CHAPTER 1

Activism, Aesthetic Education, and the Making of Modern German Theatre

'First of May in Kreuzberg'

I began fieldwork in Berlin on 1 May 2013. The district was buzzing, with screams from Greek anarcho-punk bands on makeshift stages and smoke emanating from German-Turkish street-food vendors, as Kreuzberg celebrated May Day, or as it is known in Germany, *Tag der Arbeit* – Labour Day. In many European countries, these celebrations are explicitly political. Formerly known as the *Internationaler Kampf- und Feiertag der Werktätigen für Frieden und Sozialismus* (International battle- and holiday of workers for freedom and socialism) in the GDR, the first of May has been a national holiday in Europe and Germany since the nineteenth century. In West Berlin, the 'First of May in Kreuzberg' has also been a battleground between state authorities and left-wing organisations since the late 1980s, when the police withdrew entirely from certain eastern districts. The day has since been the subject of scholarly (Rucht 2003) and popular (Ludwig et al. 2008) attention, even giving rise to a new form of protest: the International EuroMayDay. Founded on 1 May 2001 by Italian, French, and Catalonian activists, EuroMayDay is a self-organised autonomous network that attempts to bring to light new forms of precarious labour and exploitation that traditional left-wing movements were seen as unable to address (Marchart 2013). The patron saint of the movement is the fictitious San Precario.

I felt both uneasy and excited as I walked past two dozen police vehicles parked below my flat in Kreuzberg's north-east. The celebrations were spectacular and shot through with theatrical satire. Having walked the streets for a little while to observe the plethora of protest movements and groups, I settled as trucks carrying agitated Greek and Italian activists announced the start of the rally. A twelve-foot-tall marionette dressed up in the black hoodie of the radical 'black bloc' protesters was held high, its movable hands gesturing wildly. Fake papier-mâché cameras and microphones

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Figure 1.1 'Black bloc' marionette during May Day protests, 2013

were also held up, creating a theatrical situation; a metaperformance of protest, a performance *about* the performance of protest (Figure 1.1).

Behind this scene, a crowd of about a hundred protesters waving red flags shouted, 'Hoch die Internationale Solidarität!' [A cheer for international solidarity!], while the next crowd wearing black hoodies sang, 'A-Anti-Anti-capitalista!' in chorus. Through loudspeakers on a truck decked out with flags of the anti-fascist movement Antifa, a trembling female voice warned protesters in English, 'Don't speak to the cops. If you get arrested, remain silent. Remember the legal help number: …' Large banners proclaimed anti-capitalist statements denouncing privatisation and precariousness; others advocated education and equality. Twenty minutes into the heterogeneous march towards the Brandenburg Gate some five kilometres further west, I walked amidst thousands of demonstrators towards the headquarters of the Axel Springer publishing company, ironically situated on the Rudi Dutschke-Straße, named after the student protest leader who was shot in 1967.[1] The black bloc marionette had survived the journey and began gesturing towards the water cannon at the intersection of the two roads (Figure 1.2). Its movements were ambiguous and

[1] Springer Publishing and the Socialist German Student Association (SDS) blamed each other for the escalation of violence (see Schwarz 2008).

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Figure 1.2 Police and protesters at the Axel-Springer/Rudi-Dutschke-Straße intersection, 2013

carnivalesque, suggesting both threat and mockery. This ambivalence also pervaded another theatrical prop during the rally: papier-mâché cobblestones thrown towards police officers and bystanders.

It got dark as the protesters filled the Unter den Linden alley leading up to the Brandenburg Gate. I passed the now demounted Willy Brandt Forum, which commemorated Germany's first Social Democratic Federal Chancellor after World War II. Brandt's conciliatory *Ostpolitik* earned him not only the 1971 Nobel Peace Prize, but also a contentious reputation as a symbol for national unity in Berlin. The Brandt Forum's location just hundreds of yards away from the Brandenburg Gate emphasised the significance of German reunification. The harmony of this historical flashback turned abruptly into distress when I noticed I had reached a dead end. The distance between protesters, journalists, and police gradually decreased as more and more people populated the street. Some began looking for an exit through one of the side streets, but heavily armed police officers had erected barricades that blocked these escape routes. The chants of the protesters grew in volume as night fell, adding to the confusing cacophony of aggressive announcements. When one metallic megaphone voice proclaimed a 'long and violent night', I decided it was time to leave. Barred from taking shortcuts towards Kreuzberg – a police measure to

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control the dispersal of protesters – I walked several kilometres through the empty streets of Berlin-Mitte, alerted to live updates of clashes via Twitter on my phone.

During my walk home, exhausted from an unexpectedly busy first fieldwork day, I pondered what I had come to study in Berlin: critical public theatre and its relation to state patronage. Preparing my fieldwork, I had booked tickets at most theatres that fit this bill, especially at the *Volksbühne*, the self-proclaimed 'People's Stage'. This 'battleship of the working class', as former *Berliner Ensemble* director Claus Peymann (2015) referred to it, is widely recognised as a symbol of nostalgia for the East ('Ostalgie') and German reunification. The combination of these two phenomena may seem contradictory, but the *Volksbühne* was designed to reconcile, rather than do away with, the East–West divide (Bogusz 2007; Krump 2015); tending to the scars in German society, rather than pretending they can ever be completely healed or repaired. Towering above the 'VOLKSBÜHNE' in large letters, and above the changing play titles, often used for political commentary ('FUCK OFF'/'SOLD OFF'), illuminated letters read 'OST', meaning East. Two large placards overlay an image of the stone walls to the right and left of the pompous pillars showing what they looked like after World War II: replete with bullet holes and marks of war, this palimpsest frames the entrance with yet more historical allusions (Figure 1.3).

Yet, my 'incidental' involvement in the public May Day demonstrations instilled doubts about my project. The demonstrations comprised a complex mix of politics and performance, audiences and actors, ethics and aesthetics. People evidently engaged in their own projects of political self-making through solidarity action and determined activist-ethical positions (see Dave 2011; Heinicke et al. 2015; Heywood 2018). I asked myself whether public theatres could be *as political* (in Chantal Mouffe's sense of being 'receptive to the multiplicity of voices that a pluralist society encompasses', 1999: 757) or *as committed to change* as these instances of organised spectacular activism? After all, German public theatres were large institutions with well-paid directors and frequently senior bourgeois audiences. But then I wondered if what I had witnessed in the street was not rather a *different* conceptualisation of political engagement from what I came to study. The activists in the street sought an outward confrontation, while the theatres I was to explore facilitate *reflection* on politics through acting and performance, the building of narratives set aside; a politics of theatricality, of the extra-ordinary. Besides, could not the institutionalisation of critical labour afford a longer-term horizon of public engagement? How then does political reflection in theatres differ from political action in the

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Figure 1.3 The iconic *Volksbühne* in former East Berlin with the letters 'Ost' (East) on the roof, 2013

street? Or can we think of institutionalised artistic reflection in theatre as a form of political engagement too, and if so, how?

Institutionalising Political Critique in Theatre

On 1 May 1963, exactly fifty years before I arrived in Berlin, the city's government created a counterpart to the then East German *Volksbühne.* Provocatively, they called it *Theater der freien Volksbühne*, 'Theatre of the *Free* People's Stage' (my emphasis) in line with a series of other such institutional speech acts such as the *Freie Universität Berlin* in Dahlem. Directed by Erwin Piscator, the institution showed avant-garde plays, including the famous documentary theatre piece *Der Stellvertreter* (The Deputy, 1963) by Rolf Hochhuth, which problematises the role of the Vatican during the Holocaust. The so-called *Theatertreffen* or Theatre Meeting, an annual showcase of German-speaking plays, now the country's most renowned festival, was inaugurated the following year. Although designed to represent *all* German-speaking theatre, East German theatres initially refused to participate, regarding the event as a political provocation with Allied support (see Goldstein 2009; Oberender 2021). This is not surprising. After all, the *Theatertreffen* was 'designed in reaction to the wall' (Christely 2013),

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to 'demonstrate to the GDR surrounding West Berlin that West Berlin belonged to republican German society' (Dürr 2013).

Its fiftieth-anniversary edition in May and June 2013 was one of the key events during the first months of my fieldwork, since it provided me with a snapshot of current theatre, and simultaneously acted, in the words of its director, as 'a magnifying glass [*Brennglas*] of theatrical developments' over the last fifty years (Wahl 2013). For its anniversary edition, a range of activities and publications had been prepared, making the political aspects of German theatre the prevailing subject of the meeting. Through panels and publications, the festival directors encouraged discussion about state support for the arts, gender normativity, disability, and racism. I saw many plays, interviewed key figures, and immersed myself in publicity material from theatres, most of which had an explicitly critical and political tone. The booklet of a play at the nearby *Schaubühne* in the western district of Charlottenburg included excerpts from Boltanski and Chiapello's *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, in which project-based flexible labour in the arts was criticised. In short, the interrelation between social critique and theatre was ubiquitous, a situation ascribed by some to the increasing intertwining of theory and practice in theatre scholarship at graduate levels (Matzke, Wortelkamp, and Weiler 2012).

Yet, the character of this political engagement seemed not only institutionalised; political commentary was expected and thus rendered partially impotent. As a founding member of a well-known feminist freelance collective who contributed to the fiftieth-anniversary *Theatertreffen* book put it to me:

> I was invited as the token female freelance performing artist. It's good I'm included, but I am also *expected* to criticise state theatre – institutions run by old men who shout about Brecht and the proletariat despite earning six-figure sums and directing Wagner at Bayreuth.[2]

That political debate has become an expected and integral aspect of a public theatre festival is not to say that its capacity for critique is entirely inhibited. It is rather characteristic of an engagement with politics that differs from the activism I described in the previous sections. Artists and organisers articulated their political engagement by referring to art and the implicitly shared set of references among the mostly white bourgeois

[2] These were implicit references to the then Volksbühne director Frank Castorf, who staged the *Ring* at Bayreuth in 2014, and Claus Peymann, then director of the Berliner Ensemble. Both were at the time in their late sixties/early seventies and while admired for their pioneering avant-garde theatre, they were also criticised for being authoritarian and sexist. In 2015, the then cultural secretary of Berlin, Tim Renner, sacked both after nearly twenty-five years in their posts, creating an unprecedented rupture to the traditions within which they had operated and which they helped to shape.

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and educated audience rather than direct action. The contemporary institutionalised public theatre paradigms I analyse in the following text, as I will show, appear as a site for collective aesthetic reflection rather than outward-orientated action, a form of political critique that has a long tradition in the difficult inward German reflection on politics and education that I will analyse in the following chapters.

Disabled Theatre

I shall explore this claim with recourse to two events on normativity and disability that I witnessed during the *Theatertreffen*. The first, a podium discussion, revolved around invited play by the French choreographer Jérôme Bel, *Disabled Theatre*, starring eleven actors with cognitive disabilities from the Zurich-based Theater HORA, one of Europe's foremost inclusive theatre companies. The title *Disabled Theatre* is a play on the two ways in which theatre with disability provokes conceptions of normativity in art: as theatre that *is* disabled, and as a theatre that *disables* theatre. However, speakers at the podium discussion also criticised the play for 'exhibiting vulnerable actors'. Some critique focused on a scene in which actors had been asked by Bel (impersonated by an assistant sitting at a desk to one side of the otherwise empty stage) to tell the audience about their disabilities. One by one, the actors walked into the spotlight. Already framed as disabled actors through the title's crude phrasing, they continued to reveal themselves verbally to the audience as the 'real' persons they appeared to be ('My name is … and I have Down's syndrome').

Others at the podium discussion *praised* the play for raising a key issue of current political theatre, namely 'representation' (Malzacher 2015). *Disabled Theatre*, it was suggested, foregrounds the 'underrepresented and excluded minorities of our society'. Pointing to a different scene in which individual actors were simply asked to stand still for one minute – but spectacularly 'failed' to estimate the time, thus 'exposing' their otherness – one guest argued that what we perceive as the disabled actors' incompetence in basic choreographic skills was 'deeply ambivalent'. After all, who knew whether they were *acting* failure or actually failing, whether their 'exposure' was incidental or carefully rehearsed? As theatre scholars Umathum and Wihstutz write in their edited collection *Disabled Theatre*:

> Under what circumstances, for example, can we speak of a *good* performance, of *skilled* acting, of *virtuosic* dancing? … And to what extent does the discussion of aesthetic judgments and the disclosure of their criteria imply a political dimension? (2015: 8)

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In its content, in its makeup (one actor suffering from brittle bone disease took part), and as an event itself, the podium discussion illustrated how institutionalised theatre can be a site for commentary on social inequalities and function itself as a *disabling* and disrupting activity. For Jacques Rancière (2004), such aesthetic challenges to the established normative order of society (here, 'able-bodiedness') by the otherwise excluded – by 'the part which has no part' (Rancière and Panagia 2000) – exemplify one way in which art can be fundamental to political engagement and civil society. Yet, this discussion also pointed to the ambiguity of political representation on stage and its identification with a particular message. It remained unclear whether the actors were exposed as vulnerable and incompetent, or whether they deliberately disabled our perception of 'normal', minutely clocked theatre. This raised serious challenges, including a sort of double bind of authenticity: the more 'normal' the 'disabled actors' appeared, the more sceptical the audience seemed to be that they were acting. The more 'unusual' their practices (standing on stage for two minutes after being told to leave after ten seconds), the more audience members seemed convinced they were *not* acting. The discussion of this play therefore also brought to the fore questions about autonomy and ethical self-determination, which are discussed by Paul Antze (2010) with regard to the neurodiversity movement – how far is it a political and ethical act to reject the 'label of a disability' while embracing symptoms of the condition?

Political messages and ethical reflection thus merged in the audience reception of theatre, and it is through the facilitating of discussions in a public form like that of the *Theatertreffen* that such ambivalences can gain critical momentum if they are not included as tokenistic signs of the 'wokeness' of the institution itself. The jury for the festival's prestigious acting award additionally recognised this ambivalent skilfulness by awarding its prize to an actress from the *Disabled Theatre* ensemble.

Stagewatch

Semingly more radical forms of political engagement can also interrupt and thus provoke reflections on the political qualities of theatre. As the following situation shows, the *Theatertreffen* brought to the fore incongruous perspectives on the role of aesthetic reflection and the way in which theatre can be political.

One evening, I conducted an interview with a former graduate of the famous Ernst-Busch acting institute in Berlin, during which she pointed to the stark gender and class normativity in German acting education.

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> It's no surprise that audiences, actors, and directors don't understand issues of discrimination if they've all been through the same normative formation. Professional acting in Germany is still the reserve of well-educated, bourgeois, and pretty Germans.

Our interview was cut short when a friend of my interlocutor offered us two tickets for that evening's performance of Brecht's *Saint Joan of the Stockyards*, directed by the German Sebastian Baumgarten with the Theatre Zurich. We postponed our conversation until after the play. This turned out to be a good decision, since the play was to dominate public debate for the rest of the *Theatertreffen*. Baumgarten's production was a so-called post-dramatic spectacle intended as a dystopian parable on capitalism and social disintegration.[3] The stage background functioned as a projection screen, illuminated with selected negative aspects of capitalism. Each character in the play represented, in the Brechtian tradition of the alienation effect, a particular 'type': the American capitalist, the Jewish lender, the African cleaner, the Asian cook. Makeup and costumes, however, exaggerated these characterisations into racist stereotypes, including a 'long nose' for the Jewish character, 'squint eyes' and noodle soup for the Chinese cook, and Afro-style hair and 'blackfaced', darkened skin for the African. Not long into the performance, audience members started booing, some walked out, and one person shouted: 'Racist!'

Over the next few days, the reception of this play took on a more explicit dimension, moving from formal discussion to resistance and protest. One festival blogger had been sketching semiotic 'cartoon-critiques' of previous plays. Following *Saint Joan*, she posted a drawing on the official Theatertreffen-Blog (Figure 1.4). As a caption, she wrote:

> For my *Theatertreffen* blog, I developed the 'drawing critique' [*Zeichenkritik*]. I explored to what extent it was possible to condense a play into a single image. After each performance, I created a drawing, which tried to integrate not just the state aesthetic, costume, and atmosphere but also the most important dramaturgical elements. … In the case of *Saint Joan of the Stockyards*, I refused this reproduction. (Terheyden 2013)

A few days later, activists from a group called *Bühnenwatch* (literally, 'stagewatch') interrupted a screening of the play at the Sony Centre on Potsdamer Platz. They held up placards bearing the same phrase:

[3] Following Lehmann's influential definition (2006 [1999]), 'post-dramatic theatre' denotes productions that alter the 'original' dramatic structure of a play, cutting it up or creating a collage with non-theatrical elements. In the case of Brecht, this situation is ironically complicated, since the family-run Brecht estate regularly sues directors for deviating from the original Brechtian scripts.

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Figure 1.4 'No Reproduction of Racist Signs!' Credit: Henrike Terheyden, 2013

'No Reproduction of Racist Signs!' On its website and social media, the group describes itself as 'a platform which has the aim of bringing racist traditions and practices on German stages to an end' (Bühnenwatch n.d.). They claim to be 'working against the use of all racist imagery, like blackface', and seek to 'encourage people to become active – to write open letters, to organize events and actions and to raise awareness' (Bühnenwatch n.d.). This is a very distinct kind of reaction to theatre, whose articulation has not met with only positive responses.

True to their own principles, they distributed flyers in front of the *Haus der Berliner Festspiele* and published a letter addressed to the directors of the *Theatertreffen*, its jury, the director Baumgarten, and his chief dramaturg. Dated 16 May 2013, this widely circulated letter opens as follows:

> We write to you to criticise *Saint Joan of the Stockyards* with regard to your (re)production of its racist images. … As persons responsible for this political and artistic failure, you had several chances to revise your conceptual, directorial [*inszenatorisch*], and cultural political decisions. You have not taken them up and denounced our criticism as without substance. With

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> reference to the racism of the staging, several critical voices have already spoken out, for example Henrike Terheyden [the blogger who produced the semiotic 'drawing critique']. … We would very much welcome a discussion and acceptation of our criticism. (Bühnenwatch 2013)

The open letter then discusses the various 'stereotypical representations' of characters in the play, such as the 'racist connotations of the figure *Frau Luckerniddle*' and *Graham*'s 'Jewish accent' (Bühnenwatch 2013; see Figure 1.5). Its main point of criticism, however, was that 'the signs used in the staging contain enormous potential for violence' and that they were 'not sufficiently criticised, discussed, or contextualised'. In one seemingly contradictory paragraph, *Bühnenwatch* directly addressed the organisers:

> It is true that the words 'Art is free' must not be followed with a 'but'. This does not, however, free cultural actors [*Kulturschaffende*] from their responsibility. Theatre does not take place in a vacuum – that's why it remains necessary to deal responsibly with its content and means and to be aware of its possible societal consequences. The … unreflected usage of racist imagery, as in this case, promotes only one thing within and without theatre: racism.

In response, the directors of the *Theatertreffen* organised a forum entitled 'On the Question of Blackfacing'. In front of an audience of about a hundred, the roundtable opened with statements by Atif Hussein, spokesperson for *Bühnenwatch*, and Sebastian Baumgarten. Hussein accused Baumgarten of not paying sufficient attention to the racist imagery; he should have 'framed' the racist stereotypes on stage more clearly so that one could recognise them as 'bad'. On behalf of *Bühnenwatch*, Hussein argued that aesthetic elements in the staging were political and should be clearly marked as such so that the audience would not be misled into discriminating prejudices. Baumgarten refused such a normative evaluation of art, suggesting that art is an autonomous realm that should not be overdetermined by political frames. In his view, audiences were adequately educated to interpret his statements.

Video excerpts from the staging were shown for detailed analysis. Hussein cited from the play and interviews with Baumgarten to ask him: 'What do you mean when you say you want to depict an international proletariat?' Baumgarten said that the *Bühnenwatch* protests confused message with messenger. If he *portrays* racism on stage, he is not automatically a racist; rather, he *points towards* racism:

> I'd like to keep it with Tucholsky, who once said that to illustrate the effects of alcoholism, it's of no use to recite pious Bible passages – it's far more efficient to depict a miserably drunk person.

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Figure 1.5 *Bühnenwatch* activists: 'No Reproduction of Racist Signs!' In the background, we see a blackfaced actress playing Ms Luckerniddle. Credit: Mai Vendelbo, 2013

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More video excerpts were projected, and another member of *Bühnenwatch* asked for a microphone to make a comment. Comparing this discussion to the previous debate on disability discussed earlier in this chapter, this person said that German theatre is 'primarily a white profession for white audiences' and that 'it needed more roles for people of different skin colours'. Oberender, director of the *Haus der Berliner Festspiele*, intervened to justify the play's invitation to the *Theatertreffen*:

> It is a form of positive racism to say that, for example, Othello can only be played by a black man. In doing so, we associate a particular kind of conduct with a skin colour, rather than questioning it. This play portrays racism, it is not enacting it.

Several *Bühnenwatch* activists passed the microphones provided for commentary among themselves, restricting contributions from anyone else and thus taking over the discussion with repeated remarks. Since the discussants reached no agreement and the atmosphere became tense, Baumgarten and Hussein suggested they present concluding statements. Speaking for *Bühnenwatch*, Hussein insisted that theatre ought to consider its function within society, be cautious of its effects, and frame its practices in the light of political justice. Baumgarten, on the other hand, insisted that theatre retains its potential of critique precisely because it *resists* submission to a wider cause. 'We need to be able to use the grotesque, the ironic, or the provocative on the stage', he said, concluding as follows:

> There should be no criteria for art production. It needs to be 100% free. What happens with art if its quality can be assessed through moral evaluation? Look back thirty years to the GDR, look back sixty years in history to the Nazis. … Each time art becomes judged on moral terms, it's very easy for it to become a tool for political propaganda. I want us to be able to reach different conclusions about the same signs. The intellectual task of interpretation and reflection then rests with us as educated audiences and not with the director.

Set Change: From Engagement to Detachment

These three contrasting opening situations – the Labour Day protest, the *Volksbühne* palimpsest, and the symposia on political theatre – present different instances during which questions of patronage, ethics, and action in theatre intersect. They show how political performance and theatre become both subject and arena for the evaluation of what is deemed appropriate political action and its proper form of articulation. In other words, theatre

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and performance becomes a theatrical space for the negotiation precisely of the values that constitute what is politics, what is political. In each instance, theatre as an institutional space becomes a medium to dwell on and enact, rather than to illustrate, political expression on wider political struggles, including class, race, nation, and disability. It is this position – theatre as an institution for the deliberation, meta performance, and critique of social norms – and the role of the German state in upholding the principles of institutionalised traditions such as these that I analyse in this book.

While the Kreuzberg protests constituted a political choreography with performative props common to much activism today (Juris 2015), the roundtables during the *Theatertreffen* highlighted theatre's contested responsibility to speak *for* and to represent political minorities as well as to act as an assembly for democratic discussion (see Deck and Sieburg 2011; Foster 2015; Sharifi and Skwirblies 2022; Wihstutz 2012).

However, this often taken-for-granted link between theatre and public engagement is both contested in the present and historically contingent. By providing a genealogy of one concept – *Bildung* – and its relation to German cultural policy and public theatres, the second half of this chapter will illustrate that in German theatre, aesthetics, ethics, and politics have for a long time been regarded as *distinct* from activist engagement. I will show how key German artistic traditions advocated artistic *detachment* from public politics, seeking instead alternative forms of political engagement through reflection and art (see Anderson 2001; Candea et al. 2015; cf. Dave 2011; Madison 2010). German public theatres can be seen as standing in a recognisable albeit multifaceted tradition of self-cultivation that does not resist engagement, but offers an alternative way to think about the political through art.

To argue this case, I shall explore central tenets of a defining era of German intellectual development and state formation from the late eighteenth century to the present day. By showing how the notion of *Bildung* has influenced Prussian cultural policies (which in turn unified German theatres under a national, imperial framework), I establish links between self-cultivation, art, and politics that are crucial for understanding today's theatres and the case studies at the heart of this book. My interlocutors across different spheres of public theatre often invoked the genealogy of *Bildung* as a foundational background to Germany's current cultural patronage of theatres. The notion is thus not merely a heuristic term I use, but an ethnographic one mobilised by my interlocutors. It points more widely to a liberal idea of governance that became encapsulated in the idea of the state as a facilitator for the *conditions* of artistic and cultural flourishing (the *Bildungsstaat* or *Kulturstaat*); hence the reference in the title

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of this book. The reasoning behind today's *Kulturstaat* is that art is not a policy instrument, but a valued 'common good', which is protected and circulated like other capital – a sort of 'inalienable possession' (see Sansi 2007: 7; Weiner 1992). The then Christian Democratic president of the Bundestag (lower house of parliament) elaborated this logic succinctly in a book he edited on the topic:

> The state is not responsible for art and culture as such, but for the conditions under which they can flourish. … Art can afford to ignore the state, but the state cannot afford to ignore art. (Lammert 2004: 22)

Indeed, according to the German statistical office (D-Statis 2015), in 2011, the German public sector spent more than €9 billion on 'culture' and 'culture-related' (*kulturnah*) matters, such as radio broadcasting, and this amount steadily increased annually, reaching €11.4 billion in 2017 (D-Statis 2020, updated 3 August 2022). Between 1995 and 2009, the amount spent increased by 22.2 per cent (BpB 2014), and it increased again by 22.3 per cent between 2010 and 2017 (D-Statis 2020). In comparison for these periods, around €7 billion was spent in France, of which half was spent on public broadcasting, and a mere £0.5 billion (€0.65 billion) in the UK, most of it distributed via the Arts Council. In Germany in 2017, more than 83 per cent of the funding was derived from the regional stages and municipalities, and less than 10 per cent came from the German federal government and the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and Media – a distribution and cultural governance structure that was unique in Europe (Klamer et al. 2006: 22; see also D-Statis 2020). By far the largest proportion of this spending goes to the performing arts, especially theatre and music. In 2017, North Rhine-Westphalia alone spent €739 million on theatre and music, and the second largest share of €383 million on museums, collections, and exhibition. In North Rhine-Westphalia, nearly 80 per cent of all funding for theatres is derived from municipalities, amounting in 2011 to €648 million (and €351 million on museums). In 2017, of public spending on the arts, 34 per cent *overall* – the majority – goes to theatre and performing arts institutions (D-Statis 2020).

Besides state patronage, the fields of theatre, self-cultivation, and cultural policy are connected through another important civic link: the legacies of Germany's oft-misunderstood cultural bourgeoisie (*Bildungsbürgertum*) that emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a key bearer of political self-cultivation through art. As theatre director Ulrich Khuon critically noted:

> The bourgeois [*das Bürgerliche*] in all its ambiguities is deeply rooted in theatre. The bourgeoisie has acquired *Bildung* as an identity card of its

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> competence and their *Bildung* has influenced their life-praxis [*Lebenspraxis*]. Many of us are more connected to this tradition than we'd like to think. (Kaiser et al. 2010: 34)

I examine *Bildung* and the *Kulturstaat* for two main reasons: first, because they offer background to understanding the emergence of the German public theatre tradition at present. As such, this account informs the argument of the book as a whole, namely that German public theatres are institutionalised spheres for the long-term development of artistic traditions on the one hand and self-cultivation as a political life-praxis on the other. As my case studies show, these institutionalised traditions are able, sustainably, to provide narratives that challenge the national taint of such a system of state patronage through the transnational character of migration. The second reason is that my interlocutors frequently evoked the notions of *Bildung*, *Kulturstaat*, and *Bürgertum*. In explicating their significance, I therefore do not reproduce a historical account of inevitable progress into the present but try to offer a foundation for crucial ethnographic terms that my interlocutors drew upon to position themselves in these traditions. This account is therefore not a circular one; the Theater an der Ruhr is not the epitome of a singular tradition, but it *positions* itself explicitly *in relationship to* a range of traditions. The narrative I provide is only one among multiple other ways of elucidating the complexity of these traditions (cf. Boyer 2005; Ruehl 2015).

Bildung, Inwardness, and Politics

This relationship between the virtues of *Bildung* as inward-orientated self-cultivation and the role of the state in facilitating its practice is complex and at times paradoxical. The German tradition of *Bildung* both represents the conception of a reasoned and self-reflected subject and yet it is regarded as the 'stereotype of the unpolitical German' (Swales 1978: 373). What is the relationship between these two perspectives?

Campaigning for a national theatre, eighteenth-century playwright Friedrich Schiller proclaimed that theatres allow for the 'aesthetic education of man' while serving as 'moral institutes' that promote national harmony through practices of aesthetic cultivation (Schiller 1785 [1784]; see also Lepenies 2008: 29–32). In theatre, Schiller argued, pleasure and play merge with education and instruction; aesthetic self-formation becomes social care for others (see Sansi 2015: 73).

This emphasis on institutionalised *Bildung* among the German Romantics of the eighteenth century subsequently influenced Prussian

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state formation (Nolte 1990). For one of Germany's most significant educational reformers, Wilhelm von Humboldt, the idea of Prussia as a *Kulturstaat* was not a totalising cultural ideology that intervened in and determined its citizens' cultural activities (see Penny 2021). Rather, the *Kulturstaat* was regarded as the ultimate liberal patron providing the institutional infrastructure and conditions for its citizens to cultivate their humanistic faculties irrespective of class, status, and wealth – a crucial distinction between the 'propertied' (*Besitz-*) and 'educated cultural' bourgeoisie (*Bildungsbürgertum*; see Boyer 2005: 283). Intellectuals since the Enlightenment, the historian Peter H. Reill (1975: 143) writes, 'espoused a notion of personal and political cultivation: They affirmed the peace and stability necessary for correct *Bildung* – for internal improvement'. 'Their image of the future', he continues, 'was the creation of a *Bildungsstaat* – a state animated by an ethical or spiritual ideal by which the inner life of man was enriched' (Reill 1975: 217). The *Bildungsstaat* therefore represented the extension of these civic ideals of self-cultivation.

To what extent this notion of *Bildung* must be viewed critically, too, has been subject to intense debate. Confronted with the atrocities committed in the name of an extreme ideology of self-making, Nazism, German scholars questioned the overvaluation of German *Bildung* and *Kultur* (see Adorno and Horkheimer 2002 [1944]; Elias 1982 [1933]; Horkheimer 2004 [1947]; Kaehler 1980). In 1923, the Literature Nobel Prize laureate and later self-exiled writer Thomas Mann delivered a lecture to a group of republican students in Munich (cited and translated in Bruford 1975: vii). There, Mann criticises the Germans' failure to embrace social democracy in the new Weimar Republic and finds explanations in what he describes as the inward and apolitical nature of *Bildung*: 'The finest characteristic of the typical German, the best-known and also the most flattering to his self-esteem', he writes, 'is his inwardness.' It has, he continues, not only given rise to a genre of its own, the novel of formation and education (*Bildungsroman*; see Minden 2011), it is also 'an individualistic cultural conscience' (Bruford 1975: vii). The German traditions of *Bildung* and *Kultur* denote a 'consideration for the careful tending, the shaping, deepening and perfecting of one's own personality' (Bruford 1975: vii). Mann even likens the Germans' obsession with their culture 'in religious terms' to 'the salvation and justification of one's own life' (Bruford 1975: vii). What results is a 'pietistic' and 'deeply personal' world, one in which 'the *objective*, the political world, is felt to be profane and is thrust aside, "because", as Luther says, "this external order is of no consequence"' (Bruford 1975: vii).

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The ethical component of this tradition of *Bildung* is problematic for Mann. Its insistence on inwardness, he argues, underlies the Germans' failure to embrace republicanism: 'To ask him to transfer his allegiance from inwardness to the objective, to politics, … would seem to him to amount to a demand that he should do violence to his own nature, and in fact give up his sense of national identity' (Bruford 1975: vii).

But the Romantic development of *Bildung* celebrates inwardness and self-cultivation precisely because it resists submission to an overarching political cause. Mann's claim that 'the culture of a German implies introspectiveness' therefore finds an appreciative echo in Mill's formulation of the Germans' 'culture of the inward man' (cited in Bruford 1975: ix). Since *Bildung* and *Kultur* conceptualise the state as a facilitator of self-cultivation, the concepts are not detached from politics and governance. The sociologist Norbert Elias underlines this distinction with a different analogy. For him, *Bildung* is a form of 'domestic policy' ('Innenpolitik') and is opposed to 'foreign policy' ('*Außenpolitik*'; Elias 1969 [1939]: 165). The latter for Elias 'is only of a value of secondary order, something that encapsulates only the outside [*Außenseite*] of man, only the surface of human being'; *Bildung*, on the other hand, is valuable since it denotes 'self-interpretation, pride in one's own achievements, and [that] which primarily expresses the self and inner being' (Elias 1969 [1939]: 165). It is telling that neither of these considerations take into account the (post-imperial German) nation as a form of domestic body, whose national internality would come to echo the race–ethnos–nation nexus that tainted this genealogy and drastically reconfigured the relation of the German nation to migration and its self-understanding as a diverse political body (Penny and Bunzl 2003: 17).

From Personal Self-Cultivation to State Patronage: *Bildung* as Government

The emphasis on *Bildung* and inwardness at the expense of the outside, the outward, and the objective is therefore not an apolitical gesture. Rather, the tradition of *Bildung* is fundamentally tied to ideas of self- and other-governance. Ethics and politics are intertwined in this tradition.

Already for the Romantics, from whom this notion of *Bildung* as inward-orientated self-cultivation is inherited, art, ethics, and politics were not separated. As the influential early Romantic philosopher Friedrich Schlegel wrote, '[T]he artist should never aspire to rule or serve. He should only inspire *Bildung* … all he does for the state is elevate rulers and servants … to artists' (1967 [1796–1801]: 261). For a government, then, 'to

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impose a particular purpose on the league of artists means to replace the eternal union with a meagre institution; in other words, it reduces the community of saints to a state' (1967 [1796–1801]: 261). While this tradition of *Bildung* thus rejects the instrumentalisation of an ideology of rule, it is very concerned with the relation between art and government. It is not at all apolitical, as Mann suggested.

As Schlegel noted, there are fine but important distinctions between what a state or society at large can do for self-cultivation and the political potential of communities (see Schlegel 1966: 15; Tönnies 1887). The scepticism of public politics elaborated by Mann's and Schlegel's emphasis on communities refers to a characteristic feature of the educated cultural bourgeoisie. Its members often organised voluntary associations where both art and politics became valued subjects of debate and self-formation (Balet and Gerhard 1972). For the Romantics, such bourgeois associations were not to be based on social status, but on the willingness and ability to self-activate the artistic potential released through the process of *Bildung*. The early Romantic poet Novalis put it aptly: 'Whoever understands it, is *of his own accord*, and with good reason, an *initiate* [*Eingeweihter*]' (1960 [1798]: 485, my emphasis).

The Romantics' attitude towards government and the state is thus ambivalent, but not a- or anti-political. Rather, it presents an active deliberation on the ideal form of politics. As Frederick Beiser argued, self-cultivation for the Romantics was intricately linked to governance and the state – as indeed it was for ancient Greece and Rome, which was mobilised as genealogical backdrop (see Faubion 2014; Foucault 1986 [1984]). Beiser even suggests this followed immediately from their idea 'that the individual is a social being who can realise himself only within the state' (2006: 36). If this is so, that is, 'if self-realisation is achieved only within the state, then, politics, the doctrine of the state, becomes crucial' (2006: 36). 'State education', the governmental facilitation of *Bildung*, thus became subject to wider debate among late eighteenth-century Romantics. This was the case not least since its advocates were linked to political positions of power.

One of the central figures forging links between the German tradition of self-cultivation and government was Wilhelm von Humboldt. I shall use his story to exemplify how political self-cultivation through art became translated into public cultural policy. Born near Berlin in 1767 into an educated bourgeois family elevated to the nobility through military success, he became one of the most influential reformers of German cultural policy and the education system. Throughout his career as Prussian education minister, government functionary, diplomat, and founder of the

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University of Berlin (later renamed Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin), he advanced what became known as the Humboldtian model of education (Benner 2003; Spenkuch 2012). Fundamental to it was an ideal of *Bildung* that had as its *telos* the cultivation of people's autonomy facilitated by the supportive contexts of academic and artistic freedom (so-called *Lernfreiheit*). Humboldt himself regarded *Bildung* as 'the highest and most harmonious development of [man's] powers to a complete and consistent whole' (Humboldt 1967 [1792]: 22).

This echoed the importance of a cultural bourgeoisie whose communities constituted the backbone of Prussian cultural influence. The relatively tolerant social atmosphere cultivated in Berlin in the last decades of the eighteenth century, owing to Frederick the Great's reign (1740–1786), facilitated the establishment of cultural bourgeois circles such as those around Jewish intellectual Moses Mendelsohn, which were also frequented by young Humboldt. While studying at the University of Frankfurt an der Oder at that time, Humboldt even founded an 'Association of Virtue' (*Tugendbund*) with a friend whom he got to know in those bourgeois Berlin circles. Humboldt regarded the *Tugendbund* as 'an association of mutual self-improvement' (Bruford 1975: 5). One day, upon revising its rules, Humboldt wrote a letter to his friend that expresses the classicist foundational ideas of *Bildung* and happiness (*eudaemonia*):

> Since the aim of our lodge is happiness through love, and the degree of happiness in true love is always exactly proportionate to the degree of moral perfection in the lovers, *it follows that moral cultivation is what every associate most ardently seeks*. (Varnhagen von Ense 1867: 24, my emphasis)

Though the *Tugendbund* did not outlast the eighteenth century, its ethics continued to be relevant for Humboldt's formation as a politician. Having served at the Berlin Court of Appeal following his university degree, Humboldt was urged by close associates to continue his service for Prussia as a judge and diplomat. Humboldt initially turned against a career in public office, seeking instead time for the 'free development of his faculties' (Bruford 1975: 14). Explaining his decision in a letter to a friend, he wrote that he had come to think 'that only that is truly valuable that a man is in himself', and 'that a man always does good to the extent that he becomes good in himself' (von Sydow 1935: 344ff.). Summing up his views to another friend who urged him to turn to politics following their joint travel to revolutionary Paris in 1789, Humboldt responded, 'The first rule of a true ethical code is "Improve yourself", and "Influence others through what you are" comes only second' (cited in Bruford 1975: 14).

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In this statement, Humboldt does not rule out the possibility of self-cultivation to involve a care for others. In fact, he considers exemplary self-cultivation as connected to Greek ideals of pedagogy, the government of self to the government of others. During a time of prolonged intellectual exchanges with Goethe and Schiller in the 1790s (retrospectively termed Weimar Classicism to account for its significance as an intellectual movement), Humboldt formed strong relations with their new humanism modelled on classical ideals, which came to expression in Humboldt's treatise on philhellenism (1969a [1793]). It is therefore not marginal to note the link between Greek care for others and its later *renaissance* as a form of artistic self-cultivation among the Romantics. As Werner Jaeger writes, 'The German word *Bildung* clearly indicates the essence of education in the Greek, the Platonic sense; for it covers the artist's act of plastic formation as well as the guiding pattern present to his imagination' (1939: xxii; see also Foucault 1990b [1984], 2010 [2008]).

Humboldt articulated the relevance of self-cultivation for state governance most explicitly in a tellingly titled work, *Ideen zu einem Versuch, die Gränzen der Wirksamkeit des Staates zu bestimmen* (1969b [1813]; *The Limits of the State*). The book's ties to art and theatre are evident: sections of it had appeared previously in a journal for theatre and politics set up by his interlocutor Schiller while he was poet to the National Theatre Mannheim. J. S. Mill praised Humboldt 'as a savant and as a politician' (Mill 1991 [1859]: 64). He lauded the book, claiming that few outside Germany yet understood the significance of its doctrine that the *telos* of man's activity is *Bildung* and that therefore 'the object "towards which every human being must ceaselessly direct his efforts, and on which especially those who design to influence their fellow men must ever keep their eyes, is the individuality of power and development"' (Humboldt 1969b [1813], cited in Mill 1991 [1859]: 64).

Humboldt's vision of the state is directly modelled on his conception of what is required for artistic self-cultivation (Otto 1987). For Humboldt, 'if people are to be as fully developed as possible as individuals', there must be 'minimal interference from without and a maximum of variety in their opportunities for experience' (Bruford 1975: 16). 'Humboldt's *bête noire*', Bruford argues, 'is the mechanical efficiency of benevolent despotism with its idea of running subjects' lives for them according to a pre-conceived system for what it alleges to be the general good' (Bruford 1975: 16). By contrast, it was 'the creative life that Humboldt really had in view as his ideal', since 'it is the creative mind which most obviously needs a maximum of freedom (Bruford 1975: 17). Humboldt frequently articulated such a view of art and its potential for self-cultivation and betterment himself:

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> Thus peasants and craftsmen of all kinds could perhaps be developed into artists, that is, into men who loved their particular work for its own sake, improved it through their own initiative and inventiveness and so cultivated their intellectual powers, ennobled their character and refined their pleasures. (Humboldt 1918: 117)

Humboldt developed many of his ideas in correspondence with his literary interlocutors Goethe and Schiller. They treated him 'as a friend and equal', and Humboldt considered their 'enthusiasm and constructive criticism' while writing on his theory of *Bildung* (Bruford 1975: 15). Their mutual interest in theatre, *Bildung*, and politics is evident. Goethe, for example, is considered one of the founding fathers of the novel of self-formation (*Bildungsroman*). Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (2010 [1795]) tells the story of a young man whose failures to become an actor lead to a path of self-cultivation and eventual membership in a free lodge seeking to advance social change. Goethe uses the novel to proclaim each citizen's right and capacity for *Bildung* – and he links it to theatre (see also Goethe 1901 [1803]; Huber 1997). Goethe even directed one himself, the Coburg Theatre, where he introduced a strict regime of self-cultivation during theatre preparation. Schiller wrote of the aesthetic education of man in theatre, yet he had in mind a more radical *telos*. He wanted to transform courtly theatres into national stages that could serve as 'moral institutes' (Schiller 2000 [1794]). However, neither of the two poets' concern for the ethical dimensions of theatre, particularly not Schiller's ideas towards a 'moral world government' (Wihstutz 2015), managed to transform into state policies. Their ideas about government remained confined to the realm of theatre, literature, and private gatherings.

Theatre and the Development of the Modern German *Kulturstaat*: 1815–1918

Humboldt's educational ideals, on the other hand, significantly shaped Prussian cultural policy. In the early 1800s, the Kingdom of Prussia introduced a series of reforms, known as the 'Prussian reforms'. They reacted to Napoleon's defeat of Prussia in 1806, following which the empire lost nearly half of its territory and was subjected to tribute payments. The scope of these reforms was vast, initiating austerity measures on the Prussian state machinery that shaped its society in fundamental ways (Fehrenbach 2001). Among the core policies was the so-called cities' organisational reform (*Städteordnung*) of 1808, which introduced self-government (*Selbstverwaltung*) to the provinces, districts, and

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towns – a decentralisation of cultural administration that prefigured modern Germany's federal structure and theatre patronage. Humboldt was in charge of the department of religion and education, a role regarded as key for the reformulation of Prussia's internal structure by the initiators of the reforms, Heinrich Friedrich Karl Reichsfreiherr vom und zum Stein and Karl August von Hardenberg.

In various treatises, Humboldt elaborated how his reform relied on an encompassing notion of *Bildung*. Unlike other measures, the reform of the educational system comprised all estates and class structures and focused on the individual's flourishing through the provision of training. Many of these reforms remain in place today, such as the division into *Volksschule* (people's school); *Realschule* (school training people in manual trades); and the humanist *Gymnasium*, which awards the *Abitur* (A-Level) as an entry exam for university. Humboldt's reforms illustrate how Romantic ideals around the German tradition of self-cultivation influenced state policy and became a form of government and governmentality (see Bruford 1975: 19; Müller-Vollmer 1967).

This development is crucial to understand the notion of the *Bildungs-* or *Kulturstaat* – the state responsible for facilitating self-cultivation through culture and art – that still informs today's cultural policies (see Spenkuch 2012: 100). The idea that one of the aims and purposes of the German state is facilitating artistic cultivation is encapsulated in the term *Kulturstaatlichkeit*, Germany's 'culture-stateliness' (Holtz 2010). This term, used today, describes a constitutionally inscribed aim or purpose of the German state (so-called *Staatsziel* or *Staatszweck*). As *Kulturstaatlichkeit* is an official state mandate, a government is required to realise its aims through laws or decrees. A stated aim, such as the facilitation of artistic production, thus constitutes a task for a state while not prescribing precisely how this aim is to be achieved. In German federalism today, this can lead to varying views on cultural policies among the federated regional states and their municipalities, and a general suspicion of involvement in regional affairs by the national government. Today's cultural sovereignty of the regional states (*Kulturhoheit der Länder*), established in 1949 but tentatively conceptualised by Humboldt during the Prussian reforms, thus refers to the decentralised autonomy of regional governments. *Kulturhoheit* is a key to understanding the extensive grid of funded theatres in Germany today, but it finds early articulations in the Prussian reformist imaginary of a unified Germany 'with a national identity and a federal mentality' (Whaley 2012: 650). The Prussian state's introduction of a cultural ministry in 1817 was one of the earliest notable such attempts among the major

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European states, and it left a lasting impact on subsequent state formation in Germany (Spenkuch 2012: 107).

Thus, despite the initial view that the German Romantics and a tradition of self-cultivation *detached* art from political governance, aesthetic ideals revolving around *Bildung* were strongly tied to cultural politics. Not only did Prussian cultural reforms take on their liberal conception of individual flourishing, they also underscored the role of artistic institutions.

In the introduction to his edited collection on imperial cultural politics and theatre, Philipp Ther (2012) argues that the continental empires of the nineteenth century increased their cultural political activities – promoting theatres, museums, and other public cultural institutions – to strengthen their inner coherence. Cultural policy in Prussia between 1790 and 1850 constituted 'stately attempts to found, reform, and control cultural institutions and thus to influence cultural production and societal reception' (Ther 2012: 7). Prussian cultural policy, built on Weimar Classicism's humanist ideals, thus described 'the social-political functionalisation of culture' (Ther 2012: 11). This later extended into the early colonial inhumanities of imperial cultural formation; German classicism didn't stop at its borders (see Aly 2021; Penny 2022).

While Prussian cultural policy was confined to smaller territories in the east after the defeat of 1806, the establishment of the North German Federation following the Austro-Prussian war (1866) saw the dominance of Prussia over the German states and the financing of cultural institutions (Spenkuch 2012: 105). German cultural policy emerged during those decades of the early nineteenth century as a systematic field of engagement with art and civil society, a powerful and yet not unproblematic cultural strategy to form and facilitate self-formation. This 'previously undifferentiated and barely institutionalised field within state politics' became a 'core area of governmental influence, and consequently led to the purposeful and institutionally anchored field of *Kulturpolitik*' (Ther 2012: 14).

Theatres constituted but one piece of a wider cultural political jigsaw, as Ther points out, but it is notable that 'all European empires at the end of the eighteenth century sought to place theatre under the state's control' (Ther 2012: 16). Theatres received particular attention since they constituted a 'meeting place of political representation and an emerging modern public' (Ther 2012: 16). Their multimediality and declamatory nature drew wide audiences, illiterate and literate, and thus formed links between national cultural policy and wider publics, which were crucial at a time when Prussia was struggling to consolidate its territories.

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'Create the best theatre in Germany and then tell me afterwards what it costs', the state chancellor Hardenberg wrote to the general director Carl Graf von Brühl when he was charged with leading the new Royal Theatre (*Königliche Schauspiele*) – a joint formation of the National Theatre and Court Opera established in 1811 (Spenkuch 2012: 120). A hundred years later, at its peak, this 'German Empire with a Prussian character' spent 17 per cent of its entire budget (*Krondotation*) on the court theatres, amounting to 2.8 million D-mark, while the parliament of Prussia subsidised it by another 1.5 million D-mark (Kaehler 1980: 57).[4] Theatres and other 'courts of muses' (Whaley 2012: 527) flourished under Prussian state patronage (see Daniel 1995; Koller 1984). They were public institutions that exposed the entanglement of aesthetics, ethics, and politics, since they were not void of a politics of spectacle that embroiled the imperial megalomania and anti-humanism (see Zimmerman 2001).

Today's public theatres and their pedagogic tasks are often regarded as the 'result' of this conjunction of Romantic ideals of self-cultivation and imperial cultural politics, yet their genealogy is more complex. It merits an elaboration of key twentieth-century developments to appreciate the institutional ethics and transnational critiques of the case studies that I shall be describing, which responded precisely to the nationalist imposition on culture. The case studies I analyse in the chapters of this book are not the 'result' of these traditions. Rather, their aesthetic values, close relation to regional and municipal political structures, and emphasis on autonomous self-cultivation *respond* to the traditions I discussed and the historical developments I shall outline below, and they could subsequently not have emerged in any other way.

From Reich to Reich: Centralisation and Ideology

After the fall of the *Kaiserreich*, with the second successful German revolution of 1918, imperial cultural institutions were secularised and nationalised in a 'seamless continuation from *court* operas to *state* operas' (Ther 2012: 10, my emphasis). During the Weimar Republic (1918–1933), their feudal legacy stirred political (Schmitz 2012), architectural (Kallmorgen 1955), and artistic (Kolb 1999 [1988]) debate. Experimental art styles were probed in expressionist theatre, as dawning political antagonisms between

[4] Figures obtained from the *Stenographische Berichte des Preußischen Abgeordnetenhauses 1910*, Anlagen, Drucks. Nr. 515, 4549 (cited in Spenkuch 2012: 121). See also Zilch and Neugebauer's work (2014) on the financing of the Prussian *Kulturstaat.*

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socialists, democrats, and monarchists intensified. Art and politics were intensely intertwined, and political commentary flourished in a plethora of ideological camps (Leydecker 2006).

It was also a time of relative political freedom for minorities, minoritarian positions, and republican values (see Kaes et al. 1994; Schönfeld 2005; Senelick 2008 on gender, creativity, and homosexual theatre movements), yet equally of radical value shifts and ruptures with ideas of classical modernity (see Kolinsky and van der Will 2004; Peukert 1993 [1987]). Imperial Germany had come to an abrupt halt, and the Treaty of Versailles that ended World War I imposed reparations. In 'Theories of German Fascism', Walter Benjamin (1964 [1930]) discusses the mystification of war through art as a tendency towards a new mode of fascism; others later argued for a link between Wilhelminian ideals and proto-fascist art avant-gardes (Lewis 2007: 106, 196).

Despite my scepticism about positing such supposedly evident trajectories, there were persistent cultural continuities. Weimar had been the centre of Goethe's and Schiller's elaboration of Greek ideals of self-cultivation. The movement of Weimar Classicism continued to resonate with intellectual developments in Weimar Germany (Lamb 1985). Social movements thrived, and Germany, especially Berlin, boasted centres for social scientific thought and renewed interest in a critical analysis of society through art. The Frankfurt Institute for Social Research was founded in 1923, and universities had just opened to Jewish scholars, allowing many intellectuals and artists to flourish (Niewyk 2001; Schebera and Schrader 1988). As a 'total art form' comprising architecture, music, acting, and literature, theatre became a focal point for political avant-garde experiments during the period of interwar Germany (see Willett 1978: 1988). Of course, it was also around this time that Bertolt Brecht developed his 'epic, political, confrontational, documentary theatre' (Willett 1998: 103) while working with the director Erwin Piscator, whose own writings examined the development of political reflection in theatre in the 1910s and 1920s (Morgan 2013; Piscator 1980 [1929]). Rooted in Dadaism and Expressionism, Brecht and Piscator developed what is now understood as modern German drama, since their ideas influenced post-war and still influence contemporary German theatre (Barnett 2015b; Innes 1977; Luckhurst 2006; Styan 1983).

This critical experimental diversity of voices was muted on 30 January 1934 when the cultural sovereignty of the regional states was 'forcibly coordinated' by the Nazi policy of *Gleichschaltung*. Their sovereignty was transferred to and subsequently instrumentalised for propaganda by the National Socialist Third Reich (Berger 2004; Evans 2003). Despite its stark

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rupture, the rise of Nazism and its impact on the cultural landscape has had a profound 'effect' on artistic production ever since. Whether Nazism is portrayed as a radical break, continuation, or culmination of earlier fascist tendencies, the city theatre continued to be a hotbed of contestation over German identity and the role of the artist in German society. David Dennis' *Inhumanities: Nazi Interpretations of Western Culture* (2012) provides a meticulous account of how the Nazis appropriated classical and ancient Western artistic figures and institutions (see also Hortmann 1999 on Shakespeare in the Third Reich, or Gaborik 2021 on Mussolini and theatre). Much like other cultural, intellectual, and media institutions (universities, museums, schools, radio stations), theatre production was both censored and reinterpreted by the Third Reich (see also Heinrich 2017 on European theatre under German occupation). Drawing on the immense textual archive of the *Völkischer Beobachter*, the National Socialist Party's official organ and most widely circulating German newspaper, Dennis shows how leading staff of the paper used theatre to turn art and aesthetics into political instruments. Writing for the *Beobachter*, F. A. Hauptmann, a leader of Nazi cultural initiatives in Leipzig, was already reporting in the late 1920s that he was ashamed the premiere of a Jewish piece took place at the Stattheater of his hometown 'in the heart of Germany' (Heinrich 2017: 352). Theatres became contested reference points for German cultural traditions and identity. The relation between *Bildung* as a 'leitmotif of the Nazi cause' (Boyer 2005: 110), mass culture, and the arts was evident, too. For Hauptmann, for example, 'the "Jewish theatre and press industry" had "stolen healthy sentiment" from the German soul' (Dennis 2012: 352). Reporting on an opera, he wrote, 'Worthless and unworthy of German theatre, the show did nothing but aggravate the shameless conditions of the day' (Dennis 2012: 352). Hauptmann, also leader of the Battle League for German Culture (*Kampfbund für deutsche Kultur*), is but one of many examples that could be used for an entire discourse in the Third Reich, which seriously negotiated the potential of theatre to influence publics and discipline peoples' minds and bodies.

Hitler himself trained as an artist and was committed to a reconfiguration of the role of 'High Culture', especially opera. What is more, the Nazi Party (officially the National Socialist German Workers' Party, or NSDAP) incorporated many members of the cultural and educated bourgeoisie. Despite his 'legendary detestation of the class of bourgeois he termed "intellectuals", … he left a place in his social imagination for the work of "genuine artists" like himself' (Boyer 2005: 107). He published on art, including an article in *Die Deutsche Bühne* entitled 'The Renewal of

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Theatre' (1933), in which he posits that theatre artists will need to 'reeducate themselves'; the 'genuine artist', he continues, will come to realise the revolution incited by the NSDAP, because he believed they were 'the builders' and 'every real art is a kind of building' (Hitler 1933, cited in Wulf 1966: 145). Hitler's political rhetoric was saturated with references to self-cultivation and 'the future German being' (Nazi poet Hermann Burte, cited in Boyer 2005: 108). On an entirely different scale, Hitler's NSDAP itself had a marked performative 'tendency to stage itself as if Germany were a vast theatre' (Frei 1993: 83, cited in Boyer 2005).

The relation of theatre to Nazi ideas of self-cultivation constitutes a significant and vast area of research. My brief notes on art, theatre, and *Bildung* in the Third Reich are meant to show the survival and resilience, but also the many fragmented and reinterpreted fragments encompassed within and associated with German theatre. I concur with Dominic Boyer in his rejection of Elias' and others' construal of an unhelpful 'cultural teleology leading from German Romanticism to Auschwitz' (Boyer 2005: 104). Instead, I highlight theatre and art under Nazism primarily because it was to become a crucial intellectual backdrop against which post-war theatre positioned itself. It also shows how deeply the notion of self-cultivation, and culture as a field for the formation of citizens, can be appropriated in the service of political ideologies. Culture and stage patronage are not neutral and unproblematic 'Good Things'. They have been mobilised and contested to contrasting ends, as I explore in the coming chapters.

Reconstruction and Responsibility: Intellectuals and Artists, 1950–1990s

Post-war German public theatre and cultural politics reacted against the Nazi centralisation of powers by revisiting humanist ideals of *Bildung* and the critical theatre of Brecht and Piscator. Intellectually, however, the reconstruction period in West Germany did not immediately give rise to the critical theatre known from the 1960s. As Patterson aptly notes,

> Brecht may have shown the inherently theatrical quality of dialectics, but for many, especially for the Western writers who had no clearly formulated ideology, it seemed increasingly difficult to describe objectively the society in which they lived. (1976: 3)

The initial post-war years were characterised instead by a sort of 'bracketing' of the experience of Nazism and by attempts to rebuild humanist ideals in plays drawn from classical canons. However, already in the 1950s with

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more expressionist acting styles promoted by Wolfgang Borchert, through parable pieces such as Brecht's *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* (premiered 1958 in Stuttgart), West German theatres' productions began to interrogate the causes for the rise of fascism and the role played by intellectuals, artists, and citizens. The re-education policies of the Allied forces also encouraged artistic engagement with the 'collective German guilt' (Preuß 2004). Well into the 1980s, these questions were fiercely debated in art and scholarship, including in the so-called historians' quarrel (*Historikerstreit*) which revolved around Germany's arguable 'negative historical exceptionalism' (Bollenbeck 1996; Elias 1982 [1933]; Nolte 1985, 1987).

In 1955, the West German state minister for pedagogy and education, Arno Hennig, suggested at one of the most important post-war symposia on theatre (the 'Darmstadt Symposium') that patronage for theatres, as it began in the late eighteenth century, ought to remain a national and moral obligation (Vietta 1955). The division of Germany into East and West further politicised and reorientated the role of public theatre patronage; theatres were integrated in and integral to a process of national edification in both parts of Germany. Brecht's famous dictum of theatres as 'sites for education and production' (2014 [1948]) became intensified in the German Democratic Republic's aesthetic ideology and ethical ideals of Socialist Realism. While some argued this was a phase of oppression, censorship, and complicity (Bradley 2010), the GDR was also a public 'stage republic' with a spectrum of diverse theatre ranging from critical investigation to outright resistance (Irmer and Schmidt 2003: 8). While its integration into a unified Germany revealed differences between political theatre in East and West, it also illuminated their shared commitment to personal (Eberth 2015) and collective ethical self-formation through art (see e.g. Meyer-Dinkgräfe 2007 on moral resistance and theatre; Curtis and Fenner 2014 on autobiographical film; Kapferer 2008 on aesthetics and the socialist state).

In the West, 'theatre was a forum – perhaps *the* central forum – for social critique and discussion in the Federal Republic' (Gilcher-Holtey 2009: 248). It became a central medium for the mis-en-scène of Cold War politics and the politicisation of protest in the 1960s (Kraus 2007). The institution of the *Theatertreffen* can be seen in this light, too, as a provocative reaction against the restrictions on theatre in the GDR (Farenholtz and Völckers 2013: 7).

Yet, perhaps the most pervasive influence on artists and intellectuals engaging with the legacy of German fascism was the sustained critical neo-Marxist analysis of the 'Frankfurt School' (Jay 1996 [1973]; Wiggershaus 2008 [1988]). Their insistence that social critique needs to evolve from

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within society, rejection of mass culture, and scepticism of 'kitsch' as a function of capitalist ideology informed major theatre directors in the 1960s, whose ambivalent anti-capitalist elitism and avant-gardism continue to influence German stage aesthetics (Greenberg 1939; Tinius 2015a). The Frankfurt School critique of ideology (Geuss 1981, 1999; see also Adorno et al. 2007 [1977]) had a strong effect on an entire generation of artists who saw themselves as responsible for creating art that is critical, educational, non-consumer-orientated – and awkwardly positioned towards the ambivalent relation between critical theory and 'action' (see Jeffries 2016).

The gradual institutionalisation of this avant-garde could thus be regarded as contradictory. Yet, since it advocated a political critique from *within* the state, it presented a deliberately *dialectical* position (Adorno 1955; Adorno and Richter 2002 [1969]; Bernstein 2001). Adorno's aesthetic theory, for example, proposed a 'negative aesthetic' that does not *celebrate* Germanness, but instead points to its problematic nature – theoretical propositions that appealed to German post-war theatre directors and authors (see Geuss 2005; Tinius 2012). Public theatres became central sites for an aesthetic production of a corrective historical engagement with Germany's past and an imagination of its future (see Fetscher et al. 1991; Gilcher-Holtey 2000).

This gave rise to new forms of aesthetic expression that ceased to rely on the authentic re-enactment of classical plays and instead produced estranging 'post-dramatic theatre' (Lehmann 2006 [1999]) in the footsteps of Brecht; his GDR successor Heiner Müller; and those that carried their legacy, such as Frank Castorf from 1992 until 2017 at the Berlin *Volksbühne* (see Raddatz 2010). For some, this exchange between East and West presented a productive dialogue rather than a Manichean opposition (Götze 2012; Rühle 2012), but it could also be read as a competition for the better way to 'define, regularize, institutionalize, and normalize the domestic practices of the self' (Borneman 1992: 75). The politicisation of public theatre through neo-Marxist critical theory undergirded the emergence of so-called director's theatre (*Regietheater*). This movement emphasised the role of powerful directors and dramaturgs who acted at once as public commentators and artistic authorities, yet with intricate links to municipal politics (Lehmann 2002; Pelka and Tigges 2011). West German public theatre in the second half of the twentieth century – the focus of my research – thus developed an awkward artistic political theatre system: non-commercial and critical, yet bourgeois and dependent on cultural patronage.

Wolfgang Ismayr's *Das politische Theater in Westdeutschland* (1985) provides an excellent account of these unusual characteristics. Western European theatre, he argues, had long been associated with social critique

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and public collectivity, not least because of its origins as public ludic spectacle in Greek antiquity (see Benjamin 2000 [1928]; Nietzsche 1993 [1872]). As outlined in the first half of this chapter, however, German theatre stands in a long Enlightenment tradition of aesthetic detachment and a Kantian 'disinterested liking' of art ('*Interesseloses Wohlgefallen*'; Ismayr 1985: 1). Although this form of detachment, as I argued, was by no means apolitical, intellectuals after World War II queried the celebration of German *Kultur* and the moral overvaluation of 'Germanness'. Ismayr therefore suggests that from the mid-1960s onward, 'the political, in particular the socio-economical and socio-cultural reality of the *Bundesrepublik*' became the focus of theatrical production (1985: 362). Supported by a new social-liberal government, public stages run by an increasingly institutionalised elite created a position that I would like to describe with Raymond Williams as 'a quasi-sacred realm' (1983 [1958]); a corrective space against social alienation and bureaucracy, yet under the patronage of the state.

These changes coincided with the immense 'psychological as well as material boost' in post-bellum West Germany (Fulbrook 2011 [1991]: 231). The Marshall Aid programme and Ludwig Erhard's conservative social market economy facilitated the 'economic miracle' of the 1950s and helped rebuild core industrial centres in parts of Germany. A second key factor that saw the arts increasingly well funded and involved in domestic politics was a transition from Erhard's social market economy to a neo-Keynesian system of cultural patronage and cultural policy governmentality espoused by the Social Democrats and Liberals of the late 1960s and 1970s as the 'New German Cultural Policy' (Berghahn and Young 2013; Foucault 2008 [2004]: 107–110; Wagenknecht 2012). This paradigm emphasised a shift

> from restorative postwar notions of 'cultural heritage' to a more processual understanding of culture as a complex set of competencies, capitals … and potentialities immanent in the social body, needing only to be 'activated' by the appropriate policies. (Stevenson 1999: 64)

These new policies also underlined the federal nature of German cultural funding. Art patronage is a responsibility of federal government, regional states, and municipalities. It is decentralised to autonomous sources for political reasons (to avoid power concentration, such as the Nazi *Gleichschaltung*), but it also avoids competition for arts funding in the dense grid of institutions in Germany (see Burns and Will 2003: 133). The new cultural policies furthermore emphasised a democratisation of the arts with an emphasis on access, pedagogy, and outreach (Scheytt 2006: 29). 'Citizen's right culture' emerged as a guiding principle (Singer 2003: 20).

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Cultural policy and its organs – theatres, museums, operas – became intervening instruments for advancing a supposedly more accessible, yet also more autonomous, cultural sphere (Bonefeld 2013).

This liberal democratising conception of culture as capital also emphasised 'creativity' and 'competencies' in the artistic field (Hoffmann 1985; Wagner 1993). The celebration of cultural competencies prepared the ground for the commercialisation of 'creativity' in the private service sector (Belfiore and Bennett 2008; Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011; Reckwitz 2012 [1995]). The institutions of 'affirmative' high culture (opera, theatre, classical music, museums) were furthermore subjected to a modernising critique aimed at promoting greater proximity to the public (*Bürgernähe*; see Sievers and Wagner 1992). Yet, as Ther (2012) observes, the binary bias of focusing on 'popular culture' since the 1960s and rejecting 'High Culture' as elitist replicated the class division it sought to overcome. While this created a rupture with these institutions' feudal and fascist past (and a warning about its potential futures) that the neo-Marxist intellectual left had called for (Adorno et al. 2007), it also placed a renewed political emphasis on the self-critical pedagogic function of art.

For almost two decades (1982–1998), Christian Democratic chancellor Helmut Kohl facilitated German (1991) and European unification (1993, Maastricht Treaty), both of which were predicated on a progressive engagement with strained relations between the GDR, France, and Israel (Milzow 2012). Under Kohl and the Conservative–Liberal coalition, tremendous efforts were undertaken to stress the role of 'memory culture', *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* through heritage (Macdonald 2013), and so-called national lighthouses of culture (Merkel 2004; Pfeifer 2013; Zimmermann and Geißler 2008). For many East Germans, Kohl's agenda represented a 'western "colonization"' (Boyer 2005: 189); it was seen as 'paternalistic' and stunting the 'moral and individual development by a SED System that was uniformly described as dictatorial' (Boyer 2005: 189). A language of infantilisation prevailed in political discourse, predominantly describing East Germans as 'not yet *reif* (mature, ready)', as needing a 're-education' (*Umerziehung*) to participate in the new democratic world (Boyer 2005: 189). Theatre of this era documented this interdependency of politics and cultural expression, even producing a style known as *Wendetheater* ('theatre of the turn'; Haas 2004: 9). However, already in his first government declaration of October 1982, Kohl announced a clear reorientation along Western capitalist values: 'away from more state, towards more market' (Presse- und Informationsamt 1984). As in the case of the Big Society policies of the 2010 Conservative Party campaign in the

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UK, the idea was to avert economic stagnation by shifting government responsibilities towards civil society (Singer 1993). This coincided with a re-orientation of the arts as economic factors in the rejuvenation of urban space and regional economies.

Signalling the significance of a unified cultural representation for the Federal Republic with its new seat in Berlin, the then new Social Democratic chancellor Gerhard Schröder created the so-called Panel for Culture and Media in 1998. This was and remains a disputed office, since cultural policies had been a decentralised concern of the regional states for decades (Scheytt 2008). Michael Naumann, first federal government commissioner for culture and the media, thus took on a unifying role as a quasi-minister of culture that had not been conceptualised in the hitherto decentralised organisation of unified German cultural policy since the end of World War II (Naumann 2001: 30). However, the panel administers less than 10 per cent of all cultural funding in Germany and thus has not discontinued the important threefold federated structure of cultural funding (federal, regional, municipal) which already characterised Humboldt's vision of a Germany with a national identity and a federal mentality. Distancing himself from an accusation that this would yield a form of cultural neo-imperialism, Naumann asserted, 'There is indeed no danger of a "leftist Wilhelminism"' (Naumann 2001: 13, citing the late journalist Frank Schirrmacher).

As the Federal Constitutional Court ruled in 1974, the German government must not intervene in the 'artistic sphere of freedom' (Ministry for Culture and Media 2012). Therefore, according to the Panel for Culture, 'it is the responsibility of politicians to promote the *conditions* for art and culture' (Ministry for Culture and Media 2012, my emphasis). As the first federal government commissioner of the panel described it, the aims of German cultural policy could not be achieved with a wagging moral finger, but by 'supporting podiums of cultural discourse where the new, the insubordinate, satirical, critical, and different appear' (Naumann 2001: 13). Only then could cultural policy facilitate art – the 'most beautiful form of freedom' (Naumann 2001: 27). This line of government centralisation of culture continued with the reign of the former federal government commissioner for culture and the media, Monika Grütters (who was in office from 2013 to 2021, and was succeeded by Claudia Roth), who had become a significant figurehead in the promotion of federal public cultural production, not least in her role in negotiating the debacles and discussions around the reopening in mid-2021 of the Humboldt Forum and its ethnological museums in the centre of Berlin (see Macdonald 2022; Oswald and Tinius 2020; Tinius 2021a).

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From Coal to Culture: Art as Rejuvenation in the Ruhr Valley

All of the above debates can be examined in the rise and fall of the Ruhr area in North Rhine-Westphalia where the Theater an der Ruhr is situated. The region was long marked by industrial labour, having formerly served as an economic powerhouse for Bismarck and a site of steel production under Hitler. Already in the late nineteenth century, Eastern Prussian guestworkers arrived in the region to work in its heavy industries. The Ruhr valley became one of the largest industrial regions of Europe (Frank 2005). ThyssenKrupp, one of the world's largest steel producers, was founded there, and its headquarters are still based in the region. In the military build-up to World War II, the company became the biggest supplier of steel products for Nazi Germany.

Heavy destruction during World War II and a gradual decline in demand for steel and coal led to the subsequent phasing out of these industries, which, as in similar regions elsewhere in the world, profoundly transformed the space, identity, and even morality of work (see Jaramillo and Tomann 2021; Rogers 2012, 2015; Walley 2013). Germany's 'energy turn' of recent decades declared the end of heavy industrial production in the region, plunging it into economic crisis. Several of its cities are among the poorest in Germany and are marked by the highest unemployment rates in the country. Southern European guestworkers who were initially invited to work in the region, compensating for the human losses of the war, eventually became permanent inhabitants albeit mostly without German passports or recognition. The failed acknowledgment of millions of first- and second-generation migrants as citizens (see Mandel 2013) and the end of industrial labour in the region contribute to its grossly unequal social milieu (see Chin 2007; Dürr and Gramke 1993; Müller et al. 2005; Tenfelde 2006). The region is still known in local jargon as the 'coal pit' (*Kohlenpott*), evoking an image that characterises it well: at once nostalgic and self-deprecating, claustrophobic and generative of a sense of shared belonging. A phrase often heard (and read on stickers) throughout the region characterises this sentiment: "Elsewhere, it's also shit" (*Woanders is' auch scheiße)*. The fact that the entire region is still undermined by subterranean shafts that frequently collapse or release highly explosive methane (so-called *Grubengas*) underlines the eerie and uncomfortable association of an enclosed pit.

This image is changing. The shaft towers have become an idealised symbol of past labour. As monuments, they indicate the closing of a chapter

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and have become signifiers for a new era that overlays 'culture' on an industrial past: 'Here we mine a new energy. It's called culture' ('Hier wird neue Energie gefördert. Sie heißt Kultur.') declares a publicity slogan of the region's European Capital of Culture campaign 2010, which sees a baroque figure dancing atop the iconic *Zeche Zollverein* shaft tower.

The arts and creative industries were and still are supposed to bring about a 'transformation through culture', replacing and in turn reifying the region's previous industrial identity based on coal mining and steel production. Culture and the arts are meant to rejuvenate the suffering region; 'creativity' becomes an instrument for urban regeneration. Like Marseille, 'the French Ruhr valley' (Ingram 2011), or other post-industrial and otherwise disadvantaged urban areas all over the world, such as Chicago (Walley 2013) and Harlem (Hyra 2008), Ruhr valley cultural policies harness the arts as an economic driver and 'location factor' (see Bianchini and Parkinson 1993; O'Connor and Wynne 1996). Its nomination as European Capital of Culture in 2010 was the climax in this contested and clichéd logic of post-industrial transformation (see Lloyd 2010 [2006]).

The terms 'sustainability', 'energy', and 'culture', partially based on the iconic industrial landscapes of the past, become constitutive iterations of a new imagined cultural landscape. The region is an incubator of a new cultural politics that propagates the arts as forms of 'competencies'; as energy and capital that can be measured, evaluated, and even subjected to 'scientific studies for the development of concepts and expertise, for example by the recommendations of the "Expert-Commission Art NRW"' (Cultural Policies of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia 2009, cited in Sievers 2010: 4). The evident irony of the rejuvenation is that its marketed image – that of a formerly industrial region with idealised representations of manual labour – requires both the presence and the absence of this 'dirty' industrial past. Without traces and depictions of the region's former misery, the transformation would not function; and yet, it would not function with this presence of this difficult past either, since little of the 'High Culture' that takes place in these sites integrates or caters towards the former workers that made the region into what it is.

The following chapters investigate a cultural institution that begged to differ. The Theater an der Ruhr, the case study at the heart of this book, was created in reaction to the onset of an economisation of the arts, which considered cultural institutions as mere potential for urban regeneration. Rejecting profit-driven art production, it could align itself with older traditions of theatre as a site for political self-cultivation and negotiate the neo-Marxist criticality of post-dramatic theatre. Its location at the crux of

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the Ruhr valley's two financially most indebted and socially stratified cities, Oberhausen and Duisburg, and their industrial harbours appears unfit for the purpose. Yet, as the following chapter explains, the founders of the Theater could mobilise the support of industrial patrons and cultural politicians to their benefit. This allowed for the creation of an unusual institution that draws *aesthetically* on critical Brechtian post-war theatre, *politically* on a complicated notion of autonomy and self-realisation, and *structurally* on the model of a public theatre financed from municipal funds. Its location at the outmost fringes of Mülheim an der Ruhr is therefore telling of both its critical distance to politics and its cultural bourgeois character: you approach the Theater an der Ruhr down a suburban street in a genteel neighbourhood. The tree-lined avenue allows glimpses of the theatre premises itself, an elegant nineteenth-century spa complex for public health. Flanked by a freshwater pool and park, designed by the architect Baron von Engelhardt, one is guided through stone terraces and sweeps of steps to the elegantly renovated foyer of the theatre – less than a mile from the industrial harbour.

German Theatre's Multiple Traditions

The role of the state as a facilitator of theatres of artistic production builds on a number of nineteenth- and twentieth-century German traditions that value self-cultivation through art, which link public patronage with artistic autonomy.

The traditions of *Bildung* and inward-orientated self-cultivation through the arts stand in contrast with applied theatre and contemporary forms of 'artivism'. For this reason, I opened the chapter with three juxtaposed scenes that illustrated different ways in which theatre and performance are related to political engagement. The dichotomy of artistic self-cultivation versus political engagement is too crude to serve as an analytic and I am not suggesting that the theatres I describe are not engaging in current political affairs. Rather, the development of theatres as sites for self-cultivation, and of cultural policies that support them, have created an infrastructure and style of theatre where engagement with society is transposed into the artistic process itself. It has become a core principle of post-war German cultural politics that theatre funding serves not to depoliticise it, but to enable the production of critical commentaries that do not have to be commercially viable. A combination of such principles created a milieu in which post-war public theatres function as municipal organisations with a pedagogic mandate and yet also sites for the critique of politics and ideology.

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Contemporary German public theatre institutions thus embody a range of ambiguous traditions; they are at once bourgeois and critical, bureaucratic and autonomous, detached and engaged (see Hamburger and Williams 2008; Kunst 2015; Marx 2006; Rauterberg 2015). This combination of ambivalent trajectories first drew me to these traditions of 'German theatre' and made the particular fieldsite I describe in this book so enticing. The Theater an der Ruhr, whose structure, practice, and politics will be explored in the following chapters, is a public–private institution that stands at the intersection of many of the ambivalences outlined above. Despite resembling the common public theatre, it is an institution built on a critique of the traditional municipal civic theatre model (*Stadttheater*) and alienated labour conditions in the arts. It was founded by artists, not by cultural politicians, making it a theatre where individuals deliberately shaped the ethics and aesthetics of the institution, not the other way around; where artistic labour became an 'institution-building practice' (see Tinius 2015b).

Its innovative structural reform of the German public theatre model is still debated as a pioneering example of institutionalised artistic ideals (Innes and Shevtsova 2013; Raddatz 2011; Tinius and Wewerka 2020). The founders' shared and sustained scepticism of the Ruhr Campaign instrumentalisation of art, and their recognition of theatre as a medium for ethically reflexive work, international interaction, and the cultivation of radical subjectivity in a social collective makes it an apt fieldsite to explore the complexities and ambiguities of public art production in modern and contemporary Germany. It is a field situated at the productive intersection of engagement and detachment that is so characteristic of the German theatre traditions which I outlined in this chapter and which ground the following chapters.

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