

## Thomas Mann, “Culture and Socialism” (1927)

### Abstract

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Thomas Mann (1875-1955), one of Germany’s best-known writers and intellectuals, was neither an immediate supporter of the Weimar Republic nor one of its obvious opponents among the conservatives. His ambivalence about mass society derived from a tension between his aesthetic sensibilities and his political ideals—a tension which this essay confronts. In 1918, he published *Reflections of an Unpolitical Man* [*Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen*], which sparked the debate to which this essay responds. In August 1927, the *Münchener Neueste Nachrichten* published an article titled “Metamorphosis: The ‘Reflections of an Unpolitical Man’ Then and Now” by Arthur Hübscher. A series of replies between Hübscher and Mann followed through 1928, and the exchange received wide press coverage in Germany. “Culture and Socialism” reveals Mann’s political development, as he reluctantly acknowledges that socialists and the working class now embodied German intellectual ideals in practice more than did conservative traditionalists.

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The war was lost. But what most shattered the German’s morale was not the physical defeat, the ruin, the tremendous plunge into national humiliation from the height of outward power. It was a more frightful derangement still: it was the profanation of his faith, the defeat of his idea, the crash of his ideology, the catastrophe to the cultural ideal which was that ideology’s center of power—it was this that had been defeated in the defeat, and the victor was the opposed pole of the idea, the world of democratic civilization. Germany had engaged herself far too deeply in the realm of dialectics, in the field of theory, not to be overwhelmed with the conviction that she had suffered a downfall of the idea; and her desperate attempts to deny her defeat, her protests that she was “unconquered in the field” took place on ideological grounds—she hoped thereby to deny her intellectual, her so to speak philosophical, defeat as well. The conflicts that rend Germany today wear many names and take many shapes. But at bottom they are one: the conflict between defiance and the will to compromise; the grim, embittered question, shall Germany abide by her traditional conception of culture, or lay hand upon it to transmute it into the new? We are too intellectual a people to be able to live under a conflict between our faith and our polity. When she introduced the republican forms, Germany was not “democratized.” All German conservatism, “all sincere belief that the traditional German idea must be left untouched, must, in the political sphere, repudiate the republican, the democratic form of government as foreign to land and folk, as false and intellectually repugnant to the realistic sense.” That lies in the nature and inward consistency of things; as, similarly, only those can support the democratic form and have faith in its viability in the Germany of the future, who consider that the transformation of the German cultural idea in a world-reconciling, democratic sense, is both possible and desirable.

It ought to be said that the actual, essential difficulties in the way of the democratization of Germany are little understood abroad, and all our efforts to set the wheels in motion are insufficiently appreciated. People wonder at our false starts; they are strengthened in their political mistrust—they overlook the fact that almost all the intellectual preconditions for success are lacking. The framers and teachers of German humanism—the Luthers, Goethes, Schopenhauers, Nietzsches, Georges—were no democrats. Oh, no. If their names are honored outside our borders, let those who honor them realize what they do. It was they who created the *Kultur* with the big *K* that formed the power center of German war ideology. In

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Paris they applaud the *Meistersinger*. That is to misinterpret the association of ideas. For of the *Meistersinger* Nietzsche wrote: "Against civilization. The German against the French."

The word culture is of one origin with the word cult. Both mean care: the one in the sense of reverence for, and ritual attendance on, the articles of salvation; the other in the sense of a purely human, aesthetic and ethical refinement, divorced from the religious—an ennobling, an enhancement of the individual, a process which, without directly aiming at it, is supposed to advantage the world at large. And just there, in the involuntariness and personal unawareness of the individual as to its super- and extra-individual hearing, there enters into the conception an element of the marvelous and mythical which re-emphasizes its near-religious character. For "culture" is, contrasted with cult, a secular conception; but coupled with the idea of civilization, it reveals its religious, in other words, its essentially unsocial, egotistically individualistic character. "The religious man," says Nietzsche, "thinks only of himself." That is, he thinks of his deliverance, the salvation of his soul, and, originally, at least, of nothing else; yet privately he pays homage to the faith, and trusts in the promise, that the inward working of his own salvation will in some mystical way redound to the salvation of the whole. And the same is altogether the case of the believer in culture.

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German socialism, the invention of a Jewish social theorist brought up in western Europe, has always, in the mind of the culturally conservative German, been considered foreign to the country and antagonistic to the people, as the devil's work pure and simple, and cursed accordingly; with good reason, for it means the dissolution of the cultural, the antisocial folk- and community-idea, and its replacement by that of the social class. This process of dissolution is, in fact, so far advanced, that the cultural complex of ideas contained in the words folk and community must today be considered to be purely romantic. Life, with all that it holds of present and future, is beyond any doubt on the side of socialism, No mind turned lifeward—be it only on deliberately moral grounds, and without reference to its romantic and perhaps death-bound nature—but is driven to side with it and not with the party of bourgeois culture. And the reason is this: that whereas originally the intellectual, in the shape of individualistic idealism, was bound up with the conception of culture, while the social concept, the class idea, never denied its purely economic origins, it is in these days the latter that entertains toward the things of the mind far friendlier feelings than do its folk- and middle-class opponents, whose conservatism has almost lost touch with the living spirit and its patent claims. I have, and not long ago, referred to the morbid and dangerous state of tension which has been set up in the world between the spirit, the height which the peak of humanity has already reached and made its own, and material reality and the state of enlightenment thought to be possible and attainable therein. It is the Socialists, the workers, who display an undoubtedly stronger and more vital will toward the relaxing of this humiliating and dangerous tension than do their cultural opponents; whether the field be legislation, the nationalization of the life of the state, the international constitution of Europe, or whatever you like. The socialist class, in direct opposition to the cultural, is, in economic theory, alien to intellect, but in practice friendly to it—and that, as matters stand to-day, is decisive.

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Source: Thomas Mann, "Culture and Socialism" (1927), in *Past Masters and Other Papers*, translated by H.T. Lowe-Porter. Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1968, pp. 201–14.

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