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Review of Peter Hess, *Resisting Pluralization and Globalization in
German Culture, 1490–1540: Visions of a Nation in Decline*

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PETER HESS, *Resisting Pluralization and Globalization in German Culture, 1490–1540: Visions of a Nation in Decline* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), ix + 389 pp. ISBN 978 3 110 67462 0. £86.50

In 2018, the German Arabist Thomas Bauer published a book in which he argues that our modern society is increasingly rejecting ambiguity and striving for clear-cut meanings.¹ In his view, the opponents of ambiguity who accept only one truth are advancing in many areas of society – in politics as well as in culture and the economy. Peter Hess picks up this critical diagnosis of our times and uses it to describe German society between 1490 and 1540 in a similar way. Like the present, he argues, these fifty years on the cusp between the Middle Ages and the early modern period in Germany were a time when the processes of pluralization and secularization gave rise to counter-movements seeking clarity, certainty, and purity. Hess understands ‘pluralization’ as the result of Europe’s expansion, bringing an enlargement of the European world-view. And for him ‘secularization’ refers to the loss of significance of church institutions in the lives of most people. As a literary scholar, Hess draws on a wealth of literary texts of very different genres – from poetry and prose narratives to panegyrics, sermons, travel reports, and tracts.

The first part – ‘A World in Decline: Anxieties about Social and Political Order’ – looks at the disintegration of the political, social, and moral order that many writers perceived in the world around them. According to Hess, a conservative view of social and political developments was a general characteristic of literature in this period of transition. Social revolutionary views, by contrast, were hardly represented. Individual chapters in this section explore the concept of *Gute Policey* – ‘a term referring to laws, ordinances, and regulations issued by authorities to establish and enforce social norms, to achieve communal order, and to enhance the common good’ (p. 28) – and case studies of a number of writers, such as Sebastian Brant. The author looks in detail at *Till Eulenspiegel*, a chapbook that was first published

Trans. by Angela Davies (GHIL)

¹ Thomas Bauer, *Die Vereindeutigung der Welt: Über den Verlust an Mehrdeutigkeit und Vielfalt* (Ditzingen, 2018).

in Strasbourg in 1510 or 1511. In this collection of loosely connected adventures, the titular protagonist is unwilling to fit into any social order and repeatedly undermines such order through his shameless pranks. He does this by, among other things, using the German language in a way that excludes any dynamic or interpretive openness and reducing words to their literal meanings, leading to misunderstandings and the breaking of taboos. In later works, Till Eulenspiegel is presented as a harmless rogue, but Hess interprets the Till of the original version as a negative and frightening figure who was intended to make the instability of the social order clear to contemporaries.

Part two—‘Staying Home: Resistance to Expanding Spatial Horizons’—deals with European expansion and reactions to it. In a number of chapters, the expeditions which Europeans undertook to Asia, Africa, and America are described, along with their representations in literature and cartography. Hess’s main interest, however, is reserved for the negative and critical reactions of German writers. Sebastian Brant and his *Das Narrenschiff* (‘Ship of Fools’, first published in 1495) again play a prominent part. Although he made occasional positive statements, Brant was in general critical of the voyages of discovery. ‘I do not hold to be wise at all the one who uses all his sense and industriousness to explore all cities and lands’, he wrote in chapter sixty-six of his moral satire, which became the most successful German-language book published before the Reformation. The chapter was illustrated with the famous depiction of a cosmographer in a fool’s costume measuring the world with a compass. In this second part of his study, Hess also discusses other authors and works such as Hans Sachs and the anonymous *Fortunatus* in order to exemplify his main argument: ‘Travel, discovery, and generally the expansion of the spatial realm represented a destabilization and disruption of the social, political, and moral order’ (p. 191).

Finally, the third part—‘Globalization and the Nationalistic Backlash in Germany’—looks at the reactions of writers to the processes of economic entanglement in the late medieval and the early modern world. Hess begins this section by reflecting on the concept of ‘globalization’ and asks whether it adequately reflects the contemporary processes of integration. His main interest, however, is to make clear the various authors’ hostility towards all forms of global

networking and their cultural impact on Germany. A central theme in this is the widespread antipathy towards international trade and merchants, who were accused of charging excessively high interest rates, exercising a monopoly, profiteering, speculating, and trading with fake goods. These accusations had a long tradition reaching back into the Middle Ages, and around 1500, during the period under investigation, they reinforced a nationalistic and xenophobic backlash against foreign influence. In the eyes of the chroniclers, writers, and preachers of the time, the result was to weaken both Germany, which lost its wealth, and its inhabitants, who were turned into immoral and weakly creatures by the luxurious temptations of foreign trade. Instead of encouraging the country to open up economically and culturally, many writers promoted a backward-looking nostalgic project—one that envisaged a strong, independent German nation which drew on its own traditions of the past.

Hess has written a compact and stimulating book with a clear argument, supported by a colourful corpus of writers and works. The book is especially interesting because it takes part in a critical debate on globalization. In recent decades, historiography has frequently presented the increasing interconnection of the world as something positive and liberating, at least as far as Europe and Europeans are concerned. In recent years, however, this liberal and multicultural interpretation of globalization has increasingly been called into question by nationalist and populist reactions to the global erosion of boundaries. In the age of globalization, society is no longer politically divided between left and right. As Charles Maier established as early as 1997, today's most important political division is 'between two de facto coalitions: call them the party of globalization and the party of territoriality'.² This is why books like that written by Hess are important—to show the tensions between opening up and closing down in the past. The economic interconnection of the world has always involved winners and losers.

Whether the period investigated here—from 1490 to 1540—is different from others in this respect, and whether the book's argument

² Charles S. Maier, 'The New Political Divide', *Project Syndicate* (3 July 1997), online at [<https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/the-new-political-divide>], accessed 15 July 2021.

will persuade every reader, are different matters. The reception of Thomas Bauer's work cited above has also been ambivalent. Many reviewers found his argument about the increasing rejection of ambiguities in the present stimulating, but considered its empirical demonstration lacking. I had a similar experience when reading the book under review here. Hess delivers an important and conceptually stimulating contribution to the debate on (anti-)globalization and its perception in the premodern past. But I doubt whether, during the fifty years from 1490 to 1540, the conservative voices alone set the tone in the tense relationship between globalists and regionalists in Germany. This does not, however, detract from the significance of this book for our common reflections on the interlinking of the world – including its economic, political, ecological, and cultural consequences.

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