

“McKinsey Is Coming”

# A feeble warning to the German business and political establishment by playwright Rolf Hochhuth

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At the conclusion of five short acts, the flag of the European Union is burning on stage and a demonstrator shouts: “A lack of imagination and submissiveness towards our master, the US, has led us Europeans to copy their star-spangled banner. Here too in Europe, profit has now become our only god.” The curtain falls.

The premiere of Rolf Hochhuth’s new play, *McKinsey Is Coming*, had been eagerly awaited, and the theatre in Brandenburg—a small town with the same name as the depressed state surrounding Berlin—was packed to the last seat. During the event, no scandal materialised. The biggest German bank, Deutsche Bank, had long since withdrawn its threat to bring a lawsuit against Hochhuth for a supposed appeal to murder bank chairman Josef Ackermann. Director Oliver Munks had duly allowed the incriminating language, including calls for a Kalashnikov, to be spoken in a scene involving persons in an advanced state of vodka delirium.

It is, of course, to be welcomed when a well-known author (Hochhuth’s best-known work in the English-speaking world is *The Deputy*, a denunciation of Pope Pius XII’s role in the persecution of the Jews) addresses one of the most pressing social issues and denounces the horrendous degree of inequality characterising present-day society. This is a refreshing development, given that modern theatre is all too often marked by self-indulgence and mawkish sentimentality. Regrettably, however, the political content of this didactic piece of theatre remains very threadbare.

The play presents facts and figures in newspaper style, while failing to rise above the level of an editorial piece. Before the curtain goes up, an actor reads bits of news from the latest edition of the conservative *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, all the while improvising as he comments on certain news items.

Next, statistics are fired off in the course of a conversation between judge Kurt of the Constitutional Court and Hilde Zumbusch, who has just founded a political party of the unemployed. The year before last, the Deutsche Bank made a net profit of €9.4 billion—an absolute record in its 130-year history—while at the same time sacking 11,000 employees. We learn that Deutsche Bank chairman Josef Ackermann earns an

annual salary of €6.95 million and is planning more redundancies.

The play also points out that as the takeover of Chrysler was occurring, the Daimler executives raised their salaries from €2.5 million to €15.5 million—400 times the wage of an average worker.

Overall, however, the play’s dialogue lacks new ideas or at least interesting formulations, with a few exceptions, such as Hilde’s paraphrasing of Voltaire’s statement that he would rather be ruled by one lion than by 200 rats. These rare moments make the rest of the narrative appear all the thinner.

In the second act, two recently sacked female workers talk in front of their lockers. While they don’t, as Hochhuth’s stage direction would have it, emerge from the shower room undressed, they wear only underwear and proceed to change in front of the audience—more naked facts. They read to each other short news stories from—predictably—Germany’s main daily tabloid, the *Bild* newspaper, and complain about the corruption of their union convenor, who, with the legal guarantee of job security, toes the line of the boss. “The comrade of the bosses, just like his chancellor!”

One gets the impression that both playwright and director share the conviction that a dialogue between workers only appears realistic if it is as superficial and banal as possible, and spoken in a broad dialect. The same applies to the entire play. There are no characters with any depth, no human beings shown with their diverse facets and contradictions. The bosses and the managers are depicted as nothing other than brutal, selfish, cruel and arrogant. The workers, on the other hand, are purely victims, unable to defend themselves, until one of them just cannot take any more: he conspires with some others and runs amok.

The third act is taken up by a verbal ideological duel between the social-reformist variant of capitalism introduced in West Germany after 1945, “Rhine capitalism,” and so-called “predatory capitalism.” The former is represented by an aging CEO, who eventually quits his job, and the latter by the boss of a transnational tobacco corporation. Next, we see three workers who have been laid off and degraded get drunk and call for a Kalashnikov while bewailing their own lack of resolve and consistency.

Finally, the spokeswoman of the unemployed, Hilde Zumbusch, demands of the Constitutional Court that the right to work be included in the constitution. In this, she is supported by a student demonstration carrying “Attac” banners with the call for resistance. In the background, we see film material of street battles in Florence and Genoa.

Before the curtain comes down for good, an actor reads out the warning to Josef Ackermann “who never showed the least scruple, as he skilfully and murderously handled his scalpel carrying out redundancies.” The warning is read out in a deliberately sober manner, and its source is given: “Schleyer, Ponto, Herrhausen—a warning.” (Employers’ Association President Hanns-Martin Schleyer, Dresdner Bank Chairman Jürgen Ponto and Deutsche Bank Chairman Alfred Herrhausen were murdered by the terrorist group “Red Army Faction” in the 1970s and 1980s.)

The most striking feature of this play is the stark contrast between the author’s self-confident claim to stand in the tradition of the Enlightenment and his inability to come anywhere near these standards. The play quotes no less a person than Hegel: “What is known is not yet understood.” But then the author presents us only with things that we already know and exhibits no understanding.

More than half a century has passed since the authors of the West German post-war constitution, in the oft-quoted article 14, proclaimed that property must be put to a socially responsible use. Since then, hundreds of judicial amendments have proven that it is social reality that determines legal regulations, and not the other way round. Still, today, when social and political reality makes a mockery of all the old nostrums to the effect that social responsibility is bound up with the ownership of property, Hochhuth comes along proclaiming that one of the biggest social problems—the problem of unemployment—could be solved if only the right to work were included in the constitution!

Not only in its perspective, but also in its form, is the play oriented towards the past, as if nothing had changed since the days of Brecht, Piscator and agit-prop.

Maybe an important insight can be gained from precisely these weaknesses. Intellectually and artistically, Rolf Hochhuth embodies an important section of the protest generation of the 1960s. He was barely 15 years old when Nazi Germany collapsed and the political elite of this country proceeded to act as if nothing much had happened. His first play, *The Deputy—A Christian Tragedy*, denounced the collaboration of the Catholic Church with the Nazis. Directed by Erwin Piscator, it became a world success.

But at that time, it was not very difficult to create a scandal. One simply had to lift just a little corner of the rug under which the Nazi crimes had been swept in Germany. Fifteen years later, Hochhuth’s play *Jurists* was directly bound up with the resignation of Hans Filbinger as minister president of the southern West German state of Baden-Württemberg. As a judge under the Nazi regime, Filbinger had pronounced death sentences against Wehrmacht soldiers even after the German capitulation.

Shortly afterwards, Hochhuth wrote *Physicians*, which denounced the pharmaceutical industry for sacrificing human lives for the sake of profit. This play was awarded the prestigious literature prize of the city of Munich. Hochhuth has always taken

up explosive political issues, and he has invariably tried to provoke his audience. But he has never gone beyond the limits of mere protest.

Like many others of his generation, Hochhuth was influenced by ideas and conceptions that originated with the Frankfurt school of philosophers such as Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer. While they had adopted parts of the Marxist critique of society, they rejected the essence of the perspective of socialism: the transformation of society by the conscious action of a politically and culturally educated working class.

After the experience of fascism, Horkheimer and Adorno wrote in their key work, *Dialectics of Enlightenment*: “The impotence of the worker is not merely a stratagem of the rulers, but the logical fate of the industrial society.” A large part of their subsequent work was devoted to substantiating this pessimistic outlook.

These positions led to the emergence of a political orientation that was marked by social reformism at one pole and terrorism at the other. While these positions appear to contradict each other, they share in common an inability to acknowledge any social force capable of bringing about a fundamental change of society.

It was this standpoint that strongly influenced Hochhuth. Even if he realised that the deepening and irrevocable decay of capitalist society was the source of the social ills he described, and that behind individual business and political tyrants was a tyrannical system, the only way he could possibly conceive of revolution was as terrorist violence and chaos, not as a politically conscious act of the working people.

He never saw his own task as that of preparing a revolutionary transformation of society. Rather, his repeated threats of a revolution were intended to bring the ruling elite to their senses. But the mere facts and figures contained in his latest play illustrate the failure of this perspective. Hence the bad aftertaste left when the curtain comes down.

Mere protest combined with a mishmash of agit-prop theatrical technique—which, in its heyday, was always aimed at least at political education—is inadequate to deal with the contemporary world. Facts and figures cannot transform a liberal’s nightmare scenario into a viable, coherent political perspective.

Indeed, the growing social tensions that in reality beset Europe and elsewhere require a conscientious assessment of the limited political conceptions that have characterised protest movements over the past decades and that lie at the heart of this theatre piece.

From this point of view, it is possible to learn something from Hochhuth’s polemic against Ackermann and company.



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