with the resurrected folk-song and the resuscitated Shakespeare, who has poetically explored deeper into the glory of the forest than all others, the English art of gardening, an imitation of the free nature of the forest, reaches Germany. At the same time, in German poetry, Goethe again strikes the true forest-note which he has learned from the folk-song; and from the moment that the forest no longer appears too disorderly for the poets, the coarse, vigorous national life no longer seems to them too dirty and rugged for artistic treatment. The most recent and splendid revival of landscape painting is intimately connected with the renewed absorption of the artist in the study of the forest. We also find that, at the time when Goethe was writing his best songs, Mozart and Haydn were, with equal enthusiasm, composing music for the folk-song, as if they had “learned it listening to the birds” — that is to say, to the birds in the woods, not, like one of the new branch schools of romantic miniature poets, to the birds singing their sickly songs in gilded cages in a parlor.

The forest alone permits us civilized men to enjoy the dream of a personal freedom undisturbed by the surveillance of the police. There at least one can ramble about as one will, without being bound to keep to the common patented high-road. Yes, there a staid mature man can even run, jump, climb to his heart's content, without being considered a fool by that old stickler, Dame Propriety. These fragments of ancient Germanic sylvan liberty have happily been preserved almost everywhere in Germany. They no longer exist in neighboring lands which have greater political freedom but where annoying fences very

soon put an end to an unfettered desire to roam at will. What good does the citizen of the large North American cities get out of his lack of police surveillance in the streets, if he cannot even run around at will in the woods of the nearest suburb because the odious fences force him, more despotically than a whole regiment of police, to keep to the road indicated by the sign-post? What good do the Englishmen get out of their free laws, since they have nothing but parks enclosed by chains, since they have scarcely any free forest left? The constraint of customs and manners in England and North America is insupportable to a German. As the English no longer even know how to appreciate the free forest, it is no wonder that they require a man to bring along a black dress-suit and a white cravat, in addition to the ticket-money, in order to obtain entrance to the theatre or a concert. Germany has a future of greater social liberty before her than England, for she has preserved the free forest. They might perhaps be able to root up the forests in Germany, but to close them to the public would cause a revolution.

From this German sylvan liberty which peeps forth so strangely from amidst our other modern conditions, flows a deeper influence upon the manners and character of every class of the people than is dreamed of by many a stay-at-home. On the other hand, in a thousand different characteristics in the life of our great cities we perceive how far the real forest has withdrawn from these cities, how alienated from the forest their inhabitants have grown to be. One sees, of late, much more green in our large German cities; walks on the ramparts and municipal parks and public gardens have been laid out; open squares, too, have been decorated with grass plots, bushes and flowers. In no former age has the art of gardening done so much to enhance the picturesque charm of our cities as at the present day. I do not by any means wish to underestimate the high value of such public grounds, but they are something entirely different from the free forest; they cannot possibly form any equivalent for it, and the forest unhappily withdraws farther and farther away from the city. Art and nature have both an equally just claim upon us; but art can never make up to us for the loss of nature, not even though it were an art which takes nature itself as the material upon which to work, like the art of gardening.

The free forest and the free ocean have, with profound significance, been called by poetry the *sacred* forest and the *sacred* ocean, and nowhere does this sacredness of virgin nature produce a more intense effect than when the forest rises directly out of the sea. The real, sacred forest is where the roar of the breaking waves mingles with the rustling of the tree-tops in one loud hymn; but it is also where, in the hushed mid-day silence of the German mountain forests, the wanderer, miles away from every human habitation, hears nothing but the beating of his own heart in the church-like stillness of the wilderness.

Yet even in the free, sacred forest we find some splendid examples of the humor of the police. On the Island of Rügen, when one enters what is celebrated throughout northern Germany as a sort of primeval beech-forest of the Granitz,^[2] from the trunk of a huge tree a sign-board meets the wanderer's gaze, bearing an inscription stating that in this forest one may go about only if accompanied by a forest-keeper of His Highness, the Prince of Putbus, at five silver groschen the hour. To enjoy the awe of a primeval forest in the company of a member of the forest-police, at five silver groschen the hour — that only a born Berliner is capable of!

It is owing to a strange confusion of ideas that many people consider the uprooting of the forests in the Germany of the nineteenth century to be still a reclaiming of the soil, an act of inner colonization, by means of which the uprooted piece of ground is for the first time given over to cultivation. For us the forest is no longer the wilderness out of which we must force our way into cleared land, but it is a veritable magnificent safeguard of our most characteristic national life. Therefore it was that I called it the wild cultivation of the soil in contrast to the tame cultivation of the field. In our day, to root out the soil of the forest no longer means making it arable; it simply means exchanging one form of cultivation for another. He who estimates the value of the culture of the soil merely according to the percentage of clear profit accruing from it, will wish to clear forest-land in order to make it arable. We, however, do not estimate the various forms of cultivation of the soil only by the standard of their money value, but also by that of their ideal worth. The fact that our soil is cultivated in so many various ways is one of the chief

causes of our wealth of individual social organizations, and therefore of the vitality of our society itself.

The forest represents the aristocratic element in the cultivation of the soil. Its value consists more in what it represents than in what it produces and in the profit which it yields. The rich man alone can afford to manage and cultivate a forest; indeed, often the richest is not rich enough to do so, and therefore it is just that the State, as the sum total of the country's wealth, should be the first and largest forest proprietor. To cultivate the forest solely in the interest of the contemporary generation is a wretched sort of copse-wood business; large trees are raised for future generations. Therefore the forest is, primarily, a subject of national economy and, secondarily, one of domestic economy. In the forest the interests of the entire nation must be considered; it must be, as far as possible, equally distributed over the whole land, for its treasures interfere with the facilities of traffic. These are thoughts which might make any genuine forest proprietor proud of his own particular forest.

For the opponents of the conservation of large landed estates the forest will always be the worst stumbling-block, for it will never be possible to establish an even apparently successful forestry on a small scale. Where agriculture is concerned, the advantage of small farming is open to discussion; but he who would not see the pitifulness of forestry on a small scale must hold his hands before both eyes. In proportion as forestry is carried on in a small way, that is to say, in so far as it shall be exclusively operated so as to obtain the largest possible income out of the smallest possible capital and with the shortest possible delay, the forest loses its historic stamp, its cultural influence on the social and esthetic education of the nation, and on the characteristic distinctions of society.

Germany is not separated into field and woodland in such a manner that one part is dedicated almost exclusively to forestry and the other part to agriculture. Rather does the contrast between field and forest exist everywhere; it interferes with the natural division into mountainous and flat country, and thus divides and subdivides the soil of the entire German empire in a fashion of which no other country of Europe can boast. In addition, agriculture and forestry are present in every legitimate form possible. On German soil the whole scale is run through, and we have the most variegated examples all the way from spade-husbandry up to the largest private estates; in the forms of our forest economy we are much more divided than in the forms of our political economy. This unexampled multiplicity of ways of cultivating the soil is not only typical of the wonderfully rich organization of our social conditions, but it also furnishes the most natural basis for the peculiar suppleness, many-sidedness, and receptivity of German mental-culture and civilization.

Through the recently ever-increasing artificial conversion of the proud beech and oak into short-lived pine-forests, which is due to necessity or to a short-sighted financial policy, Germany has lost at least as much of the peculiar character lent to it by its forests as through the complete uprooting of tremendous tracts of woodland. In the old forest ordinances especial weight is, with good reason, laid upon the protection of the oak-trees. Even the German Reichstag, as early as the sixteenth century, was occupied with the "art of economizing the woods." There are a few kinds of forestry which, to a certain extent, permit the parceling off of the forest — as, for example, there are localities where forestry and agriculture are carried on, turn and turn about, on the same land; or others where the practice prevails of stripping the bark off the oak-trees, a process which yields a quick monetary return — these few kinds of forestry, however, which are favorable to the parceling off of the woodland into small estates, quite destroy the conception of the forest as we understand it. An oak-forest like the above, which, as soon as the trees begin to grow really strong and sturdy, stretches forth toward the wanderer only slim, bark-stripped trunks with withered remnants of leaves, interspersed with rank miserable meadows-trees, with hazel-nut thickets and dog-rose bushes, a piece of woodland in which husbandry and forestry are completely jumbled, is actually no longer a real forest. The most valuable kind of timber furnished by the massive trunks of the oaks and beeches and for which there is absolutely no substitute elsewhere — this most specific treasure of the forest can be obtained only when the forest is managed by a rich corporation which can afford to wait a hundred years for the interest on its capital.

The olden times gauged correctly this aristocratic character of the forest when they chose it as a privileged exercise-ground where princes might take their amusement, and when they ennobled the chase; although, seen by the light of a philosophic student's lamp, there is nothing very noble about it when a court, shining with the smoothest polish that civilization can give, withdraws from time to time into the barbarity of the primeval forest, and in faithful imitation of the rude life of the hunter spells out again, as it were, the first beginnings of civilization. For no title did the German princes of the Empire struggle more bitterly than for that of "Master of the Imperial Hunt." On Frankish-German soil royalty put its centralizing power to the test first and most decisively in the establishment of royal forest preserves. The king's woods from that time on stood under a higher and more efficient protection than the Common Law could have afforded. A more strikingly aristocratic prerogative than that of the forest preserves is inconceivable, and yet it is owing to this privilege that Germany still looks so green, that our mountains are not bare of trees like those of Italy, that country and people have not died off and dried up, that, in fine, such vast magnificent tracts of forest could, as a whole complete in itself, later pass over into the hands of the state.

This aristocratic love of the forest, however, went hand in hand with the forest-tyranny of the Middle Ages. The forest-trees and the game were treated with more consideration than the corn-fields and the peasants. When a cruel master wished to punish a peasant sorely he chased the game into his fields, and the hunt which was to slay the game trampled down what the latter had not devoured. The war about the forest violently forced upon the peasant the question as to whether or not the ancient privileges of the aristocracy could be justified before God and man. We possess a poem by G. A. Bürger which contrasts the naked rights of labor with the historic rights of rank in so sharp a fashion that, if it should be published today, it would undoubtedly be confiscated as communist literature. This ancient specimen of modern social-democratic poetry, characteristically, for those times, takes its theme from the "War about the Forest;" it bears the title: *The Peasant to His Most Serene Tyrants*. Because the princely huntsman has driven the peasant through the latter's own down-trodden corn-field, followed by the halloo of the hunt, the peasant in the poem suddenly hits upon the dangerous question, "Who are you, Prince?"

The horrible punishments with which poachers and trespassers against the forest were threatened in the Middle Ages can be explained only when we see in them an outlet to the bitterness of two parties at war about the forest. In this war martial law was declared. The poacher felt that he was acting within his rights, like the pirate; neither of them wished to be considered a common thief. Above, I compared the forest with the sea; the former barbarous punishment of pirates likewise runs parallel with the cruel chastisement of trespassers against the forest. The latter still frequently thinks he is only getting back again by cunning and force a proprietorship that was snatched from him by force. There are in Germany whole villages, whole districts, where, even at the present day, poaching and trespassing against the forest are sharply distinguished from common crimes which disgrace the perpetrator. To catch a hare in their traps is, for these peasants, no more dishonorable than it is for a student to cudgel the night-watchman. Therein lurks the ancient hidden thought of the "War about the Free Forest." In the forest the turbulent country-folk in times of excitement can attack the state or the individual large landholder in his most sensitive spot. We saw how, in the year 1848, extensive tracts of forest were laid waste — not plundered — in accordance with a well concocted plan. The trees were hewn down and the trunks were intentionally left to lie and rot, or the forest was burnt down in order, with each day's quota of burned forest, to extort the concession of anew "popular demand." The old legend of the "War about the Forest" had become, once more, really live history.

And this eternal trouble-maker, the forest, which, however, as we have noticed, always gets the worst of it in every disturbance, is at the same time a powerful safeguard for historic customs. Under its protection not only an ancient nationality but also the oldest remains of historic monuments have been preserved to us. Many of the most remarkable old names have been retained for us in the appellations of

the forest districts. When German philology has finished investigating the names of villages and cities, it will turn to the names of the forest districts — which, for the most part, have changed far less than those of the districts of the plain — as to a new and rich source of knowledge. It is almost without exception under the shelter of the forest-thickets that have been conserved until the present day the town-walls of the nations which, in pre-historic times, occupied our provinces, as well as the graves and sacrificial places of our forefathers, which are our oldest monuments. And while, in the name of a purely manufacturing civilization, it has been proposed to destroy our German forests, they alone have guarded for us in their shade the earliest speaking witnesses of national industry. In the mountain-forests of the middle Rhine one often finds large dross-heaps on sequestered hill tops, far from brooks and water courses. These are the places where stood the primeval “forest smithies,” whose forges were perhaps worked with the hand or the foot, and of which our heroic legends sing; these are the scenes of the first rude beginnings of our iron industry which, since then, has developed so mightily. Thus the oldest information that we possess on the subject of our German manufacturing industry starts, like our entire civilization, in the forest.

For centuries it was fitting that progress should advocate exclusively the rights of the field; now, however, it is fitting that progress should advocate the rights of the wilderness *together with* the rights of the cultivated land. And no matter how much the political economist may oppose and rebel against this fact, the folklorist economist must persevere, in spite of him, and fight also for the rights of the wilderness.

NOTES

[1] The period marking the transition from Rococo to Classicism, c. 1760-1790.

[2] Hilly woodland in the eastern part of the Island of Rügen.

Source of English translation: Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl, “Field and Forest,” in Kuno Francke and W. G. Howard, eds., *The German Classics*, vol. 8. New York: German Publication Society, 1914, pp. 410–27. Translated by Frances H. King. Available online at:

<https://archive.org/details/germanclassicsof08franuoft/page/410>

Source of original German text: Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl, *Die Naturgeschichte des Volkes als Grundlage einer deutschen Social-Politik*. Volume 1, *Land und Leute* (1854). Fifth improved edition. Stuttgart: J.G. Cotta, 1861, pp. 42–59.

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