

Ernst Rudorff, *Ueber das Verhältniß des modernen Lebens zur Natur* (1880)

Abstract

Ernst Rudorff was a composer committed to Romanticism and a pioneer of nature conservation in Germany. In 1904, he founded the “Deutscher Bund Heimatschutz,” which saw itself as an umbrella organization of local associations that campaigned for the protection of nature and wildlife, the preservation of monuments, as well as the preservation of folk art and traditional customs. This article, published in 1880 in *Preußische Jahrbücher*, a monthly journal for politics, history and culture, was prompted by the planned construction of a railroad to the Drachenfels, a hill in the Siebengebirge uplands whose castle ruin became a popular destination during the Romantic period. Citing several examples from Germany and other European countries, Rudorff criticizes the destruction and commercialization of nature in favor of the emerging mass tourism and rationalization in agriculture. While he makes ecological and political arguments that are still relevant today, his text also leans heavily on national-cultural tropes typical of many early advocates of conservationism [*Heimatschutz*].

Source

[...]

Nowadays a peculiar double game is played with nature and the monuments of history, which in a certain sense can be regarded as a piece of nature insofar as they have a picturesque and poetic effect.

On the one hand, their charms are ignored and trampled underfoot with the cruelest ruthlessness for the sake of material advantage.

In the Plauenscher Grund near Dresden, whose loveliness once inspired Wilhelm Müller to write his charming spring poems, a forest of factory chimneys has grown up out of the ground over the years, whose smoke has long since blown away all scent of poetry, whose nasty, sky-high straightness makes a mockery of anything picturesque. Railroad engines speed and whistle through every mountain valley, however beautiful and quiet, in order to have the shortest possible route between two distant points; or the track is laid in such a way that, as on the “Loreley,” it breaks through the most magnificent rock profiles.

There is hardly a single smaller or medium-sized German city whose cozy character is not being slapped in the face by the platitude with which all kinds of modern building speculation is forcing its way into the midst of the cozy architecture of the old days. Even in Nuremberg, which had hitherto preserved the character of the Middle Ages above all others and whose name could therefore be mentioned with reverence and pride throughout Germany, the mighty city walls with their gates and towers are being torn down, ostensibly to improve airflow to the inner city (which would be achieved with a few breakthroughs), but in reality to gain building sites whose sale will bring in considerable sums of money.

The painterly and poetic quality of the landscape arises where its elements are combined into an unconstrained mixture, as nature and the slow workings of history have allowed them to become. The more suddenly and violently an abstract theory is imposed on what has become, the more mathematically it proceeds, the more radically it separates those elements into individual categories that serve a specific practical purpose, the more surely it destroys all physiognomy, all the charm of

individual life. In northern and central Germany, efforts are made in this regard to transform the colorful, charming country into as bare, smoothly shorn, regularly quartered a map as possible, occasionally by linkage^[1] and dividing it into common areas. Every protruding tip of the forest is razed for the sake of the idea of a comfortable straight line, every meadow that extends into woodland is planted up with trees, and no clearing, no forest meadow that game could step out onto is tolerated in the interior of the forests. The streams, which have the bad habit of meandering along in winding courses, must make themselves comfortable flowing straight ahead in ditches. The concept of a country lane, as a footpath that runs in an unaffected line, sometimes between waving ears of corn, sometimes across a meadow, as it has grown from necessity over the decades and centuries, ceases to exist in reality.

[...]

With the rectangular division of the plots of land, all the hedges and individual trees or bushes that used to stand on the field markers also fall victim to this practice. That the herd and the shepherd disappear is the direct consequence of the division of common land. Thus the need for protective enclosure of meadows and fields, the necessity of planting new hedges, disappears and neither the hiker or worker finds a nice, shady place to rest, nor the songbird a place to nest.

In all this a ruthless realism reveals itself, which, where the sacrifice of aesthetic consideration could have been avoided with only a little understanding and just as much good will, deserves to be called barbarism, but whose justification can hardly be doubted in many other cases, where an urgent practical demand confronts the demands of the mind.

In apparent contrast to this, on the other hand, it must be conceded that there has never been so much talk worldwide of enjoying nature, of traveling in every form and to every conceivable destination, as there is today. The term “tourist” is a thoroughly modern one. But to have such a term, to invent a collective name for a class of people whose common characteristic consists in nothing else than that they seek out and appraise all the possible beauties and curiosities of the world for their amusement: this fatal aftertaste of business-like enjoyment, which clings to the term, already sufficiently indicates what is to be thought of that supposedly greater spread and enhancement of the aesthetic sense. Of course, romanticism is offered in every newspaper, in hundreds of thousands of red-bound books, but one forgets that beauty which is publicly offered for sale on the street has already lost its true value. One celebrates nature, but one celebrates it by prostituting it.

[...]

It is obvious: the two seemingly opposing tendencies of the time, the completely indifferent sacrifice of beauty for the sake of practical concerns on the one hand, and the exploitation and wear-and-tear system of the tourist industry on the other, resemble each other as much in the result as they stem from the same root, namely an increasingly pervasive rule of a realistic view of life, whose natural reflection must be an increasing coarseness and dullness towards the ideal.

[...]

And what is the outcome of this practice for humanity in general? – Have we become more poetic, more idealistic since traveling *en masse* has become fashionable? One would have to be blind or deliberately turn one’s back on the truth if one refused to admit that the opposite is the case. The majority among all strata of society is and remains trivial. When these people go on a journey, they basically want nothing more than a change of locale, only to continue the same activities there which they left at home. [...]

Despite the sudden influx of money from outside, the local populations of all the towns and districts that have become addicted to tourism on a grand scale are not actually making a profit but are suffering damage. The new way of earning money that is opening up here is partly too uncertain, partly too easy; it

has something of the gambling game about it. It is increasingly steering social development along rotten, unhealthy paths.

[...]

Our neighbors can serve as a model for us in many respects. France is far ahead of us in the sympathetic preservation and inventory of even the smallest remnants of ancient architecture. The reverence of the English for the monuments of their past is well known; the subtlety with which they know how to combine economic and aesthetic interest in the countryside deserves just as much praise. Here is the factual proof that a high culture need not necessarily lead to the mistreatment of nature. Of course, England has unfortunately long since lost its genuine, wild forest; its woodlands are more like parks. But in this country of factories and rational agriculture there is, in addition to the practical sense, such a deep and generally developed feeling for the beauty of the landscape that the country does not look like a warehouse for economic products, but like a garden. Fields and meadows are bordered by lush hedges, the presence of which is perceived so little as a deduction in material gain that, according to official estimates, 5 percent of the arable land is taken up by them. An abundance of individual free and beautifully developed trees or groups of trees are scattered across the country; on the wonderfully lush meadows, on the banks of the streams, indeed in the middle of the fields, everywhere they enliven the picture.

Compare this with the procedure described above for our linkage of enclosures, the truly deplorable denigration of our beautiful fatherland, which is practiced here to the greatest extent without any significant opposition. The merging of plots of farmland enables uniformity of cultivation, thus stimulating the pursuit of higher land cultivation and, through the regulation of water drainage and the like, brings with it immediately undeniable economic advantages. In some places, these advantages are disproportionate to the considerable costs that the whole laborious procedure causes, and in the end, it boils down to a few wealthy people winning while the rest pay the bill. But let us refrain from this and concede the desirability of the matter itself for many communities; why can't what is economically necessary be done without carelessly sacrificing the beauty of the landscape? The fact that the straightening of streams, which has been the order of the day for decades, is not only barbaric from an aesthetic point of view, but also brings with it the most decisive real disadvantages as a result of the overly rapid water runoff it causes, was demonstrated by the late Chief Forestry Director Burkhardt in Hanover, and perhaps a small setback has occurred in this direction since then. Here, by way of instruction, a shift should now be made once and for all, and the commissions entrusted with the implementation should also be instructed in the strictest terms that the picturesque forms of the forest edges, the way they spill out into individual groups of trees and bushes, in short, that all peculiarities of the transition from forest to meadow and field are to be preserved, that furthermore the system of absolute straightness and rectangularity in the layout of the paths is to be abandoned, and that first and foremost consideration is to be given to the possible preservation of what has become historical. Finally, the government should vigorously encourage the replanting of hedges in other places where they have had to give way as a result of the new subdivision, the regular planting of meadows and gardens, the preservation of individual trees and bushes and the planting of new ones, thus not only promoting the picturesqueness of the landscape, but also ensuring the preservation of birds, whose breeding grounds are in danger of being almost completely destroyed by the current practice of linking the fields.

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It has been said somewhere that "Everyone should have a patch of land to call their own." That is a lot to ask, and in the literal sense neither feasible nor necessary. But here is the truth in that sentence: everyone should learn to feel at home somewhere. This art, which used to be self-evident, is increasingly being lost to us. To revive it, to ensure that the love of one's native soil once again becomes a force in the life of the people, that should be regarded as one of the most noble and urgent tasks of our legislation, of

our administration.

Above all, it is important not to alienate the rural population from the countryside, and especially not to tempt the poorer people to seek their salvation in the big city. To establish the principle of relief on a significant scale was certainly unavoidable in its time; that it was pursued to the extreme consequences and still continues to be pursued is just as certainly disastrous.

[...]

So how does our current legislation deal with these matters? Instead of making communal subdivisions more difficult in the interest of the poor, and in some circumstances, especially in mountainous regions where the land has little value as arable land, prohibiting them altogether, they are promoted as far as possible by placing the decision on whether to subdivide in the hands of the majority owners, i.e. those who can hope to derive the greatest, if not the sole, benefit from this restructuring.

[...]

The ideal share in God's earth, which is due to Man as Man, and which finds its most beautiful expression in the freedom to enter the forest, is tacitly denied by those paragraphs of law, and that is a cut to the heart of the German people. I do not want to be "allowed" in the forest under the tiresome label of the "harmless walker" or even the "tourist" – how feeble and idle that sounds!; nor do I care whether certain official natural beauties remain accessible to the masses for the purpose of admiration or not: I want to have the right to set foot in the world and above all in my homeland, to breathe the air and pleasure of life where my heart desires it and I neither harm my neighbor nor disturb him in the enjoyment of his goods. What an unbearable feeling to have to regard the earth as a conglomerate of individual possessions, to have to think the world barred up to the highway and the few places that the grace of others deems appropriate for me to stop for refreshment! The deep sense of fairness inherent in the Germanic people has always instinctively found in the concept of "free nature" a compensation for the necessity of the gap between the haves and have-nots, and there is nothing more revolutionary than to drive the spade into this, to shake and disturb the ancient roots of this sense of justice. It is incomprehensible that conservative men fail to recognize this! It is working into the hands of social democracy to confuse the minds of precisely the most loyal and well-behaved among the people in this way, when the propertied seek to declare themselves free and clear of their obligation to the non-propertied on this point. [...]

The roots of the Germanic nature lie in the intimate and deep feeling for nature. What captivated our forefathers in Wotan's sacred oak groves, what lives on in the legends of the Middle Ages, in the figures of Melusine and Sleeping Beauty, what echoes in the songs of Walter von der Vogelweide only to burst forth again in new and unimagined fullness in Goethe's or Eichendorff's poetry, and finally in the most peculiar revelation of the German genius, in our wonderful music: it is always the same keynote, the same deep pull of the soul towards the wonderful and unfathomable mysteries of nature which speaks from these expressions of the popular mind. [...]

NOTES

[1] Consolidation of farm plots for the purpose of more convenient cultivation.

Source of original German text: Ernst Rudorff, „Ueber das Verhältniß des modernen Lebens zur Natur,“ *Preußische Jahrbücher*, vol. 45, no. 3, Berlin, 1880: 261-276. Available online at: <https://archive.org/details/preussischejahr14wehrgoog/page/260/mode/2up>

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