German History in Documents and Images

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M.M. Gehrke and Rudolf Arnheim, “The End of the Private Sphere” (1930)

The journalist Martha Maria Gehrke, who, among other jobs, worked as an author for the *Weltbühne* and as an editor of advice books, exhibited a fair bit of cultural pessimism in proclaiming the “end of the private sphere.” This, in her estimation, was a result of the parallel development of collectivism and the “technologization of life,” and it exhibited itself in the forceful intrusion of radio and the gramophone into daily life. In responding to this, art psychologist Rudolf Arnheim, who worked as a film critic and culture editor at the time (also for the *Weltbühne*), took a much more optimistic stance; collectivism, in his view, was not a “product of technology,” and aside from that, he felt that it could also have a positive impact on social and communal life – as altruism out of self-interest.

The End of the Private Sphere

M. M. GEHRKE

The Great War, like all wars, transcended isolation and raised the masses to a hitherto unimaginable level of importance. The importance remained as the war ended; the masses have recognized their weight and become active. Soviet Russia is only the most complete example of collectivism; the great trend is everywhere the same.

We are not experiencing today the first reaction of history to individualism, we are not experiencing for the first time the preponderance of the masses; but for the first time a parallel development provides a previously unimaginable and unprecendented support: the development of technology.

Prior to the existence of cities, isolation and, as its internal form and consequence, individualism were facts of nature. The more people came together in dense concentrations, the stronger became the external preconditions of collectivism. Almost every new technical invention also signified and signifies a more intense concentration of people. One recalls the distinction between workshop and factory; one imagines what it means to travel in a sedan chair, on a horse, and certainly in a carriage, or instead in a train of twenty cars—immediate examples that anyone might supplement at will. Such were the developments before 1914. Since the end of the war the technologization of life has proceeded with bewildering speed. There is radio, through which it is no longer just a few hundred or thousand theater-goers who share the same

experience, but which day-by-day, night-by-night, forces the same program upon the ears of tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of listeners.

Forces? But it is hardly the case that anyone is forced to take out a radio subscription! Certainly not. But—disregarding entirely the imponderable influence of mass phenomena in themselves—the neighbor down the street has a radio, and the one across the hall, the one below, above, and next door. All of them have speakers, all of them open their windows well into the autumn, and if they are closed in the winter, the speakers, so very good at reproductions, penetrate the walls of old and new buildings alike into the home that was once my castle. I am steadfastly a pirate listener, although it was not in the least my intention to become one. If the radio is silent, then the gramophone resounds; there is no apartment house in which it would not be represented in numbers, no homeowner who lacks the altruistic need of allowing everyone around to take part in the perfection of his recordings. For collectivism has one of its most distinct effects in the contemporary form of entertainment. Before, entertainment and sociability were always mutually determined for the majority of people; is it an accident that in today's fairgrounds and dance halls there are social classes represented from which in previous times only the men, at most, would be present, and then only secretly. Is it an accident that everyone today expects the understanding participation of the whole street in the sounds of his entertainment, and that in such streets there no longer exists the odd individual who takes the speakers and gramophones, the barking of a dog and the clatter of a running engine for an invasion of the private sphere? An accident that he, as the single individual, lacks the courage to invoke for his own benefit what few civil prohibitions there are? A majority, however, that feels itself bothered and proceeds in solidarity against the disturbers of the peace – that tellingly does not exist.

It would be foolish to speak of the end of the private sphere were there no further evidence that a collective reaction to an individualistic century. It is only the parallel development of technology that justifies the concern, and, in light of the most recent developments, now more than ever. The problem of the telephone is all but completely solved; now we are at work on television. There is no question that here, too, we are very near a practical solution. A General Union of German Televisers has already been founded for the purpose of "promoting television and representing all interests associated with it." It will achieve its goal, and humanity will be one wonderful invention the richer. But will it be possible to deploy this invention in such a way that it serves the general public without disturbing the sphere of the individual?

It will hardly be possible – if only for the reason that there will be scarcely any, and certainly too few, individuals who feel this disturbance to be just that. That no one will be forced to acquire a television, and, once one has one, will always be able to turn it off? But who can guarantee that airwaves will not be discovered and machines invented that subordinate the viewer's will to that of the broadcasters against which the viewer has as little defense as a church steeple has against being observed by someone with binoculars? Utopia? After the events of the last century, that word is no longer valid.

Defense measures? They have no chance of success, since there is no will for defense in general. Conclusions? No conclusions should be drawn. The attempt has merely been made to offer evidence, not for the sake of argument but because we all, each in his own way, must come to terms with that evidence.

RUDOLF ARNHEIM RESPONDS

M. M. Gehrke stresses her forbearance from taking a position, claiming only to establish the facts. But she speaks only of unpleasantries, only of the noise of terriers, pigeons, and exhaust pipes unleashed on the individual by dear neighbors on an era of the collectivism of engineers. As if there were not also more worthy sounds pressed by one person upon the other. She steps into our times like someone who has long been sheltered from a pouring rain; raising her umbrella, she fears in the future that this meager defense will be taken away as well.

Collectivism is a dangerous concept because it is an unstable one. Collectivism is not a product of technology nor of life together in cities. It is much more to be found in its purest form on the first beginnings of culture, among primitive peoples and animals. The development and specialization of intellectual work among humans, the increasing division of labor, the disintegration of community into classes of various educational and income levels – these developments destroyed collectivism. It was precisely the factory work mentioned by Gehrke, which, seen from without in comparison to the artisans' workshops, began the formation of great masses and overthrew a genuine collectivism, a collaboration that was self-evident at the time of the guilds.

Collectivism is not the equivalent of massing together. Big-city dwellers, packed together body and soul, lead no more a life of community than do sardines in a can. They do not live together; they bother one another. That is not collectivism; collectivism would simply be the nicest and most efficient way of coming to terms with the nuisances.

More powerful attacks on private life than cheap modern walls and automobile horns are currently underway. Here one would have to speak of the general concentration of cultural production, of the standardization of utensils and diet, of the entertainment monopoly of radio and television concerns, against which one will need not only, as Gehrke stresses, defend oneself, but upon which one will become dependent. Who know whether twenty years from now there will not be but a single play to be heard each evening in all the apartments of the nation (unless, that is, a captain of industry invites his friends to his private theater). How to come to terms with that?

The conflict between the individual and the collective did eventually find its resolution, one of much benefit to our work, but which brought with it an impoverishment of life. Papered walls and

a bank account offered sufficient protection for those inquires that thrived magnificently in greenhouses, that led science and art to the pinnacle. But the majority of people will live without education and culture until precisely the same economic system that brought forth illiteracy tears down the walls by making needs equivalent and leading the whole of the people – perhaps to culture, perhaps to vulgarity. Those who until now have indulged themselves in all the peacefulness of privacy with the good things of life, now see themselves being forced to take into consideration the needs of the general public because the individual sources of supply are slowly drying up. And they see themselves referring not to self-interest but to an altruism that can be exceedingly useful. For now that the same bread is being baked for all, it is in their own interest to contrive to improve that which is offered and to refine the tastes of the masses so that the general fare they purchase with their greater income might also be palatable. This necessity will admittedly cause enormous harm to the work of culture for a long time to come, and it is no pleasure to see what barbarism and crudity the Soviet system, for example, is introducing into art and science. But the present necessity, seen from the egotistic standpoint of the individual, simultaneously awakens the crippled joy of life in the community, of helping, of exchange. It will vouchsafe to the productive the pleasure of teaching, of giving, a welcome bonus to the fanaticism that the loneliness of the study so often involves. And it will, as is so evident in our contemporaries, tempt one to betray the intellect and in the protection of cozy, lulling comradeship give oneself over to the pleasures upon which the masses still depend today but which signal depravity in the cultivated. A useful disturbance: the all too solid position of the pampered will be shaken; in difficult circumstances they will have to rearm themselves to become fruitful, not only for the object of their attentions, but for their fellow men as well. And onto the groat-strewn pond where the teeming mass lives its life will fall sunshine and the stimulating fragrance of new-fashioned, dangerous feed. The discontent is worth it.

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