FRANZ MEHRING AND THE NATURALIST CONTROVERSY:
A PERSPECTIVE ON THE CULTURAL POSITION OF THE SPD

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INTRODUCTION

The 'Mehring-Legende' has had a history as complex as the man himself. As a Social Democrat in Imperial Germany, Franz Mehring's gift for polemics brought him to the center of many controversies, perhaps most notably, the campaign against revisionism at the turn of the century. He was one of those men who invite warm friends and equally passionate enemies, and this feature of his personality lingers on in his works. More importantly, the 'Legende' has been shaped by developments within the German Communist Party and by its ideological relation to its founders, the SPD radical wing, to which Mehring belonged. Until the late fifties Mehring's status was decidedly below that accorded him by his contemporaries.

Mehring's book the Lessing-Legende won high praise from Engels. It was the first extended treatment of literary history which employed the tools of historical materialism. Mehring recast the relationship of Frederich II to the humanist Gotthold Lessing in terms of the social conflicts within the Prussian kingdom. In doing so, he rejected the myth of Frederich as the spiritual patron of German classical tradition and emphasized the new class consciousness which Lessing represented. This work was the first of a series of pioneering efforts which Mehring
made in the field of Marxist literary and cultural his-
tory. Rosa Luxemburg assessed the importance of his con-
tributions in the following way:

...For decades now you have occupied a special
post in our movement, and no one else could have
filled it. You are the representative of real
culture in all its brilliance. If the German
proletariat is the historic heir of classic
German philosophy, as Marx and Engels declared,
then you are the executor of that testament.
You have saved everything of value which still
remained of the once splendid culture of the
bourgeoisie and brought it to us, into the
camp of the socially dis-inherited.... Every
line from your brilliant pen has taught our
workers that socialism is not a bread-and-butter
problem, but a cultural movement, a great
and proud worldview.  

During the thirties it became fashionable to en-
large upon the mistakes of the SPD radicals. Critics
took their lead from Stalin, who said that despite their
revolutionary acts, "die linken Sozialdemokraten in
Deutschland zugleich eine ganze Reihe ernstester politi-
scher und theoretischer Fehler aufzuweisen hatten."  
Mehring was regarded as a "toten Hund," no longer relevant
to the proletarian movement.

Georg Lukacs was the foremost exponent of the anti-
Mehring position. He devoted nearly one hundred pages of
of his Beiträge zur Geschichte der Ästhetik to proving
that:

So sehr die Mehringsche Zusammenfassung der Prin-
zipien der Ästhetik, der Methodologie der Liter-
aturgeschichte, Literaturkritik und beider Anwen-
dung voll der schwersten Abweichungen von der II.
Internationale steckengeblieben ist, so sehr ist
die Mehringsche Etappe doch eine Entwicklung-
phase, die nur kritisch überwunden, nicht aber
übersprungen oder ausgelöscht werden kann.
But in his anxiety to demonstrate the "sehr undialektische, sehr unkritische, mechanische Auffassung," which flawed Mehring's work, his own method exposes him to the same criticism. Biassed editing of material, innuendoes, and an inordinate preoccupation with Mehring's early liberal-Lasallean background destroyed the critical pretensions of Lukacs' argument.

For a man who rescued so many reputations from distortion, Mehring himself was badly in need of defenders. The task was finally undertaken in 1959 by three young East German scholars: Hans Koch, in his Franz Mehrings Beiträge zur marxistischen Literaturtheorie; Thomas Höhle, Franz Mehring: Sein Weg zum Marxismus 1869–1891; and Josef Schleifstein, Franz Mehring: Sein marxistischen Schaffen 1891–1919. Koch's book is a very thorough exploration of the philosophical framework of Mehring's aesthetics. Höhle writes to refute Lukacs' generalizations on Mehring's political development, pointing out the integrity with which Mehring tested and refined his political instincts. Schleifstein gives a sympathetic, insightful but brief analysis of Mehring's philosophical orientation and his literary and historical works.

These books all make important and badly needed contributions to the Mehring-Legende. However, to some extent they reflect the separation of theory and practice which has become endemic in cultural criticism. None of them (except indirectly, in the case of Koch) deal with
Mehring's practical efforts to enrich the cultural environment of the working class. He was more than a literary scholar. He carefully sifted through both the past and the present for material of value to contemporary workers. His judgments of the naturalists, for example, were always measured against what he felt to be the interests and needs of the workers; he did not write primarily for the official stratum of the party. His critical articles in *Neue Zeit* were often designed to articulate the response of the people to experience such as naturalist drama, and to underscore the importance of aesthetic considerations in the socialist movement.

The following pages offer a study of Mehring's criticism of naturalism, of the areas in which he differed from the views of his fellow socialists, and of his activity in behalf of working class culture. The controversy which naturalism generated within the party was heated enough to prompt a debate at the Gotha Congress in 1896. The topic led to a general discussion of the cultural position of the SPD, of the nature of "suitable" aesthetic standards, and of the party's responsibility in the aesthetic education of the worker. The opinions expressed in the debate are an indication of the ambiguous response of the party to the culture of German society. The dissension evident among the delegates evoked a fiery reply from Mehring in the pages of *Neue Zeit*. His
experience as director of the Freie Volksbühne, the Berlin workers' theater, enabled him to lay aside certain stereotypes about the workers and their artistic tastes. These observations serve as an introduction to a more detailed study of his analysis of naturalism. This, in turn, leads into an evaluation of Mehring's role as director of the Volksbühne, where he had the opportunity to implement his theories.

A discussion of the views of Mehring and his contemporaries on German culture raises a number of related questions. Such an analysis should be set within a larger framework of the institutions operating in their society and the values which those institutions inculcated. The basic question concerns the sensitivity of the SPD to the problem of the cultural assimilation of the working class to the dominant culture. At the turn of the century Germany was permeated with the values of militarism, nationalism, elitism, and imperialism. Each of these values filtered through the schools, churches, and popular culture—-institutions with which most workers had contact at some period in their lives. Though various forces existed which tended to isolate the socialists, namely, their self-imposed 'ideology of separation' and government attempts to stigmatize them through its propaganda, the effect of these socializing agencies should not be overlooked. The cultural alternatives afforded by the SPD should be exam-
ined for the degree to which they dealt with the problem. The level of theoretical sophistication encouraged among the common people must also be considered. For this reason it is essential to preface a survey of Mehring's criticism with a brief sketch of the interplay between these two value systems. Mehring's own background is relevant to it.
FOOTNOTES

1. The term was first used by Hans Koch in his Franz
Mehrings Beiträge zur marxistischen Literaturtheorie (Ber-

2. In a letter to Kautsky Engels said: "Mehrings
Arbeiten sowohl die Leitartikel wie den Lessing finde ich
ganz vorzüglich und habe meine Freude dran." Engels to
Kautsky, Sept. 29, 1892. Friedrich Engels Briefwechsel

3. Rosa Luxemburg to Franz Mehring, Feb. 27, 1916;
cited by Eduard Fuchs in his foreword to Franz Mehring,
Zur Literaturgeschichte von Calderon bis Heine (Berlin,
1929) p. 10.

4. J.W. Stalin, "Über einige Fragen der Geschichte

5. Georg Lukacs, Beiträge zur Geschichte der Ästhetik
(Berlin, 1954) pp. 402-03.

6. Peter Nettl makes some highly pertinent remarks on
the relation between the isolationist attitudes within the
SPD and its organizational development:
Right from the start it kept itself apart from so-
ciety, first by emphasizing philosophical and moral
differences, later completing the social contain-
ment of its members by organizational means. Thus
the whole ideology of separation had strong moral
overtones, which equated participation in society
with corruption, and claimed to provide within it-
self a superior alternative to a corrupt capital-
ism.... But this conviction/ was never considered
sufficient, and the SPD increasingly developed or-
ganizational forms through which the activities
and aspirations of its members could be expressed.
But the two were not compatible; as organization
grew moral fervour declined, and the one even be-
came a sophisticated substitute for the other.
"The German Social Democratic Party 1890-1914 as a Politi-
CHAPTER I

MEHRING AND HIS MILIEU

In 1890 Franz Mehring resigned from his position as editor of the liberal *Berliner Volkszeitung* and entered the German Socialist Party. Because of his literary interests and journalistic background, he was immediately recruited for the pages of *Neue Zeit*, the leading theoretical organ of the SPD. News of the appointment was not well received in some quarters of the party. Mehring's vehement attacks on the socialists during the seventies were still remembered. But the skepticism was ill-placed. The socialist movement gained in Mehring a man whose sense of commitment ran deep, whose talents and erudition were joined to a steadily growing perception of the class conflict in Germany and its subtle ramifications.

Mehring's career as a Social Democrat spanned the years between the re-emergence of the socialists as a legal party and the First World War. He belonged to the generation of party leaders faced with the task of implementing and applying Marxist theory to a sophisticated capitalist society. Unlike men such as Wilhelm Liebknecht and August Bebel, Mehring's political sentiments did not develop out of the working class movement. He joined the SPD only after exhausting the possibilities of German lib-
eralism. He had come to realize that parliamentary constitutionalism, even if it had a chance in Germany, could offer no guarantees of social reform. He subsequently rejected Lassalle's formula for socialism initiated by the State for similar reasons. It did not deal realistically with the forces of power within society. Disenchantment with ineffectual politics finally made Mehring a Marxist. An uncompromising spirit made him, along with Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, one of the most radical.

Mehring was born, as it were, at the other end of the political spectrum. His family traced its ancestry back to old Prussian nobility and had given many sons to the traditional professions of the military, civil service, and the Church. From the time of his birth in Pomerania in 1846, Mehring was "nursed on the milk of Prussian patriotism." His earliest aspirations centered around the Lutheran ministry. But by the time he became eligible for military service, his loyalties had cooled to the point where he decided to escape to Leipzig to avoid the draft. In 1866 he entered the University there and began his studies of classical languages and German philosophy.

Leipzig during the sixties was a rapidly expanding industrial center, and accordingly, was the center of the nascent socialist movement. It was here that Ferdinand Lassalle launched his Allgemeiner Deutscher Arbei-
terverein in 1863; Bebel and Liebknecht were actively involved in the Arbeiterbildungsvereine. Heinrich Wuttke, who later ran for the Reichstag as a workers' candidate, and Wilhelm Roscher, a socialist economist, taught the principles of the new movement in the university while Mehring was a student. It may be assumed from Mehring's subsequent references to them that he attended their lectures. ²

In 1868 Mehring continued his work in philosophy at the University of Berlin. During the following year he became familiar with the writings of Lassalle, whose theories, in Mehring's own words, left him with a great interest in social-political questions.³ During the same year he joined the staff of Zukunft, which placed him under the guidance of Guido Weiss and Johann Jacoby. From this point he drew his political orientation from that of his mentors, who still clung to the democratic liberalism of 1848. It was, perhaps, due to these men, whose views of history and politics were deeply imbued with Kantian ethics, that Mehring's aesthetic work reflects the influence of the idealist philosopher.

Mehring's energies for the next twenty years were spent furthering the cause of liberalism through various newspapers. His one venture into the political arena was short-lived. In 1884 he participated in the attempt to form a left liberal party, the Demokratische Partei, but
after the Reichstag elections three years later, the party folded. Thereafter, Mehring confined his political activity to the pen.

The might of Mehring's pen was brought to bear on the socialists in his "Zur Geschichte der deutschen Sozialdemokratie; ein historischer Versuch," published in 1877. Mehring argued that the party was a sterile, a-historical phenomenon. Because he believed at that time that personalities make history, he concentrated on character-sketches of socialist leaders. He described Wilhelm Liebknecht, for example, as a fanatic, harboring hate and contempt for society. Marx and Engels were styled the "Sybarites of the spirit," spreading the "propaganda of revolution as a kind of Mephistophelian sport." To insure that his views reached a large public, Mehring printed articles of a similar nature in the popular bourgeois magazine, the Gartenlaube. Among the socialists, his efforts earned him the respect of the early Christians for the unconverted Saul.

The Anti-Socialist laws of 1878 marked a turning point in Mehring's attitude toward the SPD. His opposition to these laws, stemming from his dislike of Bismarck's "arbeiterfeindliche" economic policies, gradually led to a rapprochement with the socialist movement. The failure of the Demokratische Partei to attract workers heightened the process. Its culmination came in 1890. Mehring's final acceptance of socialism was occasioned by an incident
involving a Berlin actress blacklisted from the city's theaters. When she appealed to Mehring, he brought her case before the public. In the course of attacking the collusion of the bourgeois press with the city's theater management, Mehring published a general critique of the press in capitalist society. Kapital und Presse, a full scale assault on the Establishment, signified Mehring's break with his liberal past and his public identification with the socialist party. The book was favorably reviewed by Kautsky in Neue Zeit and Mehring was welcomed into the fold.

In the last chapter of Kapital und Presse, devoted to culture in capitalist society, Mehring offered some insights into a school of artists who called themselves naturalists. These were a group of young German writers, originally inspired by the novels of Zola, who had earned much notoriety during the late eighties. The principles of naturalism demanded the repudiation of classical German aesthetics. The essence of the "new art" was the portrayal of the psychological and environmental factors in human experience. The moral heightening of experience according to standards of the Good, the True and the Beautiful, was replaced by a preoccupation with the moment by moment response of the individual to his surroundings. Just as controversial was the preference of these artists for describing conditions of lower class life. This stratum afforded
the most dramatic explication of the naturalists' belief in determinism. The treatment and subject-matter often led to a de facto indictment of the social and economic system. For the most part, the political theories of these artists were vague and confused. Some spokesmen for the group proudly claimed the appellation "Proletariat of the spirit." Others were equally insistent that their art placed them above the level of political partisanship. In a practical sense, the naturalists had little to offer in the way of political consciousness. Their artistic emphasis was not on cause, but effect. But they did confront the middle and upper class public with a vivid account of life on the fringes of social existence.

In the eyes of Franz Mehring, the proletarian sympathies of the naturalists merited the attention of socialist criticism. He regarded the "new art" as a hopeful development in the wasteland of contemporary German culture. His analysis of the naturalist movement was to cover the nearly twenty year period of its productivity. In the course of those twenty years, Mehring brought newly refined Marxist principles to bear on this middle class artistic group. At the same time, he had to deal with the larger problem of culture and the working class.

The *Lessing-Legende* was the first of Mehring's works intended to 'redeem' from bourgeois myth German literary figures whose humanism recommended them to the working class. Lessing, Heine, Freiligrath, Schiller and
Goethe are only a few of those whom Mehring reinterpreted in the light of historical materialism. His *History of German Social Democracy* (1898), *Aus dem literarischen Nachlass von Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels und Ferdinand Lassalle* (1902) and official biography of Marx (1918), were only side activities. Over the same period Mehring threw himself into the attack against revisionism, to the extent that his conflict with the centrist Kautsky impelled him to leave *Neue Zeit* in 1901. He resumed his campaign in the *Leipziger Volkszeitung*, the organ of the radicals, and in 1903 came under the heavy censure of his antagonists at the Dresden Congress. At the outbreak of the war he stood with Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Liebknecht, and Clara Zetkin in condemning the nationalist position of the party, and with them formed the Spartacus League. He died on January 29, 1919, only a few days after co-founding the Communist Party of Germany. His life and death were a suitable comment on the recurrent theme of his writings: that true humanism radiated the spirit of 'Kampffreude' and that socialist militancy must be rooted in true humanism.

The relation between German workers' organizations and educational-cultural interests predates the socialist movement. The *Arbeiterbildungsvereine* were the most vigorous proletarian organizations to develop out of the 1860's. These educational associations sprung from the
genius of the Nationalverein, a liberal bourgeois party. The Nationalverein saw these associations as a means of creating a powerful but docile ally in the working class. With the support of such an ally, the liberals hoped to make good the failures of 1848. The Vereine also provided a means of checking revolution from below. The spectre of the red ghost, which haunted their memories of 1848, led the liberals to insist on the apolitical character of these associations. Political discussions were forbidden. The express purpose of the educational programs was the "allgemeine Bildung unter der gewerbtreibenden und arbeitenden Klassen...zu verbreiten." The unstated purpose was the peaceful assimilation of the working class into German society under the tutelage of the liberals.

During the early sixties the Vereine spread to several cities, both in the north and south. One of the most active branches was located in Leipzig, where the first challenge was directed against liberal control. When the Nationalverein (the parent liberal party) refused to admit workers as full members and to sponsor legislation favorable to them, the Leipzig workers broke away. Under the leadership of Lassalle, they formed the Allgemeine Deutscher Arbeiterverein in 1863. Workers' groups in the south followed suit. By 1869 Wilhelm Liebknecht and August Bebel established the Social
Democratic Labor Party, known as the Eisenachers. Both organizations repudiated their former cultural character and committed themselves instead to the achievement of political goals.

The two parties, socialist in orientation, walked a political tightrope after 1870 in Bismarck's unified state. Socialist Reichstag deputies added fuel to the Chancellor's hostility by opposing the annexationist drive of the Franco-Prussian War. Bismarck retaliated by charging Liebknecht and Bebel with high treason. Before the trial took place in March of 1872 the Paris Commune reared up before the German public, arousing the terrors of anarchism, destruction and revolution. Bebel's eloquent defense of the Communards suggested a dangerous link between the French tragedy and the German socialists. The long trial of Bebel and Liebknecht the following year further branded the movement as an alien and subversive element within society.

Even as the two socialist parties strengthened and grew after uniting in 1875, the working class found no sympathy among the upper classes. The only party which strenuously represented its interests conflicted too fundamentally with the values of the dominant society. In contrast to the patriotism which flowered under the new Reich, the Social Democrats were expressly internationalist in outlook and refused to endorse the achievements of Bismarck. The spirit of the First International was
strong among the leadership. The militant atheism of the party was another affront to the still largely Christian population. During the seventies, pamphlets and newspapers attacked both religious institutions and doctrines, leaving no ground for compromise. "Religion," stated an article in Vorwärts, "is thus the most powerful enemy of socialism.... In one word, religion is the main bastion of anti-socialism, of reaction, the breeding ground of all social evil." It has been suggested that this position of the party aroused more popular antagonism than either its political or economic beliefs.

Bismarck's war on the socialist movement was not limited to overt repressive measures and appeals to public sentiment. His government could also rely on the impact of certain socializing institutions to subvert workers' loyalties. After 1871 the schools became the particular focus of government concern. With the advent of universal suffrage, the government looked upon the schools as one means of reinforcing patriotism and combatting the influence of socialism. In the late eighties the Emperor himself began to take an interest in Prussian school reform. He directed, for example, that German history texts be revised to demonstrate that "the power of the State alone can protect the individual, his family, his freedom and his rights," and that the Prussian kings "have exerted themselves to raise the conditions of the workers."
An index of proscribed books lent substance to his view of history. The government was also aware of the low social and economic status of the schoolteacher and tried to win his allegiance through fulsome propaganda on his role. He was instructed to regard himself as a representative of a divine order within the state and society. In the words of Bismarck: "As teachers you face a great number of our growing generation, in the first instance, in a position of high authority. You do not only represent the Ministry of Education, but the government itself."¹⁴ Despite this kind of exploitative recognition, the majority of teachers identified with the State, rather than with the socialist movement.

Military service was a second means for binding the individual to the State. The mystique of the military was so pervasive by the late nineteenth century that not only the traditional Junker support endorsed it. The affluent middle class incorporated it into their status symbols to the extent that a university degree was greatly enhanced by a record of membership in the student corps.¹⁵ Children's readers were heavily seeded with military images, such as the young hero adeptly creating battle strategies with his little band of "soldiers." By the time a young man reached military age, he was accustomed to regarding the army as a romantic adventure.

The political and social control begun in the school and sustained through army life was extended into the home
through popular literature. The literacy rate in Germany was extraordinarily high (at the end of the century fewer .05% could not read or write.\textsuperscript{16}) But both Lassalle and Liebknecht decried the lack of a corresponding critical sophistication on the part of the average reader. In his famous speech "Knowledge is Power - Power is Knowledge" in 1872, Liebknecht warned against the dangerous effect of commercial newspapers on social and political attitudes. The popular press, he noted, gave inordinate space to religious and military matters, but not because of the importance of the material itself. Those who raise such issues are "serious only in their efforts to secure exclusive control over the minds of the benighted masses."\textsuperscript{17} The type of literature available to the poor had much the same purpose. "Kolportage," or cheap escapist novels, abounded in ideal types - the imperialist explorer, the bourgeois family and so on.

Another of Bismarck's plans was social legislation designed to coopt adherents of the SPD. Between 1881 and 1884 the government presented a program for accident, sickness and invalid insurance, as well as for the nationalization or monopolization of certain industries, such as the tobacco industry. This threw the Social Democrats into a major theoretical crisis, regarding their position on State Socialism. The residue of Lassallean philosophy among the leadership divided opinion within the party.
Articles in *Zukunft* (the socialist, not the liberal paper) supported the legislation as a step toward socialism. The *Sozialdemokrat* initially carried editorials backing the tobacco monopoly, with the logic that monopolization would only harm the bourgeoisie and benefit the workers. At the same time repressive measures against the party were becoming more severe. The "Minor State of Seige," which permitted police to imprison or expel suspected agitators from a city, was extended to Hamburg in 1880 and Leipzig in 1887, and still applied in Berlin. This made it difficult for socialist candidates to discuss the issue with their prospective constituents. During the election of 1881 they did offer a critique of Bismarck's plan. Bernstein warned the readers of the *Sozialdemokrat* not to be misguided by the government's social concern. Kautsky stated that the program was designed to buttress the power of the "Militarist Monarchy" by giving workers "bread without freedom." But despite their efforts, the socialists fared badly in the national elections, even in traditional strongholds such as Berlin. The results indicated the confusion in many minds regarding the real intentions of the government.

In response to government attempts to isolate and control the working class, the socialists set up a number of institutions to counter the influence of the State. The most highly developed before 1878 was the socialist
press. *Vorwärts*, founded in 1876, represented the official views of the party. The same year *Die neue Welt*, a literary journal, was established. The following year *Zukunft* began publication as the first "scientific" organ of the SPD. In addition to these national papers there were by 1878 over 127 local newspapers and periodicals. The degree of quality varied, but the papers did succeed in generating discussion of national and local issues.

The anti-socialist laws of 1878 sharply curtailed the activity of the SPD, particularly the press. With the voice of the party silenced, except for the Reichstag delegation, the leaders in exile devised plans for printing and smuggling into Germany a newspaper loyal to the executive committee. By 1879 the first issues of the *Sozialdemokrät* went to print in Zurich. Julius Motteler, the "Red Postmaster," soon established a smuggling system that encompassed 110 distributing centers within Germany. In this way contact with the rank and file continued throughout the twelve years of suppression.

To complement the "organization from the top" the SPD developed a decentralized network on the local level. This took the form of groups, usually under the guise of campaign clubs or singing fraternities. These groups were more than political meetings. They served an educational function as well. Men with only the rudiments of schooling were taught to see their problems on a
theoretical level, related to national and international problems. And in an immediate way they helped to alleviate the individual's burden of isolation and hopelessness. The sense of solidarity engendered by these experiences greatly enhanced the appeal of the SPD. The memories of Eugen Frager, who later became a party historian, were not atypical:

Who does not remember what the party meant to him during long or short span of his membership? Not only the hope for a happier future, but the fulfillment of the present, too: the rescue from the political depression of the time, the belief in the creativity of the proletariat, the recognition of the emergence of a new world. In all of this we shared: in the details of everyday activities as much as in the great battles; the party newspaper was a part of our self, the organization, down to the smallest district and dues meeting, was a living community.19

When the anti-socialist laws expired, this organizational basis was expanded. Greater resources were earmarked for educational activities, for example, such as traveling lecturers, the wider circulation of socialist works on history, science and economic, and on workers' libraries.20 Programs were also designed to appeal to families of workers. Sunday outings and dances, aimed at the needs and interests of wives and young people, figured prominently in areas where the party was strong.21

This wealth of experience, introduced into the life of the worker by the presence of the party, came to have a momentum of its own. For many it meant the difference
between social abjection and a compelling sense of unity and strength, an identification with a movement capable of changing the spiritual universe of their lives. The theoretical significance of the party became a secondary, almost incidental factor in their relation to it. This was not only due to the emotional nature of the workers' attachment to the movement. SPD officials, for their part, were often more concerned with the organizational maintenance and expansion of the party than with conveying the theoretical subtleties of Marxism. 'Vulgar Marxism,' laden with determinist assumptions, relied on the workers' experience of exploitation rather than on the force of a closely-reasoned argument. It became axiomatic that the working class lacked the educated background necessary to grasp straight Marxist doctrine. Moreover, this vulgarization was considered not merely an expedient, but a desirable step.

Deterministic Marxism is for the masses of workers not only a tremendous advance of knowledge, but also a motive power of their will.... The reception of a new science by the masses is an historical process in the course of which the masses adapt the thoughts they want to understand to their capacity for comprehension at a given moment.

This popular level of comprehension had advantages and disadvantages. It undermined the efforts of the enthusiastic worker to defend his beliefs coherently and independently of the learned formulation. At the same time, however,
it shielded him from the factionalism produced by theoretical debate.

The dissemination of 'vulgar Marxism' coincided with a general anti-philosophical spirit in the party. Many of the men who rose to official positions were autodidacts, such as Bebel and Karl Frohme, the Reichstag deputy. Many had come to Marxism late in their political careers. The philosophical underpinnings of the dialectic were ignored in the face of complex practical decisions. It was too tempting to find sufficient confirmation of Marxist analysis in allusions to natural law.²⁴ Engels suggested the analogy in his Anti-Dühring (1878) and Karl Kautsky, the theoretician of the SPD took it to heart.²⁵

After 1900 the organizational structure of the SPD was reputedly great enough to warrant the title "the state within the State." But the significance of the socialist "subculture" should not be judged on the basis of its institutional strength alone.²⁶ Its importance to the socialist movement lay rather in its ability to counter-act the impact of the dominant society by positing a different set of values. If socialism was to be born in the womb of capitalism, in large part through the efforts of the proletariat, the working class had to be imbued, to some degree, with the values of the new society.

It is difficult, of course, to measure precisely how anti-nationalist, anti-militarist, etc., the average
worker was who thought of himself as a socialist. However, since the major emphasis of this discussion falls in the decade of the nineties, when Franz Mehring worked out his theories on contemporary culture, there are two sources from this period which offer some evidence for evaluation. One is the comments of Adelheid Popp, who was engaged in organizing women for the socialist movement. Another is a book by Paul Göhres, a theology student who lived as a factory worker for three months in Chemnitz. He recorded his observations on the strength of the SPD in what appears to be a fairly dispassionate account. Together these statements provide insight into workers' attitudes.

There were many factors obstructing the organization of women workers within the socialist movement, although women constituted a large part of the working force. The patriarchal nature of German society was sustained in all classes, even when women shared the economic burdens of the family equally with their husbands. Adelheid Popp described the suspicion with which she was greeted among the very poor:

Weil es eine seltene Erscheinung ist, wenn Frauen auf der Tribüne der Versammlungsaus erscheinen und unter Männern wie unter Gleichens verkehren, finden Menschen mit alten Anschauungen vieles daran auszusetzen. Nicht nur das Traditionelle "Die Frau gehört ins Haus," sondern auch moralische Bedenken wirken Das Neue begegnen immer Misstrauen.... Um so schlimmer, wenn die in Betracht kommende weiblische Person jung ist.27

This initial suspicion carried over into the attitudes of
the socialist workers. It was not easy to convince men
that women were not merely competitors for their jobs,
but rather were objects of even greater exploitation. On
the average, women's salaries were at least a third less
than their male counterparts. But the double demands
of job and household, plus the objections of husbands,
made it difficult to reach women. Male chauvinism afflic-
ted the party leadership as well as the proletariat. When
Clara Zetkin appealed to the Gotha Congress in 1896 for
special funds with which to organize, she was turned down
with a resolution of moral support. It was only after
1900 that she began making headway. The women's organiza-
tion became quite a radical part of the socialist movement,
but only because it managed to elude the control of the
male bureaucracy.

In 1895 Paul Göhres took a factory job in Chemnitz
in order to investigate at first hand the conditions of
the working class. He related with grudging admiration
that the SPD had strong support in the area. He was par-
ticularly interested in the educational opportunities it
offered the worker. The discussion groups, inexpensive
socialist literature, bookstores and newspapers fulfilled
important needs, especially among those workers who had
grown up in the cities and attended urban schools.
The impulse towards education lies, like an elemental force, deep in the hearts and heads of many in this third group of our factory working men. It confronted the observer every day and at every turn, and found utterance in a hundred ways, in words and wishes, sighs and questions. At the same time, Göhres noted one area where the socialists had failed to make their influence felt. Pictures of army life abounded at the work bench, he said. He himself often sat in on lively stories of military experience, in which socialist workers participated. He reported, with some unction, that the cosmopolitan, anti-military position of the party was not appreciated by "the average social democrats as a mass," even the more active and zealous of them. "On the contrary, they manifest a surprising affection for the German Fatherland, the Emperor, and the army." But he also admitted that for many workers, military service represented the one significant escape from the monotony of the factory. If Göhres is to be believed, the government's hold on popular loyalties was still strong, despite the concerted educational programs of the SPD.

These two sources may be somewhat arbitrary gauges of the party's effectiveness. They do suggest that the SPD may have fallen into the trap of providing little more than parallel institutions for the working class, instead of institutions with a revolutionary potential. A profile of the leadership's attitudes toward popular culture helps
to place the question of 'cultural assimilation' in a revealing light.
FOOTNOTES.


2. Thomas Höhle, Franz Mehring, Sein Weg zum Marxismus 1869-1891 (Berlin, 1958) p. 34.

3. Franz Mehring, Kapital und Presse (Berlin, 1891) p. 60.

4. "Die deutsche Sozialdemokratie unterscheidet sich ... darin von ihren Schwesterparteien in den europäischen Kulturstaaten, dass sie nicht ... sich allmählich aus einer allgemeinen Zeitströmung heraus konsolidierte, sondern durch den energischen Willen eines autokratischen Mannes aus einem Boden gestampft wurde, der ... vollkommen steril erschien." Franz Mehring, Die deutsche Sozialdemokratie (Bremen, 1879) p. 207.


6. Ibid., p. 141.


8. For a good treatment of the personalities involved in the naturalist movement, their individual works, and their various aesthetic positions, see Jethro Bithell, Modern German Literature, 1880-1950 (London, 1959) pp. 38-52. Richard Hamann and Yost Harms, Naturalismus (Berlin, 1959) provide an excellent discussion of the movement in relation to the social, political and economic developments in Germany. The section entitled "Massen und Milieu" is particularly helpful for understanding the determinist orientation of the art. Arnold Hauser, The Social History of Art (New York, 1951) IV, pp. 210-213, offers a good explanation of the break with traditional aesthetics.


11. Albert Dulk, "Religion," Vorwärts, No. 58 (May 19, 1878) p. 3.


15. Ibid., p. 19.

16. Ibid., p. 37.


20. When surveys were made of SPD libraries in southern Germany, Berlin and Leipzig, the results indicated that the workers much preferred Zola, Dickens, Disraeli, and folk and escapist literature to socialist works on history, economics and philosophy. See J.S. and E.P., "Was lesen die Arbeiter in Deutschland?" Neue Zeit, XIII, 1 (1894/95) pp. 153-55; Advocatus, "Was liest der deutsche Arbeiter?"
Neue Zeit, XIII, 2 (1894/95) pp. 814-815; and Konrad Haenisch, "Was lesen die Arbeiter?" Neue Zeit, XVIII, 2 (1899/1900) pp. 691-693.


24 I use the work "subculture" in the same sense that it is used by Roth, i.e., to designate activities not controlled by the larger society, though the character of these activities may resemble those of the dominant society. See Roth, op. cit., p. 221. A similar point can be made in regard to values. Gerhard A. Ritter, for example, in the last chapter of his Die Arbeiterbewegung im Wilhelminischen Reich 1890-1900 (Berlin, 1959), shows how the attitudes of the organized workers toward the "Lumpenproletariat" mirrored those of the upper classes. They feared the entrance of "rabble" into their organizations.


27 Adelheid Dvorsk Popp, Erinnerungen (Berlin, 1923) pp. 7-8.

28 Clara Zetkin, Zur den Anfängen der Proletarischen Frauenbewegung in Deutschland (Berlin, 1955) p. 3.

29 Protokoll über die Verhandlungen des Parteitages der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands, 1895. Abgehalten zu Gotha 1895 (Berlin, 1896) p. 183. This prejudice was in strange contradiction to the ideas expressed in Bebel's Der Frau und Sozialismus, the SFD's best-seller. In this book Bebel developed the theory of Engels' The Origin of the Family
which attributed the inferior position of women to the rise of private property. Clara Zetkin had been able to obtain funds in 1892 for Gleichheit, directed to "Die Genossinnen, die im Vordertreffen des Kampfes stehen, prinzipiell klar auf den Boden der Sozialdemokratie zu stellen und die nicht von der bürgerlichen Frauenrechtserei durchseuchen zu las-

sen..." However, her efforts did not really begin to bear fruit until after 1900.

30 Roth, op. cit., 265.

31 Gohres, op. cit., p 151.

32 Ibid., p. 120.
CHAPTER II
MEHRING AND THE DEBATE ON NATURALISM

Mehring was not the first socialist to see the ideological implications of naturalism. Prior to the time that his reviews of naturalist drama began appearing in Neue Zeit, naturalism had tended to be identified in the public mind with the socialist movement. This was due both to the social content of its themes, and to the image cultivated by some of its leading exponents, such as Otto Brahm, who considered themselves followers of Marx. In order to set the record straight, Wilhelm Liebknecht offered to the readers of Neue Zeit in 1890 his opinion of the "new art."

After reading the best works of the foremost representatives of naturalism, Liebknecht said, he thought that the "jüngste Deutschland" might bear the same relation to socialism that the Young Germany artists had borne to the liberal movement of the 1830's and 40's. The earlier school had given artistic expression to a social and political theory. But after attending a number of naturalist plays in Berlin, he concluded that "there was nothing young about /these jüngste Deutschland/ but their name." Their plays could well have been
written in an earlier period, before the advent of the socialist movement. He found in their work no genuine reflection of the issues and struggles of contemporary society.

Liebknecht's disappointment was not surprising. He looked for political consciousness in an artistic school preoccupied with the effect of environment. The naturalist "hero" was more likely to be a man driven by misfortune to suicide, than a man who organized his co-workers against factory exploitation. Liebknecht passed over the innovation in subject matter - the introduction of the social outcast into literature - because, though the content of naturalism was new, its treatment lacked a sense of the contemporary. There was no evidence of socialism's analysis of the problems it depicted. Nor was there an adequate picture of the acceptance of socialism among the working class. And this is precisely what Liebknecht sought.

What is most revealing about Liebknecht's article is the way in which he dismisses the myopia of the naturalists. "One cannot serve two Masters," he wrote, "not at the same time the gods of war and the Muses." Furthermore,

Das alte, junge and jüngste Deutschland...welches für die soziale Bewegung ein Verständniss hat, kampft, und das welches nicht kämpft, hat kein Verständniss für sie. Und das kämpfende Deutschland hat keine Zeit zum Dichten.
He who understands the nature of social conflicts can no longer serve his art. He is drawn into the issues, on one side or the other. Liebknecht continued with an allusion to the "intensity" of the social struggle, and the incompatibility of the "Lyre and the Sword." With these statements, in effect, he repudiated naturalism by invoking Kantian aesthetics. They constituted a reformulation of Kant's demand that art remain disinterested and universalist in its portrayal of human experience. Like Kant, Liebknecht suggested that art and active involvement are mutually exclusive. Kant believed that art should be the object of contemplative pleasure, or 'passive satisfaction,' not the inspiration to action. Liebknecht was saying the same thing: commitment to a cause renders the artist incapable of artistic detachment. The urgency of the needs of the people over-rides the artist's dedication to his art.

Liebknecht presented his remarks on naturalism as a personal impression, not a systematic analysis. The article reads as a defense of socialism against any association with naturalism. This was apparently Liebknecht's main concern. The Kantian bias of his judgments indicates the reason why he was content merely to reject this group of artists. He stated his priorities when he wrote "...das kämpfende Deutschland hat keine Zeit zum Dichten." He did not proceed to examine the assumptions behind his
arguments. Art was for those who had leisure, not for those still fighting the good fight. With this Liebknecht turned to matters of substance, a report on the Reichstag debates, in which he participated as a socialist deputy.

Paul Lafargue, the son-in-law of Marx, also registered his complaints against the naturalists in Neue Zeit. Though literature was not his main field, he had done analyses of Balzac and of the French romanticists. In a series of four articles on Zola in 1891, he discussed the artist's efforts to create a 'social novel.' Zola's preoccupation with environment, he said, was based on the tenuous theory of determinism and on Zola's own doubtful (and in many cases, second-hand) research. Lafargue compared his approach to his subjects with the attitude of a newspaper reporter whose only concern is that the thing happened. He therefore contented himself with the superficial, resorting to fatalism as a kind of 'deus ex machina' to explain his heroes. Since Lafargue could find no justification in Zola's work on an aesthetic level or in a philosophical view of man, he looked for other reasons for the artist's innovations. They sprung, he suggested, from the hope of the bourgeois artist to appeal to a new reading public, now no longer the cultured upper classes. He condemned most of the naturalists as "students of rhetoric" whose works were full of "verbal acrobatics." But he reluctantly credited Zola with the most
significant "literary productions of our epoch." Compared to his imitators, Lafargue said, he was a giant among pygmies.

Franz Mehring was not entirely satisfied with these analyses. He offered a more detailed critique of naturalism in the last chapter of his book Kapital und Presse, by distinguishing between what he regarded as two kinds of naturalism. One, he said, has capitalist roots and portrays the worker as part of a degenerate race, a "Herdentier." He is always described in the tavern and brothel so that the exploitation of his labor appears reasonable and necessary. But the other kind of naturalism, Mehring believed, had its roots in "democratic and social soil," its penetrating view of social conditions spoke for its artistic potentiality. However, he felt that this second form of naturalism had not yet matured. It clung to the pessimism of a reactionary order, in which there was little hope for change. He then formulated what became the basis for the aesthetic theory underlying all his future criticism.

Diese naturalistische Richtung strebt in ihrer Weise nach Ehrlichkeit und Wahrheit; sie will die Dinge sehen, wie sie sind, aber sie sieht die Dinge doch nur einseitig, weil sie in dem Elend von heute nicht die Hoffnung von morgen zu erkennen weiss. Sie hat den Mut und die Wahrheitliebe, das Vergehende zu schildern, wie es ist, aber ihr--heute noch ungewisses--Schicksal hängt davon ab, ob sie den höheren Mut und die höhere Wahrheitliebe finden wird, auch das Entstehende zu schildern, wie es werden muss und täglich schon wird.
Implicit in this statement is an insistence on the dialectical character of art. It is not enough to condemn the existing order by artistically clarifying and emphasizing the injustices which that society embodies. The artist must make explicit his frame of reference, the ideal order against which he measures reality, if his art is to fulfill its function. Art must transcend the negation, to negate the negation, to place before its audience the possible as well as the real. What Mehring requires from the naturalist artist is, not that he advance a particular political theory, but that he bring his work into line with the forces of history. For the artist who chose the German worker as his subject, this meant depicting in some way the relation of socialism to his situation.

In addition to this dialectical principle which Mehring defined here, he also acknowledged the class origin of the artist's view, though it is referred to in a very vague way. Mehring later developed this aspect of his aesthetics much more clearly. But by including an analysis of the "new art" in his Kapital und Presse, Mehring used it to exemplify the corrosive influence of capitalism. Not only the press had been made to serve its interests, but art and philosophy as well. The import of the book is that socialists cannot afford to ignore this dimension of capitalist society. It was necessary to apply Marxist principles to all facets of public life.
Five years later another occasion arose in which Mehring's analysis of naturalism was measured against that of his fellow socialists. During the interim Mehring had sharpened the ideas sketched out in Kapital und Presse in his reviews for Neue Zeit. But it appeared from the views expressed at the Gotha Congress in 1896, when the naturalist controversy arose, that many of the SPD had given little thought to problems of art and culture in general. It may be more to the point to say that this first debate of the party devoted to cultural questions was overshadowed by political considerations.

The men who dominated the discussions at Gotha were for the most part the old Guard of the party. Liebknecht, Bebel, and the Reichstag deputies Herman Molkenbuhr, Karl Frohme, and Bruno Schönlank, had been with the SPD during the lean years of its suppression. The experience had given their stewardship a hard-headed practical character which was evident in the administrative decisions which faced the congress in 1896. The budget was a major problem on the agenda: how to cut down on the costs of the SPD press. The remaining issues—the May Day demonstration, women's organizations, the relation of the local leaders to the executive committee—were dispatched with efficient moderation. It was, on the whole, a rather pedestrian meeting.

On October 12th, however, during the fourth session
of the congress, a heated discussion erupted in the midst of a review of allocations for various party newspapers. It began with a complaint brought against Edgar Steiger, the editor of Neue Welt. Steiger had aroused the indignation of party officials and working class readers alike because of the space he gave in his pages to naturalist literature. Sensibilities were outraged by the feuilletons featured in the Neue Welt, passages from naturalist novels with their grim descriptions of life among the poor. Neue Welt, as an illustrated weekly paper, had a wide family appeal. Many of Steiger's colleagues felt they had a moral mandate from their constituents to demand Steiger's removal as editor. The delegates from Hamburg, Altona, and Wandsbeck submitted a motion to that effect. But Steiger would not be outflanked so easily. He was able to shift the focus of the discussion from the question of his editorial discretion to the larger question of the party's responsibility for the cultural enrichment of the working class. At Steiger's insistence, the lines of the debate were expanded to encompass not only the criteria, purpose and limitations of art, but its relation to the revolutionary goals of the party and to the inner needs of the working man.

The issues brought out in the discussion seem to have taken the delegates unawares. There was surprising agreement regarding such things as aesthetic standards,
but it arose more from a consensus of unexamined assumptions than from a well-thought-out theoretical position. The ideological dimension of the cultural milieu was not of prime concern to the majority of the speakers. The official attention given the matter is evident from the remarks with which Liebknecht prefaced his address:

Es hat mich im Ganzen sehr gefreut, dass wir zum ersten Mal eine Pressdebatte gehabt haben, in der man versucht hat, einen höheren Flug zu nehmen; es ist einmal ernst und würdig von der Kunst gesprochen worden.12

Given the extensiveness and popularity of the SPD newspapers and the central role they played in shaping the workers' attitudes toward society, this was a striking admission to make in 1896. But if the issue of a "cultural critique" was new to the SPD, the naturalists were not.

In 1890 dissension had broken out within the Social Democratic Party over the issue of a general strike to be called for May 1st. "A great international demonstration" had been agreed upon at the meeting of the Second International in Paris the previous year, and the socialist leaders of each country were left to work out the details. The leadership in Germany, however, was reluctant to undertake such a demonstration at that time. Government repression was beginning to ease and the executive committee feared that a massive demonstration might get out of control, thereby jeopardizing the political prospects of the
party. When it became apparent that the committee did not intend to organize the strike, their inactivity aroused the criticism of a young radical group within the party. The dissatisfaction of this group, the "Jungen," issued into a general critique of the "petty bourgeois parliamentarism," which, they charged, had sapped the revolutionary elan of the SPD. More than a generation gap separated these young people from the party leadership. They were, for the most part, university graduates, whose political awakening had occurred during the eighties, as liberal ideals atrophied under Bismarck. Their approach to social problems was scientific and they tended to view authoritarian measures as the most effective method of change. This contrasted sharply with the convictions of the older socialists. These men drew their inspiration from the radical democratic spirit of 1848. Several of the Jungen were also members of a literary group known as "Durch," an avant-garde group of naturalist writers, who therefore viewed society from the perspective of its worst abuses. These impatient and articulate one, such as Bruno Wille, Paul Ernt, Paul Kampffmeyer, and Hermann Bahr, were unable to translate their artistic radicalism into realistic political options for the party. But because of their prominent roles within the SPD press, they threatened to undermine the policies of the established leadership. It was not long before Bebel managed to isolate and
discredit them. By the end of 1890 they had been forced out of their journalistic positions and silenced.

Memories of the challenge of the Jungen must have returned to many of the delegates at the mention of naturalism. The most forceful critics, Frohme, Molkenbuhr, and Liebknecht, worked with the press and may have known them personally. And ironically, the May 1st demonstrations were again scheduled for debate.

The Reichstag deputy Karl Frohme launched the attack on Steiger by stating the matter simply as a question of decency and good taste. A self-educated former worker, Frohme had literary ambitions of his own. In 1905 he brought out a book entitled Arbeit und Kultur: Eine Kombination naturwissenschaftlicher, anthropologischer, kulturgeschichtlicher, volkswirtschaftlicher und sozialpolitischer Studien. By their own admission, he said, the naturalists "wade in filth to describe sexual promiscuity and psychiatric illness."15 Under Steiger's editorship, sexuality had become commonplace in the Neue Welt. He charged that Steiger failed to understand the real needs of his readers, particularly the women, and the children who must profit from the instruction of their parents. If Steiger and his friends are so committed to naturalism, he added, let them take it elsewhere. The number of complaints made it clear that naturalism did no service to socialism.
To Frohme's way of thinking and for those who supported him, the issue was not that of accepting or rejecting the art of the larger society. Considerations of decency neutralized whatever value the art had. Presumably the perversion depicted by naturalism made it unfit for any reader.

One of the delegates was quite pragmatic about standards of good taste. "We want to win the women," as he put it, "and this isn't being accomplished under Steiger. The Neue Welt should be family directed and also serve an agitational function." In other words, there was a rationale for the type of art presented in the party papers. It should be subordinate to the instructional and organizational ends for which the paper existed. Its effectiveness was its potentially special appeal to feminine readers, which placed definite limitations on its subject matter. It was to weld its readers to the party strengthening the bonds of loyalty by its moral efficacy.

In an effort to establish criteria for "good taste," Liebknecht suggested, "what I should not say and do among cultured people should not be said or described in newspapers, entertainment pages, etc." While he conceded that "naturalia sunt non turpia," decent society proscribes certain things. Because they are natural in a biological sense, it does not make them acceptable. The ancients, he said, were great realists, as fond of the horrible as
the naturalists, but their art always hid such things behind the stage. However, the naturalists, with their "cult of blatant animality," do not belong in a socialist paper!

The words of the old socialist were followed by cries of "sehr richtig!" Many of the younger generation apparently concurred in Liebknecht's non-radical analysis of "decency." There is no evidence in his address of an awareness of the ideological implications of "polite" or cultured society. His criterion suggests that what is offensive is inherently so, not because of social conventions. He failed to see the potentially repressive character of these standards, which had special bearing on the social critique implicit in naturalist literature.

Liebknecht's concern for "taste" was more than a question of propriety. The word was part of the terminology of classical German aesthetics and provides an insight into the assumptions underlying the discussion. Liebknecht and Schönlank had received a traditional university education. The others who spoke, Frohme, Molkenbuhr, and Bebel, were self-taught men, but known and respected for their mastery of the classics. In each case, this meant a background imbued with the values of 'Kultur.' One studied Lessing, Schiller and Goethe, the philosophy of idealism, and other fields related to the enrichment of the spirit. "Art" within this framework meant "The
Good, the True and the Beautiful." It was uplifting, its subject matter was noble-minded people, sensitive souls such as Goethe's Wilhelm Meister. Society might be presented as callous or brutal, but largely by inference. The focus was on the high-principled individual. Men who had been given this kind of cultural formation, the 'gebildeten Menschen,' had a hard time coming to terms with the modern art espoused by Steiger.

The delegate from Hamburg, Hermann Molkenbuhr, continued in the same vein. He too spoke from wide journalistic experience. He defined his criterion for art from the point of view of the worker, that is, the "mental disposition" of the reader. The healthy man, he said, may aesthetically enjoy a description of a cripple's afflictions, but the cripple does not want to be reminded of his sorrows.

The worker, who has to struggle with need, who in this time of unemployment is already disposed to discontent, cannot enjoy art if only his troubles are repeatedly depicted in the most striking colors. On the contrary, it will only arouse in him thoughts of suicide. Molkenbuhr's remarks suggest another facet of the 'Kultur' approach to art. Literature should offer the spiritual nourishment to uplift and sustain the inner man. It should permit one to withdraw from the burdens of practical life and experience the soul as the real center of existence. Again, the ideological content of art eludes
the grasp of Kultur. Art as sublimation had little to contribute to the revolutionary goals of the worker.

A rather confused idea of who "the worker" was weakened the analysis of the debate. Frohme saw him as the good, sturdy type, the man of solid virtue, conservative in his private morality. The gifted orator drew hearty laughs from his fellow delegates by reading a passage from *Mutter Bertha*, one of the novels serialized in Steiger's paper. The selection described a young woman forced to excuse herself from the presence of her beloved in order to relieve herself. "If naturalist artists believe they are justified in offering these kinds of absolute, stinking obscenities in novels, then this beats everything!" was his comment.19

Other speakers painted a more drastic picture of the worker. Molkenbuhr had warned of the possible temptation of suicide; Liebknecht also feared that literature might reinforce a depraved environment. "Today's proletariat is already so ground under by social and economic conditions. Should we also cooperate in ruining the bodies and souls of the children?"20 August Bebel was more practical-minded than the advocates of Kultur. He reminded the assembly that political radicalism did not insure radicalism in artistic matters. The socialist party encompassed a whole spectrum of tastes and sophistication. He added that the choice of material should take both
extremes into account.

Steiger justified his promotion of the new art by what he felt was the party's pedagogical obligation in cultural affairs. He saw the differences in sophistication as something to be taken advantage of. The real question, he said, was how the cultural education of the people should be directed. He believed it to be a matter of strategy: should it be aimed at the level of the Catholic peasants or at the workers in the Rhineland. His model was the tactic of the social agitator. In order to create a radical workers' organization, Lassalle had addressed himself to the progressive element in the cities. "We see the result: it took ten years of work, but today we have a working class who can read Lassalle, and it is for them that I have worked out my art program." 21

Steiger's second argument dealt with the charge that he used party funds to support an avant-garde literary experiment. "Today we virtually have no other art than modern art." 22 Anything else, which does not place contemporary life before the eyes of the reader or theater-goer is merely an anachronism, but not art. There is no point, he said, in educating the working class in the tradition of a declining age, instead of that which relates to the world in which they live.

Steiger's criterion for aesthetic education was linked to "relevance." He dismissed as "treatise readers"
those who insisted that literature must be uplifting or instructive. He called, in effect, for the recognition of a 'fait accompli' in art. In answer to the moral reservations of his fellow socialists, Steiger replied that evil is handled in a qualitatively different way in modern art, that is, with emphasis on its social origin. The problems of alcoholism or the misery of the poor are depicted so painfully that the spectator is provoked to anger over the very conditions which he otherwise takes for granted. Socialists could not ask artists to ignore what they themselves struggle against without contradicting theory with practice. He regarded the threat to proletarian morale as a false issue. "Our working class is sophisticated enough to realize that the holy things for which we all strive are not dependent on the few weak men who may be caught up in criminality...."23

In order to strengthen his defense of naturalism, Steiger rephrased it in Marxist terms. He made no claims to its comparability with the achievements of Kultur. "Do you still think that the greatest artistic period coincides with the crashing of the old world to the ground?" The middle class also found the substance of this literature offensive, precisely because it laid bare the nature of its world. "It strips the mask off bourgeois society and portrays its death symptoms."24 The sense of outrage on the part of polite society should be interpreted as an
indication of the artists' perceptiveness.

The eloquence of Steiger's analysis does not conceal an obvious ambiguity in naturalism which he seemed unwilling to define. He seized upon the negative character of its social critique, but failed to question further. His speech implies a satisfaction with the "objectivity" of its value judgments, and in fact, stressed its debt to scientific methods of observations. "The reproduction of the smallest impulses of the human soul rests upon the great role of natural science in the present. The microscope has, as it were, revealed to us a new world and has given us modern art." By invoking the "Darwinist and materialist Weltanschauung" of his associates he hoped to put their enlightened judgments to the test.

But Steiger's credentials as a Marxist critic were somewhat suspect. His book on naturalism, Der Kampf um die neue Dichtung, made elaborate claims for the new art. ("...es sich hier um keine blosse 'Schule' oder 'Clique' handelt, sondern um eine litterarische Weltrise..." Darwinism played an important role in his evolution of these artists. Though his book implies that their tendency toward determinism was supported by science, he invites the squeamish to select from the naturalists only what they find palatable, if not their world-view, then at least individual social insights. His enthusiasm for naturalism eclipsed his Marxism, as is evident from
the eclectic nature of his arguments. Not long afterwards Steiger left the Neue Welt to join the staff of the liberal political satire magazine, Simplicissimus.

Dr. Bruno Schönlank came to Steiger's defense with a cut at Kultur aesthetics. Because of his great work in up-dating and improving Vorwärts and the Leipziger Volkszeitung, his words should have carried some weight. "The pure song of art...is nothing else but the pure song of the 'eternal truth' of bourgeois society.... Fig-leaf politics serves us neither in politics nor in literature!"28 With this Schönlank came closer to Marx than the others present.

Bebel, the chairman of the discussion, exerted his best diplomacy to bring the debate to a close. He commended Steiger for the improvements he had made in Neue Welt, and added that the discussion should be helpful in providing guidelines for the future. If Mutter Bertha was not dead before, he said, she certainly died today. After both praising and blaming the young editor in this way, he moved to appease the other side. From Homer to Heine, Bebel said, great literature has depicted many scenes which would not make proper reading for children, though they are studied by the sons of the bourgeoisie in the Gymnasium without scandal attached. Even the Wahre Jacob (the socialist satirical review) has to be censured by fathers before being given to the family. But since Steiger had
agreed to rethink his editorial policies, Bebel persuaded the congress to let the matter rest by referring the paper's financial problems to a committee. 29

The issues raised in the Gotha debate provoked the comments of Franz Mehring in Neue Zeit. He had not been present at the Congress, but one can imagine the interest with which he followed the reports. Not only had he given the naturalists a great deal of thought, but as the former director of the Freie Volksbühne, 30 he could speak with experience of the workers' preferences.

In his article on the debate Mehring rejected both the positions of Steiger and of his critics. Anyone who has worked with class-conscious workers, he wrote, knows that their repudiation of naturalism is not due to a conservative moral bias. Nor can it be explained by a preoccupation with bourgeois melodrama. On the contrary, the real question is not whether they chose one over the other, but why they prefer Goethe and Schiller. Their alleged aesthetic ignorance is a myth. They value classical literature because they find pervasive in it the very quality which naturalism lacks: a joyous militancy (freudige Kampfelement). Whereas the objection to naturalism centers on its treatment of material, not the material itself.

Modern art is deeply pessimistic. It knows no way out of the misery which it describes with such relish. It arises from the bourgeois crisis and is the reflex of an inevitable dissolution. 31
According to Mehring, naturalism was an expression of the moral exhaustion of its society, of which the artist too was a victim. Art no longer edifies, nor does it accomplish what it professes to do--observe and analyze. It succumbs to the class struggle and cannot describe life "as the class-conscious proletariat knows life is." For this reason Mehring saw no point in imposing naturalism on the worker. No amount of cultural formation (Erziehungskursus) would induce him to accept what contradicts his own convictions.

Mehring also disagreed with the proponents of Kultur. Even "pure art," he said, is in a very real sense partisan. It is the earmark of a reactionary romantic school. It wards off a confrontation of a society, on an aesthetic level, with the contradictions inherent in its cultural values. The problem in naturalism is that it is not clearly committed to one side or the other. It ignores the fact that a period of dissolution is also a period of rebirth. Unless it portrays those forces which are coming to life, it lacks artistic wholeness. However, alienated the naturalists might be, Mehring implied, they cannot or will not renounce their class origins.

Unlike the delegates at the Congress, Mehring realized the importance of relating the aesthetic needs of the worker to revolutionary goals. He said, in effect, 'Let us not over-rate the role of art in the proletarian struggle.' Without disparaging the importance of art in
the sense of personal enrichment, he believed that history had changed the value of art as a tool of strategy. Aesthetics had a significance in the ascendance of the middle class, but the configuration of strength and vulnerability in the ruling powers had changed.

Die bürgerliche Klasse hatte das Geld, Theater zu bauen, und der alt Absolutismus drückte ein Auge zu, gleichviel ob aus Berechnung oder aus Verblenung, indem er der bürgerlichen Klasse auf den Battern, die die Welt bedeuten, gern gewährte, was er ihr in der Wirklichkeit unerbittlich versagte und versagen konnte. Heute hat die arbeitende Klasse aber kein Geld, Theater zu bauen, und der moderne Absolutismus der ihr den Kampf auf dem Gebiete der Wirklichkeit nicht mehr versagen kann, kühlt wenigstens sein Mächchen, indem er ihr die Welt des schönen Scheins hermetisch verschliesst. Die Arbeiterklasse, die auf ökonomischem und politischem Gebiete täglich neue Siege über den Kapitalismus und die Polizei ersicht, ist ohnmächtig gegen diese erhabenen Mächte auf künstlerischem Gebiete. 32

Mehring was not proposing that socialism abandon the field of art to the enemy. But he insisted that it could not take the place of struggle on an economic level, where the working class if unified could command some strength.

As one of the first socialists to apply Marxist principles to literary criticism, his priorities were practical as well as theoretical. He was more than an academician, and concerned himself with the quality of the lives of working people as well as with the tactical problems their situation presented. This is perhaps the reason why he did not give up on naturalism. He harsher statements in this article do not represent his final assessment of the group. He was to observe its career for another decade.
In doing so, he explored at a deeper level, the immediate and long range implications of working class culture.
FOOTNOTES

1 Wilhelm Liebknecht, "Brief aus Berlin," Neue Zeit, XX, 1 (1890) pp. 709-710.

2 Ibid., p. 709.

3 Ibid., p. 710.


6 Ibid., p. 9.

7 Ibid., p. 70.

8 Lafargue's disdain for naturalism was not shared by his sister-in-law, Eleanor Marx Aveling, nor by Friedrich Engels, both of whom took great interest in the school, especially the work of Ibsen. See Lee Baxandall, "The Revolutionary Moment," Tulane Drama Review, XIII, 2 (1968) p. 97.

9 Mehring, Kapital und Presse, pp. 131-132.

10 It was Nietzsche, according to Mehring, who supplied the rationalization for capitalism, with an ethic 'beyond good and evil.' The struggle against morality was really the formulation of a new morality, which the capitalist class demanded in order to be free from the strictures of honor and respectability of the old order. In Nietzsche the bourgeoisie had its apologist for social exploitation. Pp. 124-127.

11 The more indignant protests urged that the contents of the Neue Welt be completely changed, to produce a journal of popular entertainment rather than an arena for
literary experiments. *Protokoll, 1896*, op. cit., p. 14. The type of entertainment desired was not specified. Because the *Neue Welt* was distributed as a supplement to the party newspapers, it was not self-supporting. To a limited extent, the protesters held the 'power of the purse.'


15 *Protokoll, 1896*, op. cit., p. 78.


18 Fritz K. Ringer quotes the following from the 15th edition of *Der grosse Brockhaus* (1928-35): "Kultur...; in particular, the ennoblement of man through the development of his ethical, artistic, and intellectual powers; also the result of the activity of such cultivated men; a characteristic; personal style of life; the products of such activity (cultural objects and values). Thus Kultur is the forming and perfecting of the world around us and within us...." *The Decline of the German Mandarins: The German Academic Community, 1890-1933* (Cambridge, 1969), p. 89.

19 *Protokoll, 1896*, op. cit., p. 95.


26 Edgar Steiger, *Der Kampf um die neue Dichtung*: 
Kritische Beiträge zur Geschichte der zeitgenössischen deutschen Literatur (Leipzig, n.d.) p. 58.

27 Ibid., p. 112f.

28 Protokoll, 1896, op. cit., p. 96.

29 Ibid., p. 110.

30 Mehring was the director of the Volksbühne from the fall of 1892 until the spring of 1896.


32 Ibid., p. 133.
CHAPTER III

MEHRING'S ANALYSIS OF NATURALISM

In 1891 the leaders of the SPD put together the Erfurt Program to define one aspect of the party's relation to German society. It stated its position as one of total opposition to capitalist society, the contradictions of which were leading it inevitably to its own destruction. In the meantime, however, the efforts of the party would be directed toward securing better conditions for the worker.

As a revolutionary party with a strong and militant membership, the SPD found itself in an anomalous position. Its new legitimacy made the leadership hesitant to incur further recrimination. The glorification of Realpolitik was a sobering reality which filtered down into all levels of public life. In the eyes of many Social Democrats, Rudolf Hilferding noted, "power appeared concretely embodied in the army, police, and capital." This made them reluctant to invite a final decisive clash with the State over goals only indirectly related to the long-range goals of the movement.\(^1\) An additional reason for the cautious policy espoused by the SPD was the conviction that as the working class became more isolated, its political consciousness would develop.\(^2\) "Consciousness" in
this respect meant its desire for socialism and a corresponding strength and will to achieve it. While capitalism developed to the point of vulnerability, the socialist party chose to give priority to the politicization of the worker.

Since the party had adopted a program of working within the established order, the preservation of its principles depended on a vigilant and unsentimental assessment of the society it confronted. The Erfurt Program had, in effect, ruled out 'propaganda of the deed' by ruling out violent or insurrectionary activity. The task of nurturing a revolutionary consciousness hinged upon the party's ability to focus the attention of the working class on its long range goals. It was imperative that German society, which was beginning to provide welfare legislation and a better standard of living, be constantly measured against the vision of a socialist future. On a more elusive, qualitative level, socialism would have to forestall the neutralizing effect of the cultural values of the upper classes. The cultural dimension of German life was that which threatened most to integrate and weld the worker to the status quo. In this area the SPD could draw upon the powerful resources available in Marx's critique of culture.

One of the earliest and most succinct statements on the nature of culture is to be found in The German Ideology (1845). In their analysis of the development
of material production within society (i.e., a history of the division of labor and the growth of private property), Marx and Engels showed how cultural forms are produced and utilized by the dominant class. In their view this class reinforces its control over those below by its ability to define the principles and values which act as the rationale of their particular society.

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas; i.e., the class, which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which made the one class the ruling class, therefore the ideas of its dominance. The individuals composing the ruling class possess among other things consciousness and therefore think. In so far, therefore, as they rule as a class and determine the extent and compass of an epoch, it is self-evident that they do this in their whole range, hence among other things rule also as thinkers, as producers of ideas of their age: thus their ideas are the ruling ideas of the epoch.4

This analysis deals with the use of ideas as an extension of power.5 An obvious illustration, used by Marx in the Communist Manifesto, is the attempt of the bourgeoisie "to transform into eternal laws of nature and of reason" the right to private property. His purpose in the passage cited above was to reveal the relation of ideas or cultural forms to the class struggle, emphasizing their potenti-
all repressive function.

Mehring would attempt to isolate the principles Marx formulated within his critique of class ideology. These principles had to be reformulated on a practical cultural level to serve the immediate interests of the proletariat. Naturalism served as part of the raw material for this endeavor.

As the leading theoretical journal of the SPD, *Neue Zeit* would be the logical place to look for other work devoted to the same problems. The quantity and quality of the literary criticism in the paper varied over the years. Prior to Mehring's joining the staff, the years between its origin in 1883 and 1890, articles on art or literature averaged about three a year. Book reviews on literature, philosophy, history, economics, and the social sciences took the place of original work. In the early years nearly half of these were written by Kautsky. The articles were most often the work of non-professional contributors, i.e., those who lacked a literary or philosophical background. Minna Kautsky, the mother of Karl and authoress of a turgid working class novel, Robert Schweichel, the worker-novelist and Irma Zadek, a passionate advocate of Zola, were among the literary commentators. The naturalists, particularly Zola, were most often discussed.

After 1890 the names of various Jungen began appearing in the paper and the Zola debate broadened to
include German artists. When Gustav Landauer, founder in 1891 of the dissident (Jungen) Verein unabhängiger Sozialisten, contributed an article on "Die Zukunft und die Kunst," an editorial footnote took exception to his praise of Hauptmann and Nietzsche. The lines of the argument were drawn between those who tended to reject all past and present literature as bourgeois and therefore irrelevant, such as Paul Lafargue, and those who warmly and uncritically embraced the new art. Until Mehring began resurrecting the classics, they received little attention. The same was true of foreign writers. For the most part, the articles did not progress beyond a very scholastic level. Portrayal of the working class was the decisive factor in the evaluation of an artist, perhaps because it seemed an obvious touchstone of political consciousness. The more radical and innovative literary critics were more likely to be found in the Leipziger Volkszeitung. With the exception of a few articles on the importance of providing good reading material for the worker, his needs or interests were not generally discussed.

After 1905 a new type of article began appearing in Neue Zeit concerned with 'Arbeiterbildung.' This coincided with the development of the Arbeiterschule sponsored by the SPD, and dealt with questions such as "Zur theoretischen Durchbildung der Arbeiterklasse" and "Erziehungsfragen." But for an integration of all these
strands—Marxist theory, classical and contemporary criticism, and working class education—Mehring's work must be regarded as a unique effort. The other writers failed to compare with his theoretical insights and practical synthesis.

One of the basic considerations in an appraisal of Mehring's work on naturalism is the system of categories which he used. He outlined his method in a series of articles in the Volksbühne (1892), the organ of the workers' theater. The word "naturalism," he said, has been the battle cry of various movements and must be examined in a context to determine its meaning. In words similar to those of Marx in the German Ideology, he continued,

Wie die religiösen Vorstellungen, wie die juristischen und politischen Einrichtungen, so wird auch das Künstlerische und literarische Schlaffen der einzelnen Völker im letzten Grunde durch ihre Ökonomischen Entwicklungskämpfe bestimmt. Die Dichter und Künstler schneiden nicht vom Himmel, sie wandeln auch nicht in den Wolkes; sie leben vielmehr mitten in den Klassenkämpfen ihres Volkes und ihrer Zeit. Die einzelnen Köpfe können dadurch in der allerverschiedensten Weise angeregt und beinflusst werden, aber den Bannkreis dieser Kämpfe dann keiner von ihnen hinaus. 11

Marx had discussed the intellectual production of the dominant class. Mehring extended the analysis to the artist of a challenging lower class. The clash of ideologies is transferred to an artistic level, with the artists of both sides reflecting at least to some degree the interests
of their own class. The challengers become the artistic innovators, while the ruling elite insists on an ever more rigorous application of the standards of the old order. 'Naturalismus' or 'Realismus' represents the view of reality which the struggling lower class hopes to impose, as was the case with the eighteenth century German bourgeoisie. But, as Mehring points out, this slogan need not have a genuine revolutionary force behind it. It may only mask the sublimated frustrations of an oppressed class and soon pale into the 'dreamland' of romanticism.

In a subsequent essay Mehring identified the thrust of naturalism in his own society as "der Widerschein... den die immer, mächtiger auflodende Arbeiterbewegung in die Kunst wirft."¹² Here he implicitly links the best of contemporary naturalists with the worker in a common rejection of capitalism. To a great extent, therefore, naturalism represented the cause of the proletariat.

Mehring still avoided in this article a detailed discussion of the class origin of naturalism. His previous article postulated a social and economic struggle as the origin of 'Naturalismus.' Here, taking a historical perspective, he relates this latest group of naturalists to a tradition of protest, which places them on the right side of the class struggle. The crucial factor is their negative assault on capitalism.

In singling out this critical aspect of their art,
Mehring ignored what the naturalists were saying about themselves. They were quite aware of being a particular artistic school, based on specific artistic innovations. The portrayal of lower class:Life, the emphasis on milieu, the use of 'Sekundstil' (fragmented sentence patterns) in dialogue, were carefully chosen techniques which concretized their concept of reality. The most important constituent of their world-view was their belief in environmental determinism.

Mehring dealt with this determinism only in terms of the naturalists' "pessimism" and protest.

Es kommt wenig darauf an, ja es ist bis zu einem gewissen Grade unvermeidlich, dass der Naturalismus dabei das Kind mit dem Bade verschüttet. In dem er sich gegen die Unnatur entarteter Zustände empört, indem er sich gegen die akademisch-konventionelle, der Natur entfremdete, überlebt Dicht- und Malweise auflehnt, verleugnet er das Wesen jeder Kunst durch die Forderung, dass die Bedeutung des Kunstwerkes einzig und allein nach seiner Naturwahrheit zu beurteilen, dass als Preis der Kunst die sozusagen buchstäbliche Wiedergabe der Natur aufzufassen...sei.13

He acknowledged that the social critique offered was severe and unrelieved by hope. Yet he felt that because the naturalists' work had 'Ehrlichkeit' and 'Wahrheitsliebe,' it could progress to a deeper perception of reality, that is, to a recognition of the workers' role in the regeneration of society. He insisted that this did not involve partisanship. He was not asking for "rhymed editorials." "Politik und Poesie sind getrennte Gebiete; ihre Grenzen dürfen nicht verwischt werden...."14 It was
simply a matter of rising above the degenerate conditions of the present, to portray the society coming into being.

The weaknesses in this analysis made it difficult to apply. Almost none of the naturalist plays which Mehring reviewed during the next few years fitted his ideal model. But because he believed the basic ideological orientation of the school to be correct, he had to find other reasons for its failures.

Part of the artist's responsibility, Mehring felt, was to ask the right questions. This is what he found commendable in Sudermann's play *Heimat* (1893). The plot revolves around a young woman whose life-style conflicts with middle class values. She is faced with the choice of yielding to traditional pressures or of defining her own values. She longs for a spiritual 'home;' a resting place, which means accepting the existence either of the "spiessburgerliche Herdentier" or the "grossburgerliche Alleinflieger." Sudermann puts the problem to his audience and leaves it dramatically unresolved. Mehring added that the author himself could not answer the question, but at least he posed it honestly and meaningfully. Sudermann's limitation was his attempt to find a solution within the existing society.

Mehring soon began to complain about the creation of characters with the wrong class consciousness or of situations atypical of the class represented. In Hauptmann's *Hannele* (1893) he ridiculed the idea of a starving
and ragged child dreaming of a glorious, hierarchized heaven, "which would put a theologian to shame." In Halbe's Eisgang (1893) he questioned the artist's understanding of East Elben landowners. "Sein Held...ist ein ganz interessanter, psychologischer Versuch, aber kein soziale Wirklichkeit. Er ist kein Faktum, sondern eine Hypothese." Hauptmann sinned again in Vor Sonnenaufgang (1893) by presenting the atypical. The play depicts a village of miners who discover a cache of money. Mehring rejected this rags to riches portrayal when the vast majority of workers had no such fortune but were caught up in capitalist exploitation. By departing so far from the real these plays lost at the outset whatever aesthetic merits they might otherwise have had.

This analysis bears the strain of Mehring's system of categories. Because he refused to recognize the naturalists as a particular school, largely defined by dramatic technique, he could not allow the individual artist to experiment with new forms and new techniques. Vor Sonnenaufgang, for example, Hauptmann's first "realistic" play, was written in 1889, before he had really gained a mastery of the form. Hannele, completed four years later, reflects the artist's growing interest in dreams and the subconscious. Hauptmann himself called the play a "Marchendrama." He did not consider Hannele a betrayal of his critical function as an artist, as Mehring did, but rather as an attempt
to bring to the stage two different levels of human experience.

In Hauptmann's *Die Weber* (1893), however, Mehring felt that his faith in the naturalists was justified. His review of this play offers a good example of his method of analysis—of the instructional use which he made of his reviews, and of his aesthetic standards.19

The article began in the usual way with a survey of the reviews of middle class critics. Mehring did this as a way of pointing out the ideological biases which determined the success and popularity of an artistic work. In this case he underscored the hypocritical reaction to Hauptmann's play, one that was obviously good but rather dangerously critical. He demonstrated how the bourgeois critic could flatten out the play's critical themes by translating them into innocuous generalizations. *Die Weber* did not present "the revolutionary speeches of party politicians," the critics told their morning readers, "but only /the words/ of universal humanity." Hauptmann was numbered among those few "who raise themselves above the rhetoric of party politics and dwell in the pure heights which only the poet, the philosopher and the truly religious nature attain." Mehring's comment was that the critic knew only too well: the author had written his play according to the texts of genuine social democracy.

He then turned to an analysis of the historical
background for the play. In other reviews he frequently offered a short evaluation of the social themes or of the relation of the playwright's personal background to his insights and treatment of a particular issue. Here Mehring quoted from a report of the 1844 uprising of the Silesian weavers, made by Wilhelm Wolff, a contemporary to the event. Wolff's comments on the economic ramifications of the revolt were quite astute; he concluded that only a reorganization of society according to principles of solidarity and justice could repair the evils of private property. Marx and Engels regarded him as a "treu, edle Vorkämpfer des Proletariat." This introduction established the framework for the actual review, and at the same time reveals what Mehring felt to be within the range of true naturalism.

Having provided data on the historical situation, Mehring then described how Hauptmann imposed dramatic form on the material, capturing its inner truths as well. He commended Hauptmann for having "taken his material where he found it," for his skill in adapting mass action to the stage. He set even the masses into dramatic movement, the article stated, without the ascending and descending movement around a controlling central point. This constituted a break from traditional theater technique, with its customary climax and denouement, but it proved a bold and successful departure. "This production leaves
no doubt as to the powerful revolutionary effect, which the drama—should have on a sensitive public, and if Hauptmann still cherishes hopes of staging his work for the general public, he may as well bury them. The 'Börse und Press' and the Prussian police determine which dramas have audiences.

_Die Weber_ apparently led Mehring to believe that the naturalists could now solve the problem presented by their material. He had been dissatisfied with their emphasis on the monotonously regimented life. He had found their "lack of psychological depth" intolerable. As mentioned above, he sensed ideological implications in their depiction of determinism. But _Die Weber_, Mehring hoped, opened up new possibilities for the genre.

Hauptmann's second historical work, _Florian Geyer_ (1895), however, did not come close to Mehring's criteria, nor was it well received by the public. The middle class audiences rejected it, according to Mehring, largely because of the rough treatment of the minor figures, such as Luther and Götz vom Berlichingen, who happened to be bourgeois heroes. Mehring's main objection was that Hauptmann failed to make his characters come alive. He obscured motivations and class sympathies as well as the complex issues of the Peasants' Revolt. Furthermore the 'art of stuttering' (Sekundstil) imposed limitations on its material which made a caricature of great history.
Sonst erwies dies Drama die völlige Unfähigkeit nicht nur Hauptmanns, sondern des modernen Naturalismus überhaupt, einen grossen historischen Stoff dramatisch zu gestalten.... Zur Wesen des modernen Naturalismus gehört diese unglaubliche Beschränkheit eines Gesichtskreises aber durchaus.21

Mehring came to the reluctant conclusion that naturalism could not save itself by transferring its technique to more significant levels. Whatever true consciousness might inspire its rejection of capitalism, it had a negative impulse which lost its elan beyond the immediate context of its social protest. There is a great lesson in Florian Geyer, he said, "the regeneration of the German theater will not come about through a revolution of dramatic form, but only insofar as this revolutionary form is directed to some goal."

If, in conquering new and greater material, the artist's loyalty is still confined to his art, to the "flat imitation of reality," rather than to a portrayal of the spiritual dimension of the historical process, he achieves nothing. With this, Mehring inadvertently went to the heart of naturalism's dilemma: its view of life was microscopic, not macrocosmic. It conceded nothing beyond the particular and observable data. The historical process, in the sense of macrocosmic forces, was beyond its compass.

When the issue of naturalism came up before the Gotha Congress later that year, Mehring's esteem for the group was at a low ebb. In an effort to account for the philosophical shortcomings of the naturalists, he took a
deeper look at their class loyalties. A man cannot be asked to jump beyond his own shadow, he wrote, nor can a middle class artist be expected to repudiate his own class.\textsuperscript{23} The naturalist has no social commitment. He merely records the decay of his own society.

By 1898 Mehring decided that Hauptmann would not be capable of another \textit{Die Weber}. "The substance of tragic conflict which may comprise the life of the modern worker, lies far beyond Hauptmann's horizon."\textsuperscript{24} He also had second thoughts about the play. Given the artist's self-imposed limits—describing action rather than treating both action and interior development, the play should not have been done as Hauptmann's version was done. Hauptmann had not written an accurate chronicle of events. According to the principles of naturalism, Mehring said, the playwright should have devoted his fifth act to the brutal suppression of the rebellious weavers."\textsuperscript{25} By invoking the letter of its own law, Mehring dismissed what has come to be regarded as the classic of the naturalist movement.

In the same 1898 series of essays, the "Aesthetische Streifzüge,"\textsuperscript{26} Mehring sketched some of the broader conclusions to which his study of naturalism had led. He heaped scorn on the naive assumption of Edgar Steiger that compassion aroused aesthetically could be socially efficacious.\textsuperscript{27} There is nothing more vacuous, he argued, than the principle that "moralische Mitleid" for the poor
and exploited will lead to "werktätige Mitleid." Quoting Schiller, Mehring said that a good society makes such compassion irrelevant, by attending to the causes of misfortune. The interest which the bourgeois public had in the portrayal of working class life extended no further than the footlights. They enjoyed the titillation of a forbidden world, where the life-style and morality escaped the strictures of polite convention. For this reason they preferred to see the "Lumpenproletariat," which reinforced their stereotypes and reassured them of the justice of the system. When the entertainment value of such presentations was exhausted, the interest of the audience waned. "Above all, the public wants novelty, the pleasant sensation of stimulation never experienced before." And so, Mehring said, the poetic brain strives to outdo the daring innovation of yesterday with something even more bizarre today, to tempt the jaded palate of his public.

The death of Zola in 1902 led Mehring to reflect, in an article of tribute, on the character of a great artist. For approximately twelve years he had followed the progression of naturalism into neo-romanticism, and now he looked to the experience of Zola as the 'other option,' which German artists might have taken. Alluding to the myth of Apollo, the archer-god and artist-god, he said,
The "artist as militant" was an extension but also a radicalization of the commitment which Mehring had previously demanded. Only an ideal which preceded the artist's attempt to solve social conflicts in his material would give substance to his critical role as artist. There is no mention in this essay of "standing above party," as Mehring had formerly qualified the artist's position. For the artist to take his society seriously, particularly the artist in a capitalist society, where the danger of cooperation is real, he must be a 'Kämpfer.' The great artist will be able to harmonize his dual role according to his talent and the historical circumstances in which he lives. Zola's example (that of a middle class artist) suggests that this can and should cut across class lines.

Mehring gradually saw that the development in naturalism was leading it in the same direction that earlier middle class realism had gone. In an article entitled "Naturalismus und Neuromantik" (1908) he tried to reply to the remarks of a critic who despaired over the degeneration of German art. The critic is correct, Mehring said, in his evaluation of modern art, but he does not face up to the reasons for its condition. At the outset naturalism had attempted to free itself from capitalist society and the artistic demands of that society. It rightly attributed the source of German's social and cultural problems to the organization of its economic structure. But it could not pass beyond a description of
the quality of life under capitalism. It abdicated, as it were, its dialectical function and submitted to the tastes of its middle class audiences.

Capitalism, which had reduced art to a market commodity, could demand from the artist, "dass er nach der Pfeife 'geist-und-kunstverlassener Nationalökonom' tanzen solle."30 The naturalist artist had ultimately bowed to economic pressure and class interest, instead of freeing himself from those demands. Behind the facade of non-partisanship, i.e., confining himself to a "skavisches Abschreiben der zufälligen Wirklichkeit," he condemned his own art to death. The original spirit of naturalism was dissipated in a few years. Having rejected the progression to a higher level which would demand from art a new vision of reality, the naturalist artist turned instead to neo-romanticism.

Historisch ist die Neuromantik nicht anders als ein ohnmächtiges Abzappeln von Kunst und Literatur in den erstickenden Armen des Kapitalismus, und es ist am letzten Ende allerdings der 'Wille' des kapitalistischen Publikums, der ihr das Gesetz diktiert.31

The ideologically safe realm of neo-romanticism, with its preoccupation with dreams and fairy-tales, offered a safe haven for the artist who would no longer bear responsibility for his society.

Mehring continued: "Today's theater has become a capitalist enterprise, just like any other.... It no longer has anything to do with art and it is a thankless task
to search for the last traces of it where ruthless market
values are the deciding factor."32 This was the world of
competition and profit to which he saw most naturalists
surrender.

At this point, Mehring, in essence, closed the door
on contemporary culture. But at the same time he was un-
willling to seek creativity among the working class. In
his formula "artist as militant," "artist" preceded "mili-
tant" with a reason. He was convinced that "The muse is
silent under arms." Just as he believed that a decadent
society was incapable of artistic greatness, he feared the
passion of a revolutionary class. Mehring did review the
work of a number of proletarian artists, notably Robert
Schweichel,33 but he dealt with their work as a first step,
a tentative venture into the world of aesthetics. The
full flowering would have to wait until after the revolu-
tion. A socialist society would be capable, he felt, of
a higher level of culture than had yet been attained.
The human principles on which it would be based, would be
precisely human principles, devoid of the class, religious,
and philosophical mystification of earlier societies.34

One cannot help sensing in this conviction a rem-
nant of Kultur aesthetics and the influence of Kant.
Mehring had not completely left behind his background in
classical philosophy. Though he realized that art can be-
come permeated with political issues, ideally, in his mind,
it should not. There is an implicit distinction running
through Mehring's analyses between understanding the dynamics of history and subordinating art to class interest. He had hoped the naturalists were capable of perceiving the historical forces within their own society. He had demanded that their art portray the working class in this role. But he feared that while the proletariat was still engaged in the class struggle, it could not approach art with the necessary detachment. Only when society was liberated from a class structure, would the workers be capable of great art.

With no one to fill the vacuum left by the naturalists, Mehring was even less prepared in 1898 to cope with problems he had raised in 1895. He had written in 1895 that the question of the relevance of art to the workers can be answered in two ways. One may say that art, particularly the theater, is not relevant to the proletarian struggle as it had been to the bourgeois, and therefore should be seen as a private matter in order to concentrate entirely on practical goals. Or it could be said that the proletariat should prepare itself, under existing conditions for the tasks which will face a liberated society. Mehring believed that the major focus should be economic and political, but that it would be self-defeating to let considerations of proletarian aesthetics go unattended.

In this respect he strongly warned against cultural assimilation. As an example of what he meant, Mehring said, "Socialist children's literature must proceed from
totally different assumptions than that of the middle class, simply because the children of the proletariat live under totally different conditions and correspondingly, with a totally different world-view than the children of the bourgeoisie." He saw nothing more reactionary than a revolutionary movement which instilled in worker youth a consciousness of the realities of industrial society, but at the same time filled their minds with the fairytale illusions of petty bourgeois life.

But the fact remains that realizing the need for alternatives does not in itself create those alternatives. On a theoretical level, Mehring was unable to suggest a solution. As director of the Freie Volksbühne in Berlin, however, he had to act and make choices. His experience there will be discussed next.
FOOTNOTES


3Although the full text of the German Ideology was first published in 1932 by the Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute, these ideas occur in similar formulations in the Communist Manifesto, A Critique of Political Economy and Capital. I chose the following passage for its conciseness.


5Several years later Engels attempted to offset the economic determinism which had been read into this kind of formulation. He restated it in terms which give more consideration to the content and dynamic of a cultural tradition.

According to the materialist conception of history the determining element in history is ultimately the production and reproduction in real life.... The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure--political forms of the class struggle and its consequences, constitutions established by the victorious class after a successful battle, etc.,--forms of law--and even the reflexes of all these actual struggles in the brains of the combatants: political, legal, philosophical theories, religious ideas and their further development into systems of dogmas--also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles and in many cases preponderate in determining their form. There is an interaction of all these elements, in which, amid all the endless host of accidents (i.e., of things and events whose inner connection is so remote or so impossible to prove that we regard it as absent and can neglect it), the
economic movement finally asserts itself as necessary. Otherwise the application of the theory to any period of history one chose would be easier than the solution of a similar equation of the first degree.


Curt Landauer, "Die Zukunft und die Kunst," Neue Zeit, X, 1 (1891/92) p. 612. Roth notes, "The culturally progressive wing of the German labor movement could only advocate the assimilation of the works of the bourgeois avant-garde. There were simply not enough men of literary and artistic sophistication in the labor movement to take a more critical approach to the values of the dominant culture or to create new styles and art forms." Op. cit., pp. 226-227.


Dr. R. H., "Notiz," Neue Zeit, XX, 2 (1901/02) p. 513.


Franz Mehring, "Etwas über Naturalismus," Gesammelte Schriften und Aufsätze (Leipzig, 1929) II, p. 103. Further references to the Gesammelte Schriften und Aufsätze will be noted GSUA.

"Der heutige Naturalismus," p. 105, GSUA.

Ibid., p. 106

Ibid., p. 107, GSUA.

Hermann Sudermann: Heimat," pp. 111-14, GSUA.
The date given after the play cited is for the year Mehring's review appeared, not for the year in which the play was written.

16 "Ein Traumstück," p. 159, GSUA. Although Mehring's reviews covered the works of several naturalists, both German and non-German (Sudermann, Halbe, Holz, Hartleben, Zola, Ibsen, etc.), most of those cited will be for Hauptmann's plays. As the most popular and probably the most talented of the naturalists, Hauptmann's productions were a weather vane for Mehring's estimation of the whole group.


18 "Aesthetische Streifzüge," p. 283, GSUA.


20 Lenin was equally impressed with Hauptmann's play. He saw it for the first time in Geneva in 1893 and his sister Anna translated the German version into Russian in 1895. After the revolution in Russia he persuaded the Peoples' Will Publishing House to print the play despite the limited funds. Baxandall, op. cit., p. 98.

21 "Streifzüge," pp. 278-79, GSUA.

22 "Hauptmann: Florian Geyer," p. 164, GSUA.

23 "Kunst und Proletariat," op. cit., p. 130.


25 Ibid., p. 278.

26 The "Aesthetische Streifzüge" was a series of essays in which Mehring attempted to formulate a system of aesthetics according to the principles of historical materialism. The effort was, for the most part, unsuccessful, and his reviews are considered more indicative of his general approach. See, for example, Schleifstein, op. cit., p. 118f. I have used only those passages relevant to the issue of working class culture.

27 Mehring here refers to Steiger's book Das Werden
des neuen Drama.

28 "Aesthetische Streifzüge," pp. 270-71, GSUA.

29 "Emile Zola," p. 304, GSUA.

30 "Naturalismus und Neuromantik," pp. 110-11, GSUA.

31 Ibid., p. 111, GSUA.

32 Ibid.

33 Mehring's first article in Neue Zeit (1888) was a review of Robert Schweichel's work. He continued to follow the career of the worker-novelist until Schweichel's death in 1906. He called him, however, a master of 'village history! Though an urban worker, Schweichel took his material primarily from rural settings. "Robert Schweichel," Neue Zeit, V, (1888) p. 51.


35 "Ibsen: Klein Eyolf," pp. 329-30, GSUA.
CHAPTER IV

MEHRING AND THE VOLKSBÜHNE

In late fall of 1892 a delegation from the Berlin Freie Volksbühne came to Franz Mehring with the proposal that he assume the directorship of their organization. At that time the workers' theater association faced dissolution due to a crisis in leadership. If he would agree to accept the post, his name would be submitted to the vote of the entire membership.

The role of director demanded a great deal of tact as well as expertise. Mehring had had little contact with workers up to that time. His previous activity, even in their behalf, had been confined to various editorial positions. The members of the Verein, on the other hand, had come to resent the authoritative control of middle class literati. The present problems stemmed from conflicting views as to the very nature of the organization. Opinions tended to divide along class lines. The workers felt the need for the guidance of educated men, but at the same time, they envisioned a more radical organization than that created by the founders of the Freie Volksbühne. It was, in effect, a repetition of the conflict which developed within the Arbeiterbildungsvereine initiated by the National Liberals in the 1860's. Again, the workers hoped to broaden the narrow artistic orientation of the
of the Verein, while the middle class leadership demurred.

The Freie Volksbühne Verein grew out of a workers' discussion group in Berlin, one of the many which comprised the socialist movement during the suppression years. The workers of the "Alte Tante" group, as it was called, wanted to visit the experimental naturalist theater, the Freie Bühne. Their contact was a young intellectual, Bruno Wille, a friend of many of Berlin's 'modernes.' It was Wille who conceived the plans for a proletarian theater organization, as a means of making such experience available to workers without prohibitive expense. He published his idea in the SPD's Berliner Volksblatt in March of 1890.

Wille's "Aufruf zur Gründung einer Freien Volksbühne" called for the formation of a theater association composed of educated "leaders" to choose productions, and associate members to attend and support them through quarterly fund drives. The plan was devised roughly on the basis of two models, the Theatre libre of Paris and Otto Brahm's Freie Bühne. The Theatre libre, founded by a gas company worker, Antoine, for Parisian workers was the first such undertaking of its kind. Since its establishment in 1887 it had successfully supported itself through quarterly subscription drives. The Freie Bühne, founded in Berlin by Otto Brahme in 1889 also offered the example of a successful private theater group. Its reason for being was to cultivate a segment of the public interested in supporting experimental drama, particularly naturalist
drama. It was created to free both the artist and the avant-garde theater-goer from the mediocrity prevalent in the public theaters. Wille hoped to combine the working class orientation of the Theatre libéré with the selectivity of fare which characterized the Freie Bühne.

Wille's first mistake was probably the use of the SPD press to publicize his idea. It was to his advantage, of course, to appeal to the sophisticated among the workers, and these were certainly to be found among the socialist workers of Berlin. Wille himself had had at one time a tenuous relationship to the SPD as a member of the ill-fated Jungen.4 Perhaps because of his experience with this group, he insisted that his organization, the Freie Volksbühne Verein, would be completely non-political. Its purpose, the cultural elevation of the workers, would involve no ties with the Social Democratic Party.

By July of 1890 Wille was able to gather a commission together of six men, five of whom had ties with the art world, and one worker.5 An assembly of two thousand prospective members of the Verein delegated to these men the task of setting up the organization. A subsequent meeting confirmed them as an executive committee, with the responsibility of negotiating contracts with a theater and director, and selecting the plays to be produced. Provisions were made for regular general meetings to consider financial matters.

This brief outline of the original character of
the Volksbühne gives some indication of the problems which would come to the surface in the next two years. The built-in tensions were essentially those of elitism versus democratic group action and "pure" aesthetics versus politicized cultural activity. Wille stood firm on his conviction that the Verein must uplift the perceptive but culturally ignorant worker. The workers who entered the theater association, however, did not conform to the tabula rasa image. Many had strong views, both in regard to art and politics. Those allowed to assume executive positions, such as Julius Turk, who served as treasurer, resisted the paternalism of Wille and his colleagues.

In 1892 the membership finally polarized between Wille and Turk. The former wanted to continue in the original manner; the latter demanded democratic changes and closer cooperation with the SPD. When Wille and his friends threatened a boycott unless Turk were removed, the majority stood behind the treasurer. In response, Wille broke away to establish a new organization, the Neue Freie Volksbühne.

The resignation of the leadership left the remaining members of the Verein without any direct links to the theatrical world. In addition, there had been little opportunity for any of the workers to gain experience negotiating contracts with theater owners and directors. For this reason they turned to Franz Mehring.
Mehring undertook his new role with a degree of caution. He declared in *Vorwärts*\(^7\) in October, 1892, that "the Verein will remain what it has been: a place of noble 'Erholing' and pure artistic enjoyment for the working class, after their difficult days of work and struggle." But these euphemisms did not serve Mehring well. Within a few months he presented a more realistic appraisal of the Volksbühne. The nature and purpose of the Verein, he said, made it "an auxiliary wing of the great struggle of the working class."\(^8\) However, Mehring was not fully committed to this position either. It is difficult to find a clear and consistent statement of priorities in Mehring's comments on the Volksbühne.

Mehring wanted the theater to be a source of spiritual renewal for the workers. He also realized that few cultural experiences were ideologically neutral. Therefore, 'personal enrichment' must involve not only content, or the artistic merits of the drama. It must also by its form heighten a critical aesthetic response in the spectator. For this reason it was not enough that the Verein offer productions different from those of middle class theaters. The workers had to be actively engaged in the life of the Volksbühne. But Mehring no sooner outlined the possible para-political role the Verein might play, than he de-emphasized its over-all importance. He repeatedly insisted that such activity was not indispensable
to the proletarian movement; that it should not divert too much energy away from more crucial areas of conflict. He hesitated to claim more than a subsidiary importance for the Volksbühne. He may have done this out of deference to the conservatism of his associates in the SPD. Or he himself may have worried that the workers' enthusiasm for the Verein might push political issues to the side.

The most provocative aspect of Mehring's approach was his principle of "Selbstbefreiung und Selbstziehung." He developed this idea partly in contrast to Wille's concept of "Volkspädagogischen Unternehmen." Mehring declared in an article for the Verein newspaper that,

unser Verein nur dann leben kann, wenn die Mitgigleider nicht die Gegenstände einer noch so wohlgemeinten Erziehungskunst sind, sondern als freie Männer und Frauen, prüfend und wählend, erobernd und erwerbend, und sei es auch manchmal tastend und irrend die Geistesschatze der dramatischen Weltliteratur sich zu eigen machen.

The danger in taking the opposite course, that which Wille advocated was that it so closely paralleled the function of oppressive social institutions. Wille's pedagogical orientation would only foster uncritical attitudes of dependence and awe for authority, reinforcing the cumulative effect of church, school and government.

Mehring's warning was not based on a fanciful analogy. In an article for Neue Zeit (July 13, 1893) he cited a confidential report of a senior government adviser calling for a royal Prussian Volksbühne to promote "Volkspädagogik." The implication was that such an
institution might augment the effect of the government's social legislation by co-opting the cultural interests of the workers. 11 Mehring pointed to the strong support given to Wille by the capitalist press. If he failed to see the ideological import of his theory, others did not. Judging from the strenuous arguments which Mehring put forth in Neue Zeit, it appears that many within the SPD had greater faith in Wille's approach than in his own. To counteract this, Mehring attempted to relate the Volksbühne in an essential way to the goals of the party. In the same article cited above he insisted that

die proletarische Entwicklung vollzieht sich nicht noch einer einseitigen Schablone, und das ist nicht die letzte Ursache ihrer Kraft. Neue Quellen sprudeln auf, wo Niemand sie vermutet hätte. Mann kann sie nicht verschätten; man darf nur und man muss dann freilich auch dafür sorgen, dass sie zuletzt doch wider in den grossen Strom des Kulturfortschritts münden, den die Arbeiterbewegung darstellt.

Mehring urged the party leadership to support the Verein as a manifestation of the self-awareness and creativity of the workers themselves. Such impulses cannot and should not be destroyed, he said. The party's role should be to nurture this interest and link it to the finest traditions of German culture. Mehring argued that although the Volksbühne might not yield immediate political fruit, it could be a valuable means of heightening radical consciousness among the working class. The popularity of the Volksbühne would also enhance the status of the SPD, the only place
where a democratic organization would be encouraged. Unless the SPD backs the theater, he warned, their interest will take them elsewhere and they'll be lost to the socialist movement.

Mehring's ideas were perhaps more promising theoretically than they were in implementation. Shortly after his taking office, there were changes made in the organizational make-up of the Verein. Committees formerly held by the literati were broadened and filled by workers. Mehring renounced any claims to a "literary or political guardianship of the members," limiting his office "solely to the function of carrying out the general will." The new spirit which infused the Verein is evident from the sharp increase in the membership. Mehring had personally been opposed to new subscription drives, fearing that middle class patrons might become a majority. But his fears proved groundless. By 1894 the Volksbühne could boast 6,312 members (as opposed to the 2,000 with which it began), of whom 87% belonged to the working class. The remainder were students, small shop-owners and professionals.

In application, Mehring's theory placed more emphasis on "Selbsterfreung" than on "Selbsterziehung." His ideal approximated 'participatory democracy.' He was less concerned with stimulating artistic creativity among workers. He apparently did not encourage workers' produc-
tions of any kind, or literary workshops, where talent
might be discovered or developed. Mehring sometimes re-
ferred to "pointless experiments" in his articles but he
was speaking of professional work, not amateur efforts.
He explained his disparagement of the untested by the
fact that the large membership made him wary of taking
risks.14 Because a production had to play for a month to
accommodate approximately seven thousand members, the Ver-
ein could not afford failures. He thought it wiser to
depend on works of proven value. The necessity of rely-
ing on a professional theater and troupe also made it
difficult to select plays outside a given repertoire.

Yet it is possible that opportunities were missed
to enable workers to create their own alternatives. Un-
doubtedly informal groups might have been created to ex-
plore and experiment with new artistic themes and expres-
sions. The absence of that kind of activity can probably
be traced to Mehring's bias against working class art.
As mentioned earlier, he did not believe that the creative
power of the working class could be released before the de-
struction of class-ridden society.

This conclusion is borne out by the fact that in
1906 Mehring heartily opposed the establishment of a pro-
letarian art center. The idea was discussed as a "Kunst-
heim" which could provide concerts and week-day programs
for the people. But Mehring held it to be a waste of the
workers' money and a drain on the movement. Just as the class spirit of the Volksbühne was eventually dissipated, he said, this project will become important for the sake of entertainment alone. It will be just like another capitalist enterprise. 15

The selection of material did become a problem for the young theater association. Much of the fare currently offered in Berlin's theaters was unsuitable—'Melodramatik' and 'Schauspielerie' as Mehring called it. He explained the criteria which the Verein employed in choosing its productions in an article for a Frankfurter newspaper:

Wir richten unser Augenmerk erstens auf klassische Dramen, zweitens auf ältere erprobte Stücke von sozialem Gehalt, drittens auf solche neueren Stücke, die mit grundsätzlicher Schärfe die sozialen Probleme der Zeit behandeln und deshalb trotz ihres dramatischen Vertes nicht auf die bürgerliche Bühnen gelangen. 16

With this hierarchy of classical drama, traditional plays with social content and finally new works dealing with contemporary social problems, the Volksbühne sponsored the following plays over a three year period: Anzengruber's "Vierte Gebot," "Meineidbauer," "Kreuzschreiber," and "Pfarrer von Kirchfeld;" by Sudermann, "Ehre," "Heimat," and "Sodoms Ende;" Lessing's "Nathan," and "Emilia Galotti;" Kleist's "Zerbrochener Krug;" Grillparzer's "Traum ein Leben." Foreign playwrights were also featured:
Augier's "Die arme Lowin;" Bjornson's "Fallissement;" and Ibsen's "Stützen der Gesellschaft."

Some of the plays did not have Mehring's wholehearted approval. Artists such as Hermann Sudermann, in his opinion, were timid and petty bourgeois in their treatment of social issues.\(^{17}\) The fact that they were staged may have been due to the wishes of the selection committee and/or the limitations of the repertoire. Mehring used the newspaper of the Freie Volksbühne to analyze the merits of each production. He intended his reviews to serve as guidelines for aesthetic judgments and also as an educational tool. As has been noted, he not only commented on the play under consideration, but on the historical context or the issues which formed the basis for the play. In this way he introduced the reader to principles of historical materialism and the relation of ideology to art. He hoped thereby to sharpen the critical and aesthetic perceptions of the Volksbühne members.

The most famous production of the Verein was Gerhart Hauptmann's "Die Weber." The play had its premier showing before Bruno Wille's group in October of 1893. When it played before Mehring's Volksbühne, he gave it a rather indifferent introduction, focussing at length on the historical details of the Silesian uprising.\(^{18}\) But in attendance and enthusiasm, Hauptmann's play marked the high point of the Verein's career. The responsiveness of
the audiences, the degree to which they identified with
the militant spirit of the drama was noted by both the gov-
ernment and the bourgeois press. Several newspapers car-
ried alarmed reviews of the audiences and in doing so, re-
vealed the uneasiness with which the public watched the
growing popularity of the Volksbühne.

Mehring, on the other hand, was extremely proud of
the sophistication of the Volksbühne audiences. Anyone
who attends a Sunday afternoon performance of the Volks-
bühne, he said, and then visits one of the great bourge-
ois theaters in the evening, cannot fail to appreciate
how greatly the workers surpass their counterparts in cul-
ture, taste and artistic understanding. This estimation
was confirmed by Engels himself, when he attended the 1893
presentation of Sudermann's "Heimat:"

Yesterday we were in the Freie Volksbühne—the
Lessing Theater, one of the nicest and best of
Berlin had been hired for the occasion. The
seats are drawn for as in a lottery by the sub-
scribers and you see working men and girls in
the stall and boxes, while the bourgeois may be
relegated to the gods. The public is of an atten-
tion, a devotion, I might say, an enthusiasm sans
egal. Not a sign of applause until the curtain falls—then a veritable storm. But in pathetic
scenes—torrents of tears. No wonder the actors
prefer this public to any other. The piece was
rather good and the acting far superior to what
I had expected. The Kleinbürgerrei of old has
disappeared from the German stage, both in act-
ing and in the character of the pieces.

Because of the calibre of its membership, the Volks-
bühne avoided the fate of several contemporary theaters.
Mehring attributed the poor quality of German drama to the
jaded audiences, which demanded novelty and distraction. Even Otto Brahme's Freie Bühne, established solely for the purpose of naturalist drama, was nearing bankruptcy. The Wolf Theater initially offered a semi-classic program, but was forced to compromise--"Die Rauber" one night, a "Pos- senfabrikant" authored work the next. Those works not prohibited by police censureship were often killed by public apathy. Mehring confidently insisted that the Volks- bühne need not fear a similar decline.\textsuperscript{21} In a strict sense he was correct, but his optimism about the future of the Verein was politically naive.

The attention which the public press gave to the Volksbühne had begun with the Wille controversy. The Prussian police also took particular interest in its development. According to Siegfried Nestreipke, the authorities decided as early as 1892 that its "influence on public affairs" necessitated some degree of police control.\textsuperscript{22} At first this took the form of periodic demands for the membership list. By 1894 the police had discovered a Prussian statute, dating back to 1851, which was sufficiently ambiguous to threaten the Volksbühne with censureship. The issue hinged upon whether the Vereine (both Mehring's and Wille's) were genuinely private organizations, which made them exempt from official scrutiny, or whether, as the police charged, they were only fronts for political
activity directed toward a wider public. When the Berlin police shut down a scheduled performance of the Neue Freie Volksbühne (Wille's), Mehring decided to wrest the initiative from the authorities. On April 23, 1896, he called a general meeting which resulted in the following protest:

Der Verein Freie Volksbühne erklärt die Behauptung des Polizeipräsidenten, dass die Vorstellungen des Vereins öffentliche seien, für fälsch. Er beauftragt den Vorstand, gegen die Verfügung des Polizeipräsidiums den Rechtsweg zu beschreiben.\(^2\)

Furthermore, as a consequence of the police campaign, the assembly voted to take the only course left open to it. Rather than submit to political harassment, it declared a suspension of the Verein's activities.

The case was appealed to the court and lost. The leadership of the Verein (of Mehring) finalized the dissolution of the Volksbühne. It was decided that the money left in the treasury would be divided among the SPD, a workers' school and a group of striking weavers. In a matter of weeks, the organization which had developed so promisingly, ceased to operate. One of the most vital of working class cultural institutions met with defeat, precisely because it was successful.

Wille's group decided that some form of accommodation was better than self-dissolution. After a long and humiliating process of "negotiations" they accepted the terms set out by the Prussian authorities and were per-
mitted to continue. These terms involved stringent regu-
gulation of members, e.g., records of the name, address,
occupation and parentage of each member; stricter use of
membership cards and collection of dues; more rigorous
control of attendance at performances. Having met these
stipulations, Wille made overtures to the former members
of the Freie Volksbühne.

**Vorwärts** of March 7, 1897, carried an article calling
for a "great public gathering" to consider the options
open to the old Verein. Mehring was one of the eighteen
responsible for the article. This was approximately the
extent of his participation in re-establishing the organ-
ization. The outcome of the meeting was an arrangement
similar to that of Wille's with the Berlin authorities.
Thereafter, Mehring's contributions were confined to his
articles in **Neue Zeit**.²⁴

Mehring's brief association with the Verein left a
certain stamp upon it. This is evident from the fact that
the Volksbühne rejected a merger with Wille's association,
which was still thought to be undemocratic, and therefore
undesirable. To the extent that it was linked to the So-
cial Democratic Party, that is, formally along ideologi-
cal lines, it was unique as a working class institution.
Unlike the cultural programs sponsored by the SPD at that
time—lectures, publications, discussion groups—it was
not primarily a channel of information from the learned
to the untaught. Mehring's emphasis on participation, decision-making, and critical thinking was a deliberate attempt to off-set authoritarian institutions. He was certainly one of the few intellectuals in the party who attempted to put his theoretical insights into practice. He not only wrote about the subversiveness of capitalist culture, but used it in such a way as to demonstrate its ideology.

Both Mehring and the working class movement benefited from his work as director. His theoretical view became more practical, more relevant to the needs and potential of the workers. At the same time, he helped nurture an interest in the theater among German workers which in time flourished into a proletarian theater movement throughout the country.\textsuperscript{25}
FOOTNOTES


3 Baxandall, op. cit., pp. 95-96.

4 Wille was also a member of "Durch" the naturalist group to which several other young men belonged. Ruprecht describes him as a "religiös-soziale Naturphilosoph." Ruprecht, op. cit., pp. 145-44.

5 Wilhelm Bölsche, writer, at one time affiliated with the Social Democrats; Julius Turk, a small businessman and amateur dramatist; Julius Hart, critic; Kurt Baake and Conrad Schmidt, journalists, also associated with the SPD; and Carl Wildberger, upholsterer. Nestroy, op. cit., pp. 13-14.


7 Cited by Nestroy, op. cit., p. 97.

8 Ibid., p. 97.

9 See, for example, Franz Mehring, "Freie Volksbühnen," Neue Zeit, XI, 2 (1892) p. 482.

10 Cited by Nestroy, op. cit., p. 98. Except for certain essays in the GSUA, Mehring's articles could not be quoted directly because the Volksbühne is not available in the United States.


12 Cited by Nestroy, op. cit., p. 98.


17. See Mehring's Sudermann reviews, GSUA.

18. This review appeared in the Volksbühne; a much more enthusiastic treatment was given the play in Neue Zeit after its successful appearance at the Volksbühne performance. See Chapter III.


Quoted, without reference to source, by Erwin Piscator, Das Politische Theater (Berlin, 1929) p. 31.


24. Mehring continued to follow the career of the Volksbühne, urging its support, providing critical guidelines, discussing the political implications of its various crises, until 1910.

25. Workers' theaters were established in Hamburg, Altona, Munich, and Vienna.
CONCLUSION

The relationship between the SPD and working class 'culture' at the turn of the century was in many respects a tragic one. Several factors militated against the development of a genuinely revolutionary culture, one of the most important being the failure of the leadership to see the need for it.

As a new class, without a tradition of its own, without financial resources, leisure time, and with a minimum of education, workers were more likely to be on the receiving end of party benefits than partners in a creative historical movement. This was due in part to the serious political challenges which pre-occupied the SPD during this period. The attention of the party was focussed on the effort to apply Marxist theory to new tactical problems. It seemed easier and safer to teach the workers, to provide for their social needs through a regulated organizational life, than to encourage them to create new cultural forms and values relevant to their particular situation. The only alternatives offered were the culture of the past or the empty visions of their contemporaries.

Men such as Mehring, who did fear the assimilation of the working class by the dominant society, had only
dated idioms and sacrosanct substitutes. Mehring realized that a revolutionary culture must be subversive, that it must undermine the socialization process which binds men to the status quo, but he wanted it to be subversive in a genteel kind of way. Because 'culture' suggested a special category, not a life-style integrated with and encompassing a political and economic struggle, he had to insist on a hierarchy of importance. It meant that culture was an experience to be introduced to, almost to be grafted on to; not to be created from within. Creativity would have to wait until after the revolution, when the more urgent social crises would be alleviated. But World War I came first. And it proved that the values of the working class were not so different from the rest of their countrymen. The new society, with its post-revolutionary humanism, was not as worth fighting for as the old.
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