

Hitler's *Kampf* and Our *Frage*

Irving Louis Horowitz

Irving Louis Horowitz is chairman of the board and editorial director of Transaction Publishers. He is Hannah Arendt Professor Emeritus of Sociology and Political Science at Rutgers University.

A book fair of such massive proportions as the Frankfurt Buchmesse is more than a business exchange at which publishers meet to buy and sell rights or seek new market outlets for their products. It is an episodic, annual event, which links the practice of publishing with the ideas and dominant ideologies of the publishing community. For example, in 1998 the Frankfurt Peace Prize went to Martin Walser, who in his acceptance speech claimed that references to the Auschwitz death camp were being used to pummel Germans with guilt about the past. The hue and cry was such that this year, the prize went to Columbia University historian Fritz Stern, who took the quite opposite view, namely, that "Germans are rightly admonished not to forget." He continued by claiming that such voices

. . . do not place guilt at the door of today's generation. They demand responsibility, reinforced by a knowledge of the mistakes and crimes of the past.

To be sure, similar concerns arose this year, namely how to recognize the impact of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* without celebrating totalitarianism.

The close of a century is an appropriate time for reflection and remembrance. That the editors of *LOGOS* would choose the occasion to recollect one hundred books that shaped our century is a worthy exercise in the core values of our age, and challenges the rest of us to do likewise. This type of list, exposing the attendees of the Frankfurt Fair to the nature of their special industry has a parallel importance: it offers a normative framework for assessing quality. Such a list moves us beyond the fashionable relativism in which every book or author is as good or bad as every other book or author. And few people are as entitled to provide such literary guidelines as Gordon Graham of the United Kingdom and Richard Abel of the United States. Their shared lifelong dedication to international publishing is properly legendary.

This communiqué must therefore be seen in a context of overall respect and admiration for the *LOGOS* project. Quite apart from larger considerations raised by friends and supporters of *LOGOS* about the list compiled by its editors of the one hundred books that shaped the twentieth century is the thorny problem of an entry for 1926: *Mein Kampf* by Adolf Hitler. That was clearly a book that shaped our epoch and continues to cause concern and consternation. The advance correspondence generated by the *LOGOS* list as a whole, i.e., whether it is actually bifurcated between great literature and major figures who wrote books,

who rationalized major events, or whether the list is Anglo-American or myopic with respect to French, Italian, or Nigerian writers, pales in comparison to this uniquely and disquieting entry. Indeed, the question of Hitler raises the Humean concern writ small: are we dealing with a book that shaped the century or a movement within the century that shaped a book?

The choice of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, like Lenin's *What Is to Be Done* for 1902, is untenable on strictly literary grounds. Nor do I think the editors of *LOGOS* aim to challenge such a judgment. It might be claimed that the twentieth century is the political and ideological century par excellence. But that is a separate claim from say a book like D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* that did help shape new sexual mores between men and women. The Hitler tract offered a Nazi blueprint for a genocide. It can be viewed as predictive and prophetic, but it is difficult to view it as anything more than Hitler's self-pitying, self-serving effort to mobilize his forces to commence a crusade against free choice in culture, religion, and association, and also freedom of occupation and mobility.

Just how thorny an issue this is becomes apparent when one examines the circumstances of the entry for *Mein Kampf*: Unlike every other title, there is no example of the book displayed, because this book is banned in Germany. The statement next to the blank space cannot be accused of being indifferent to the horrors of National Socialism. And Gordon Graham makes no effort to disguise or certainly not to deny Hitler's

. . . utter disdain for freedom and civil morality, virulent anti-Semitism,
a naked lust for power and a plan for world domination.

The problem is the unintentional parallel with the ban on Lawrence earlier in the century. The stark reality of a blank space instead of the copy of the book itself at the Frankfurt Fair [of 1999] perhaps unintentionally reminds one of the dangers of literary bans. The imputation of repression is suggestive. But is it accurate?

My own belief is that limits exist to a free press, however far back we push those limits. We take for granted that secrets of making nuclear weapons are not necessarily for public consumption, or that virtual anti-Black racism is not something that merits elevation to a major book meriting attention even if racism has shaped our experience of the century. We would be well advised to view civil liberties as a relative concept no less than civil obligations. To do otherwise is to sanction an extreme relativism that allows everything to be shown, displayed, and read. The idea of limits is built into the nature of successful democratic societies. To deny obligations is to trivialize the very freedoms *LOGOS* and its editor clearly aim to celebrate.

My own view, developed fifteen years ago in relation to Nazi marches through a Jewish suburb of Chicago (*American Bar Foundation Research Journal*), is that the limit of civil rights is the threat it poses to the human rights of others. The need for democratic expression must be weighed against the capacity for anti-democratic mayhem and murder. Clearly, while the display of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* at an exhibition honoring the one hundred most significant books that shaped the

century scarcely falls into the same category of menace, the legislative design of the German ban is not created for a special and singular event. Rather, this particular strain of book banning is a symbolic recognition of the great damage done to millions of innocents as a result of a régime which implemented the final solution only hinted at in this book that shaped the century.

Civil liberties, more specifically the freedom to read, is after all an ideal to be sought and fought for; it is not a divine right given at birth. But by the same token, civil society itself falls into the same category. When incivilities that result in the loss of massive human rights are at stake, then one must perhaps face the limits of the good of free expression within the higher limits of the goods provided by a free society.

In a nutshell: the Frankfurt Buchmesse does not take place in hothouse isolation from German society and Nazi history; the ban on *Mein Kampf* might one day be lifted because the text itself will be an idle curiosity of the century and little else. But while the legacy of Hitlerism is known first-hand and felt intimately by living beings who survive this ghostwritten testimonial of death, it behooves us to tread with caution in favor of absolutisms of any sort—including the presumptive right of freedom to read with little regard to context or content. We are all creatures of specific spaces and times, and not simply extrapolated Olympians offering opinions on the “greats” of our times. Museums and statuary littered through the world offer testimony to move cautiously in attempts to define who or what is important. Ω