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The Sovereignty of the Individual in Ernst Jünger's The Worker

David Pan

Individualism and nationalism are often held to be competing or even mutually exclusive concepts. Hannah Arendt, for instance, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, argues that a focus on the rights of the individual could have provided an antidote to the kind of racist nationalism established by the Nazis.¹ According to this logic, the more firmly individual rights are defended, the less dangerously nationalist the resulting society will be, because individuals' goals and desires will not be subordinated to those of a larger group. Studies of the work of Ernst Jünger have confirmed this assessment of the importance of the individual as a defense against nationalist forms of repression. Critics who have alleged the complicity of his work with the rise of National Socialism typically point to the ways in which his work eradicates the individual.² Yet, the status of the individual subject, both in Jünger's work and within the cultural history leading up to National Socialism, may not be so clear-cut. The critique of the subject, leading to a recognition of the limitations of the individual, is a broader phenomenon that is arguably the fundamental unifying basis of European modernism and not just an element of right-wing movements. At the same time, the defense of the individual may actually be compatible with Jünger's nationalism, indicating that individualism and nationalism might in fact be linked projects within a larger process of identity construction.

1. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1966), p. 235.

2. Klaus Gauger, "Zur Modernedeutung in Ernst Jüngers *Der Arbeiter*," *Sprachkunst* 25, no. 2 (1998): 277, 282; Anton Kaes, "The Cold Gaze: Notes on Mobilization and Modernity," *New German Critique* 59 (1993): 111.

The link between individualism and nationalism is a key issue in Jünger's 1932 *The Worker*, an extended essay that attempts to establish a new form of subjectivity that is suited to a total mobilization for a national project. Jünger uses the "worker type" as a model for subjectivity that has replaced the bourgeois concept of the individual, indicating for Marcus Bullock that in this text "individual sovereignty has no place."³ Yet, Jünger's worker type, though it is explicitly distinguished from the bourgeois individual, in fact takes up the structure of subjectivity developed in the bourgeois individual and extends it. The worker type does not result from a simple setting of constraints on the individual but from a focus on the individual as the sole source of sovereign authority. Paradoxically, this exclusive valorization of the individual brings with it an intensification of a nationalist project as the apotheosis of individual sovereignty.

Jünger's construction of a new form of subjectivity in the worker type fits within a larger modernist response to the disenchantment of the world in modernity. Jünger justifies his critique of the bourgeois concept of the individual by describing a broad process of modernization in which the individual's character and qualities are no longer so important in their particularity: "The abandonment that has become the tragic fate of the individual is paradigmatic for the abandonment of the human in a new, unexplored world, whose iron law is felt to be meaningless."⁴ Here, Jünger shares a more general modernist sense of the disjunction between nineteenth-century forms of individuation and the social and technological forces of the twentieth century, which are perceived as impersonal, meaningless, and impervious to individual engagement. He attempts to provide an objective description of a historical change, and, in fact, his description is similar to other accounts of the period, for example, by Walter Benjamin, who argues that modernization has changed the parameters for the development of "the tiny, fragile human body."⁵ Andreas Huyssen argues that Jünger's writing is to be differentiated from Benjamin's because Jünger attempts either to forget the body "or rather to equip it with an impenetrable armor protecting it against the memory of the traumatic experience

3. Marcus Paul Bullock, *The Violent Eye: Ernst Jünger's Visions and Revisions on the European Right* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State UP, 1992), p. 141.

4. Ernst Jünger, *Der Arbeiter: Herrschaft und Gestalt* (Hamburg: Hanseatische Verlagsanstalt, 1932), p. 105. Subsequent references will be documented parenthetically within the text.

5. Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), p. 84.

of the trenches.⁷⁶ Yet, Jünger's war writings, far from forgetting or armor-ing the body, directly confront its fragility in order to overcome it through an act of courage that establishes "the devotion of the individual person with the force of an iron commitment, the positing of the idea against the material, without regard for what might happen."⁷⁷ Jünger does not define courage here as a protection of the body from harm, but as an acceptance of this possibility, leading to a sovereignty of the individual will over this possible threat to the body.

Jünger's focus on individual sovereignty, though it does not forget the body, does indeed establish what Huyssen calls "an aristocratic, stoical self,"⁷⁸ except that this self follows the model of the worker rather than the aristocrat. Jünger's conception of the worker type does not completely break with an individualist ethic but rather refers back to a view of the individual established by Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, in which "it is only through staking one's life that freedom is won."⁷⁹ Just as for Hegel's dialectic of lordship and bondage the attainment of freedom has two steps—the first in which consciousness experiences "the fear of death," and the second in which "consciousness, *qua* worker, comes to see in the independent being [of the object] its *own* independence"⁸⁰—for Jünger the facing of death is accompanied by work as the key to individual freedom. Work is not merely the task of a social class of workers, as opposed to owners or aristocrats, but is the primary existential way in which humans relate to both the natural and the social world: "Every claim to freedom within the working world is therefore only possible to the extent that it appears as a claim to work. This means that the measure of an individual's freedom corresponds precisely to the extent to which this individual is a worker" (65). The link between freedom and work places the development of individual capabilities at the center of Jünger's conception of the subject.

Although Jünger thereby extends a Hegelian approach to the subject and consequently continues, in aesthetic form, a modernizing, Hegelian

6. Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 134.

7. Ernst Jünger, "Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis" (1922), in *Sämtliche Werke* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1980), 7:49.

8. Huyssen, *Twilight Memories*, p. 143.

9. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977), p. 114.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 117–18.

project to synthesize world history into a unity and totality,¹¹ it would be false to conclude with Peter Koslowski that Jünger establishes a “myth of modernity” that gathers philosophical and aesthetic forms into a unifying *epos* of modernity.¹² If Jünger does indeed try to establish a totality, he also criticizes a Hegelian totality for claiming a universal status when it is in point of fact a particular totality. The main focus of Jünger’s political argument is after all to demonstrate that the idea of a universal reason grounded in bourgeois values and defended by France and England in World War I is in fact a particular culture that is masquerading as a universal one in order to demonize its enemies. Jünger’s response to the idea of a universal, rational culture is to insist that the call to reason is a sham intended to “ban the opponent from the realm of society and thus from the realm of humanity and the law” (18). Rather than establishing a unitary movement grounded in a hyper-modern project,¹³ Jünger’s construction of subjectivity, though extending the Hegelian notion of a development of the individual consciousness through work, also opposes the unity of the modern project in order to insist on the particular national character of a totality.

This focus on a particular whole outside the individual then leads him to describe a new type of subjectivity, arising out of a “will to race development,” and which results in the “production of a certain *type*” (102). With the model of the type, Jünger both embraces the modern transformation of subjective experience and makes a prescriptive judgment about the type of subject he wishes to see. The difference between the bourgeois individual and Jünger’s type is that the former enters into voluntary associations and the latter is bound to certain groups and “suited to tasks within an order” (102). The new phenomenon that Jünger describes is the extent to which a person’s role in society in the twentieth century has defining consequences for that person’s identity and social bonds. He sets this modern situation, first, against older feudal forms in which birth and tradition are defining for identity and, second, against bourgeois forms in which there is a presumed universality of condition combined with an emphasis on individual decision and freedom that create the possibility of particularity for individuals but not for groups.

11. Peter Koslowski, *Der Mythos der Moderne: Die dichterische Philosophie Ernst Jüngers* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1991), pp. 29–31.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 29–31.

Because Jünger's worker is defined through the group and not as an individual, the worker's social associations are not voluntary ones. Rather, using organic, naturalistic language, Jünger describes the worker as belonging to a group that is an "organic construction" to which individuals are bound due to a "factual linkage [*tatsächliche Verflechtung*]" (114). Yet, unlike the feudal aristocrat, the worker is not born into a position but develops into it based on individual capabilities and role in society. One of his examples of a type is the air force pilot, who does not enter into his role through his military-aristocratic upbringing but through the rare gift of being able to successfully fly a plane and engage in air combat (108). This aspect of individual affinity and achievement in determining the worker type maintains an important link between Jünger's worker and the bourgeois individual in the extent to which both are meant to develop their own individual capacities as far as possible. The key difference that Jünger identifies is that the bourgeois individual strives for a general cultivation that is meant to develop individuality of expression within a universal humanity, whereas the worker strives for a specialized education that makes him suitable for a particular function in society that must mobilize for modern warfare (109). Different groups distinguish themselves as a consequence of specialization, and Jünger locates particularity in the group rather than in the individual.

His particular construction of the relation of the subject to the national totality links the sovereignty of the individual to a larger whole in the form of the *Gestalt*. This idea allows Jünger to focus on the individual struggle for life and death as the key experience that in itself demonstrates the sovereignty of the individual yet also links the individual to a totality through the relationship to a world of elemental and violent forces. He praises "a sort of human who can blow himself up with pleasure and can even see in this act a confirmation of order," because the individual confronts in violence an intensity of experience that justifies the individual will as part of a greater pattern that is not fundamentally differentiated from the individual but is rather the overarching structure within which individual life exists (34). Although the individual is being mobilized as part of a national project, there is paradoxically no other authority outside the individual to which the individual is to be subordinated. Instead, the individual accepts the possibility of death as part of the individual's preservation within a *Gestalt* that is the essence of that individual's existence. "Of the highest importance however is the fact that the *Gestalt* is not subordinate to the

elements of fire and earth and that consequently the human belongs to the form of eternity. In his Gestalt, completely separate from any simply moral judgment, any redemption, and any 'striving effort,' lies his inherent, unchanging, and immortal achievement, his highest existence, and his deepest confirmation" (34). The Gestalt is not just an aesthetic quality, an image, or a tool for understanding the character of a culture. Rather, it justifies individual existence in an unchanging and permanent way.

Because Jünger's Gestalt consists of the structure of the individual's existence, the individual looks to no higher authority than his own self in order to set up a relationship to the "eternal." At the same time, the Gestalt still establishes the framework within which the preservation of the individual is also the functionalization of the individual within a total mobilization of a nation for war. Jünger sees the experience of war and violence as constitutive for human subjectivity because in this experience the subject affirms its own disdain for its material existence. This sacrifice of the individual serves to affirm the primacy of the individual's Gestalt as the nation. While the individual should "see his highest freedom in destruction," Jünger also interprets war as "a space in which to die, that is, to live in such a way that the Gestalt of the empire might be confirmed—this empire that is left to us, even when they take away our body" (38). The nation becomes the Gestalt through which the individual attains meaning in a sacrifice that ultimately still preserves the individual in the affirmation of the nation.

The merging of the individual with the nation occurs by means of Jünger's depiction of individual experience as a direct and unmediated encounter with intense moments. The subject finds its measure in its own self and its own intensity of experience. There is no other authority than subjective experience for the affirmation of the individual, and there is no cultural mediation of this intensity. Indeed, this intensity of experience becomes for Jünger the source and basis of culture because the individual (*der Einzelne*) "takes his own self to be his measure. Herein lies the pride and the mourning of his life. All the great moments of life, the glowing dreams of youth, the intoxication of love, the fire of battle, fall together with a deeper consciousness of the Gestalt and the *memory* of the magical return of the Gestalt that moves the heart and convinces it of the immortality of these moments" (35). Intense subjective experiences of the individual subject and the return of these experiences in the memory guarantee the permanence of these experiences as an ultimate reality preserved in the

Gestalt. The Gestalt does not subordinate the individual but only the body, allowing the individual to have his measure within himself by way of his most intense experiences, without the need for any cultural mediation of these experiences.

As a consequence, Jünger's understanding of experience leaves out language and concentrates on the elemental and the dangerous as those characteristics that lend intensity and permanence to individual experience.¹⁴ But without any linguistic or cultural marking, these experiences remain completely undifferentiable. The only characteristic is a proximity to the pure and featureless elemental force of violence, and the fundamental source of intensity is the approach of death:

It is only in this moment that he declares a life-and-death struggle. It is then that the individual, who is in the end nothing more than an employee, becomes a warrior, the mass becomes an army, and the establishment of a new order of command takes the place of the revision of a social contract. This pushes the worker out of the sphere of negotiations, pity, and literature and raises him into the sphere of action, it transforms his juridical ties into military ones, which is to say that, instead of lawyers, he will have leaders, and his existence will become the measure, instead of being in need of interpretation. . . . For what have programs been up to now besides commentaries to an original text that has not yet been written? (25–26)

By focusing on the life-and-death struggle, Jünger seeks to shift the emphasis from the word to the deed. In so doing, he feels that he is shifting from the abstraction of negotiations, pity, and literature to the hard and certain world of orders, war, and soldiers.¹⁵ Because Jünger rejects the primacy of the word and focuses on pure intensity of experience in the encounter with death, he does not understand the Gestalt as a cultural structure but as a part of an elemental reality. This means that the intense aesthetic experience of the world that he imagines does not set up a cultural relationship to violence. Rather, the reaction to an overwhelming of the human by an intensity of violence is the positing of the sovereignty of

14. Russell Berman describes this suppression of language as a turn to visuality, in "Written Right Across Their Faces: Ernst Jünger's Fascist Modernism," in *Modernity and the Text: Revisions of German Modernism*, ed. Andreas Huyssen and David Bathrick (New York: Columbia UP, 1989), pp. 71–74.

15. For a detailed description of Jünger's focus on "perceptual acuity," see Helmut Lethen, *Cool Conduct: The Culture of Distance in Weimar Germany* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2002), pp. 147–48.

the individual will against this violence. This violence in action becomes then the “original text” in terms of which all language is reduced to the status of commentary.

As a result of his opposition to language as the structuring element for the individual, Jünger ends up opposing a traditionalist project that would subordinate the individual to ideological and collective structures that are defined within a specific cultural tradition. A key characteristic of Jünger’s worker type is that it allows for a smoother integration into a national project than the bourgeois individual. But this ease of integration of the individual is not a result of a flat subordination of the individual but of a thoroughgoing insistence on the primacy and sovereignty of the individual, to the exclusion of all symbolic limitations on this individual. Jünger criticizes the bourgeois subject for being caught up in a false world of cultural refinement and literature and sets up the worker as a figure who directly confronts an underlying reality of violence. Yet, the structure of the worker’s subjectivity is still based on his status as an individual without context, facing an ultimate reality of violence. The key move in Jünger is consequently not a rejection of individuality but a rejection of the last vestiges of a traditional cultural determination of the subject that is still maintained in the bourgeois idea of the individual. By peeling off this last layer of tradition, Jünger is not arguing for an abandonment of the individual but for a more thorough and consistent focus on the individual than in the bourgeois subject.

This is because the ideal of freedom and self-determination in the bourgeois subject was in fact never carried out consistently. Instead, the bourgeois subject was always hemmed in and constrained by a complex set of rules and conventions that governed the subject’s actions and thoughts in a way that made nineteenth-century bourgeois society highly conventionalized and thus not at all universal. This conventionality of bourgeois society becomes the object of critique for Jünger because he sees the bourgeois as alienated from an underlying reality of violence and elemental forces. Because Jünger expresses this opposition to bourgeois culture by criticizing the word and ideology in favor of action and a direct facing of horror and violence, Karl Heinz Bohrer reads Jünger’s work as “one of the last attempts to break with the concept of reason through the pure intuition of beauty.”¹⁶ But the opposition to reason is in fact an opposition to a specific nineteenth-century bourgeois culture that sets itself up to be

16. Karl Heinz Bohrer, *Die Ästhetik des Schreckens: Die pessimistische Romantik und Ernst Jüngers Frühwerk* (Munich: Karl Hanser Verlag, 1978), p. 19.

a universal one. As such, the critique of reason is actually a critique of a specific culture's claim to universal value. The difficulty with Jünger's critique is that it does not stop at insisting on the specificity of bourgeois culture. Instead, Jünger uncovers this specificity in order to then reject all specificity based on language and ideology, while only affirming a Gestalt that is taken to be eternal and thus unattached to a cultural tradition.

In contrast to Jünger's turn to a pure beauty based in the unmediated sensation and detached from the word (which includes reason but also the link to a specific cultural tradition), the conventionality of bourgeois society might have been its most endearing aspect from the point of view of a perspective that seeks to limit the excesses of a hyper-modern subject unconstrained by any outside rules. The conventionality and artificiality made it into a particular society with its own unique rituals. Problems arose when this society mistook its own conventions for universal ones that could and should be applied to all of humanity. Jünger's critique points to this universal claim and debunks it, without, however, recognizing the cultural and moral advantages of maintaining the conventions precisely as particular and contingent ones.

Without a sense of the importance of specific traditions and values, Jünger's individual must establish itself based on the purity of violence as a universal experience outside of any reflection on the goals of war and sacrifice. Consequently, there is ultimately no subordination of the individual to a collective that would establish limitations on the individual and its pursuit of its own sovereignty. Instead, the affirmation of individual development that Jünger emphasizes can be integrated with the nation to the extent that this nation consists of linguistically and ethnically similar individuals, all pursuing similar individual developments within a private experience of sovereignty over death. In this merging of individual and nation, the individual's most violent whims can be affirmed and merged with those of a group of like-minded individuals linked together not on the basis of shared values, but of shared affinities. The only value affirmed in this progress of the nation is the right of its members to continue to develop according to their own private desires, regardless of the violence this development might engender. Within this context, the death of the individual within a nationalist project does not represent a subordination of the individual but its apotheosis.