

# Heinrich Mann, “Address in Celebration of the Constitution at the Dresden State Opera” (August 11, 1923)

## Abstract

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August 11, the day on which the Weimar Constitution was signed by President Ebert in 1919, was a national holiday in the Weimar Republic. On August 11, 1923, the writer Heinrich Mann, who was best known for his socially critical novels (and was the older brother of the writer Thomas Mann), gave a speech at the constitutional celebration at the Dresden State Opera. Unlike his brother, Heinrich Mann had rejected the First World War and supported the democratic movement in Germany from the outset. In his speech, which he delivered while Germany was unsettled by hyperinflation and the occupation of the Ruhr, he warned of the threats to which the republic and its constitution were already exposed just four years after its creation. According to Mann, these included, in particular, “warmongering nationalism” and the “unfettered power of capital.” He criticizes the government under Chancellor Wilhelm Cuno as weak and incompetent and accuses it of paving the way for the “dictatorship of the greediest”, by which he meant above all the Ruhr industrialists.

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*Most esteemed attendees, dear friends!*

We are here to celebrate, and the hour is critical. We are here to celebrate the constitution and yet we do not know what has become of it in the meantime. What will become of it in future? 1919 was a long time ago.

Let us try to recall, if we are still able, what the constitution was originally intended to be. After all, back in 1919 it embodied ideals. The revolution, whether it was quite voluntary or not, in any case freed our minds. Many things that neither the ruling class nor the great majority had ever considered especially urgent suddenly seemed possible and obvious. For example, the unification of Germany, without any excessive concessions to particularities or special rights. Or internal freedom, which can only mean that governance should be in the interest of the many, and never again to the advantage and privilege of the few.

In the interest of the majority, that is, peaceful, without martial attitudes. In the interest of the majority, that is, equalizing, including property. In Weimar, strict socialism was not the driving force, but social consciousness played its part. People opposed dangerous accumulations of capital. “Clear the way for the capable,” and don’t deliberately place obstacles such as privileges or all-consuming wealth in their path. That was the spirit of the Weimar Constitution, which is why we celebrate it. It was never the spirit of republican plutocracy.

The spirit of the constitution has been misunderstood, denied and disfigured; it has now nearly been purged from it. Once again, war-mongering nationalism is on the rise and extends to the seat of power, which now originates in the people and is accountable to them. Capital has once again become truly overwhelming. Its thirst for power now grasps for each one of us, as for the state itself. That is why, now more than ever, we are celebrating the constitution, which sought to eliminate this, to liberate and to disseminate humaneness. It was unable to do so, but one day it will be.

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What are the reasons given by the reactionary forces? They will cite first one I will cite as well: Outward oppression by neighbors. If a country is not even free of foreign armies, it cannot be inwardly free. This is absolutely true, even if more profound circumstances underlie this obvious fact.

The second main reason is the prevailing hardship. How far will it go? A people whose children are dying of starvation does not have the mental energy to defend itself against the political injustices inflicted upon it. The greatest injustice, after all, is that children are dying. If no one is certain to live another day, the few excessively rich and powerful who seek to impose their will on everyone else feel all the more confident.

Incidentally, the psychological exhaustion that accompanied the war continues to affect people. It exists everywhere, but more nakedly in the vanquished countries. "What do I care for my spiritual well-being?" asks a nation, even one that has not been conquered, if some down-to-earth fellow promises bread and begins by taking away its freedom in exchange.

Among an industrial people, it is not a political dictator but the great industrialists who exploit the general exhaustion and gently—or not so gently—take possession of the entire economy, the state itself and, beyond it, the majority's habits of thought.

Dear friends, this is the most unnerving of all our experiences. Coups and revolutions, well, they kill us, or they make us stronger. We shall see. But to be sucked dry like a helpless insect caught in a web?

Horrible. A subjugated, weakened people also loses the remaining blood of poverty drop by drop to a few enterprising individuals, who have grasped the situation and ruthlessly exploit it. Two billion gold marks yearly, as much as we have to pay England and cannot pay, is being squeezed out of us for coal by industrialists in the Ruhr, and that is just the basis for building up their business.

You can purchase the world here for two billion in gold. But you can also buy it with borrowed money and pay it back when it has lost its value. The buyers snatch up the German world piece by piece, let it work for them and send the profits to foreign enterprises. And that's not all! German enterprises, the very ones that German workers have fought for with such dedication, already harbor hostile capital.

Just look at how we are working twofold for foreign countries. First for the victors, which might just be acceptable, for they too have sacrificed and suffered; but second to line the pockets of a few German buyers, expropriators, extractors of substances. And what have they ever sacrificed or suffered? Whom did they vanquish? Oh yes, they vanquished us too.

Dear friends, the dictatorship people speak of is not in the future, and if it does come in name, it need not make any impression upon us, since it is already here; it is the dictatorship of the greediest, and they dictate with no competition. For cold cash is apparently not merely the rarest, but also the hardest, commodity among us nowadays. In the condition in which our country finds itself, no other power counts, not merits, not intellectual leadership, not ability. We have moved beyond that. The weight and force of will of the working masses do not count for much either. In a country where money is scarce, only money has power.

Through our fault, through our most grievous fault! Why did we let this happen? Money otherwise rules only under the opposite conditions, in America, where there is a lot of it, where anyone can hope to make some. There, human hope reigns, if you like, in the form of money. Here, as long as we allow money to rule us, all that reigns is our own despondency.

Let's admit this! Let's pull ourselves together! I prefer not to dwell too long on a few individuals who are basically also not doing well. For if we do not like them because they are too rich, they don't like us either because we are too poor—and it can be no pleasure for them to sense that nothing flourishes under their

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rule but themselves.

The dollar is rising into many millions. The Bolshevism so deeply disdained by our great economic leaders ultimately managed that too. But it knew why, and they know nothing. They have not managed to pay proper wages thus far. This should make exports impossible. But they can always pay as much for the dollar as their kind of economy drives up its value.

Leave them be! Ultimately, they are less culpable than we are. They are simply following their greedy impulses and could not care less about what happens next. We, however, in our totality as a living race busy creating the future, should have the right to different expectations altogether. Do we really have to allow a few capitalist monstrosities that happen to float by to lead us down the most wretched path?

It is obvious that if the interests of wealthy private individuals who call themselves “the economy” were not always preeminent, our state, including the economy, would be in a different position—and our foreign relations would also show us a friendlier face.

How did the entire misfortune with France come about? Of course we are suffering under the unreasonable peace treaty, which is unproductive in every respect, above all in human terms; it allows the people, who are supposed to work for their creditors, no satisfaction or dignity. That is why it is also an economic failure.

It is difficult to honor. If we wished to go some way towards fulfilling its terms, we would need to keep rather than squander our assets, and not allow German property to fall into the hands of exporters. On the contrary, their own property, which is the most important anyway, would have to be seized before all others. But what actually happens? It is seized last, or not at all. As a consequence, property otherwise also avoids the obligations that the good of the state demands.

This is criminal weakness. We are not fraudulent bankrupts; the creditor is mistaken. We

have simply been criminally deprived of our rights. In 1919 we wrote something in the constitution about the nationalization of private economic enterprises, the participation of the German state in these enterprises, and the need at the very least to place natural resources under state supervision. Is this no longer in the constitution in 1923?

Alas! One article of the constitution also demands the protection of small business against excessive burdens and absorption. I notice nothing of the kind. It would be no wonder if all those who have been cheated of their constitutional rights finally joined forces to reclaim them.

The creditor, for his part, sees only: let's sell off the mass cheaply. He prepares the invasion. He waits until there is a national government whose good will appears unassailable. But scarcely do ministers appear in Berlin whom he considers mere agents of the defaulting regreter than he pounces. Now the regreter is off the hook. He is the patriot.

He is supposed to be. There are all kinds of patriots. One kind thinks of his business, another of state and people, of his country's intellectual and economic accomplishments, which are meant to link it peacefully and beneficially with other countries. Of course, there are situations in which, for good or ill, the former type of patriot must cooperate with the latter. Yet one difference remains. The workers now defending the coal mines are doing so to ensure the survival of the country, not in order to depress the percentage of the French share of the pits.

The French invasion is hard in any case and by no means honorable, despite its history, which is certainly not glorious for anyone. But if German nationalism has been on the rise again since the invasion of the Ruhr, we should make no mistake about where responsibility for this and the invasion lies: in illegally

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accumulated capital. True love of country, which might just as well be called love of humanity, requires reflection and legality. But nationalism thrives on injustice and destruction.

Whether the coal mine owners fund the nationalist organizations directly is irrelevant. They remain dependent on those wealthy gentlemen in any case. Nationalism and its organizations could never play the major role they do today. They would be a private affair with no public existence without the foul air that these unnatural excesses of capital spread around them like a pile of corpses; for in fact they are the extinguished power of the people. Nationalism would not exist without the foreign entanglements into which our paradoxical high capitalism casts us; they would not exist without the hardship that makes people capable of anything.

Nationalism is the creature of our weakness, which first dispensed with equalizing property. And that is also when it arrived. It is cheap to shift responsibility for everything onto blind fate and the evil foe, too cheap for these costly times. But certain classes of exhausted, including mentally exhausted, people can just about be convinced that the French want to dismember Germany. Nobody asks how we could have avoided any pretext or lever for their evil intent—assuming it actually exists—or how we should have prevented the evil intent from arising in the first place.

The invasion of the Ruhr, however, is also French weakness. Let us view matters in their proper light! This France, which presents itself as strong and commits acts of violence, is just as beset by weakness as we are. If that is a comfort to us, we have it. France suffers from a waning dedication to liberty, like most peoples at the moment, including our own. France allows a minority of nationalists to force it to commit acts with which neither thinkers nor the working masses agree. And we, too, have been conquered by a minority. It is of the utmost importance that the better spirit of both peoples regains its voice; then they, and not just their big capitalists, will communicate with one another.

The better spirit of each people seeks liberty, which means both internal balance and international justice. Germany's better spirit speaks through the Weimar Constitution. We must learn to listen to it again. Enthusiasm for the Republic was alive in Weimar in 1919. We need to allow it to participate in our public experiences, not just our economic and political hardships. Only enthusiasm for ideas can help us to cope with hardship.

It is no accident that the constitution was instituted in Weimar. Weimar meant that in future, we wish to live according to recognized ideas. We had just left absolutist constraints behind us. We renounced them. Did this simply mean that they were supposed to recapture us straight away under a different name? In place of military absolutism, the unfettered power of capital?

The most serious republicans, the first ones in this country, are disappointed by this republic

—we must concede it—and it would be unfortunate for this republic to lose these friends, of all people. From time to time we hear assurances that the constitution and the political order will be maintained under all circumstances. But it depends upon how we define political order. If someone allegedly responded to the objection “Your Excellency, the Reichstag is against you“ by saying “But the Reichswehr is with me,“ then this type of political order may certainly be safeguarded, but the constitution would be left out in the cold. Should we regard governments that hand over the power, the assets of the nation and the state itself to a few people and walk open-eyed into chaos as constitutional? And should the executive branch of the Reich perhaps be prepared to oppose such governments that wish for the state to be understood as a free republic? It becomes clearer with every passing day that Germany can only continue to exist as a free republic.

Everywhere people are speaking of the threatened disintegration of the country as the ultimate result of a shameless economy—everywhere, to be sure, except where it should be discussed, in the Reichstag.

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Dear friends, anyone who lived through the past three days in the Reichstag experienced a house of ghosts the like of which has never been seen before. A spectral sonata. No theater has yet put on such a tragic grotesque. The chancellor appeared and people shouted "Walking corpse!" and "bankrupt!" Throughout, he maintained a blank expression and continued to speak, telling tall tales and making empty promises. When he began to talk, the dollar was still high, and when he stopped it was even higher. Then another ghost appeared, an imperial minister who had stated during the war "They cannot fly, they cannot swim, they will never come," by which he meant the Americans. This ghost also blathered on and appears to be still alive. To prevent any Communist from speaking, the foreign minister was allowed to chat about the League of Nations, and outside the direst suffering clamored loudly, the final collapse loomed. These are veritable waves of life that cannot possibly reach this locked house. If even a revolutionary speaks, it is stifled here. The workers send delegations, ask to be heard, which however means subordination to this Reichstag. No! Do you know what emanates from this Reichstag? Insane laughter. These ghosts laugh in a pseudo-safety akin to the grave, as if surrounded by an imperial army of twelve million men. Anyone who has experienced this knows: We cannot expect a living word from them, let alone a deed.

But here we would like to speak of the most burning issue and dare to state that in the worst case, we face the collapse of the country, since the social classes whose greed and selfishness have brought us to this place could no longer stop this collapse if it actually occurred. Who can still do so? Only the productive strata, the people, who love their country more than they love foreign businesses. This people must stick together with an iron will in every sense of the word, this trial could then, to be sure, produce its greatest human benefit.

We should celebrate. The spirit of the Weimar Constitution allows for all progress, all human benefit, but forbids us to retreat and lose our humanity.

What else does it come down to but human beings? Is the state perhaps an end in itself, or the economy, or the struggles between different interests that move life along? Everything begins and ends with human beings. The state and the economy are suitable or misguided, depending on whether they encourage or inhibit human beings. Humanity in the sense intended by Weimar, the cultivation of human beings, should be the heart of politics.

If leaders who muster as much determination, singlemindedness and strict dedication to do what is right as we witness year after year serving what is wrong were to prevail, we would go far.

My friends, follow leaders who think in terms of human values and see in you not just a body in need of nourishment, but also the moral essence to which they have devoted themselves. Working people, the thinking man is your best friend. I believe that one day, as has already happened on earth, this country and this part of the world will be guided, quietly and non-violently, by the people who know the most.

Until that time, to be sure, we all need to become wiser. By then, the decisive class struggle that now lies before us should be in the past. We must have survived the retribution and the convulsions, the violent abolition of violence. Then it will be possible to imagine clearer air and human beings who are not wolves to each other, but perhaps already somewhat more human.

And even today in our daily struggles all of us should and can already seek to hold onto what matters for human beings and their future. The objective is fairmindedness, rationality, purity. The objective is peace.

From time to time, torches are lit along the still-dark path that leads there. The generations pass them to one another. The Weimar Constitution is one of those torches. Let us hold it high.

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