

ARTICLE

Edgar Zilsel ‘The Social Roots of Romantic Ideology’ (1933). A translation and commentary

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Abstract

Edgar Zilsel (1891-1944) was an associate of the Vienna Circle and an Austro-Marxist. He is remembered for the so-called ‘Zilsel Thesis’, a historical reconstruction of the social and economic preconditions for the emergence of modern experimental science written in exile in the USA. His earlier work in Vienna on the cult of genius has recently been revisited by a number of scholars. The aim of this translation is to make one of his writings on this subject available to an Anglophone audience. Here he develops a genealogy of irrationalist ideology—one opposed to the rationalism of urban and commercial culture and to science—whose roots he traces to the German Romantic Movement. He offers a novel account of the interaction between Romantic writers, artists, and philosophers and wider currents of counter-revolutionary thought that emerged as a reaction to the French Revolution. The commentary seeks to contextualize the work as a critical, if indirect, engagement with fascism and points to its contemporary relevance.

Keywords

Austro-Marxism; cult of genius; Edgar Zilsel; fascism; German idealism; German Romanticism; irrationalism

Edgar Zilsel (1891-1944) was an associate of the Vienna Circle of logical empiricists and a Marxist, making him part of what Thomas Uebel (2005) has called the Left Vienna Circle. Like many intellectuals, artists, and (left-wing) politicians in Vienna at the time, Zilsel’s background was middle class (his father was a lawyer) and Jewish. He studied natural science and philosophy at the University of Vienna and took his doctorate in the philosophy of mathematics (1915). Zilsel then taught secondary school while also working on two books on the cult of genius. The material on the cult of genius, which included what would become the second book (published in 1926), he submitted for the Habilitation in philosophy (1923/1924). While the application had the support of a majority of the committee, including Moritz Schlick, it met with unyielding opposition from more conservative members on the (ostensible) grounds that it was too empirical to qualify as a work of philosophy. However, the anti-socialism and anti-Semitism prevalent within the professoriate of the University of Vienna may have played at least as great a role (see Taschwer, 2022). Zilsel eventually withdrew the application. With a career in academia now barred, he carried on as a schoolteacher but was able to take leave to teach in municipal *Volkshochschulen* (‘people’s universities’) supported

by the SDAP, the Social Democratic Workers' Party who governed so-called Red Vienna between 1919 and the Austrofascist seizure of power in 1934. In 1938, the year of the *Anschluss*, Zisel escaped first to Britain and then, in 1939, to the USA. In US exile he led a hand-to-mouth existence on temporary research grants and teaching, and with some help from the exiled Frankfurt School in New York. Like Kleist, one of the Romantic writers he mentions in the essay translated here, faced with lack of recognition and dogged by financial woes he took his own life in 1944 (see Stadler, 2022 for a more detailed account of the tragic life of Zisel as perpetual outsider). Zisel's outsider standing was compounded by the fact that he was both working across disciplines—philosophy, sociology, history—and was an ill fit within any one of them, which may in part explain the relative neglect of much of his work (see Rief and Scott, forthcoming).

Insofar as Zisel is remembered today it is for the so-called 'Zisel Thesis', the thesis that the origins of modern experimental science are to be found in the socio-economic as well as technological changes brought about by early capitalism. The thesis focuses particularly on the interactions between 'higher craftsmen' or 'artist-engineers' and university scholars and humanists during the Renaissance. This contact, and eventually cooperation, between those with craft skills and more systematically trained scholars gradually overcame the 'barrier between tongue and hand' (Zisel 2000 [1942]: 19), a necessary condition for experimental science. Zisel's work on the origins of modern science was written in American exile between his emigration in 1939 and suicide in 1944.

However, the Zisel Thesis is, to borrow the title of an insightful paper by Donata Romizi (2018), merely the American tip of a Viennese iceberg. That iceberg contains the two book-length studies on the concept and cult of genius (Zisel 1990 [1918] and 1926). Neither book has been translated. But we also have Zisel's more accessible summaries of the arguments published in *Der Kampf* (the struggle/the campaign), the theoretical journal of the SDAP in which many of the theoretical discussions within Austro-Marxism took place. There has recently been a spate of excellent commentaries on Zisel's analysis of the cult of genius (Romizi 2018; Fine 2020; Köhne 2022; Nemeth, 2022; Riesinger 2022; Sandner 2022; Stadler 2022) and one of the *Der Kampf* pieces ('The intellectual state of our time?' ('Die geistige Situation der Zeit?'), Zisel, 2020 [1932]) has been translated and published in abridged form in the very useful *The Red Vienna Sourcebook* (McFarland et al (Eds.) 2020). This revival of interest in Zisel is further illustrated by the publication of an updated edition of Johann Dvořák's *Edgar Zisel und die Einheit der Erkenntnis* (2023). With this translation of another *Der Kampf* piece, '*Die gesellschaftlichen Wurzeln der romantischen Ideologie*' (1933), I hope to contribute to this revival of interest in Zisel's early work by making this programmatic statement available in English.

But why? And why now? Are there reasons, beyond scholarship for its own sake, why contemporary readers should take note of an analysis developed in inter-war Europe that has been largely passed over? The residual influence of the later Zisel Thesis is not in itself a sufficient answer. The analysis of the genius cult must be of intrinsic interest and of some relevance not simply to Zisel's time but also to ours. I shall briefly attempt to address this.

In these studies, Zisel seeks to identify the sources of an ideology of irrationalism, and his reasons for doing so are political. These works, or at least those from the mid-1920s and 1930s, can be read as responses to the rise of fascism. (The piece translated here was published in the year of Hitler's Enabling Act and one year before the Austrofascist seizure of power in Zisel's home country). Zisel traces the source of irrationalist ideology back to German Romanticism and its philosophical expression, German idealism. These he interprets not simply as (increasingly) politically counter-revolutionary but also as opposition to rationality, calculability, technology, science, and capitalism;

in brief, to modernity. He was not alone in this. We have Karl Mannheim's much better-known analysis of the 'thought style' of German conservatism (1986 [1925]), which has clear affinities with Zilsel's account—e.g., both identify Adam Müller (1779-1829) as a key figure in translating Romanticism into a reactionary political creed. Nor was Zilsel alone in this endeavour within his own left-wing Viennese milieu. For example, Karl Polanyi (2018 [1935]) likewise interpreted fascist thought as a metaphysical and anti-naturalist epistemology and not simply as an irrationalist social and political philosophy. In this sense, the work translated here, like his more elaborate accounts of the genius cult, is to be located within the anti-fascist efforts of left and left-leaning intellectuals across Central Europe in the inter-war period. Whereas Zilsel's work in America offers a genealogy of rational thought and action, the earlier Viennese work offers a genealogy of its opposite.

Zilsel's specific contribution was to accord the cult of genius a central place both in Romantic literature and, more broadly, in anti-rationalist counter-revolutionary thought. He traces the genius cult back to societal subgroups of early Romantic writers that emerged out of a very specific milieu, student circles in small university towns, notably Jena, in the early decades of the nineteenth century, which then spread and become increasingly metropolitan. His sociological analysis here is innovative. He seeks to show how the interactions within and between subgroups can get caught up in larger social and political struggles, become instrumentalized and mobilized for quite different (political) purposes. But he does not present this process as one way. The subgroups provide a breeding ground for ideas that both transform and are transformed by wider social currents in a dynamic feedback loop. While Zilsel in the end reaffirms the Marxist view that economics trumps ideas, he accords the latter considerable weight and views the relationship between ideas and material interests as a matter of historical and empirical contingency.

The genius cult turns on the contrast between (i) the genius and the philistine and (ii) the genius and the masses (*die Menge/die Massen*). Thematically, it rests on what Zilsel considers the key distinction, and innovation, of Romanticism, namely that between shallowness and depth. It is not merely the philistine who is shallow, but empirical science, calculating reason, and commercial society. In contrast, Romantic writers and idealist philosophers view empirical reality as a mantle drawn across the world's primal origin and inner mystery that must be deciphered rather than merely empirically investigated. Similarly, history is viewed as superior to the individual. History, by which Zilsel means irrational forces and fate-like social bonds, we would now likely subsume under the term culture (cf. Eagleton 2016: 113-115). Zilsel's theme is intellectual resistance against increasingly rational urban and commercial culture. There are clear affinities with what one might call the early modernist sociological 'mainstream', with Max Weber's rationalization thesis and Georg Simmel's account of the mental life of the urbanite (Simmel 1950 [1903]). But there are also less superficial similarities.

First, thematically, despite Zilsel's general hostility to Weber his analysis of the genius cult is strikingly close to the concerns of Weber's St Louis lecture (2005 [1906]). Both Zilsel and Weber, in that lecture, seek to identify the social groups/classes opposed to rationalization and to capitalism, and the often curious anti-capitalist coalitions that emerge. For Weber, these are coalitions between peasants, the clergy, the aristocracy, sections of officialdom, and the urban working class. For Zilsel, they are coalitions between Romantic writers, artists, and philosophers, on the one hand, and the much more powerful currents emerging as a reaction against the French Revolution on the other.

Secondly, the piece is interesting as a contribution to the sociology of art, or rather the sociology of the artist. As Martin Jay (1992: 46-47) has noted, 'as Europe's first self-conscious intellectual avant-garde, the Jena Romantics [...] set the agenda for the conflation of art and politics pursued by so

many later intellectuals.' The centrality Zilsel accords the political influence of artists, and of the early Romantics in particular, already hints at the 'aestheticization of politics' and its possible relation to fascism, a matter famously raised a couple of years later by Walter Benjamin (1999 [1935]). Furthermore, Zilsel is concerned with artistic production as a way of life. The conduct and lifestyle of artists, writers, and philosophers are formed in conscious opposition to that of the modern bourgeois subject. The relationship between the two is both confrontational and one of mutual dependence. Writers and artists who can no longer rely on, or have broken free of, patronage need sources of income from a mass (but middle-class) audience that they also mock as philistine. Zilsel relates this lifestyle and the ideology of freedom that accompanies it both to the rise of capitalism, and with it the emergence of the freelance writer and artist, and views them as trans-historical features inherent in artistic production because artists' conduct of life always and everywhere verges on the extrarational.

If, as suggested above, there are thematic overlaps between Zilsel and Weber there is also a sense in which the former's critique of genius might also be taken as a critique of Weber. Weber is no less implacable an opponent of German political Romanticism and of its assertion that there is a specific 'German' state form, the corporatist state (*Ständestaat*), and economy, the communal economy (*Gemeinwirtschaft*), than is Zilsel. He advises any littérateur who touts such nonsense to 'learn his sociological ABC before troubling the book-market with the products of his vanity' (Weber 1996 [1917]: 91). However, there is one respect in which Weber may have remained trapped in the world of Romantic thought, namely in his expectation that the true political leader must be an exceptional talent with 'inner charisma' (1996 [1919]). Here the exceptional (political) talent comes close to the genius ideal. In Weber's account of political leadership, the contrast between the political leader and the masses is retained, but the other contrast here is not with the philistine but with the 'parvenu' (see Scott, forthcoming). Nevertheless, the logic and assumptions are broadly similar. Weber's view of the 'natural' leader as possessing extraordinary (*außeralltäglich*) qualities and the Romantic genius cult may have, at the very least, an elective affinity.

Given that Zilsel's analysis of the social roots of Romanticism is primarily a search for the roots of irrationalism, with all its potentially dangerous political implications, it is striking that he does not slip into mere polemic. Instead, he acknowledges that its 'discovery' of the primacy of history and the irrational in human thought and action are genuine discoveries that have altered (and darkened) our worldview. Without the former, he notes, there would be no Hegel – and no Marx! – and, without the latter, presumably no Freud. The emphasis on folk and national traditions also, in his view, generated new fields of research, notably comparative linguistics.

I have been, very sketchily, suggesting that Zilsel's analysis of the cult of genius is of continued interest, first, because it is part of a broader intellectual confrontation with fascism in inter-war Central Europe and, secondly, due to its potential contribution to the wider sociological analysis of modernity. But what of its possible present relevance? Zilsel characterizes anti-rationalism as coming in waves that swell, peak, and recede, and sees, with good reason, 1920s/1930s Europe as caught in a powerful swell. But does this not also apply to our own times? Have we not, over the last couple of decades, witnessed the rise of anti-science and growing scepticism towards, and declining trust in, expert systems? From Orbán to Modi, religious conflicts have been rekindled as a strategy for retaining power and garnering support (at least within majority religious communities). Putin has been peddling a semi-mystical nationalism, which eerily resembles the 'historical-extrarational bonds' Zilsel described, to justify the invasion of a sovereign country, and with imperialist intent (Snyder, 2018). From populist 'wars' against institutions—the judiciary, public service broadcasting,

the universities, etc.—and against 'cosmopolitan' (cultural, rarely economic) elites to Trump's depiction of himself as a 'very stable genius', we find echoes of anti-rationalism and the genius cult, now, as then, potentially culminating in the cult of the political 'strongman' (cf. Ben-Ghiat, 2020). The 2020s are not the 1920s, but a sociological examination of the sources of anti-rational and anti-procedural currents would not go amiss.

A NOTE ON THE TRANSLATION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Zilsel likes to describe past events in the present tense (the historic present), lending them immediacy. I have sought to retain his tenses. I have, however, split some of his more baroque sentences into more digestible bites. I have also used masculine pronouns throughout, not simply because a gender-neutral rendering of historical texts is anachronistic, but also because the cult of genius itself is profoundly masculinist. Finally, I would like to thank Helen Chambers (to whom I owe the final observation in trans. fn.23) and Brigitte Scott for fielding my many pesky questions concerning German terminology and Romantic literature with good humour and patience, and Silvia Rief, Friedrich Stadler, and the two anonymous reviewers for further helpful suggestions.

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