Chapter 1

The Dream of a National Theater: German Civic Culture and The History of the Kroll Idea

The Public and the Private: Art and Urban Culture

This chapter will explore the idea of the national theater and its roots in pre-1914 Berlin.The complex relationship between private and public deserves more attention, specifically in the context of the city. Paul Nolte mentions the dearth of regional studies that would clarify the relationship between "elite" culture and *Volkskultur*, and relate both to civic identity.[1] More challenges are needed to counter the idea that, once the *Bürger* had established themselves as a clearly delineated class or socioeconomic group, only the private and domestic realm nourished artistic culture. This line of argument reproduces the Habermasian line, in which, as the public sphere evolved, it paradoxically led to a new kind of privacy.

Court and private theaters in Berlin did not measure up to ideals of the national theater which gained currency as a result of the revolution of 1848. At the same time, the proposed national theater was envisioned as something which would combine the best aspects of both - it would present works of high artistic quality, and it would be available and open to all. The "Kroll idea" championed by Otto Klemperer and Hans Curjel in the 1920s had roots in the 1840s, as calls for a more liberal Germany became fused with demands for a different type of theater. Within this framework, operas became an increasingly important subject of cultural

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[1] See Paul Nolte, *Gemeindebürgertum und Liberalismus in Baden 1800-1850* (Göttingen 1994) on redefinitions of the *Bürgertum*.

debate, especially after Richard Wagner's contribution to the national theater conversation in *The Art Work of the Future*.[2]

Wagner was concerned with establishing opera, or "music drama", as he termed it, within the framework of the national theater debate. The central importance of music in the construction of a German national identity has recently received much attention from scholars.[3] Theater has also been recognized as crucial for the development of national consciousness in Germany - and, more specifically, a democratic national consciousness. As Rainer Lepsius has described the nineteenth-century concept of the *Bildungstheater*, "The program of the *Bildungstheater* was developed not in a socially narrow sense or aimed affirmatively at a specific class, but for the entire people..."[4] Even though theater was usually not understood as political, the popular view that it represented an escape from political reality is mistaken.[5] This chapter will relate theater, and especially opera, to the notion of a civic culture bound up with and indeed dependent on artistic expression.

This idea took the form of a "national theater." Calls for a national

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[2] Richard Wagner, *The Art-Work of the Future and Other Works*. Translated by William Ashton Ellis. Lincoln, Nebraska 1993. The understanding of Wagner as the promoter of a democratic German art extended well into the Weimar Republic and competed with more exclusively nationalist and racist conceptions. See my "Wagner Reception and Weimar Democracy: Bernhard Diebold's *The Case of Wagner*." Unpublished paper.

[3] For examples, see Pamela Potter, *Most German of the Arts*: *Musicology and Society from the Weimar Republic to the End of Hitler's Reich* (New Haven, Connecticut 1998) and Celia Applegate and Pamela Potter, eds., *Music and German National Identity*. (Chicago 2002.)The intellectual impact of opera in particular is discussed in Gloria Flaherty, *Opera in the Development of German Critical Thought*. (Princeton 1978).

[4] In Rainer Lepsius, ed., *Bildungsbürgertum im 19. Jahrhundert, Bd. III: Lebensführung und ständische Vergesellschaftung*. Stuttgart 1992. p.47.

[5] An argument presented most forcefully in Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (info?) but which has become something of a cliché in discussions of nineteenth-century Germany.

theater accompanied every move toward liberalism and democracy in Germany, starting with the period immediately following the French Revolution and Germany's attempt to establish its own culture.[6] I will examine the nineteenth-century roots of the national theater, focusing on a key text, Eduard Devrient's *The National Theater of the New Germany*. I will trace the development of this idea up to the beginning of the First World War. In the development of the civic culture of Berlin, Kroll's Winter Garden, built in 1844, played a crucial role. Founded as a private theater and "establishment", it later became a court theater in 1896 under Kaiser Wilhelm II. It can thus serve as an illustration of both types of theater and what they meant for Berlin culture at the turn of the century. Finally, between 1908 and 1914 conservative politicians developed ambitious plans for the Kroll. It was to be the site of a vast new opera house which would replace the traditional representative house located on Unter den Linden. The older building, designed by Georg Wenceslaus von Knobelsdorff in 1742, was perceived to be no longer compatible with the needs of the regime. However, the outbreak of the First World War left the Kroll's very existence in question. In 1918 the building was a partially demolished ruin. The intervention of Germany's first theater-goers' organization, the Berlin Volksbühne, began the Kroll's association with the practice known as *soziale Kunstpflege*, or providing high culture to lower-income people at reduced prices. The history of the Kroll as an institution of Berlin civic culture is, however, much older.

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[6] This was stressed by many theater reformers in the Weimar Republic. See Konrad Haenisch, *Neue Bahnen der Kulturpolitik*. Stuttgart 1921.

Eduard Devrient and the German National Theater

The most important inspiration for Weimar-era attempts to expand civic culture was Eduard Devrient's *The National Theater of the New Germany*. The author (1801-1877) was the nephew of the noted actor Ludwig Devrient. He was himself an actor and singer, and eventually the director of the Court Theater in Karlsruhe (1844-46). After a fire in 1847, the theater did not reopen until 1853. As a result of censorship imposed after the revolution of 1848, the theater was unable to regain its former reputation and could not serve as an example of Devrient's vision, which he first outlined in 1849.

Devrient called for a complete restructuring of the theater. He was clearly inspired by Friedrich Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, which he refers to explicitly, but some of his ideas concerning theater and morality also show the influence of G.E. Lessing's writings on theater in his *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*. Lessing had been instrumental in promoting Hamburg's National Theater, founded in 1766, which was "the first serious attempt to provide a German theatrical company with a fixed abode and at the same time to introduce a new system of management."[7] Lessing wrote a series of articles on its performances, which were apparently of very high quality but could not appeal to the general public. The national theater in Hamburg was therefore short-lived and closed its doors in November 1768.

Lessing's most important feature for Devrient's later argument is his position that theater and actors are vitally important for national character.

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[7] Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, Vol. 1. Introduction by G. Waterhouse. Cambridge 1926, p. v.

In fact, he argues, theater ought to be "the school of the moral world."[8] The ability of actors to arouse empathy had important implications for the structure of society because theater revealed human traits which were potentially universal: "In the theater we should not learn what this or that person did, but rather what every person of a certain character would do under certain circumstances."[9] Even comedy had a moral purpose because it exposed the ridiculous nature of some social conventions.[10]

Lessing took the position that certain emotions, such as fear, were profoundly democratic. Any person might feel such emotions. In this Lessing relied on Aristotle's theory of catharsis, but reinterpreted it as follows: "...if Aristotle had simply wanted to teach us which passions tragedy can and should excite, he could have spared himself the addition of fear...But he also wanted to teach us which passions could be cleansed in us through those excited by the tragedy; and in this context he had to pay special attention to fear."[11] Through the persona of Shakespeare's Richard III Lessing explores this theory. Why does the protagonist arouse interest, even identification? Perhaps because he appeals to the latent emotions of the audience. The audience is, according to Lessing, ambivalent concerning the results of Richard III's actions. This is because they identify with him emotionally, if not morally. Thus the response to theater is a mixture of the rational and the emotional. Drama was uniquely suited to unite a national audience because it had the potential to arouse empathy.[12] Thus, the example set by the ancient Greeks and Romans, who

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[8] *Ibid,* p. 11.
[9] *Ibid,* p. 54.
[10] *Ibid.*, p. 79.
[11] *Ibid,* Vol. II, p. 37.
[12] *Ibid,* Vol. II, p. 55.

had profoundly identified with their theater, should be emulated in Germany. While many people believed that the French had a true national theater and that the Germans should imitate their example, Lessing disagreed. He found French theater emotionally hollow.[13]

The only advantage France had was that it was already a unified nation. Was it possible to speak of a German theater culture when there was no one German nation? The problem did not consist merely in the fact that political unity was an elusive goal. Germans also lacked self-confidence in their culture and a sense of national character. "One could almost say that this [the national character] consists in not wanting to have one."[14]

Devrient clearly wanted to change this situation and create a broader basis for German theater culture. Court theaters, he claimed, had originally set a good example, but "their present appearance does not express their original idea."[15] After 1815, the monarch could no longer be said to represent the will of the nation. In the realm of theater, he chose *Intendanten* who were merely court personalities and did not necessarily have theatrical interests. In a republic, however, state subsidies would not be counterproductive. They would in fact be absolutely necessary: "Everything which educates and ennobles humanity must be supported by the state, made independent of mere commerce."[16] The reform of theater had to be a national issue and could not be left to individual German states. In Devrient's day, theater in Prussia, his own state, was under the

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[13] *Ibid,*, Vol. II, p. 60.
[14] *Ibid*, Vol. II, p. 80.
[15] Eduard Devrient, *Das Nationaltheater des neuen Deutschlands*. Berlin 1919. p. 12.
[16] *Ibid,,* p. 17.

control of the Ministry of the Interior and was subject to censorship. He demanded that it be placed under the control of the Ministry of Culture. Further, a *Direktion* (directing board) should be established, made up of the artistic personnel. They would choose the most qualified person to direct the theater, subject to the approval of the ministry.

In Devrient's view, there was a natural harmony between theater and republican institutions:

> The nature of the dramatic art is the most perfect socialization [*Vergesellschaftung]* of all, yet it still preserves the unique nature of the individual. It demands...that the individual find the satisfaction of his own desires in the satisfaction of the general good. The art of acting therefore requires republican virtue in its full strength.[17]

Further, he contended, theater should also represent a future republic: "Every important date for the nation...should be celebrated with an appropriate performance and thus gain the sympathy of the present day. The most important events of the day should also find expression on the national stage..."[18]

In addition to the ideas of Schiller and Lessing, it is not difficult to see the influence of French revolutionary views of theater and spectacle, particularly the notion of "republican virtue."[19] Devrient's vision was, however, primarily a reaction against what he perceived as excessive foreign influence on German culture. In Vienna and Berlin, he claimed, the theaters were already too specialized. This specialization would vanish

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[17] *Ibid*, p. 25.
[18] *Ibid*, p. 35.
[19] See Carol Blum, *Rousseau and the Republic of Virtue: The Language of Politics in the French Revolution*. Ithaca, New York 1986.

in the age of the national theater, which would be composed of three branches:

> Clearly, at least until these three theaters can consolidate themselves, all other theaters in Berlin must be closed, and Italian opera and French plays must be forbidden. One must inspire the theater and the public, both spiritually and ideally, to support a truly national theater before one can expose them to tempting and distracting rivalry.[20]

The national theater, or at least this version of it, was never fully realized. Devrient's ideas nevertheless had a significant impact on thinking about theater after 1848. Their influence remained strong after the First World War, when the German actors' union republished his work with a preface explaining that this was what theatrical personnel expected from the new Weimar republic. Devrient influenced primarily those on the political left. This was due to his suspicion of capitalism and private theaters run for a profit. In Berlin, the latter was certainly dominant at the time he wrote the appeal for a national theater. It was in the context of private entrepreneurship that Kroll's Establishment first emerged.

The Origins of the Kroll Opera

The history of the Kroll Opera has been related before, but seldom in the context of Berlin theater as a whole.[21] Joseph Kroll, a Breslau restaurateur, obtained permission from Friedrich Wilhelm IV to build a

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[20] Devrient, p. 44.

[21] The most important source on the Kroll's early history remains Alwill Raeder, *Kroll: ein Beitrag zur Berliner Cultur- und Theatergeschichte* (Berlin 1894) Raeder published this volume to honor the fiftieth anniversary of the house's existence. Other important sources include Hans-Joachim Reichhardt,*...bei Kroll 1844 bis 1957: Etablissement, Ausstellungen, Theater, Konzerte, Oper, Reichstag, Gartenlokal.* (Berlin 1988) and Ruth Freydank, *Das Theater als Geschäft: Berlin und seine Privattheater um die Jahrhundertwende*. (Berlin 1995).

restaurant with a garden and a space for concerts and other musical performances. The establishment, as it was then called, opened on February 15, 1844. It was intended "to offer the educated public of Berlin a place to relax", via concerts, balls and other entertainment suited to "the good taste of the present day."[22] A masked ball followed two days after the official opening.[23] Lectures and patriotic festivals were also featured. The building's location in the Tiergarten district, or what was then called the Exerzierplatz, unfortunately proved a problem. Kroll died and left the establishment to his daughter Auguste before a plan could be made concerning the rather remote location.[24]

In 1848-49 the number of theaters in Berlin was growing, and therefore the Kroll faced increased competition. Shortly after the revolution of 1848, numerous summer theaters were established, but Auguste Kroll had more in mind for her own theater than light entertainment. She planned to present operas instead of the usual summer fare, and received permission from the police president to present operas in 1850.[25] A fire in 1851 was not a serious setback and the Kroll reopened the following year.

Auguste Kroll's plan to have high culture performed at the Kroll was unusual, as opera was an art form generally reserved for court theaters. The Kroll had in fact developed into the archetypal popular theater [*volkstümliches Theater*] which performed neither opera nor the German classics, but rather light entertainment such as vaudeville and

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[22] Raeder, p. 18.
[23] *Ibid,* pp. 20-23.
[24] *Ibid,* p. 38.
[25] *Ibid,* pp. 83-84.

operetta. The relaxation of theater censorship after 1850 led to a situation in which "a drama developed which took political and social conditions as its subject."[26] Not until 1865 did private theaters get permission to perform the classics, By then, however, the privately owned Kroll had long been competing successfully with the court theaters. Private theaters were originally supposed to ensure the financial survival of their attached restaurants or beer gardens. In time, this situation reversed itself. The patrons of private theaters had a notably relaxed and participatory attitude towards the theatrical performances they saw. As Ruth Freydank has noted, "The relationship of theaters to the public was marked in those years by direct contact, by enthusiastic activity and by the participation of the audience in the form of calls and interjections, unified singing, its own performances and open demonstrations of approval or disapproval."[27]

Such activities were not regarded as contrary to decorum. The difference in atmosphere between private theaters and court theaters may be grasped when one considers the fact that court theaters did not perceive themselves as open to the wishes of the general public. In fact, only in 1904 was the audience at the Linden Opera officially allowed to cheer and boo despite the presence of the court.[28] A popular theater was a different matter: "Here the little man had the chance and the right to be himself."[29]

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[26] Freydank, *Theater in Berlin: von den Anfängen bis 1945*. Berlin 1988. p. 29.
[27] *Ibid,* p.33.
[28] *Der neue Weg* 48, Nr. 1-2, January 1919.
[29] Freydank, *Das Theater als Geschäft,* p.39.

Such theaters were, however, primarily profit-making operations, which worried those who stuck to Eduard Devrient's vision of the theater. Especially after the *Gewerbeordnung* of 1869, many new theaters were built. In the early days of a united Germany after 1870, most politicians did not take theater seriously as a political institution. Those on the left, primarily the Social Democratic Party (SPD) thought differently. They feared the corruption of the public through mass entertainment. After the party's legalization in 1890, it was a major voice in the debate about what theater should represent and what role it should play. The situation in Berlin was especially complicated. The problem of creating a democratic theater culture was more acute because Berlin had no city-state tradition, but had always been the capital of the state of Prussia. In the new unified Germany, the city was under pressure to represent the entire nation.

Kulturtheater **in the Wilhelmine Era and the Origins of the Freie Volksbühne**

The concept of a cultural theater (*Kulturtheater*) was widespread in the years after 1870. The SPD's understanding of this word was uncomplicated and nonetheless utopian. It meant theater removed from the demands of the market. However, Wilhelm II also tended to pay lip service to this concept, because he viewed himself as a protector of the arts. He explained his position in the following terms: "To declare a theatrical production as a commercial item to be sold to the public every evening means giving up its function as an artistic institution."[30] The Kaiser's views led him to interfere constantly in court theater, so that it

[30] *Ibid,* p.16-17.

became less and less representative of what the public actually wanted. Thus, both artistic reform and economic reform were pressing issues in the Wilhelmine era, but they were handled in very different ways.

Unification led to a clear change in the position of Berlin. The city's culture was now expected to be the showpiece of the nation instead of merely the court or of private citizens. Competing concepts of *Kulturtheater* illustrate the various ways in which Berlin faced the challenge of representing national culture. The expansion of the city after 1870, and the emergence of a large urban working class, brought social issues to the foreground. Was access to culture in fact one of these social issues and an additional sign of working-class deprivation?

The underground cultural activities of the SPD had sustained its political mission. After 1890 this interest in cultural issues continued. The call for a popular theater in a new sense of the word found support among working-class activists and those who sympathized with them. Because the working class lacked access to most theaters, a popular theater intended exclusively for them was an idea whose time had come. The Freie Bühne, a largely middle-class organization which supported modern drama, was the inspiration for a similar working-class movement.[31] The Freie Bühne had been especially successful in promoting the literary movement known as naturalism. Many left-wing intellectuals, especially the journalist Bruno Wille, called for a working-class equivalent as the best way of making up workers' deficit in *Bildung*.

Over two thousand people appeared for the founding meeting in

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[31] See Gernot Schley, *Die Freie Bühne in Berlin: der Vorläufer der Volksbühnenbewegung*. Berlin 1967.

July 1890.[32] From the beginning, the political goals of the Freie Volksbühne, as it was called, were a source of controversy. The organization was never formally subject to the SPD, but always maintained close ties to it. Some members believed that the Freie Volksbühne should in fact serve as the cultural arm of the party. Conflict within the SPD over whether to use revolutionary or reformist tactics were mirrored in the development of the Freie Volksbühne. This conflict led the organization to split in 1892, as Wille and his followers left to form the Neue Freie Volksbühne. Despite their differences, both organizations were regarded as political and therefore dangerous to the state.[33]

The expulsion of Wille and his followers on political grounds meant that a vocal opposition favored the idea of explicitly political theater.[34] Wille, the middle-class son of an insurance inspector, was more concerned with acquainting the workers with traditional *Bildung*. Naturalism was important to him not for its social criticism but because of its artistic quality. The breakup of the original Freie Volksbühne did not, however, produce a new age of political theater. Indeed, it was unclear what sort of drama would be appropriate for this purpose. Naturalism never became the official art of the proletariat, doubtless due to the difficulties of conceiving a well-articulated concept of proletarian culture.[35]

Increasing police harassment led the original Freie Volksbühne to

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[32] Freydank, *Theater in Berlin*, p. 342.
[33] There is considerable literature on the history of the Volksbühne, most recently Cecil W. Davies, *Theatre for the People: The Volksbühne Movement, a History* (Amsterdam 2000). Other sources are discussed below.
[34] Heinz Selo, *Die "Freie Volksbühne" in Berlin: Geschicbte ihrer Erstehung und ihre Entwicklung bis zur Auflösung im Jahre 1896*. Berlin 1930.
[35] See my discussion in Chapter 3.

reorganize itself along different lines in 1897. Instead of becoming the literary organization of the working class, "it encouraged the public taste for dramatic art".[36] The growth of membership was relatively slow. It reached 6,000 by 1892 and 7,600 by 1894. Workers were also joined by many former members of the Freie Bühne, which had never had its own theater. Renting a theater was a considerable problem for the Freie Volksbühne as well. Eventually, they persuaded the Lessing-Theater to open its doors for Sunday afternoon performances. These were an absolutely new phenomenon at the time, clearly geared to the needs of workers who otherwise had to contend with a ten-hour workday.[37]

Concerning the behavior of the public in the theater, it first had to learn certain norms. Women frequently did not remove their hats, and men brought beer to the theater. Once the public was more experienced, however, they showed little desire for theatrical productions that would remind them of their everyday lives. For some later figures on the left, this represented a far more serious problem. Heinz Selo commented in 1930 that "The Social Democratic worker forgot his political tendencies completely in the theater - if he was not reminded of them."[38]

An exclusively political conception of the Freie Volksbühne's role is, however, too narrow. If art as a goal in itself was a major concern of the ordinary people who attended a performance, this did not negatively impact their class consciousness. Some accounts of the Volksbühne's history have blamed leaders and membership alike for having a "naive"

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[36] Selo, p. 78.
[37] *Ibid,* p.31.
[38] *Ibid,* p.169.

attitude towards the theater.[39] Likewise, the fact that workers and the middle class sat together in the theater is, according to some commentators, evidence of the latter's undue influence rather than a positive attribute of civic culture.[40] Struggles over the political character of the Volksbühne became even more intense during the Weimar era, as I explain in Chapter 3. The fundamental issues at stake, however, remained essentially the same from the 1890s on.

Rather than relying on a dubious concept of proletarian art, which has never been well articulated, historians ought to take seriously the mission of the Volksbühne as it evolved during the 1890s: "The Volksbühne chapters saw themselves as the legitimate heirs and guardians of a theater culture which had originated with the *Bürgertum* and had flourished there; but it had not been further developed or even preserved by this class, so that it needed a new social and organizational base."[41] The aesthetic and political priorities of the Volksbühne did, however, have to be readjusted when it came to the issue of opera. The movement for aesthetic reform of opera initially had nothing to do with the expansion of *Bildung*. Thus, access to opera performances became a political issue later than was the case with spoken theater. Naturalism, in the minds of many adherents, had a direct link to the socialist movement. Thus, the demand for a type of theater which was not often performed elsewhere was tied to the demand for political emancipation. Opera, by

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[39] Almut Schwerd, *Zwischen Sozialdemokratie und Kommunismus: zur Geschichte der Volksbühne 1918-1933*. Wiesbaden 1975, p.37. In this context I must also mention Heinrich Braulich's work on the Volksbühne, the political bias of which I address more explicitly in Chapter 3. See Heinrich Braulich, *Die Volksbühne: Theater und Politik in der deutschen Volksbühnenbewegung*. Berlin 1976.

[40] Schwerd, p. 58.

[41] Dietmar Klenke and Peter Lilje, *Arbeitersänger und Volksbühnen in der Weimarer Republik*. Bonn 1992. p. 333.

contrast, was anything but avant-garde in the 1890s, especially not in Berlin.

Aesthetic Reform of Opera

Members of the Volksbühne actually had the opportunity to see opera performances as early as 1896. In order to do this, however, they had to rent out various different venues around the city. This involved considerable effort and expense. The Linden Opera remained artistically stagnant well into the twentieth century. The tastes of Kaiser Wilhelm II essentially determined what would be performed there. His *Intendant,* Georg von Hülsen-Haeseler, followed in the tradition of his predecessors and took no chances with anything which might possibly cause controversy. Berlin had shown great resistance to performing the works of Richard Wagner long after the composer had been accepted elsewhere in Germany.[42] Notable examples of von Hülsen's attitude included his insistence in 1911 that certain suggestive passages of Richard Strauss's "Der Rosenkavalier" be toned down. Kaiserin Auguste Viktoria apparently took offense at the fact that the opera opens with a bedroom scene, and Strauss commented that an aristocrat such as von Hülsen could not stand to see aristocratic characters behaving the way they often did in real life, engaging in adultery and fathering illegitimate children.[43]

The aesthetic and cultural shortcomings of the Linden opera were noticeable to perceptive critics. In the journal *Die Schaubühne,* Walter Reiß mocked a 1905 production of Wagner's "Die Walküre" for its lack of realistic detail. For example, the character of Siegmund, who is supposed

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[42] John Sargent Rockwell, "The Prussian Ministry of Culture and the Berlin State Opera". Unpublished dissertation, Berkeley, California, 1972. p.4.
[43] Hugo Fetting, *Deutsche Staatsoper Berlin: zur Wiedereröffnung des Hauses unter den Linden am 4. September 1955.* Berlin 1955 p. 30.

to be seeking shelter from a storm, appeared on stage with perfect hair and clean clothes. The audience only tolerated this, Reiß suggested, because the orchestra and the singers maintained the highest standards.[44] Nevertheless, he suggested, there was room for a second opera in Berlin to make up for the Linden Opera's deficits.

Hans Gregor and the Komische Oper, 1905-1911

Ironically, for someone who did not produce the works of Wagner, the conductor Hans Gregor considered opera "music drama." That is, he aimed to make theatrical standards as high as musical ones. Some contemporaries believed he went too far in the theatrical direction. A short *Schaubühne* piece which poked fun at prominent theatrical figures in Berlin featured a Gregor character dismissing the leading lights of the Linden opera with these words: "Oh, there you go again with your music."[45]

Gregor arrived from Elberfeld at a time when the court had opera in a stranglehold. His concept for a new opera was revolutionary in that he refused all subsidies. This meant that he could not offer affordable seats. His public was made up of essentially the same people who would have patronized the Linden Opera were it not for the latter's tired and old-fashioned repertory.[46] The Komische Oper, which opened in 1905, presented itself as a supplement to the larger house, performing works which had previously been overlooked in Berlin. Some interpreted these

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[44] *Die Schaubühne* 1/16, 1905.
[45] *Ibid*.
[46] The major contemporary source on Gregor is Fritz Jacobsohn, *Hans Gregors Komische Oper 1905-1911*. (Berlin 1911). See also Freydank, *Das Theater als Geschäft*.

works as "those which perhaps can best be appreciated by somewhat aesthetically jaded gourmets."[47]

Gregor wanted to steer his audience away from the accepted German canon. Non-German works were far less popular before 1914 than they would later become. Nonetheless, it is astonishing that the Linden Opera passed over so many operas which have proven to be of lasting popularity. The works of Giacomo Puccini, now considered the bread and butter of most standard opera houses, were missing from its repertory. The Komische Oper made up this deficit by productions of "La Boheme" and "Tosca." The latter was performed in the 1906-07 season for the first time in Berlin. Apparently it had been considered too shocking and radical.[48]

French and Italian opera played a significant role in the Komische Oper's repertory. In addition to Puccini, Gregor premiered Debussy's "Pelléas et Melisande" in Berlin as well as several nineteenth-century French operas. Gregor was not only unwilling to take on Wagner; he also lacked the space to do so. From the beginning, he was cursed with an "almost impossible" house.[49] The building on the Weidendämmer Brücke was cramped and the acoustics were unsatisfactory. The need for new costumes and singers and for sufficient rehearsal time raised costs enormously. Although critics praised him, Gregor could not fill the house. The gap between his artistic goals and his means led to the closing of the Komische Oper in 1911.[50] The moral of the story appeared to be that

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[47] *Die Schaubühne* 1/11, 1905.
[48] See Jacobsohn.
[49] *Ibid*, p.21.
[50] See Freydank for a discussion of this.

privately financed operas could not survive. The citizens of Charlottenburg, at the time a city independent of Berlin, had made their own attempt at privately financed opera, but in 1912 they also closed. It was clear that they could not sustain the project. The integration of opera into the project of a national theater nevertheless had a long way to go.

Kaiser Wilhelm II did not lack interest in such a project. Notably, however, he expressed himself as follows on the question of theater:

> I was convinced, and had adopted it as my task, that the royal theater should be a tool of the monarch, just like schools and universities, which have the task of educating and preparing the next generation to work for the preservation of the spiritual treasures of our splendid German fatherland...The theater is also one of my weapons.[51]

Between the ideology of the monarchy, which saw theater as a means of propaganda for the status quo, and the alternative of a theater purely for profit stood the concept of *Kulturtheater*. In 1911, Max Epstein's *Das Theater als Geschäft* had claimed to show that most theaters could survive entirely without subsidies.[52] Proponents of *Kulturtheater* believed that this proposition might be true for theater which appealed to the lowest common denominator, but the artistic function of the theater and that which made it a part of *Bildung* would thereby be lost.

The Volksbühne, according to future theater referent Ludwig Seelig, was an example of *Kulturtheater*, but it was a model which ought

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[51] Quoted in *Ibid,* p. 15.

[52] Max Epstein, *Das Theater als Geschäft*. Berlin 1996. This edition is a facsimile of the original 1911 edition. In the context of the current controversy surrounding theater subsidies in Berlin, I find it no accident that Epstein's work is attracting renewed interest.

to be more broadly instituted in German society.[53] It was inextricably bound up with class struggle, not only because for-profit theaters exploited actors, but also because they offered the public the most undemanding and frivolous art. Seelig expressed himself on this issue as follows: "The artistically worthless operetta, farce and tearjerker of the most sentimental kind command the field. Serious art does not appeal to the public; at least not in the way it is presented by commercial theater."[54] Opera, while prestigious, was often under-rehearsed, and the court theaters which presented it were not suitable models. They wasted money on luxuries and had to make up for this through imitation of commercial theaters.[55]

Devrient and Wagner were Seelig's inspiration for his idea of theater, which in his opinion should be subject directly to cities and states. In 1913, the time of his manifesto, the only theater directly controlled by a local government was Mannheim's, which had attained communal status as early as 1839. Mannheim also had a theater constitution, like Vienna's Burgtheater and some French state theaters.[56] Importantly, Seelig anticipated many of Otto Klemperer's ideas in his concept for the Kroll Opera. He asserted that an ensemble and adequate rehearsal time would benefit both actors and the public.

One thing Seelig did not anticipate, however, was Klemperer's attitude toward the public. In his view, the theater should work to promote culture among the downtrodden: "Today, when the machine threatens to

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[53] Seelig was a lawyer and SPD member who later became referent for theater in the Ministry of Culture in the Weimar Republic; see my Chapter 2.
[54] Ludwig Seelig, *Geschäftstheater oder Kulturtheater?* Berlin 1913. p. 15.
[55] *Ibid,* p. 22.
[56] *Ibid,*, p. 38.

make man himself into a work machine, the treadmill of everyday life which degrades him, the exaltation of the soul to eternal spiritual values is a more urgent problem than ever."[57] The "theater of the people" was the wave of the future. Once theater ceased to be the sole property of the rich, claimed Seelig, it would lead to social peace and to a reduction in class conflict.[58]

In retrospect, of course, this seems a dangerous illusion. Class conflict could certainly not be solved by cultural means alone. However, as I argue in this study, the attachment of the working class to high culture was a real phenomenon which challenged the notion that *Bildung* was only for the privileged few. Thus, the SPD was correct to promote the goal of universal *Bildung*.

The party was in fact the most vocal defender of civic culture. As liberals abandoned the idea, it became increasingly centered on the arts - but artistic culture had always been a main focus in any case. At the turn of the century *Bildung* was indeed on the defensive because it was so clearly unrepresentative.[59] As an ideal, the Wagnerian project remained powerful, but in the Wilhelmine era, as Wagner became respectable, his works and ideas were increasingly associated with elite culture.

Opportunities for workers were, however, not limited to the Freie Volksbühne and the Neue Freie Volksbühne. Beginning in the winter of 1907, the Königliche Bühnen offered "people's performances" for lower prices. Bothe plays and opera were presented, but the total amounted to

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[57] *Ibid,,* p. 45.
[58] *Ibid*, p. 47.
[59] See the first section of this chapter as well as Ulrich Engelhardt, *Bildungsbürgertum: Begriffs- und Dogmengeschichte eines Etiketts* (Stuttgart 1986) and Georg Bollenbeck, *Bildung und Kultur: Glanz und Elend eines deutschen Deutungsmusters*. (Frankfurt 1994).

ten productions attended by 1560 people each.[60] This was insufficient, as demand was much greater than this. The court theater system was not suited to the workers' demands, and Wilhelm II's plans for a new representative operatic culture were intended primarily for his own glorification.

The Plan for a New Opera House, 1908-1914

The competition to build the projected new opera house went through three different stages, that is to say three different architectural competitions.[61] Ultimately, nothing was decided. The new house was to have been built on the former site of the Kroll Opera, but the latter was rebuilt whereas the plans for a new representative opera were shelved. The Linden Opera, due to historical circumstances, remained the main representative house.

The debates surrounding the plans and financing of a new opera are nonetheless crucial for what they reveal about cultural attitudes in the years directly before the First World War. The issue of the new opera was first debated in Prussia's House of Deputies beginning in March 1908. The issues were twofold. The Linden Opera was widely acknowledged to be inadequate in terms of fire safety.[62] Several deputies therefore proposed addressing the safety situation by converting the house into a site for scholarly meetings and conferences. At the same time, a new house would be built on the former site of the Kroll which would comply with contemporary architectural standards. However, it was not only these

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[60] Hertha Siemering, *Arbeiterbildungswesen in Berlin und Wien*. Berlin 1911. p. 129.
[61] Waltraud Strey, *Wettbewerb für den Neubau eines Königlichen Opernhauses in Berlin für Wilhelm II*. Berlin 1981.
[62] Haus der Abgeordneten, meeting of April 18, 1910. Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz, I. HA Rep. 90, Staatsministerium, S. III. 3, Nr. 1, Bl. 173.

practical details which occupied the deputies' time. A change in the notion of opera culture itself was clearly in the air. The new opera, the deputies insisted, could not be a mere elite institution.

The SPD and the National Theater

A somewhat surprising source played a prominent role in the debates over the future of Berlin opera - Social Democratic deputy Karl Liebknecht. Liebknecht said that he supported the idea of a new opera, although he felt that the city of Berlin should not help to cover the costs. However, he stated that the architectural designs presented thus far fell short of what the city and the population of Berlin needed. The task of building what was specifically understood to be a court opera was impractical, as Liebknecht proclaimed in a 1913 speech in the House of Deputies. "Through this problem of the court theater, which is at the same time supposed to be a theater of the people - because the court cannot fill the theater, it cannot even maintain the theater or at least does not want to maintain it - the issue acquires a stark inner contradiction."[63] The theater designs presented were not satisfactory, because they did not take into account the technical complications involved in building a modern theater.

Liebknecht also expressed his concern about the high priority accorded the oper a project. He conceded that the city did have aesthetic and cultural responsibilities to its population: "But the Royal Opera House will unfortunately not be an institution for the great mass of the people...we will get a theater exactly like the current Royal Opera House,

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[63] Meeting of April 29, 1910. *Ibid*, Bl. 183.

for the top ten thousand with extremely expensive seats."[64] Under such circumstances, the city of Berlin did not even have the right to pay for such a project.[65] Liebknecht nonetheless supported the project, at least theoretically: "By this I do not mean that all of us have no interest in the building of the opera house, in spite of its court theater character, in spite of its socially exclusive character...But this is not the task of the city of Berlin."[66] However, he did not suggest who should fund the new opera, having already stated that the court was unwilling to do so. Liebknecht went on to criticize other political parties for their cavalier attitude to the future of the Linden Opera: "Gentlemen, it would perhaps not offend your aesthetic sensibilities if we suggested that the Berlin police headquarters be moved into the Royal Opera House."[67]

The SPD was certainly trying to have it both ways. It would support cultural endeavors, but insist that the city of Berlin not be forced to pay for them. After the revolution of 1918 and the transition to a republican Germany, the party's position changed along with political circumstances, as I discuss in the next chapter. Yet even before the war Liebknecht foresaw a future for representative German culture which would transcend its connection with the monarchy. The building as such was not something his party opposed. Four years later he stated that even if the submitted designs were all related to the traditional concept of a court opera, "We nevertheless feel that the kind of luxury building the opera house will represent is not solely for this reason a disadvantage or

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[64] *Ibid.*
[65] *Ibid.*
[66] *Ibid.*
[67] *Ibid.*

something to be condemned."[68] The costs did, however, stand out in view of the fact that Prussia and the Reich were less and less willing to spend money for social welfare.[69] Liebknecht demanded change in the area of cultural policy: "I have repeatedly explained that Social Democracy can only approve this building under the condition and the expectation that the government and the management of the opera house fulfill their obligations to the mass of the population and not simply to the court or to the upper ten thousand."[70] Ticket prices especially ought to be within the reach of the average Berliner. If this were to become a reality, representative culture could still have a future:

> If an opera house like this one is built, it will not be built only for a few years, but for generations, and we have the hope and the firm conviction that this house will still be standing at a time when it has lost the character of a court opera house, when it will be a people's opera house, and where the splendid space will serve the general public, the people.[71]

At this point the record shows that Liebknecht was cheered by his own party and called to order by the president of the House of Deputies. Clearly, what the president perceived him to be saying, and what he probably intended to say, was that sometime in the foreseeable future, there would be no court to deal with. Indeed, Liebknecht went on to quip

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[68] Meeting of May 19, 1914. *Ibid,*, Bl. 270.
[69] *Ibid*.
[70] *Ibid*.
[71] *Ibid*. Interestingly, the Conservative deputy Henning had already argued in 1908 for preservation of the Linden Opera because it was so important to preserve Prussian tradition: "I am not thinking of the present; I won't say anything about that; it will probably be handled within very patriotic limits. But no one knows what the future will bring. It could happen that very different flags from the black and white one will be planted there [at the opera]". Meeting of March 12, 1908; *Ibid,* Bl. 166.

that "...a gentleman from the right called to me that he had a better image of the revolution than I do. You seem to be an expert in this area!"[72]

Conclusion

The last debates on the opera house project took place in May 1914. As we know, nothing came of these plans, because the First World War intervened. The remains of the Kroll Opera served as a hospital during wartime.[73] The impetus for a more democratic high culture had, however, not been lost. The SPD's call for a more inclusive opera would attract much support in the years immediately following Germany's defeat. In the next chapter, I discuss the concrete cultural policy initiatives pursued in the state of Prussia after 1918.

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[72] *Ibid*.
[73] See Reichhardt,...*bei Kroll 1844 bis 1957*.