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The New Conservatism
Cultural Criticism and the Historians' Debate

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Edited and Translated by
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introduction by Richard Wolin

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Introduction

Richard Wolin

There are not two Germanys, an evil and a good, but only one, which, through devil's cunning, transformed its best into evil. . . .

Thomas Mann, *Germany and the Germans*, 1945

I consider the continued existence of National Socialism within democracy potentially more threatening than the continued existence of fascist tendencies against democracy.

Theodor Adorno, "What Does Coming to Terms with the Past Mean?"

Until now, Jürgen Habermas has been best known in the English-speaking world as the author of a number of seminal works on the metatheoretical foundations of the human sciences: *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1973), *Communication and the Evolution of Society* (1979), and, what will undoubtedly be viewed historically as his masterwork, the two-volume *Theory of Communicative Action* (1984, 1987).¹ In the Federal Republic of Germany, however, his reputation as a scholar has gone hand in hand with his role as a passionate commentator on a wide range of contemporary political themes in speeches, interviews, and reviews that have appeared in leading German publications such as *Die Zeit* and *Merkur*.² The present volume comprises a variety of occasional political and cultural writings conceived by Habermas in the 1980s, an extremely significant decade in the political life of the Federal Republic which saw thirteen years of Social Democratic rule (1969-1982) come to an end in favor of a coalition headed by the conservative Christian Democrats. Led by Chancellor Helmut Kohl, the Christian

Democrats were returned to office (along with their junior partners, the Free Democrats) in 1987. The political transformation of the 1980s thus represents in many ways a delayed confirmation of the *Tendenzwende* or ideological shift first visible in Germany in the mid-1970s. The multifarious ramifications of this era of neoconservative stabilization in the Federal Republic in the political, cultural, and intellectual spheres of life are explored by Habermas in the essays that make up this volume. And while these texts are integrally related to the peculiarities of the West German historical-political context, many of their insights concerning the decline of the welfare state, the function of scholarship under conditions of democracy, and neoconservatism in general are, *mutatis mutandis*, applicable to conditions of other late capitalist societies.

It has recently become fashionable to deny the existence of a causal relation between an author's theoretical position and his or her political convictions³ a standpoint consonant with the poststructuralist interest in exposing the limitations of theory in general, which is always suspected of promoting covert, "foundationalist" tendencies. In this respect, the work of Habermas is refreshingly traditional: the political essays continued in *The New Conservatism* represent a studied, practical complement of his theoretical labors of the past thirty years. Indeed, the relationship between "theory" and "practical life" has always been a paramount concern in Habermas's work. In *Knowledge and Human Interests*, for example, he attempted to demystify the misguided, "objectivistic" self-understanding of the human sciences by demonstrating that the so-called observer is an inextricable element of the network of social relations under study. In a similar vein, in his introduction to *Theory and Practice*,⁴ Habermas set forth the program of a revitalized critical theory defined as a "theory of society with a practical intent." That he has remained extremely faithful to this early insistence on the practical implications of all social inquiry is attested to by the political texts in this volume. In essence, they may be read as studies in applied critical theory. For despite his telling criticisms of the shortcomings of the first generation of critical theorists,⁵ Habermas has, throughout his work, remained faithful to one of the central insights of Max Hork-

heimer: that what distinguishes "critical" from "traditional" theory is an active interest in advancing a more rational and just organization of social life. Or, as he observes in *Theory and Practice*, "We can, if needs be, distinguish theories according to whether or not they are structurally related to possible emancipation." 6

The central theme that unites the various essays of this volume is the German problem of the *Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit* or "coming to terms with the past." For years, the "German question" as perceived by politicians of Western Europe had been, "How can German aggressiveness be curbed?" But after 1945, this question took on an entirely different, more sinister meaning. It was rephrased to read, "How could the nation of Goethe, Kant, and Schiller become the perpetrator of 'crimes against humanity'?" Or simply, "How was Auschwitz possible?" One could justifiably say that the very "soul" of the nation is at stake in the answer to this question. For the development of a healthy, nonpathological national identity would seem contingent on the forthright acknowledgment of those aspects of the German tradition that facilitated the catastrophe of 1933-1945. And that is why recent efforts on the part of certain German historians bolstered by an era of conservative stabilization to circumvent the problem of "coming to terms with the past" are so disturbing. For what is new about this situation and here I am referring to what has been called the "Historians' Debate" is the attempt not simply to provide dishonest and evasive answers to the "German question," as stated above, but to declare *the very posing of the question itself null and void*.

Historically, the problem of coming to terms with the past has not been an easy one; and in the first decade and a half of the Federal Republic's existence the "latency period" of the Adenauer years, which lasted from 1949 until 1963 the nation as a whole did very little of it. Instead, the wrong lesson seemed to have been learned from twelve years of Nazi rule: there was not only a rejection of jingoistic-genocidal politics (which had, after all, brought in its wake unprecedented misery for the Germans, too, an experience they were far from anxious to repeat) but a total rejection of politics, which, in the

post-Hitler era, seemed irrevocably contaminated. These were years of overwhelming political apathy. German political energies, which had once been so robust, were entirely sublimated into economic reconstruction. The result is well known: the creation of the *Wirtschaftswunder* or economic miracle, which catapulted the Federal Republic, within years of its foundation, to the position of one of the world's leading industrial powers. But democratic societies do not come into being overnight. And many features of the Adenauer regime—the incredible political docility of the general populace, the fact that so many officials from the Nazi years so readily found positions of power and influence in his governments—suggested that the essential structure of the traditional *Obrigkeitsstaat* (the authoritarian state of the Bismarck and Wilhelmine periods) remained in place beneath the veneer of democratic respectability.

Such conclusions were generally confirmed by social-psychological studies of German character structure in the 1950s. In his incisive analysis of the results of one such study, ⁷ Adorno noted that many of the attitudes displayed revealed character traits that were highly "neurotic": "defensive gestures when one isn't attacked; massive affect in situations that do not fully warrant it; lack of affect in the face of the most serious matters; and often simply a repression of what was known or half-known." Instead of "coming to terms with the past," the latter was consistently repressed through a series of familiar, highly inventive rationalizations: only five, not six million Jews were killed; Dresden was as bad as Auschwitz; the politics of the Cold War era confirmed what Hitler had always said about communism anyway—which justified in retrospect the war he launched in the East (and from there it is a short step to the conclusion that Hitler was right about a number of other matters as well); the fate of the "East Germans" (i.e., those driven from the eastern territories at the war's end) was comparable to that of the Jews.

The incapacity of the German nation during these years for any honest expression of grief or remorse was brilliantly satirized in a scene from Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum*, where people require onion-cutting ceremonies to help them shed

tears. As one pair of critics astutely observed regarding the German national character of the postwar years: "there is a determining connection between the political and social immobilism and provincialism prevailing in West Germany and the stubbornly maintained rejection of memories, in particular the blocking of any sense of involvement in the events of the Nazi past that are now being so strenuously denied." 8

Certainly, much has changed in Germany since this initial period, largely through the efforts of the generation of the 1960s, who, refusing to remain satisfied with the strategy of repression pursued by their parents, pressed forcefully for answers to the most troubling questions about the German past.⁹ However, just at the point when one is tempted to believe that genuine progress has been made concerning the confrontation with the Nazi years, one runs across studies such as Dieter Bossman's *Was ich über Adolf Hitler gehört habe* (*What I have heard about Adolf Hitler*; Frankfurt, 1977), revealing astonishing ignorance on the part of young Germans concerning their recent past. For example, upon being asked what Hitler had done to the Jews, some of Bossman's young interviewees responded as follows: "Those who were against him, he called Nazis; he put the Nazis into gas chambers" (thirteen year-old); "I think he also killed Jews" (thirteen year-old); "He murdered some 50,000 Jews" (fifteen year-old); "Hitler was himself a Jew" (sixteen year-old).

The work of mourning is essential, not as "penance" but as an indispensable prelude to the formation of autonomous and mature identities for both nations and the individuals who comprise them. As Freud showed in his classic study, "Mourning and Melancholia," unless the labor of mourning has been successfully completed that is, unless they have sincerely come to terms with the past individuals exhibit a marked incapacity to live in the present. Instead, they betray a "melancholic" fixation on their "loss," which prevents them from getting on with the business of life. The neurotic symptom formations that result (as described above by Adorno) can be readily transmitted to the character-structures of future generations, which only compounds the difficulty of confronting the historical trauma that wounded the collective ego. And

thus the crimes of the past tend to fade into oblivion, unmourned and thus uncomprehended.

Instances of collective repression are, moreover, far from innocent. They prevent the deformations of national character and social structure that facilitated a pathological course of development from coming to light; instead, these abnormalities remain buried deep within the recesses of the collective psyche, from which they may emerge at some later date in historically altered form. In Germany, these "deformations" are often discussed in terms of the persistence of authoritarian patterns of behavior that are a holdover from traditional, predemocratic forms of social organization.

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So long as this incapacity to confront the past exists, there usually follows an inability to live realistically in the present. Thus, historically, one of the salient features of Germany as a nation has been a tendency toward a militant exaggeration of the virtues of "nationalism" as a way of compensating for its relatively late and precarious attainment of nationhood under Bismarck in 1871. Or, as Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich have expressed it in their landmark study of postwar German character structure, *The Inability to Mourn*: "World-redeeming dreams of ancient greatness arise in peoples in whom the sense of having been left behind by history evokes feelings of impotence and rage."¹¹

Such infantile fantasies of collective omnipotence have led, on not a few occasions, to a false estimation of national strength and some correspondingly catastrophic national defeats. The important point is that unless the historical reasons that have led to disaster have been explored unless the labor of coming to terms with the past is undertaken in earnest one risks reenacting the same historical cycle yet again as a type of collective "repetition compulsion": one proceeds to invent new, more sophisticated rationalizations and defenses to protect the idealized image of national greatness from the traumatic blows it has most recently endured and so on, *ad infinitum*.

Thus, in the immediate postwar period, the theory arose that it was the German leaders alone who were to blame for the most heinous of Nazi crimes, thereby absolving rank-and-file Germans from responsibility. In truth, of course, the Ger-

man populace had given their full and enthusiastic support to Hitler's war aims and policies; and without the alacritous and dedicated cooperation of large segments of German society from industrialists and the judiciary to public officials and railway personnel the Third Reich and its atrocities would hardly have been possible. 12

It is within the context of this longstanding attempt to deny the Nazi past as well as its possible repercussions for postwar German society that the arguments of Habermas's adversaries in the Historians' Debate must be understood.¹³ Their efforts to trivialize and thus finally have quit with past German sins represent much more than a dubious act of historical reinterpretation: they constitute an insidious rewriting of history by virtue of which "the murdered are to be cheated even out of the one thing that our powerlessness can grant them: remembrance."¹⁴

It is also important to recognize, however, that the "revisionist" standpoint did not materialize overnight and by chance. Rather, it complemented a carefully orchestrated campaign on the part of the ruling Christian Democratic coalition to remove once and for all the stigma of the Nazi era perceived as a troublesome blot on the honor of the nation and to return Germany to the status of a "normal nation."

The centerpiece of this process of "normalization" was to have been the visit of the American President to the German military cemetery at Bitburg on May 8, 1985, the fortieth anniversary of the end of both the Second World War and the Nazi dictatorship. Kohl, who had been shunned at the Allies' commemoration of the landings at Normandy the previous year, had obtained a small degree of consolation in a ceremony with President Mitterand at Verdun, which thus became a sort of "dress rehearsal" for Bitburg.

However, it was the Second, not the First World War that weighed heavily on the German conscience; and Bitburg was to have symbolized the end of Germany's pariah status and return to the fold of political normalcy, a *coup de théâtre* that was to receive international sanction by virtue of the presence of the "leader of the Free World." As is well known, however, the affair backfired spectacularly once it was discovered that

forty-seven SS members were also buried in the cemetery at Bitburg. 15 What was intended as a display of German "normalcy" was thereby transformed into a prime example of that country's inclination toward grievous lapses of historical memory. 16

Unflustered by the Bitburg debacle, the Christian Democratic leadership continued to make "normalization" one of the focal points of the federal election campaign of 1987. Such was the intention of Christian Democratic parliamentary president Alfred Dregger, as he argued vehemently in April 1986 against distinguishing between the "victims" and the "perpetrators" of Nazism in a debate before the Bundestag over a new war memorial. In a similar vein, Franz-Josef Strauss, head of the Christian Socialist Union (the Bavarian allies of the Christian Democrats), repeatedly urged in his campaign addresses that Germany must "emerge from the ruins of the Third Reich and become a normal nation again."

It would not be unfair to say that the major claims of Habermas's antagonists in the Historians' Debate have been perceived by most Western historians as neonationalist provocations.¹⁷ A good example of such "provocation" is the rationale for historical study provided by Michael Stürmer, one of the leading members of the revisionist contingent. Stürmer believes that it falls to historians to provide compensations for the potentially confusing array of value-choices that have arisen with the decline of religion and the rise of modern secularism.¹⁸ According to Stürmer, what is needed is a "higher source of meaning, which, after [the decline of] religion, only the nation and patriotism were able to provide." For Stürmer, it is the task of the historian to assist in the renewal of national self-confidence by providing *positive* images of the past. In his eyes, the historical profession is motivated by the "establishment of inner worldly meaning."¹⁹ For "in a land without history, whoever fills memory, coins the concepts, and interprets the past, wins the future."²⁰

In a similar vein, Andreas Hillgruber, in his book, *Two Sorts of Destruction: The Smashing of the German Reich and the End of European Jewry*, suggests that, in scrutinizing Germany's collapse in the East toward the end of World War II, a historian

is faced with the choice of "identifying" with one of three parties: Hitler, the victorious Red Army, or the German army trying to defend the civil population from being overrun by Soviet troops. 21 And in his eyes, the choice is self-evident: the brave German soldiers, desperately fighting to save the fatherland from the atrocities of the Red Army, win hands down. It is as if Hillgruber were attempting to apply literally the "positive" approach to historical study recommended by his colleague Stürmer.

But as Habermas points out in "Apologetic Tendencies," Hillgruber in effect presents us with a series of false choices. Why is it the obligation of the responsible historian to "identify" with *any* of the historical protagonists? In fact, is it not his or her responsibility (in this case, some forty years after the events in question have occurred) to arrive at an independent and morally just verdict regarding the past, rather than to "play favorites"? Moreover, Hillgruber can succeed in his choice of "protagonists" only by abstracting from some extremely gruesome facts: It was the same "heroic" German army in the East that established the Jewish ghettos from which concentration camp victims were chosen, that provided logistical support to the SS *Einsatzgruppen* charged with exterminating the Jews, that was responsible for the shooting of thousands of Jews in Serbia and Poland, and in whose hands some two million Soviet prisoners of war perished during the course of the war, either from famine or starvation.²² It was this army that, as an integral part of Hitler's plans for European domination, served as the guarantor of all Nazi atrocities in Eastern Europe from mass exterminations to the sadistic enslavement of the populations of the occupied territories. The sad irony of Hillgruber's thesis is that it was the brutal war of aggression in the East launched by the German army (a war that resulted in the death of some twenty million Soviet soldiers and civilians) that was responsible for unleashing the "revenge" of the Red Army on German soil.

But in addition to the important "material" questions that have arisen in the debate concerning the manner in which crucial episodes of the German past should be interpreted, equally important issues concerning the integrity and function of scholarship in a democratic society have emerged. Should

the primary role of historical study in a democracy be to facilitate "social integration" through the "establishment of inner-worldly meaning," as Stürmer claims an approach that results in the creation of images of the past with which people can identify in a positive way, such as Hillgruber's nostalgic portrait of the German army in the East at the end of the war? Or should scholarship assume a more skeptical and critical attitude vis-à-vis the commonplaces of a national past for which Auschwitz has become the unavoidable metaphor, thereby assisting concretely in the process of "coming to terms with the past"? Compelling support for the historical importance of a "critical" approach to scholarship has been provided by the historian Detlev Peukert, who in a recent essay has argued that what was historically new about the National Socialist practice of genocide was the fact that it received a theoretical grounding through a determinate conception of "positive" science, namely, the idea of basing science on racial categories. 23 Habermas's specific fear is that by subordinating scientific criteria to an identity-securing function, historical study risks falling behind conventional standards of liberal scholarship, resulting in the production of neonationalist "court histories." Indeed, the very idea championed by Hillgruber that a historian must in some way "identify" with one or several of the protagonists of his or her drama represents a throwback to the "empathic" historiography of German historicism a school formed in the German mandarin tradition for which the writing of history from a "national" point of view was a common phenomenon.²⁴

The most sensational of the theses espoused by Habermas's opponents in the debate were undoubtedly those set forth by the Berlin historian and former Heidegger student Ernst Nolte. In an article that appeared in English,²⁵ Nolte had revived a choice bit of anti-Semitic propaganda from the early days of the war: that an alleged declaration by Chaim Weizmann (then president of the Jewish Agency) of September 1939, urging Jews to support the cause of democracy in the impending world war, 'justified' Hitler's treating them as prisoners of war, as well as subsequent deportations.

But it was Nolte's contention, in a June 6, 1986, article in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, that the atrocities perpe-

trated by Hitler at Auschwitz were merely an understandable (if exaggerated) "response" to a "more original Asiatic deed" (Stalin's Gulag), of which Hitler considered himself a potential victim, that proved the most offensive and ominous of the revisionist claims. Nolte's argument reads as follows:

A conspicuous shortcoming of the literature on National Socialism is that it doesn't know, or doesn't want to admit, to what extent everything that was later done by the Nazis, with the sole exception of the technical procedure of gassing, had already been described in an extensive literature dating from the early 1920s. . . . Could it be that the Nazis, that Hitler carried out an "Asiatic" deed only because they regarded themselves and those like them as potential or actual victims of an "Asiatic" deed? Was not the Gulag Archipelago more original than Auschwitz? Was not the "class murder" of the Bolsheviks the logical and factual *prius* of the "race murder" of the National Socialists?

And to sum up: the singularity of the Nazi crimes "does not alter the fact that the so-called [*sic*] annihilation of the Jews during the Third Reich was a reaction or a distorted copy and not a first act or an original." 26 Nolte goes on to enumerate an entire series of twentieth-century crimes, in comparison to which the uniqueness of the Holocaust is reduced to "the technical procedure of gassing."

As Habermas is quick to point out, there is a method behind Nolte's madness. With the stroke of a pen, the singularity of the Nazi atrocities is denied: they are reduced to the status of a "copycat" crime; and at that, merely one among many. The gist of Nolte's feeble and transparent efforts to rewrite the saga of Auschwitz may be read as follows: Why continue to blame the Germans? The communists did it first anyway. And after all, during the war we were fighting on the right side at least in the East.

In face of such claims, Habermas's response was guided by an awareness that it is Germany's willingness to deal forthrightly with the dark side of its national past that will determine the moral fiber of the nation in the future; and that only the "analytical powers of remembrance" can in truth break the nightmarish grip of the past over Germany's present:

The less internal communality a collective context of life has preserved, the more it has maintained itself externally, through the usurpation and destruction of life that is alien to it, the greater is the burden of reconciliation imposed on the griefwork and the critical self-examination of subsequent generations. And does not this very thesis forbid us to use leveling comparisons to play down the fact that no one can take our place in the liability required of us? . . . There is an obligation incumbent upon us in Germany . . . to keep alive . . . the memory of the sufferings of those who were murdered by German hands. It is especially these dead who have a claim to the weak anamnestic power of a solidarity that later generations can continue to practice only in the medium of a remembrance that is repeatedly renewed, often desperate, yet continually on one's mind. If we were to brush aside this Benjaminian legacy, our fellow Jewish citizens and the sons, daughters, and grandchildren of all those who were murdered would feel themselves unable to breathe in our country ("On the Public Use of History").

One of the key theoretical arguments Habermas mobilizes in his refutation of the revisionist position is the distinction between conventional and postconventional identities.²⁷ Within the framework of developmental psychology, the formation of a postconventional identity indicates that an individual has acquired a capacity to evaluate his or her moral convictions in terms of general ethical maxims; that beliefs concerning right and wrong are no longer decided by immediate and particularistic points of reference (e.g., the standpoint of one's peer group or nation), but instead by appeal to universal principles. Habermas thus views the revisionists' desire for a return to a conventional national identity as a potential regression behind the precarious gains the Federal Republic has made as a democratic nation since its inception forty years ago.

The "conventionalist" perspective comes through most forcefully in the positions of Hillgruber and Stürmer, whose arguments betray no small measure of nostalgia for a highly mythologized image of the old German Reich: Germany as master of *Mitteleuropa*, capable of mediating the interests of the nations to the west and east.²⁸ Their contributions to the debate are reminiscent of the traditional nineteenth-century argument for a German *Sonderbewusstsein*, suggesting a "special" historical course of development for Germany between east and west. The same nostalgia is also implicit in Nolte's desire to minimize

the historical significance of Auschwitz, thus paving the way for Germany's return to the status of a "normal nation." But the bankruptcy of the *Sonderbewusstsein* argument was definitively proved at Stalingrad and Auschwitz, that is, by the infamy these two places have come to symbolize for the course of German history. In defiance of this historical lesson, one of the main strategies of Nolte and the others has been to downplay the importance of the years 1933-1945 in relation to the trajectory of German history as a whole. But as the opening citation from Thomas Mann reminds us, the wistful desire to differentiate in cut-and-dried fashion between "good" and "bad" Germany is based on a dichotomy that fails to hold up under closer historical scrutiny.

It is for this reason that Habermas emphatically insists in "Apologetic Tendencies" that the unqualified opening of the Federal Republic to the political culture of the West "is the great intellectual accomplishment of the postwar period," and that the attempts to revive neonationalist dogmas whose disastrous outcome is a painful matter of historical record must be combatted by the "only patriotism that does not alienate us from the West," namely, "a constitutional patriotism." 29 For Habermas, the latter would be a "postconventional patriotism." Indeed, the Western constitutional state may be viewed as a postconventional form of political consciousness, insofar as the inherent distinction between "law" and "right" (which corresponds to a broader distinction between "reality" and "norm") mandates that all concrete legislation be evaluated in light of universal normative precepts embodied in the constitution itself.

Habermas associates the revisionist offensive in the Historians' Debate with a neoconservative backlash against the student and antinuclear movements that seemed to peak in the mid-1980s. Of course, neoconservatism has been a phenomenon common to virtually all Western democracies over the course of the last ten years. But, as Habermas explains in "Neoconservative Cultural Criticism in the United States and West Germany," the peculiarities of the German version are especially worthy of note, insofar as its roots are to be found in protofascist ideologies that date from the prewar era.

In a 1984 interview, Habermas recounts his shock as a university student in the immediate postwar years upon learning of the continuities between the leading intellectuals of the preand postwar eras, many of whom had been enthusiastic supporters of National Socialism. 30 And although a new generation of thinkers has since come to prominence in the Federal Republic, antidemocratic intellectual habits have been slow to die. In most cases, although the transition to democracy has been grudgingly accepted (which could not have been said for the advocates of a German *Sonderweg* during the days of the Weimar Republic), the dissonances of modernity are perceived as placing such great burdens on the adaptational capacities of social actors that the preservation of "order" (as opposed to "freedom") has become the foremost value in contemporary political life. (One of the concrete and highly controversial political expressions of this mania for order was the *Berufsverbot* or "professional proscription" first decreed in 1972, which aimed at excluding political extremists, sympathizers, and other undesirables from the German civil service.³¹) Hence, those who are perceived as the intellectual and cultural standard bearers of modernity (e.g., artists and critical intellectuals) receive more than their fair share of blame for failures of social integration. But in this way, as Habermas shows, the neoconservatives confuse cause and effect: Responsibility for disturbances of social integration that have their source in functional imperatives of the economic and political-administrative spheres is mistakenly attributed to avant-garde artists and a "new class" of free thinkers.

It is considerations of precisely this nature that dominate the historiographical concerns of Stürmer and Hillgruber, in whose eyes history must take on the affirmative function of reinforcing national consensus. Or, as Habermas remarks in his essay on "Neoconservative Cultural Criticism," "The neoconservatives see their role as, on the one hand, in mobilizing pasts which can be accepted approvingly and, on the other, morally neutralizing other pasts that would provoke only criticism and rejection." The currency of *Ordnungsdenken* "philosophy of order" in West Germany today (evident above all in a preoccupation with questions of "internal security") is at