

Sweeping cuts in German cultural facilities

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The huge cutbacks being made in the sphere of culture in Germany are an indication of the bourgeois establishment's low regard for the arts. Although the cultural budget traditionally constitutes only a small part of municipalities' total expenditure, it is one of the areas that are being most aggressively cut.

In total, expenditure on culture at the federal, state and local level amounts to only 1 percent of all public spending. Such expenditure, however, is regarded as a "voluntary service," which cities and municipalities are not legally required to provide, in contrast to spending on schools or welfare. The latter can be cut but not done away with completely.

The Ruhr district city of Essen, together with a number of adjacent municipalities, has been designated this year's European Capital of Culture. Against a background of shrinking financial resources, those responsible for cultural affairs are desperately seeking to portray the city as a culturally pulsating and multifaceted metropolis.

A broad range of meetings, exhibitions, museum reopenings and theatre productions give the impression of a thriving region in the process of radical change. Huge buildings that were formerly home to the city's extensive steel and manufacturing industries have been converted into centres for a wide range of cultural events.

These changes are, in many cases, a product of the International Building Exhibition Emscherpark (1989 to 1999), one of the last major efforts to improve the quality of life in the Ruhr region. The project envisaged the transformation of many of the former industrial areas into museums and centres for creative or environmental activities.

Many of the projects undertaken at that time are now under threat due to a lack of financial support, but local marketing agencies are still advertising the region's cultural variety in an attempt to attract new investors.

The Zollverein mine in Essen, which was the site for the opening of the City of Culture in January 2010, now hosts the new Ruhr museum and has been included in the world cultural heritage list. Essen's Folkwang Museum, which has been a centre for modern art since the 1920s, has been expanded with the addition of a new building designed by architect David Chipperfield, and is currently running a magnificent exhibition.

Anselm Weber, the director of the Essen Grillo Theatre, sees the city as a "centre for all social life." But his own theatre, which has been praised for its artistically challenging pieces and its practice of bringing young and elderly persons and local residents onstage, is now expected to make cutbacks.

Essen is home to large corporations such as Eon Ruhrgas and RWE, which occasionally free up funds for cultural purposes. The Krupp Foundation provided the €55 million for the new Folkwang building, but the subsequent costs of maintaining the museum must be covered by the city. This is one reason why projects such as the Grillo Theatre are being forced to make cuts.

Behind the scenes, the situation is deteriorating in a region with 300,000 officially unemployed and very limited opportunities for young people. Virtually all of the 53 Ruhr municipalities are implementing emergency budgets or have submitted plans for substantial cuts in spending, in

particular in the sphere of culture.

As a result of shrinking resources, many projects planned for the Capital of Culture in 2010 have been pared down or even cancelled. Some sponsors have failed to keep their promises of financial support.

Instead of the projected budget of €80 million, the city administration has declared it has €62.5 million to spend on cultural activities; which prompted Managing Director Fritz Pleitgen to declare that he had not imagined the task would be so hard.

Many smaller arts projects, which for years or decades have survived despite a lack of public funding on the basis of considerable initiative and volunteer work, are now threatened with closure because the last public funds are being withdrawn. This is especially true for independent facilities in which concerts and workshops for young people and theatre activities are held, especially in the less-privileged neighbourhoods.

In Duisburg, austerity measures proposed by the city in the youth work sector (cuts of 10 percent in 2010 and 30 percent in 2011) mean a third of such facilities must be shut down. Even municipal cinemas that offer moderate ticket prices and a selection of movies that go beyond the mainstream blockbusters will struggle to survive the impending cuts orgy.

A statement by the Association of Socio-Cultural Centres in North Rhine-Westphalia warns against indulging in the "politics of envy," in which facilities for children and adolescents, welfare recipients, and opera and concert enthusiasts, on the one hand, and adult education and music schools and facilities provided by independent groups, on the other, are pitted against each other. The "city of cuts," the association declares, is threatened with a return to the type of "segregated city which predominated in the nineteenth century: promenades for the wealthy, while the mob are condemned to tenements and slums on the fringes."

In addition to the closure of libraries, reduced budgets for new books and media, the drying up of funding for museums—affecting exhibitions, catalogues and restoration services—and theatres will be hit especially hard by the financial constraints.

Theatres on the hit list

Düsseldorf City Council President Jürgen Büssow believes the towns on the Rhine and Ruhr have not fully exploited the potential for budget savings. In addition to merging certain administrative bodies, or even entire cities, he has made proposals on how further savings can be realised in the field of culture.

He recently complained to the press that in Oberhausen, every theatre ticket is subsidised to the tune of €146. "Why can't people in Oberhausen travel to the Grillo Theatre in Essen?" he asked, where tickets are subsidised to the amount of €93. Cooperation by the theatres could save a lot, he said. Specifically, he praised "the courage of Wuppertal in closing its theatre."

The variety of theatres in the Ruhr area and its surroundings, paid for by the inhabitants over many decades with their taxes and entrance fees, is a

cultural achievement that is reflected in the region's many independent theatres and amateur and youth groups. But this clearly counts for nothing when it comes to making cuts.

Of particular value are the Children and Young People's Theatre Groups and the pedagogical theatrical facilities, which significantly contribute to the development of critical consciousness among the youth. Apart from the fact that theatres and orchestras also provide many jobs, such artistic institutions have an important function, especially in times of economic difficulty and social deprivation. Through the selection of what is performed and the type of staging, they are in a position to raise awareness of critical social issues.

Germany's largely publicly financed theatrical culture is unique and is an achievement of the German bourgeoisie and even more the labour movement of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Such historical cultural traditions cannot be abruptly severed and then revived in better economic times in the distant future.

Every good theatre has its own artistic traditions and draws new ideas from its immediate surroundings and the reactions of its audience. Theatre closures are a step towards barbarism, while doing little to close municipal budget deficits.

Theatre cutbacks have been going on for decades, but the recent proposals are on a previously unheard-of scale. The works councils of the larger German theatres complain that since the 1990s, money for the theatre has been continually cut back and local contracts have depressed wages.

"Against desolation"

"Protest against desolation" was the slogan one person in Wuppertal inscribed on his banner when people recently gathered in front of City Hall. Mayor Peter Jung (Christian Democratic Union—CDU) had previously announced austerity measures that not only included increases in fees and taxes, but also the closure of swimming pools and libraries. The budget for the municipal theatres is to be reduced by one fifth, which will inevitably lead to the closure of one facility, most probably the playhouse.

Jung said he regretted making such cuts, but he justified them by the fact that the federal government was demanding that the city cut €6 to €8 million as part of the Economic Growth Law, and the city had to take on €20 to 25 million in new debt every year as part of the transfer to funds to the former East Germany.

Wuppertal City Treasurer John Slawig assumes that the previously announced cuts by the municipalities are only the tip of the iceberg, and that the full array of cuts will be presented only after the North Rhine-Westphalia state elections. Many local politicians are keeping the extent of their plans for cuts hidden because they do not want to worsen the chances for their respective political parties in the election campaign.

In a 24-hour theatrical marathon at the end of January in Wuppertal, artists from more than 20 theatres and opera houses, including some from Essen, Bochum, Bielefeld and Cologne, appeared in the foyer of the Schauspielhaus in Wuppertal. They were there not only out of solidarity with their Wuppertal colleagues, but to fight against the threat to their own venues.

As in Wuppertal, theatre artists all over Germany are threatened by existential problems. The cultural pride of the Rhine-Main region, the Mannheim National Theatre, the oldest in Germany, is going to ruin.

The roof leaks. In heavy rain, buckets must be placed on the stage. The stage floor is rotting, threatening closure on grounds of safety. The building's facade is crumbling. Foyer and stairs no longer meet current

fire regulations. The building's technical facilities are completely outdated; often, it is difficult to find spare parts.

But the city of Mannheim, which wants to apply to become the 2020 Capital of Culture, cannot afford the €25 million needed for the theatre's restoration because it has debts of nearly €1 billion.

Theatre director Regula Gerber has a five-year contract with the city, providing the establishment with €29 million in subsidies. But that does not prevent the city calling for further savings.

The staff has been steadily reduced in recent years, and it has tried to maintain its programme with fewer people. Gerber considers an increase in ticket prices to be inevitable.

Even a reduction in the number of new productions is being considered, which would then affect ticket subscriptions, and thus revenue. Theatres have already noticed how the economic crisis is affecting playgoers' willingness to spend. People go to the theatre less often and buy tickets for the cheaper seats.

In many German theatres, the planned financial reductions will cut to the bone. This is true in both large and small establishments. Thus, even the smallest local theatre in Erlangen is being told to save €48,000 this year, even though this beautiful Rococo theatre is very popular and can expect a run of sold-out performances.

Oberhausen has to have every expenditure approved by Dusseldorf. The town has the highest per capita debt in Germany—nearly 14 percent unemployment, and one third of all its children live below the poverty line. This is because the coal and steel industries, the heart of this former industrial city, have completely collapsed. The Oberhausen Theatre, whose productions are praised well beyond the regional press, is threatened. It faces cuts of €2 million a year. This means that some productions will have to be eliminated.

The musical theatre in Gelsenkirchen and the Dortmund theatre will both have to manage in 2010 with €1 million less. The existence of the Schlosstheater Moers is also threatened. The director, Ulrich Greb, fears he will have to end operations in the summer. If things proceed in this vein, in five year's time the theatre would have only one actor and no scenery. The list of venues affected could be extended indefinitely.

The city of Cologne deserves mention for a special act of stupidity. The local theatre, a listed building, is to be demolished and replaced by a new building. But since this would be too expensive, it was decided upon a stripped-down version, which experts believe is incapable of providing a decent base for producing plays. The director, ensemble, and numerous artists and local people interested in culture have joined together and are now fighting for a much cheaper renovation of the old theatre.

As in Cologne and Wuppertal, resistance is starting to grow against this cuts orgy. The protesters are determined to prevent culture being sacrificed while billions in taxpayers' money are squandered on the banks and financial institutions.



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