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LETTER FROM THE U.K.

JEREMY CORBYN'S ANTI-
SEMITISM CRISIS



With the election of Donald Trump, the latent threat of American authoritarianism—identified decades ago by German intellectuals—is on the verge of being realized.

PHOTOGRAPH BY DAMON WINTER / THE NEW YORK TIMES / REDUX

Shortly after the Presidential election, a small piece of good news came over the wire: the Thomas Mann villa in Los Angeles has been saved. The house, which was built to Mann's specifications, in the nineteen-forties, went on the market earlier this year, and it seemed likely to be demolished, because the structure was deemed less valuable than the land beneath it. After prolonged negotiations, the German government bought the property, with the idea of establishing it as a cultural center.

The house deserves to stand not only because a great writer lived there but because it brings to mind a tragic moment in American cultural history. The author of "Death in Venice" and "The Magic Mountain" settled in this country in 1938, a grateful refugee from Nazism. He became a citizen and extolled American ideals. By 1952, though, he had become convinced that McCarthyism was a prelude to fascism, and felt compelled to emigrate again. At the time of the House Un-American Activities Committee's hearings on Communism in Hollywood, Mann said, "Spiritual intolerance, political inquisitions, and declining legal security, and all this in the name of an alleged 'state of emergency.' . . . That is how it started in Germany." The tearing down of Mann's "magic villa" would have been a cold epilogue to a melancholy tale.

Mann was hardly the only Central European émigré who experienced uneasy feelings of déjà vu in the fearful years after the end of the Second World War. Members of the intellectual enclave known as the Frankfurt School—originally based at the Institute for Social Research, in Frankfurt—felt a similar alarm. In 1950, Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno helped to assemble a volume titled "The Authoritarian Personality," which constructed a psychological and sociological profile of the "*potentially fascistic*__individual." The work was based on interviews with American subjects, and the steady accumulation of racist, antidemocratic, paranoid, and irrational sentiments in the case studies gave the German-speakers pause. Likewise, Leo Lowenthal and Norbert Guterman's 1949 book, "Prophets of Deceit," studied the Father Coughlin type of rabble-rouser, contemplating the "possibility that a situation will arise in which large numbers of people would be susceptible to his psychological manipulation."

Adorno believed that the greatest danger to American democracy lay in the mass-culture apparatus of film, radio, and television. Indeed, in his view, this apparatus operates in dictatorial fashion even when no dictatorship is in place: it enforces conformity, quiets dissent, mutes thought. Nazi Germany was merely the most extreme case of a late-capitalist condition in which people surrender real intellectual freedom in favor of a sham paradise of personal liberation and comfort. Watching wartime newsreels, Adorno concluded that the “culture industry,” as he and Horkheimer called it, was replicating fascist methods of mass hypnosis. Above all, he saw a blurring of the line between reality and fiction. In his 1951 book, “*Minima Moralia*,” he wrote:

Lies have long legs: they are ahead
of their time. The conversion of all
questions of truth into questions of
power, a process that truth itself
cannot escape if it is not to be
annihilated by power, not only
suppresses truth as in earlier
despotic orders, but has attacked
the very heart of the distinction
between true and false, which the
hirelings of logic were in any case
diligently working to abolish. So
Hitler, of whom no one can say
whether he died or escaped,
survives.** **

Mann, who had consulted Adorno while writing his musical novel “*Doctor Faustus*,” was reading “*Minima Moralia*” as he contemplated his departure from America. He compared the book’s aphoristic style to the “enormously strong gravitational force-field” of a super-compact celestial body. Possibly, it exerted a pull on his decision to go into exile again. A few months later, on the eve of leaving, Mann wrote to Adorno, “The way things are developing is already clear. And we have rather gone beyond Brüning.” Heinrich Brüning was the Chancellor of Germany from 1930 to 1932.

The fears of Mann, Adorno, and other émigrés came to naught—or so it seemed. The McCarthyite danger passed; civil rights advanced; free speech triumphed;

liberal democracy spread around the world. By the end of the century, the Frankfurt School was seen in many quarters as an artifact of intellectual kitsch. In recent years, though, its stock has risen once again. As Stuart Jeffries points out in his recent book, “Grand Hotel Abyss: The Lives of the Frankfurt School,” the ongoing international crisis of capitalism and liberal democracy has prompted a resurgence of interest in the body of work known as critical theory. The combination of economic inequality and pop-cultural frivolity is precisely the scenario Adorno and others had in mind: mass distraction masking elite domination. Two years ago, in an essay on the persistence of the Frankfurt School, I wrote, “If Adorno were to look upon the cultural landscape of the twenty-first century, he might take grim satisfaction in seeing his fondest fears realized.”

I spoke too soon. His moment of vindication is arriving now. With the election of Donald Trump, the latent threat of American authoritarianism is on the verge of being realized, its characteristics already mapped by latter-day sociologists who have updated Adorno’s “F-scale” for fascist tendencies. To read “Prophets of Deceit” is to see clear anticipations of Trump’s bigoted harangues. (The script in 1949: “We are coming to the crossroads where we must decide whether we are going to preserve law and order and decency or whether we are going to be sold down the river to these Red traitors who are undermining America.”) As early as the forties, Adorno saw American life as a kind of reality show: “Men are reduced to walk-on parts in a monster documentary film which has no spectators, since the least of them has his bit to do on the screen.” Now a businessman turned reality-show star has been elected President. Like it or not, Trump is as much a pop-culture phenomenon as he is a political one.

What Adorno identified as the erasure of the “borderline between culture and empirical reality” is endemic on social media. The failure of Facebook to halt the proliferation of fake news during the campaign season should have surprised no one; the local hirelings of logic are too enamored of their algorithms—and of the revenue they generate—to intervene. From the start, Silicon Valley monopolies have taken a hands-off, ideologically vacant attitude toward the upwelling of ugliness on the Internet. A defining moment was the turn-of-the-century wave of music piracy, which did lasting damage to the idea of intellectual property. Fake news is an extension of the same phenomenon, and, as in the Napster era, no one is taking responsibility. Traffic trumps ethics.

The Immigrants Deported to Death and Violence

Traditional media outlets exhibited the same value-free mentality, pumping out Trump stories and airing his rallies because they got hits and high ratings. At some point over the summer, it struck me that the greater part of the media *wanted* Trump to be elected, consciously or unconsciously. He would be more “interesting” than Hillary Clinton; he would “pop.” That suspicion was confirmed the other day, when a CNN executive, boasting of his network’s billion-dollar profit in 2016, spoke of “a general fascination that wouldn’t be the same as under a Clinton Administration.” Of the clouds and shadows that hung over Clinton in the press, the darkest, perhaps, was the prospect of boredom. Among voters, a kind of nihilistic glee may have been as much a factor in Trump’s election as economic dissatisfaction or racial resentment. The mechanism by which people support a political program “largely incompatible with their own rational self-interest,” as Adorno wrote, requires many kinds of deception.

So here we are, living in what feels like an excessively on-the-nose novel by Don DeLillo, in which a President-elect tweets of his cabinet-selection process, “I am the only one who knows who the finalists are!” One all-too-schematic plot twist is

the revelation that Richard Spencer—the white supremacist whose phrase “alt-right” was adopted by Trump’s strategist, Steve Bannon—wrote a master’s thesis on the topic of none other than Theodor W. Adorno, arguing that Wagner’s anti-Semitism prevented Adorno from coming to terms with his love for Wagner’s music. The Department of Hitler Studies, from DeLillo’s “White Noise,” is moving to D.C.

When the purchase of the Mann house was announced, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, Germany's foreign minister and likely its next President, declared, “In stormy times like these, we need more than ever cultural anchor points with our most important partner outside of Europe.” Steinmeier was implying that the villa could become an outpost of cosmopolitan thinking as nativism overtakes both America and Europe.

The ironic reversal of roles hardly needs to be noted. However the Trump Presidency turns out—whether it veers toward autocracy, devolves into kleptocracy, or takes some unheard-of new form—America has, for the time being, abdicated the role of the world’s moral leader, to the extent that it ever played that part convincingly. “Make America Great Again” is one of Trump’s many linguistic contortions: in fact, one of his core messages is that America should no longer bother with being great, that it should retreat from international commitments, that it should make itself small and mean.

Germany, on the other hand, increasingly appears to be the strongest remaining bastion of liberal democracy. With the United Kingdom mired in the aftermath of Brexit, France facing a possible hard-right swerve, and Italy in disarray, the country that long stood as a synonym for nationalist insanity has so far resisted political and cultural regression. Tellingly, it has rejected the libertarian code of the big Silicon Valley companies, with their disdain for privacy, copyright, and limitations on hate speech. On the day after the American election, which happened to be the seventy-eighth anniversary of Kristallnacht, a neo-Nazi group posted a map of Jewish businesses in Berlin, titled “Jews Among Us.” Facebook initially refused to take down the post, but an outcry in the media and among lawmakers prompted its deletion. Such episodes suggest that Germans are less likely to acquiesce to the forces that have ravaged the American public sphere.

The defeat of the Freedom Party candidate in the Austrian Presidential election is a hopeful sign: perhaps the German-speaking countries can remind the rest of the world

of the darkness of their former path. Still, the far right is creeping forward in Germany, as it is all over Europe. No coming political race will be as tensely watched as Angela Merkel's run next year for reelection as Chancellor. The ultimate fear isn't of the second coming of Hitler: history never repeats itself so obviously, and a sense of shame over the Nazi past remains pervasive in all corners of German life. No, the fear is that the present antidemocratic wave may prove too strong even for Germany—the only country in the history of the world that ever learned from its mistakes.



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