The rise of mass culture, beginning at the end of the nineteenth century, embodied the crisis of the liberal project of modernity. At the time, the idea that the «mass age» was on the horizon became prominent across Europe. Ever since, contemporaries have commented on the character and effects of cultural forms shaped by and related to the «masses». Intellectual networks and emerging scientific communities contributed to the moulding of mass semantics that were shared throughout Europe.1 These debates transgressed national boundaries and can be understood as expressions of a European process of self-reassurance. Although interest in European entanglements has grown in recent years,2 there is a notable lack of studies systematically reflecting on the similarities and differences of perceptions of masses and mass culture.

To help fill up this gap, this thematic issue presents individual case studies on four societies with the aim of providing a basis for further comparative perspectives. All contributions include depictions of national semantics and / or expert definitions of what mass culture was considered to be, yet they go beyond intellectual


history and scrutinise the diverse social backgrounds and the concrete political consequences of mass discourses in Europe. While the articles deal with different cultural phenomena, together they picture the three main representations of mass culture: consumption, leisure and the media. Most importantly, they suggest that it can be useful not only to compare national debates on mass cultural experiences but to conceptualise the history of European perceptions of «mass culture as modernity» as the history of a common «problem».

Earlier studies have mostly interpreted the emergence of mass culture as an effect of the modern process of democratisation, representing the entrance of the lower classes into the realm of culture in analogy to their former infiltration of the political scene through revolution and of the economic sphere through industrialisation. Contemporary reactions to this cultural democratisation were accordingly analysed as anti-modern critiques of the levelling of cultural boundaries, or as attempts to re-stabilise the traditional high-cultural hierarchy over the masses through education or censorship.² Referring to current debates in the historical sociology of modernity as well as to recent historiographical discussions, this volume takes on a slightly different perspective: It argues that mass culture mirrored not only the overwhelming impact of the social, political and cultural transformations European societies were facing since 1900 but also the intrinsic ambivalence of modernity. The case studies aim to show that mass culture represented a Janus-faced modernity, one characterised by openness in shape and direction and torn between individualism and collectivism, rationality and emotionality, quantity and quality, differentiation and integration. Modernity under the conditions of mass culture meant an increasing plurality and accessibility of culture as well as the standardisation and homogenisation of cultural forms; it could be considered manipulative and emancipating at the same time. In perceiving mass culture, contemporaries therefore did not refuse or embrace a certain form of «the modern» but actively participated in the formation of various «modernities». Many of them described the presence of mass culture as the expression of a profound crisis of and lack of meaning in society; at the same time, they experienced it as a unique opportunity for all kinds of new concepts and visions of cultural modernity. In this sense, being «modern» was an attitude to the world, a constructivist mode of relating oneself to the ambivalence embodied by mass culture.⁴


In the following, four of the main arguments holding the articles together will be presented in greater detail. Firstly, the contributions to this issue show that, instead of either withdrawing to the position of pessimistic Kulturkritik or simply marching the path of euphoric progressiveness, many of the most influential observers of mass culture opted for organisational, pragmatic or technocratic solutions which allowed them to integrate existential fears about and optimistic outlooks on modernity. Especially the period from 1900 to the 1960s can be seen as the heyday of experiments in cultural engineering in many European countries. The aspect in which they differed was the degree to which these contemporary strategies tried to «solve» the modern problem of individuality versus collectivity: As Orsi Husz can show, Swedish experts suggested rationalised consumption strategies to adapt the individual to the collective without negating it: «Quantity and quality, the mass and the individual» read their formula. Stefanie Middendorf argues that French technocrats strove for a better organised cultural modernity through a scientifically legitimised elitist dirigisme, whereas German intellectual revolutionaries aspired to freeze modern society into a static unity founded on human types instead of individual beings. Swedish and French modernisers, despite all technocratic fervour, seem to have kept open the ambiguous dynamics inherent in modern societies, while German elites, at least during the 1930s and 1940s, forcefully tried to bring them to a definite stand-still. In a similar vein, even though they included strategies of self-organisation, Stalinist conceptions of mass culture and «independent» tourism, as discussed by Christian Noack, denied modern reflexivity and declared the primacy of collective principles. Ambivalences were handled by paternalistic or coercive means (including techniques of the self) which, while aiming to integrate society, in fact could create new differences. The profile and the limits of Soviet modernity – much like those of its National Socialist counterpart – thus remain of specific complexity.

Secondly, all contributions present a long-term perspective and thereby document the evolving character of mass discourses and politics based on contemporary experiences. In this light, modernity becomes intelligible as a historical process that involved institutional, practical and categorical changes. The Italian example espe-

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cially makes clear that mass cultural modernity cannot self-evidently be understood as an all-encompassing national project. The contribution by Stefano Cavazza reveals how it was put on the agenda by representatives of competing social milieus and local cultures. The rivalry between Catholicism and Socialism/Communism and the self-legitimisation strategies of «unemployed» intellectuals contributed to the specific ways in which the problem of modernity was posed in Italy (much like in France). Fascist nationalist corporatism gelled as an answer to such diversities. In general, up until the First World War, European observers had been more preoccupied with internal changes and confrontations rather than with external influence. The challenge of «America» as the first seemingly coherent model of materialistic modernity accelerated the development of all-embracing visions of cultural modernity based on centralised co-ordination and nation states occurred only afterwards. Semantics of «organisation» and «order» began to spread in the interwar years, denoting a variety of strategies between the collectivisation and individualisation of culture. Here, a closer comparative analysis would seem promising. The fact that in the Soviet Union as well as in China the concept of «order» did not play the prominent role it was assigned in many Western discourses alludes to the limits of modern European categories of self-description. The longue durée also shows the complex chronology that linked the ideas of the collective and the individual to conceptions of rationality and emotionality born out of the struggle with the European legacy of enlightenment. While early theories of mass culture assigned irrationality to the mass experience and opted for solutions relying on reason, the 1960s and 1970s saw individualistic conceptions of an emotionalised and creative modernity arise that presented themselves as answers to massive rationalisation. Subsequently, in the last third of the twentieth century, visions of solidarity and individual responsibility within new cultural communities took over, in which the «masses» as an epistemological category seem to have lost importance.

While the case studies in this volume are all national ones, they, thirdly, try to avoid methodological nationalism by focusing on a common problem and taking into account transnational semantics, shared experiences and the circulation of ideas. Nonetheless, the European perceptions of mass culture outlined on the following pages present themselves as being firmly rooted in national contexts. Differing intellectual hegemonies and asynchronicities in mass discourses as well as divergent cultural strategies can therefore not be explained without considering specific national constellations. Still, European modernity should not be understood as a multitude of particular national models but as an interplay of specific combinations of common variables, or, to use Colin Crouch’s term, as «structured diversity».

Finally, what this issue does not try to do is to decide which European societies

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7 See the contributions by K. Gestwa and S. Stein in: Etzemüller, Ordnung, 241–277 and 279–299.

were (more) resolutely modern and which were not. Instead, it aims at a better understanding of the historicity of mass cultural modernity. However, it seems plausible to paraphrase James Faubion's statement that only those answers to the modern problematic of individuality versus collectivity should be considered part of modernity that were formulated in response to this ambivalence, or within it – and not in refusal or denial of it. In this sense, modernity remains at stake in all European societies. The fact that the most recent theories define mass culture affirmatively as an expression of a genuinely modern ambiguity and individual Möglichkeitssinn, while at the same pointing at the lack of an adequate social consciousness, indicates just another chapter in the long story this volume aspires to explore.

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