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EDUCATION IN REALITY. HELMUTH PLESSNER'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE INTELLECTUAL FOUNDATION OF THE FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY[1]

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To what extent were intellectuals responsible for the Nazi power grab in Germany? Who was responsible for what exactly? These questions have been discussed since 1933 – in the beginning, primarily by intellectuals, artists, and politicians in exile, and after 1945 more widely in the German public. How can intellectuals best contribute to a new beginning in Germany, and what shape should the new nation take? Opponents of National Socialism asked themselves these and related questions since the end of the «Third Reich» was foreseeable.[2] These questions were never purely academic in nature, especially not in the immediate postwar period, but were at least partly motivated by political interest. After 1945, the people deemed responsible could lose their

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[2] For discussions among exiles concerning the responsibility of intellectuals, see, for example, the material on the German Academy in exile in Lehmann [1993]. On plans for Germany expressed in exile, see, especially, Koebner *et al*. [1987]; and Krohn *et al*. [2000].

academic positions. By contrast, those who managed to convince the new university administrations and the Allied and political authorities that they and the disciplines they represented would contribute to developing a democratic society often received generous support. Yet even from the mid-1960s, when the generation most accountable for the Nazi takeover, the war of aggression, and the Holocaust reached retirement age, the debates about responsibility and the contribution of individual intellectuals did not abate. Moreover, the issue of personal responsibility expanded to include how one dealt with Germany's past. For example, the students of historians who had borne some responsibility during the «Third Reich» have, more recently, also had to address how they dealt with their teachers' past. And this question, too, was political as it could serve to establish or destroy individuals' moral legitimacy.[3]

However, around 1990, two books appeared that were particularly influential in forging a new analytical perspective on intellectuals' relationship to National Socialism: the 1987 study *The Other God That Failed: Hans Freyer and the Deradicalization of German Conservatism* by Jerry Z. Muller, and Dirk van Laak's 1993 work *Gespräche in der Sicherheit des Schweigens*. Muller's subject was sociologist Hans Freyer, who became a prominent proponent of the «Conservative Revolution» and an intellectual pioneer of National Socialism with his book *Revolution von rechts* (1931). Without whitewashing, Muller traced Freyer's ideological positions toward the end of the 1920s, as well as the ways that he conformed to the Nazi state of his own accord (his *Selbst-Gleichschaltung*) and worked toward getting the University of Leipzig and the German Society for Sociology to conform to Nazi ideology as well (*Gleichschaltung*); at the same time, Muller showed that Freyer began to grow increasingly disillusioned with National Socialism in 1935, leading him to undergo a process of deradicalization. Muller's aim was not to assign political blame but to examine by means of this case study a thought process experienced by a host of radical German conservatives. He sought to understand how a prominent intellectual who had welcomed and supported the Nazi «revolution» dealt with the

[3] A good introduction to these debates can be found in Fischer & Lorenz [2007]. The questions and answers of the student generation in the historical field can be found in Hohls & Jarausch [2000].

direction it took and to determine what conclusions Freyer drew from this. As a sort of complement to Muller's work, Dirk van Laak analyzed the corresponding ways in which people dealt with the past in the early Federal Republic using the example of Carl Schmitt and his followers. In van Laak's work as well, the precise investigation of intellectual processes of interpretation, reinterpretation, and adaptation under new political conditions took the place of moralizing outrage at the influence that Schmitt still wielded in the Federal Republic.

These two works inspired a series of case studies, most of which examined the «Academic Politics of Memory» (*Akademische Vergangenheitspolitik*) by means of biographies of German intellectuals [Weisbrod 2002; 2003].[4] If one juxtaposes the results of these and other similar studies, certain patterns of behavior with significant overlap come to light, ranging from self-mobilization and deradicalization to complete breaks with the past. «Self-mobilization» was a relatively common reaction around the beginning of the 1930s. It can be defined as a radicalization of one's thinking and actions expressed by direct political engagement with the National Socialist movement, and the hope that Nazis would carry out the imminent national revolution. Hans Freyer self-mobilized around the time of the elections in September 1930; Martin Heidegger did so at the latest from 1932, with Carl Schmitt falling in line at the time of the Nazi takeover in 1933 [see Muller 1987, Ch. 6; Ott 1992, 131 ff.; Morat 2007, Ch. 2.4; Gross 2000, 42 ff.]. Less prominent intellectuals seem to have followed this pattern as well [see Langewiesche 1997]. Deradicalization – understood as (voluntary or involuntary) retreat from politics accompanied by disillusionment with some developments in the «Third Reich» – generated a broad spectrum of behaviors. One pole, exemplified by Carl Schmitt, Martin Heidegger, and Ernst Jünger, among others, is characterized by a large degree of continuity. These intellectuals adhered to the positions they had held

[4] On the term «Academic Politics of Memory», see Weisbrod [2002; 2003]. For case studies that followed, see the contributions in Weisbrod's aforementioned 2002 book; as well as Morat [2007]. Carola Dietze applied the same approach to the biography of an emigrant in Dietze [2006a]. Further studies with analogous research interests include, for example, Etzemüller [2001]; Eckel [2005]; Dehli [2007]; and for the GDR Keßler [2001].

around 1933. To compensate for their unexpected marginalization, however, they now sought out conversation exclusively with like-minded people, cultivated «attitudes of seclusion and passivity» [Morat 2007, 13], defended themselves from criticism and quietly distanced themselves from their former positions with subtle arguments, and postponed their anticipation of the true revolution to the distant future [van Laak 1993, esp. Chs. 2.2 and 3.1; Morat 2007, particularly Chs. 3-4]. Others (such as Hans Freyer) reconsidered their own fundamental political assumptions, said adieu to radical politics, and resignedly criticized the modern, liberal society in the Federal Republic they had previously aimed to prevent [see Muller 1987, Chs. 8-10]. Still others (like Alexander Mitscherlich) tried to break as thoroughly as possible with the guiding political and academic principles of their Nazi past by effecting a radical Westernization, now expressing suspicion for German traditions of thought per se [see Dehli 2007, 124 ff.]. The pole of the greatest discontinuity is represented by Hans Schneider, who tried to denazify himself by changing his identity. He had been a unit leader in Heinrich Himmler's personal staff, as well as the man in charge of SS-Ahnenerbe (ancestral heritage) in the Netherlands. Under the guise of Hans Schwerte, though, he became a left-liberal-leaning professor of literature at the *Rheinisch-Westfälische Technische Hochschule* (RWTH) in Aachen [see Leggewie 1998; König 1998]. These various responses of intellectuals who supported National Socialism to developments in the «Third Reich» typically emerged at certain historical moments: those who cultivated continuity in their thinking or gradually transformed it usually began to grow disillusioned in the mid-1930s, whereas those who chose to break completely with the past typically did so in the mid-1940s.

In addition to these studies addressing the question of intellectuals' responsibility and how they dealt with it, new studies have taken up the question of how intellectuals contributed to the success of the Federal Republic. The point of reference for this debate is an essay collection from 1999 which maintains that the Frankfurt School was responsible for «The Intellectual Foundation of the Federal Republic» [Albrecht *et al.* 1999]. In contrast, Paul Nolte regarded the subject of sociology per se as an anti-utopian «science of reality» and applied Jerry Muller's

deradicalization thesis, developed for «Conservative Revolutionaries», to the social sciences in the Federal Republic on the whole (and particularly to the schools in Frankfurt, Cologne, and Münster that revolved around Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, René König, and Helmut Schelsky). Nolte saw the work of sober sociology – wherein the «shrinking of the time frame» constituted a «departure from utopia» (Reinhart Koselleck) – as crucial to the success of the Federal Republic [Nolte 2000]. Jens Hacke, in turn, declared deradicalization and the departure from utopian thinking a «philosophy of civic-ness» (*Philosophie der Bürgerlichkeit*) and located its origin in the circle of students around the Münster philosopher Joachim Ritter. In his view, intellectuals like Hermann Lübbe and Odo Marquard (and *not* those in Frankfurt who persisted in their utopian and critical thinking) carried out the «liberal-conservative establishment of the Federal Republic», thus making the decisive contribution to the success of democracy in Germany [Hacke 2006; 2009].

One problem with this debate about intellectuals' contribution to the new beginning in Germany, aside from its renewed politicization, is that neither the concept of «intellectuals» nor that of «contribution» is clearly defined. For example, there is no clear distinction between intellectuals and academics, nor discussion of which non-academics qualify as intellectuals or may have been able to make an intellectual contribution. Thus far, the authors in the debate have dealt exclusively with professors – indeed, only with German professors in the humanities and social sciences – without discussing this exclusive selection or justifying it. Even the possible intellectual contributions of natural scientists fail to come into view, let alone those of German and international writers, poets, artists, architects, city planners, musicians, stage artists and actors; newspaper, radio, and television journalists; and politicians who reflected on the development of the state; the effects of supranational and impersonal processes like the Cold War and the emergence of consumer and media society are, likewise, left out.[5] Such a narrow focus does not do justice to the intellectual life of the early Federal Republic; moreover, it seems that scholars are overestimating their own field's sig-

[5] For such a broad approach, Hermand [1989] still sets the standard; as well as, above all, the volumes by Schildt & Sywottek [1998]; Naumann [2001]; and Herbert [2002].

nificance for society. This tendency is exacerbated by a lack of criteria for determining what even counts as an «intellectual contribution to the foundation of the Federal Republic». In the tradition of focusing on the high points of intellectual history, the aforementioned literature does retrace the debates of university professors and the transformation of their arguments. However, the reach of these debates – the concrete influence that the protagonists wielded both inside and outside of academia – remains unclear, as does the nature of the relationship between this influence and other factors. Consequently, studies in reception history – like those in the history of science – are needed [see, for example, Kelly 1981]. Only with the help of such studies can the relative importance of the contribution of social scientists and scholars in the humanities to the intellectual foundation of the Federal Republic be ascertained.

The following remarks place Helmuth Plessner's thinking and intellectual development in the context of these two research debates while keeping the abovementioned reservations in mind. First, we have to determine whether Plessner was even an intellectual (*Intellektueller*). He himself would have used the term *Geistiger* (thinker) or *Gebildeter* (educated person) and saw himself as a philosopher and professor who tried to do justice to the social responsibility that came with his public office and exceptional status. This self-understanding, however, corresponds to what today would ordinarily be called an «intellectual»: a person educated in scholarship and the arts who works primarily in the realm of thought, takes a stand on social issues, and expresses them in society.[6] Among intellectuals so defined, Plessner is a rare breed in twentieth-century Germany. He was a man of the political middle who rejected totalitarianism on both the right and left all his life – indeed, he expressly cautioned against both forms of political extremism. He likewise rejected every form of essentialism as not appropriate for man (*den Menschen*) and was fundamentally skeptical of any kind of thinking that promised salvation in this world. Moreover, he was a «half-Jew» and an emigrant. Thus, in contrast to the abovementioned right-wing intellectuals who advocated for the «Third Reich», Plessner did not undergo processes of self-mobilization and disillusionment, nor did he

[6] See, for example, the definition in *Duden* [2001, 839]. The sociopolitical dimension is lacking in *Duden*, although it is still present by means of the term's etymology.

have to deal with the issue of his own guilt. In the case of Plessner, who was a liberal philosopher and sociologist and also a victim of the Nazi regime, the question is rather what conclusions he drew from his experience of National Socialism and the Second World War and the effects this had on his thinking and actions. In answering this question, I will demonstrate continuity and shifts in his themes, contents, methods, and political positions, as well as his comportment and self-understanding as a philosopher and professor. I will focus on Plessner's political philosophy, particularly of the 1930s and 1950s, and ask: did an intellectual who was never radical undergo processes of deradicalization and departure from utopia, too?

In order to answer this question, I will first briefly describe the continuities and ruptures in Plessner's life and oeuvre. The second section will analyze the education of the German bourgeoisie in reality (*Erziehung zur Wirklichkeit*) – and away from utopian thinking – as a decisive and ever-present concern in Plessner's political philosophy. After that, the discussion turns to the shifts Plessner's experience of National Socialism and World War II brought about in his thinking. In the course of the investigation, it will become apparent that Plessner's works are largely characterized by continuities in his basic convictions. Ruptures are more likely caused by the conditions of his life, such as his expulsion from Germany, than by a need to rethink his ideas: neither in his contributions to philosophical anthropology nor in his political philosophy did he need to fundamentally alter his positions or announce a «conversio» (*Kehre*) (Martin Heidegger). Nonetheless, Plessner's experience of National Socialism did change his thinking and actions. Looking for continuity and shifts in Plessner's life and oeuvre, one can observe parallels between the years up to about 1925 and from 1934/35, whereas the time around 1930 is different from the other phases. Plessner's patterns of thinking and acting around 1950 most clearly resemble his patterns from the beginning of the 1920s and from 1935 onwards rather than his patterns around 1930. These changes, however, constitute shifts rather than ruptures or profound revisions. Concerning the timing of these shifts, they correspond roughly to the period when the right radical thinkers were undergoing self-mobilization and disillusionment. They relate to Plessner's expectations of Germany, as well as

his relationship to the public: Around 1935, Plessner gave up both the idea of a German mission and his elite habits of the years around 1930. Instead, he transformed himself into an internationally effective scholar who consciously took on the role of a public intellectual.

1. Biographical Ruptures – Continuities in Content

Helmuth Plessner, born in Wiesbaden in 1892, was the son of Fedor Plessner, a doctor and medical counselor, and his wife Elisabeth. He grew up in a prestigious private sanatorium frequented by international patients.[7] He studied medicine, biology, and philosophy in Freiburg, Heidelberg, Berlin, Göttingen, and Erlangen. At the beginning of World War I, he volunteered to serve but could not because he was disabled in his right arm. Instead, Plessner completed his doctorate in the summer of 1916 with a dissertation on Kant. He finished his habilitation in 1920 in Cologne and taught there as an adjunct professor (*Privatdozent* and *außerplanmäßiger Professor*) until 1933. With his publications *Die Einheit der Sinne* [1923] (*The Unity of the Senses*) and *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch* [1928] (*Levels of Organic Life and Human* [2019]), he developed his own version of modern philosophical anthropology. In addition, with *Die Grenzen der Gemeinschaft* [1924] (*Limits of Community* [1999]) and *Macht und menschliche Natur* [1931] (*Political Anthropology* [2018]), he outlined a political philosophy built upon principles of his anthropology. In January 1933, President Hindenburg made Adolf Hitler chancellor of Germany. Shortly after the introduction in April 1933 of the Law for the Reconstitution of the Professional Civil Service (*Gesetz zur Wiederherstellung des Berufsbeamtentums*), which discriminated against all state servants

[7] On Plessner's life and work, see, in particular, Dietze [2006a]; as well Krüger [1999] and Krüger [2001]; Haucke [2000]; Kämpf [2001]; Fischer [2008]; and for the period up to 1933, Schüßler [2000]. For introductory texts and discussions of Plessner's works in English, cf. esp. the special issue of *Iris* [Philosophical Anthropology and Contemporary German Thought 2009], the special issue *Soma and Psyche* edited by Shusterman for the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* [Shusterman 2010], de Mul [2014], Fischer [2018], as well as Bernstein [2019].

who did not support National Socialism or were of Jewish descent, Plessner was prohibited from teaching at a German university. At first, in the hope of getting a position at the newly founded University of Istanbul, he traveled to Turkey. There, he received word that his Dutch colleague Frederik J. J. Buytendijk would be able to offer him a two-year fellowship at the University of Groningen. Plessner went to the Netherlands, where his analysis of the National Socialist rise to power, *Das Schicksal deutschen Geistes im Ausgang seiner bürgerlichen Epoche* (later revised and republished as the much better known *Die verspätete Nation* [1974], in English: *The Delayed Nation*), emerged from lectures for students in all departments in 1934 and 1935. Thanks to a fellowship from the Rockefeller Foundation and later an endowed chair in sociology created specifically for him, he was able to remain in Groningen. It was during this time that he was able to continue his philosophical anthropology with *Lachen und Weinen* [1941] (*Laughing and Crying* [1970]). The German occupying forces dismissed Plessner once again in 1943. He managed to survive the war years and the Holocaust by going underground in Utrecht and Amsterdam. After the war ended, he took up his professorship in sociology once again, and in 1946 was appointed full professor of philosophy, a rare distinction for a German in the Netherlands directly after the war. In 1951, he received an appointment at the University of Göttingen, where he taught as a sociologist and philosopher until 1962. After his retirement, he accepted an invitation to become the Theodor Heuss Professor at the New School for Social Research in New York. Thereafter, he settled down in Erlenbach near Zürich and lectured part-time at the University of Zürich. He returned to Göttingen at an advanced age, dying there at 93.

In view of Plessner's life story, it is hardly surprising that his rejection of radicalism and essentialism, as well as his skepticism of utopian political expectations and thinking that promised salvation in this world, were not just intellectual positions but convictions that he lived by. What's more, he embodied them to model how to deal with others and out of personal need. In the international private sanatorium that his parents ran, he had grown up around the art of cosmopolitan sociability of the fin-de-siècle. Certainly, he did not belong to the «Uncompromising Generation»

[Wildt 2010].[8] In addition, Plessner's self-perception contradicted others' perception of him because his background did not assign him a clear identity – his father was born Jewish but converted to Lutheranism and his mother was of the Reformed confession. Whereas Plessner perceived himself simply as a German – or, more precisely, a Prussian – he was frequently regarded as a Jew. Consequently, he was a man of the middle for whom issues were never merely black and white – a sociable person who could easily glide between and relate to various social circles.[9]

According to Dutch sociologist Reinier F. Beerling, this basic attitude helped to make Plessner's acculturation and acceptance in Dutch exile easier:

> If the German tendency toward globalism and the fool's privilege of speculation had been part of your baggage as an immigrant, then your encounter with the Dutch might have ended in less felicitous relations. But there was something very Dutch about you even before you crossed our border: a certain aversion to taking philosophical matters to an extreme, positioning yourself as a humanitarian and non-utopian, and taking yourself as a philosopher, indeed, very – but not deadly – seriously [R. F. Beerling, Festrede zum 80-jährigen Helmuth Plessner, University Library Groningen, in the following cited as ULG, H. Plessner papers].

For his part, Plessner greatly appreciated the patrician bourgeois culture and tolerance, as well as the sense of reality, in his host country. Shortly after his remigration to take up a professorship in Göttingen, he wrote back to Groningen that many of the German students were lacking «the political understanding and the sense of proportion that virtually everybody in Holland possesses» [Helmuth Plessner to Jacobus L. H. Cluysenaer, n.d., ULG, H. Plessner papers, 138.224]. In the basic structure of his personality, Plessner was a sociable but independent person who respected distance. This was one continuity in his biography and thinking that his life experiences reinforced.

[8] On this, see, with supporting documentation, Dietze [2006a, Ch. 2.1]. For the characteristics of the uncompromising generation, see Wildt [2010].
[9] For more details, see Dietze [2008].

Yet the ruptures in Plessner's life also follow from this short, biographical outline. They brought caesuras in his work in their wake [this and what follows is developed in more detail in Dietze 2002; 2004]. For example, at the start of the 1930s, Plessner had to give up any immediate plans to further establish his philosophical anthropology because the fellowship in Groningen was tied to experimental studies in sensory and animal physiology, like those he had carried out with Buytendijk in the early 1920s. The German invasion of the Netherlands in 1940 and his dismissal by the German General Commissioner for Administration and Justice in 1943 were political events that were reflected in Plessner's work; war, hunger, and persecution also have to be added to this list. Moreover, political circumstances and the course of Plessner's career brought about thematic shifts in his work: for example, Plessner revisited his German political interests in 1934 with *Das Schicksal deutschen Geistes*, and his appointments to the endowed chair of sociology in Groningen and the full professorship for sociology in Göttingen made it necessary for him to conduct empirical investigations in this field. His repeated dismissals, his efforts to acculturate in exile, and his changed work demands, thus, had profound consequences on his oeuvre in that they brought an abrupt end to the further development of his philosophical anthropology in productive periods and forced him to shift his thematic focus.

At the same time, these caesuras and thematic shifts remained a comparatively external phenomenon. There were no fundamental changes in his methods and ideas. Regarding empirical research as an important task of sociology, he felt obliged in Groningen and Göttingen to engage in it, not least in order to properly introduce his students to the field and give them necessary practical experience. Yet this did not mean that he now considered empirical research methods to be a solely Western and democratic method, as many of his colleagues who were trying to break with their Nazi pasts did – he knew the history of empirical social research in Germany too well for that. He did not question the value of theoretical approaches or other methods (such as those of phenomenology) on account of his empirical studies. Plessner, likewise, saw no reason to fundamentally revise the content of his thinking. He remained convinced of the correctness and significance of his philo-

sophical anthropology approach. In his eyes, it had stood the test of time, although he did make slight alterations to it, too: for instance, in *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch* [1928], he had suggested that being human was not tied to a particular form. In the essay «Tier und Mensch» [1938] (Animal and Man), which he wrote together with Buytendijk, as well as in *Lachen und Weinen* [1941], he corrected himself on this point. Aside from this, however, Plessner continued to systematically develop his version of philosophical anthropology. In his political philosophy, we find a similar continuation of fundamental themes and ideas.

2. Educating the German Bourgeoisie in Reality: Continuities

Plessner was an «offensively» (as opposed to defensively) liberal thinker throughout his life: from the beginning of the 1920s, he supported democratic principles in his political writings, and he used his philosophical approach – philosophical anthropology – to help establish and defend an open society.[10] Thus, characterizing him as an «offensively» (in the sense of proactively) liberal thinker is in no way meant to assign him to any particular political party. Although he was close to the Majority Social Democrats at the beginning of the 1920s and to the German Nationals in the early 1930s, and although he agreed to act as the liaison lecturer for the Free Democratic Party's Friedrich Naumann Foundation after the war, Plessner does not seem to have belonged to any political party in his life [Dietze 2006a, 41, 76f].

Jan-Werner Müller called Plessner a defensive liberal as his liberalism was, in Müller's view, directed against communism and also against the Western powers [Müller 2002]. However, this characterization misses the core of Plessner's reasoning in two respects: First, Plessner defended society against both left-wing and right-wing radicalism to keep space open for the public and politics. Even though this constitutes a «defense», it was not «defensive» in either its argumentation or its tone. Second, Plessner was interested in this case, as in other works, less

[10] On the liberal and democratic nature of Plessner's philosophy, cf. also Krüger [2009].

in resisting Western liberal thinking – he repeatedly expressed his admiration for the old democracies – than in improving on this thinking, which he felt was no match, argumentatively, for the totalitarianisms of his time. This stance, in my opinion, can better be described as «offensive». Finally, Plessner's clear advocacy of – and his attempt to further develop – the basic principles of an open society over and against the majority opinion in the Weimar Republic supports this characterization of him as an «offensive» liberal. For example, in books, essays, and newspaper articles, Plessner emphasized the value of society (*Gesellschaft*) and the public for the coexistence of people and the dangers of contemporary concepts of community (*Gemeinschaft*) on the right and the left. He advocated statecraft and political realism and cautioned against utopian expectations of politics. He was fascinated by modernity and called for it to be acknowledged, although he also recognized the upheaval that proceeded from it and sought ways to make modern forms of society livable. In this, his political philosophy was distinguished by its quality, its systematic nature, and by its high level of reflection. Thus, according to Paul Nolte, Plessner's criticism of the idealizations of community in Germany in the 1920s in *Grenzen der Gemeinschaft* is the «sharpest – and the shrewdest – criticism» that sociology and social philosophy produced in the Weimar Republic [Nolte 2000, 168].[11]

The positions outlined here pervade Plessner's entire oeuvre. They are already explicit in his early political essays from the years 1915-1920. For instance, in «Staatskunst und Menschlichkeit», Plessner attributed the failure of the November Revolution to the fact that it «sought to realize a utopia», namely, by «overcoming» politics and replacing it «with an ethics for states and peoples oriented purely toward morality». Yet such a task for politics that was derived from the spirit of utopia was

[11] Nevertheless, following Ferdinand Tönnies' argument in his 1925 review of *Grenzen der Gemeinschaft*, Nolte accuses Plessner of «remaining stuck with his own suggestions in the very system of thought of an 'ethical' shaping of the individual, of an ethical solution to the problems of the present, [a system of thought] that also forms the basis of the ideology of community» [Nolte 2000, 169]. This criticism is mistaken, however, in that Plessner's text deals expressly *not* with an individual ethics but with a "social ethics" [Plessner 1924, 13], with a social philosophy of limits as the core of societal ethos. On this, cf. Fischer [2002, especially 87-89].

doomed to failure because we have to «follow the rules of our nature» [Plessner 1920b]. In his article «Politische Kultur», which appeared on the front page of the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in 1921, Plessner analyzed what he saw as the typical German aversion to politics and state reality in more detail. Since he regarded the state as a «matter of its citizens […] placed in the responsibility of its people», the political culture of a people was of central importance to him [Plesser 1921]:

> As long as we, in Germany, do not learn to see politics as a […] sphere that deserves to be accepted in the system of culture as an independent member […], we cannot demand that the understanding for the republic and its tasks in the world dawn in our country; we should not be astonished by the political passivity of large parts of the German bourgeoisie. The secret longing or the open cry for the strong man is only a symptom of the fact that we are seeking political salvation from anywhere but from our own decisiveness. Philosophy and psychology should contribute ideas to this work of preparing for *education in reality*. It remains not hard to believe that when all who are affected do their duty and when the intellectuals of the country have first been won over to politics that the […] appraisal of the business of politics will change […] and a new state feeling […] will come forth [Plessner 1921, 56; emphasis by Carola Dietze].

Following the diagnosis – that Germany's political culture was underdeveloped – Plessner suggested a remedy: he called upon the «educated», the «intellectuals of the country», to engage in «education in reality». In other words, German intellectuals should rouse the understanding for the specific quality of «the political» among the German bourgeoisie, thereby winning them over for the republic and generating engagement for an open society. This suggestion characterizes the basic motivation and intention of Plessner's political philosophy and can be read as a program for his political writings.

Plessner took the first step in realizing this program in *Grenzen der Gemeinschaft* (The Limits of Community), whose subtitle, *Eine Kritik des sozialen Radikalismus* (A Critique of Social Radicalism), described his intent [Plessner 1924]. The aim of the book was to make society

appealing to the German bourgeoisie, which felt threatened and really *was* threatened, in Plessner's view, because it was treating the crisis of modernity «in a self-destructive way». He wanted to make the German bourgeoisie «capable of society», thereby rescuing it from giving up on itself.[12] For this purpose, Plessner sought an anthropological justification for the necessity of society in its modern, industrialized, and technologized form for its functional relationships, politics, and power, as well as for its role in «social abstractions», tact, and diplomacy. At the same time, he wanted to point out the limits of community, which meant demonstrating the limits of people's ability to interact with one another in an authentic and unreserved or wholehearted way [Plessner 1924; the quotation is on page 83]. Thus, Plessner directed his writing against the criticism of modern society from the Communist and National/*völkisch* camps and the youth movement – in other words, against social radicalism and utopianism from the left and right. Plessner saw essential agreement in both camps' ideal of community and rejection of modern society and felt that they differed merely with respect to the principle upon which the community should be founded: whereas the Communists regarded the common humanity of mankind as the basis for a world community, those in the National and *völkisch* camps looked at *Volkstum*, or ethnicity, as the criterion for inclusion or exclusion. However, for Plessner, love and mutual trust were the prerequisites for community – understood as authenticity and wholeheartedness in interacting with one another. But both love and trust could only be directed toward individuals and not toward grand abstract concepts like humanity or the *Volk*; consequently, the chance of realizing community decreased as the distance from individual reality grew. That is why the demand for collective wholeheartedness and unreservedness on the level of the *Volk* or of humanity had to resort to the rule of terror. The functional relationships of society corresponded, in his opinion, to the

[12] For such an interpretation of the text, see also Fischer [1993]. The quoted terms can be found on page 60. In contrast to Fischer's interpretation, Lethen [1994] places the book in the context of the "New Objectivity" movement. For a critical discussion of Lethen's position and for the context in which Plessner's work arose, see Eßbach *et al.* [2002] and Dietze [2006a, 52-57]. For an interpretation of the text, cf. also Krüger [2010, especially 265-267].

human need for distance and protection; they served to preserve human dignity.

Plessner's next big contribution to his political philosophy, *Macht und menschliche Natur*, approached the same issues with the same aims but from another perspective: it was directed against radical, political relativism, that is, against the escalation of relativistic philosophies of history and society like those developed in historicism and the Marxist critique of ideology [Plessner 1931].[13] According to Plessner, bourgeois Germans in the crisis of modernity derived the relativity and the breakdown of all value systems – even their own – from relativism, leading them to give up on themselves and fall into political cynicism. By contrast, Plessner wanted to empower the German bourgeoisie by calling upon them «not to relinquish the decision of what matters in a crisis».[14] Once again, he established the necessity of politics, but this time he began his argument with Dilthey's reflection on the historical experience of man developed in the context of his philosophy of life. Reflections on world history lead to the conclusion that the essence of man is «unfathomable». Man (*der Mensch*) is an «open question», a «power to….». For such an unfathomable being, culture is a horizon that opens specific worlds for managing the course of life. A culture forms the basis of possibilities for each individual's existence, as well as awareness of culture's contingency and indispensability. These realizations generate a political responsibility for one's own culture: «Because history has overcome the absolutism of plans that are supposed to influence history once and for all, […] a people among peoples can only be necessary to the extent that it makes itself needed and necessary» [Plessner 1931, 232].[15] Plessner derived a philosophy of the political from the philosophy of open humanity through the category of culture. Not least, he

[13] On this text, see Fischer [1993, 64-70]; Dietze [2006a, 73-83]; and Krüger [2010, 262 f.].

[14] This is a translation of Fischer's summarizing interpretation in Fischer [1993, 70], which reads: «in einer Krise die Entscheidung darüber, was gelten soll, nicht abzugeben».

[15] On the concept of the "unfathomability of man" (*Unergründlichkeit des Menschen*), see, especially, Plessner 1931, 160 ff. The phrases "open question" (*offene Frage*), "power to…" (*Macht zu…*), and "basis of possibilities" (*Möglichkeitsgrund*) can be found, e.g., on 188 f. and 233.

hoped that this reasoning would make politics more civilized because it implied respect for other cultures to understand them as foreign but equally valid answers to the question of what it is to be human.

Das Schicksal deutschen Geistes im Ausgang seiner bürgerlichen Epoche (1935) continues the reasoning of these two works under drastically changed political and life conditions for Plessner [Plessner 1974].[16] The book, originating in lectures for students in all departments at the University of Groningen, is neither an analysis of National Socialism nor a theory of fascism but a renewed appeal to the German bourgeoisie: Why – this is his central question – did this class support the romanticizing, biologistic, and racist Nazi ideology of the national *Volk* and the violence that the Nazis generated? The answer lay, he believed, in the specific history of German statehood and in the political thinking of the German bourgeoisie, which had failed to generate a productive idea in times of «total suspicion of ideology». Thus lacking an ideational footing for political action, it tried to create an «artificial footing» by adopting blood, race, and *Volk* as the decisive authorities for such action [Plessner 1974, 142, 179]. At the same time, the book also calls Plessner's colleagues from the Weimar period to account for failing to fulfill the social task his 1921 article «Politische Kultur» outlined and assigned to them: In Plessner's view, German philosophy, rather than showing the bourgeoisie meaningful ways out of the crisis and strengthening its efforts to open up to the world and reality, devoted itself to formalized language and academic issues and even reinforced the German tendency toward inwardness and secular piety (*Weltfrömmigkeit*). In this situation, Plessner saw his own philosophical approach as the «last alternative» to National Socialist ideology, lending it an explicitly political character [Plessner 1974, 187].

Returning to the Federal Republic gave Plessner another chance to realize the program he had set for himself to «educate [the bourgeoisie] in reality». That he took the program seriously as before is evident in the unrevised reprint of this essay in the *Deutsche Universitätszeitung* in 1953 [Plessner 1953]. Picking up the themes, propositions, and convictions from the Weimar period and from exile, Plessner then continued to

[16] On the interpretation and original context of this work, see Dietze [2006a, Ch. 3.3]; as well as Dietze [2006b].

develop them in relation to contemporary scholarly debates and political processes in Germany and the world. The central tenets of his thought remained the justification of society, the public, statecraft, and politics; his warning about idealizations of community and utopian expectations and thought patterns; questions of modernity, progress, and technology; as well as Germany, German history, and the German bourgeoisie. Succinct, easily accessible presentations, essays, and articles took the place of philosophically challenging books. These short, concise, humorous, and often (self-)ironic texts, which were full of information and suggestions, allowed Plessner to get involved in discussions within entirely different societal realms. These writings have yet to be analyzed in relation to his earlier works or to each other.[17] Here, too, we will have to dispense with a thorough analysis as it would go beyond the scope of this paper. Nonetheless, the example of the essay «Soziale Rolle und menschliche Natur» (Social Role and Human Nature) will show how these interventions in the Federal Republic continued Plessner's early ideas and also updated his fundamental convictions and positions.

In 1959, Ralf Dahrendorf published his book *Homo Sociologicus. Ein Versuch zur Geschichte, Bedeutung und Kritik der sozialen Rolle* [Dahrendorf 2006]. Dahrendorf was a student of Plessner's longtime friend Josef König and at that point a professor of sociology at the *Akademie für Gemeinwirtschaft* in Hamburg. He had written the study while a guest at Stanford to motivate Germans to deal with the category of the social role, which was so central to American sociology and ethnology. The response to the book was overwhelmingly positive and generated broad discussion. In 1960, Plessner joined this debate with his essay «Soziale Rolle und menschliche Natur» [Plessner 1960a, 239]. First, Plessner tied his text to Dahrendorf's by working out the advantages that the role concept had for sociology as an empirical science. However, by relating the emergence and use of the idea in the United States to the specific social conditions of America, Plessner also relativized it. Then, he compared the character and value of the formal and functional role concept in the American social sciences to the theatrical role concept of Old Europe and to anthropology's understanding of the

[17] For an overview of the themes and arguments, see Dietze [2006a, 502-509]; and the relevant sections in Fischer [2008].

«Doppelgänger-hood of man». This anthropological concept emerged from Plessner's philosophical anthropology – his theory of the ex-centric positionality of man – although he did not mention this theory in this essay. The principal difference between the formal-functional and the anthropological understandings of the role concept lay, in his view, in their relation to self-observation. Whereas sociology's role concept allowed for the investigation of the relations between functions, positions, and prestige values, it excluded the prerequisite for such a (self-) observation of man – the relation of human nature to its social existence – from analysis. Anthropology's understanding of the role concept, in contrast, was directed precisely toward «every structure that makes self-perception possible». Consequently, it described a constant «which is open to every type of human sozialization and comprises one of its essential requirements» [Plessner 1960a, 235]. Nonetheless, Plessner saw both role concepts as completely legitimate and useful in their respective disciplinary contexts.

At the same time, the formal-functional understanding of roles *did* become politically dangerous, in Plessner's opinion, when it was removed from the context of sociological modeling and put on a level with thought patterns associated with alienation and reification or identified with roles «in which the human being is doubled» [Plessner 1960a, 238]. Such self-alienating patterns of thought, together with the normative baggage they entailed, derived from philosophical concepts ranging from religious ideas of inwardness, Kant's concept of the thing «in itself», and Hegel's possibility of externalization or alienation, to Marx and late bourgeois existentialism. This led to «a devaluation of 'annoying' social existence […] in the interest of securing individual personal freedom». If sociology were ready «to fundamentally separate being in a role from actually being oneself and to play it off against the nuisance of society» – which is what Plessner saw in Dahrendorf's book – then it would – intentionally or not – fuel «antisocietal affect». This was because such a stance perfectly suited «a poorly developed consciousness of social responsibility and which certain philosophemes of the present have given expression to: Heidegger ante portas. His theory of the degeneration in the deficient mode of the One strikes a chord with German inwardness» [Plessner 1960a, 239]. On the other hand,

anthropology's role concept, which was derived from man's ex-centric positionality, conceived of man as a being that was, indeed, relegated to a social role but was not defined by a particular one:

> The role player or bearer of the social figure does not come together with [that role]; however, he cannot be thought of as a separate entity without losing his humanity. What the role affords him fundamentally and at all times, namely, having a private existence, his own sphere of intimacy, not only does not cancel out his self but creates it for him. Only in the other of himself does he have – himself [Plessner 1960a, 235].

Plessner regarded such an integrative, non-normative concept of the social role as a requirement for seeing in public life not «only a distraction from everything that is essential for man, a zone in which he becomes alien to himself», but rather a genuine field of human activity [Plessner 1960b, 213]. Only such a demythologized concept of the public and society could secure «the latitude of responsibility for protecting our social freedom» and dry up the springs of extremism in theories of state and society [Plessner 1960b, 225]. However, for Plessner, this concept of the social role, the public sphere, and society also called for combatting the retreat from public life and politics; it called for every citizen to be engaged publicly and politically. In his life, Plessner did not always fulfill this self-imposed task to the same extent.

3. From the German Mission to the Public as a Task: Shifts

The conclusions that Plessner drew from his experience of National Socialism in his professional thought and actions pertain, above all, to two areas: his understanding of his role as a university teacher in relation to the public, and his expectation of the historical role and task of Germany.[18] In the Weimar period and up to the middle of the 1930s, Plessner had a distinct expectation of Germany's task in the world. Unlike the

[18] Moreover, there were some situations in which Plessner distanced himself from his German national perspectives before 1933. On this, see Dietze [2006a, 396 f.].

nations of the West, Germany, in his view, was a country without solid backing in humanism and enlightenment. But precisely for this reason, he wrote in 1935 in *Das Schicksal deutschen Geistes*: «it is open, embarking on possibilities that are no longer possibilities for the West; [it has] become young, the land without tradition, which suffers from this defect but also derives its titanic powers from it» [Plessner 1974, 81]. Plessner saw Germany's crisis as an opportunity not only for Germany but for all of Europe because the country was dealing with a general European crisis in political and ethical orientation, the crisis of modernity, in philosophy, art, literature, and politics. If Germany managed to find new ways out of the crisis – and Plessner thought it had the potential to do so – then it would not only have found its idea, its style, and its place in the world like the old nations of the West, but it would also have fulfilled a task of world historical importance [Fischer 1990].

Yet Germany fled into the «artificial foothold» of popular biological archaism and National Socialist barbarity. This was not the way for it to find a persuasive response to the greater European questions; rather than meet this challenge, it botched the task in an invidious and dangerous way. In his 1939 essay «Lage der deutschen Philosophie» (Situation of German Philosophy), which Plessner published under the pseudonym Ulrich Eyser in the magazine *Maß und Wert* edited by Thomas Mann and Konrad Falke, he drew the necessary conclusion from this: The universal

> impeachment of every intellectual authority […] had to be tried, and the land without tradition or center tried it. But its utmost possibilities have been depleted. Under the impression that man has to pay for the escapades of the idea with his blood, the rediscovery of reason will come to pass. Not as a third humanism, not as any sort of ism at all, but in honest, level-headed work and in the feeling of having escaped a danger [Plessner 1939, 815].

As before, Plessner here continued to express his conviction that it was worthwhile for Germany to try out the experiment of giving a new, particular, and forward-looking answer to the crisis of modernity. Yet in the summer of 1939, possibly under the impression of the pogrom night the previous November as well as in view of the coming war, Plessner

realized that the price of such an experiment was too high. Consequently, he gave up all expectations and ambitions in this direction – of Germany as well as of himself – and retreated into the «protection zone of civilizing humanism» [Fischer 1990, 419]. From then on, he acted and thought from within this zone. Hence, Plessner's experience of National Socialism and exile led to the end of his idea of a special German mission. This should be regarded less as a loss than as Plessner educating himself in reality.

The end of the German mission and the thought challenges associated with it allowed Plessner to focus on a different task once again: that of the public intellectual. On a more modest scale, Plessner had already sought to have a public effect at the beginning of the Weimar Republic. Thus, he wrote for the *Deutsche Allgemeine*, the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, and other papers, and held lectures for the Kant Society «on the intellectual causes and aims of the [November] Revolution».[19] However, such activity stopped by the end of 1924, and no further such newspaper articles or appearances before the general public can be found in his work through 1933. In December 1924, before the parliamentary elections, a colleague at the *Frankfurter Zeitung* asked Plessner to write an article that would likely «rouse the half-hearted, persuade the doubters, [and] fire up the strong to advocate for the democratic idea», but Plessner refused. He did so on the grounds that he reflected on «political things from a perspective […] that does not allow me to use the tone that would be necessary for the contribution you require to be effective» [Correspondence Drills with Plessner, 18.11.1924 and 24.11.1924, ULG, H. Plessner papers, 130]. Not until he was in exile in Groningen did Plessner return to seeking a greater public effect, for example, by teaching courses at the adult education center and writing articles for the *Telegraaf* that Frederik Buytendijk translated into Dutch. Moreover, after he was dismissed by the German occupying forces in 1943, Plessner held talks in the underground and wrote articles for underground Dutch newspapers [see Plessner, 1957, 314; Dietze 2006a,

[19] See the report on this event in the *Nürnberger Zeitung*, University Library Groningen, H. Plessner papers, 40. Examples of Plessner's articles in newspapers and popular magazines (aside from the already cited texts) include Plessner 1918; 1920a; 1921a; 1921b; 1921c; 1921d; 1922a; 1922b.

164, 216; as well as the following articles by Helmuth Plessner: 1944a; 1944b; 1944c; 1944d].

Plessner was particularly active in the public sphere after he remigrated to Germany in his function as a university teacher in Göttingen. Despite his advanced age, he gave scholarly talks at national and international congresses both in and outside of Germany and embarked on numerous lecture tours in Germany and the Netherlands. In addition, he was involved in a variety of international, cultural, and political spheres. For example, he was a founding member of the committee on «Scholarship and Freedom» and participated regularly in the committee's conferences until it became too ideological for him. Plessner directly utilized international contacts he made through the committee when the University of Göttingen sought to prevent Leonhard Schlüter, a right-wing extremist politician and publisher, from being appointed as the Cultural Minister of Lower Saxony.[20] Above all, Plessner was an active public speaker. Whereas, around 1930, Plessner had principally addressed the artistic, bourgeois, and aristocratic elite, as well as the educated classes and students who were interested in philosophy in his public-oriented activities, he now turned to the whole population of the Federal Republic. Thus, he had a strong presence at Protestant academies as well as synagogues and spoke on behalf of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) as well as the pacifist working group Sonnenberg. In addition, he wrote numerous newspaper articles and radio pieces and participated in radio discussions [for individual citations, see Dietze 2006a, 497-502]. Moreover, Plessner was highly involved in adult education: he repeatedly gave talks at adult education centers, participated in university weeks that the University of Göttingen regularly organized with various cities in Lower Saxony, and, in spite of some resistance, even established the first institute for university adult education at the University of Göttingen, which persisted into the 1980s [see Dietze 2006a, 399-407].[21] In his understanding of conversation in and with the broad public as part of the intellectual's task, he now put into practice

[20] On the Schlüter case, see, in general, Marten [1987]; Schael [2002]. For more detail on Plessner's role in the conflict, in particular, see Dietze [2006a, 414-418].

[21] University weeks are university open houses for adult learners held in different cities each year.

what he had called for in his writings of the Weimar period but had himself not always honored, previously. Thus, in the postwar period, Plessner moved his own philosophy out of the realm of theory and into the realm of practice; he fulfilled and lived it.

What Plessner conveyed – now with deeds to match the words – was not so much political lessons in the Realpolitik of the Federal Republic. Rather, he shared fundamental liberal convictions about the value and meaning that a society and public sphere have for living together in freedom and dignity when they are sustained by citizens who think independently and critically. As before, Plessner took up his theory of the openness and ex-centric positionality of man, using these ideas to explain from a philosophical perspective why totalitarianism, essentialism, and expectations of salvation in this world are not humane and why they necessarily lead to brutality. These basic ideas had pervaded his work from the early 1920s; the National Socialist regime, as well as the war and Holocaust it unleashed, had reinforced them in the most atrocious way. In contrast to the philosophical constructs of the «Conservative Revolutionaries», Plessner's philosophy had stood the test of the political calamities of the age. This was perceived in the immediate postwar period, greatly contributing to the high degree of popularity and appreciation Plessner enjoyed among the public and the students who were then entering the universities [see Dietze 2006a, 366-382].

4. Conclusion

To what extent were intellectuals responsible for the Nazi takeover of Germany? One of the few intellectuals who were not in any way responsible was Helmuth Plessner. He took a stand against the extremist strands of thought among the German bourgeoisie by trying to present alternative perspectives on the world, thereby providing this class with an ideational footing that would prevent it from choosing a totalitarian response to the challenges of modernity. In addition, he was one of the first people to give a systematic answer to the question of intellectuals' responsibility for National Socialism – an answer that is still worth reading today. How could intellectuals best contribute to a new beginning in Germany, and what should the new polity look like? Plessner answered

this question as well, both with his writings and his public actions. For him, it was less about commenting on questions concerning the political system of the Federal Republic or getting involved in a party than about demonstrating the anthropological conditions of a society that make it possible for all of its members to live in dignity. In this way, he was also advocating an open society.

Plessner's ideas seem to have inspired and persuaded many of the politically engaged and interested students who entered German universities in the 1950s. For example, Plessner strongly influenced the young Jürgen Habermas [cf. esp. Habermas 1958; Yos 2019]. Moreover, it has been shown that Plessner had a lasting impact on the circle of students around Joachim Ritter – above all, Robert Spaemann, Hermann Lübbe and Odo Marquard [see Hacke 2006, esp. 21, 261, 269, 284; as well as Fischer 2008].[22] The Federal Republic's «philosophy of civicness» (especially in its less conservative form up to 1968), thus, can also be traced back directly to Plessner. Yet, since Plessner's books on political philosophy emerged during the Weimar period, he is primarily regarded as a thinker of the 1920s in the debates about the intellectual foundation of the Federal Republic. This perspective not only fails to appreciate Plessner's remigration and public engagement as a university teacher but also leaves out his postwar texts. Helmuth Plessner was one of the few unburdened and publicly effective intellectuals in Germany, whose political philosophy was situated on this side of utopia (*Diesseits der Utopie*) [Plessner 1966] and had withstood the test of National Socialism. If one were to apply the criteria that are common in the debate about the intellectual foundation of the Federal Republic, then Plessner would have to be regarded as one of its intellectual founders – indeed, before the students who learned from him and before the colleagues who operated *intra muros* (such as Joachim Ritter). As with other potential founders, however, the exact influence of Plessner's thought – particularly outside of academia – remains to be determined.

What conclusions did Plessner draw from his experience of National Socialism and the Second World War in his thought and actions as a liberal philosopher and sociologist who was, moreover, a victim of the

[22] Fischer characterizes the University of Münster as a "hub for Philosophical Anthropology" [see Fischer 2008, 419-445, quote on 419].

regime? Compared to the political philosophy of representatives of the «Conservative Revolution», Plessner's exhibits extensive continuities: for example, the version of philosophical anthropology that he developed in the 1920s remained a basis of his philosophical writings, as well as of his contributions to sociology and political philosophy in the Federal Republic. Yet shifts in his thinking can also be discerned, above all, in his expectations of Germany and in the way he related to the public: he gave up the idea of a mission for Germany that had pervaded his works into the 1930s and turned in the postwar period toward the general public, thus translating his own philosophy into deeds. His appeal to «*Geistigen*» [intellectuals] to devote themselves to educating the German bourgeoisie in reality and away from utopian thinking, which runs through his entire oeuvre, had already shaped his actions at the beginning of the Weimar era. In this respect, Plessner's conclusions from National Socialism, war, and the Holocaust should be understood more as a return to earlier positions and actions than as a rupture.

Accordingly, we can conclude that intellectuals who were never radical underwent shifts in thought, actions, and habitus rather than deradicalization and a departure from utopia. However, the paradoxical element of the question that lies behind the statement – did intellectuals who were never radical undergo processes of deradicalization? – is indicative of problems inherent in the research debates mentioned at the start: Certainly, in a country where so many intellectuals embraced radical political ideas and actively worked to ensure the Nazi power grab, the questions of why, when and how they distanced themselves from these positions remain crucial in order to understand the success of democracy in Germany after 1945. Still, it is necessary not to overstretch or overemphasize the thesis of the deradicalization and departure from utopia. For, when one applies this thesis not to specific individuals, groups, or intellectual contexts but rather as a leading narrative for whole scholarly disciplines or for the intellectual history of the early Federal Republic, one runs the risk of excluding those who were not radical thinkers around 1930 and, therefore, did not undergo processes of deradicalization later on. This once again marginalizes and excludes those who were marginalized or were outsiders in the period under study. However, it is well possible that exactly these non-radicals

who held a political middle ground since the early Weimar Republic decisively influenced the intellectual formation of the Federal Republic, even if their number was comparatively small. They had the authority of integrity and consistency behind them. By making the research question broader and by searching, in general, for the consequences that National Socialism, World War II, and the Holocaust had on the thinking and actions of individuals or groups, any such exclusion can be easily avoided. I did this here with Helmuth Plessner, but the question remains whether Plessner's conclusions – his renunciation of the German mission and his turn toward the broader public – are typical. Are there patterns in the ways that nonradical intellectuals reacted and dealt with these events? And if this is the case: Can these patterns be regarded as analogous to the deradicalization processes of left-wing and right-wing radical thinkers? Comparative studies of appropriate biographies are needed before this question can be answered [Epstein 2012].[23] Such a turn towards the political middle ground must include those who remained in Germany during the Third Reich [*Daheimgebliebene*] and remigrants, just as much as the intellectuals who were driven out of Germany and remained in their host country or traveled back and forth between their country of exile and Germany in the postwar period. Indeed, it is quite possible that the group of such refugees will be the largest.

(Translated from the German by Patricia Casey Sutcliffe)

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[23] Epstein suggests that émigré historians to the United States, like Georg Iggers, Fritz Stern, and Renate Bridenthal, also concluded from their experience of National Socialism, the Holocaust, and the Second World War that they would be politically engaged [see, esp., Epstein 2012, 61].

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Keywords

German history; intellectual history; political philosophy; anti-utopian thinking; Helmuth Plessner

Abstract

To what extent were intellectuals responsible for the Nazi power grab, and how could they contribute to a new beginning in Germany after 1945? Numerous scholars have debated these questions in relation to right-wing academics. This article places the intellectual development of the "half-Jew" and emigrant Helmuth Plessner in the context of such debates. As a man of the political middle who cautioned against political extremism on both the right and left all his life, Plessner was a rare breed in twentieth-century Germany. In contrast to right-wing intellectuals who advocated for the «Third Reich», Plessner did not undergo processes of self-mobilization and disillusionment, nor did he have to deal with the issue of his own guilt. Therefore, in his case the question is rather what conclusions he drew from his experience of National Socialism and the Second World War and what effects this had on his thinking and actions. The article shows there was one goal in Plessner's political philosophy as a decisive and ever-present concern: the education of the German bourgeoisie to deal with the world as it really was, that is, with reality (*Erziehung zur Wirklichkeit*) and

away from utopian thinking. Apart from that, there were shifts (rather than ruptures or profound revisions) in Plessner's thinking and actions: Around 1935, Plessner gave up both the idea of a German mission and his elite habits of the years around 1930. Instead, he transformed himself into an internationally effective scholar who consciously took on the role of a public intellectual.

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