

Visions of a Cosmopolitan Europe Klaus Mann's exile journal "*Decision: a review of free culture*"

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Abstract

This essay examines the anti-fascist journal "Decision: a review of free culture" edited and published by Klaus Mann from January 1941 to April 1942 in order to articulate its centrality and critical import within the exile experience as well as within the discussion of America's role in the creation of a new Europe and a new world order after WWII. The essay provides a look at diverse essays which capture the dialectical tension between the two poles – America and Europe.

Keywords: anti-fascist journal, Klaus Mann, exile experience

In response to the Nazi presence, the 1930s and 1940s brought forth a large number of exile journals that were powerful documents of resistance and carried high literary value.¹ The anti-fascist journals, *Die Sammlung* and *Decision* were published and edited by Klaus Mann who was well connected in the literary world. *Die Sammlung* published in Amsterdam from 1933 to 1935 was forced to close due to an expanding Nazi Germany and financial hardship.² *Decision: a review of free culture* appeared in the US from January 1941 to April 1942 and folded because of financial restrictions and a lack of interest among American readers.³ Despite their short run, the journals were highly praised in intellectual circles and served as a mouthpiece not only for the exile experience but also for a discussion on the "problems of civilization, which is at stake in this war" (*Decision*, Vol. III, No. 1-2: 5). The contributors were Germans and non-Germans clearly engaged in the socio-political issues of the time, bringing forth documents of resistance with the aim to promote a free world. The idea of a free world and a free citizen was strongly connected to the idea of American democracy and the texts that brought these journals together are a testament to the diverse interpersonal relations between German and non-German nationals in their effort to unite against a totalitarian regime of terror. An underlying ideological thread was the promotion of the

idea of a Europe that moves away from nationalism towards the creation of a cosmopolitanism transcending geographic borders and age.

This essay examines the journal “*Decision: a review of free culture*” in order to articulate its centrality and critical import within the exile experience as well as within the discussion of America’s role in the creation of a new Europe and a new world order after WWII. The diverse essays capture the dialectical tension between the two poles – America and Europe – and what stands out is the belief in America as the ideal of democracy, which challenges the fascist totalitarian regime ideology.⁴ Before and during the war, the sense of rupture and discontinuity inherent to the exile experience brought forth an idealistic vision of and hope for a new world and a new cosmopolitanism. In 1940, Klaus Mann propounds his idea of Americanism in his unpublished book *Distinguished Visitors*:

[...] the American Way embraces the entirety of all ideals and tenets striving for human progress, the steady increase of human dignity; because true Americanism is in stark contrast to nationalism. It is rich with all the hopes and all the creative endeavors of modern man (Grunewald 186).

The following analyzes selected texts from the journal as poetic projects of confronting and grasping the vicissitude of modernity’s troubled path both in Europe and in America in the late 1940s. The selection of certain texts derives from their various positions between two cultures and continents and their ability to negotiate the various nuances of “German” and “American”. In this regard, Klaus Mann’s journal and editorial comments also serve as repositories of our troubled past and failures.⁵ The high hope for a united and free Europe extending to world peace that circulated at the end of WWII and culminated in the formation of the United Nations finds a somber answer in the Cold War politics that engulfed the world for most of the twentieth century and the failure of capitalism at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Why did *Decision* have to fold after only fifteen months? The journal suffered from the start from an obvious disinterest among American sponsors and the American public. Praised highly by prominent figures, the publication nevertheless stayed obscure. As Dieter Schmauß (2001) points out, Klaus Mann’s lack of business sense played a decisive role in the journal’s lack of financial success. Yet, the line-up is impressive and reflects Klaus Mann’s role and influence in the artistic and intellectual circles of the time. Wystan H. Auden and Muriel Rukeyser published alongside Claire and Yvan Goll as well as Stefan George and Bertolt Brecht. Sherwood Anderson was a regular contributor and Bruno Frank’s novel “16 000 Francs” was printed over several editions. Prominent contributors were Jean Cocteau, G.A. Borgese, Georges Bernanos, Curt Riess with critical essays on art as well as illustrations by Rudolf Thöny, Rudolf Ripper and Raoul Dufy. Aside from his lack of business skills, Klaus Mann was also not much in tune with the puritanical spirit of the upper American class, his potential sponsors. The illustration “Morning” by the contemporary American artist John Koch is a male nude that further put off a society that was not much interested in Germany’s past and future (Vol. I, No. 4: 58). American reality at the time was grounded in capitalist individualism, and, as *Time* magazine noted, *Decision* was full of sad reminiscences and bewildered self-questioning. Nevertheless, *Decision* expressed the hope of many immigrants, refugees, and concerned citizens in the creation of a new Europe and in America as the future ideal for a new world order.

As late as 1942, Mann enthusiastically writes in his editorial introduction, borrowing Roosevelt’s words, “for America is now the arsenal of democracy, [where] we are witnessing, now and here, the birth, or at least the potentiality, of a new cosmopolitan culture” (Vol. III, No. 1-2: 4). This view was not shared by all, and according to Adorno and Horkheimer the “potentiality” turned into mass deception, or as Brecht states a “unerschöpfliches Becken, wo alle Rassen sich eifrigst aufgaben, ihre eingewurzelten Eigenarten vergessend wie schlechte Gewohnheiten” (Brecht).⁶ Despite Klaus Mann’s outward enthusiasm, letters and

diary entries referring to the loss of Walt Whitman's idea of democracy illustrate his growing doubts and disillusionment about America as a role model for a new liberated Europe.

When Mann arrived in the United States, his naïve and trusting nature, as his brother Golo Mann later writes, was accompanied by a great optimism for the future and for America. His essays and selection of contributors on the other hand show a man who is acutely aware of the dangers of his time, namely totalitarian aggression. Mann's admiration of Franklin Roosevelt, in particular the key role the US president played in the formation of the United Nations and of Immanuel Kant whose "Ideas for a History with Cosmopolitan Tendency" he quoted in the September 1941 issue of *Decision* are reflected in Mann's editorials "Issues at Stake" (Vol. II, No. 3: 8-9). He launched the journal *Decision* in January 1941 at a time of world disjuncture that needs, as he says, "a new forum for the creative spirit – now, at precisely this moment of fatal decisions" (Vol. I, No. 1: 6). In almost every issue he appeals to the young writer and reader and evokes the concept of a "new order" or rather "the evolutionary transformation [of the old] into more reasonable and more inspired forms of social life. [An order] we are able to create" (6). For him it is clearly the responsibility of the writer and intellectual to envision a new future and fathom new ideas. In this vein, Aldous Huxley addresses in the same issue the overestimation of facts and underestimation of concepts and ideas while Jean Cocteau creates a poetic vision of a Paris in ruins. Cocteau's "The Ruins of Paris" is taken from *La Fin du Potomak*, which was published in 1939. It is a foreboding note on the destruction to come written in a dream-like stream of consciousness that does not so much refer to the actual city of Paris but to the inner state-of-being of the protagonist. The excerpt ends poignantly with a description of the smell of death and decay. "It was the smell of the field of glory, so dear to heroes" (40).

Literary themes and political themes often flow together as in the case of William Carlos Williams's essay entitled "Ezra Pound: Lord Ga-Ga!" This essay reflects Williams's respect for the literary giant "even when through the deprivations of age or other defects of the intellect he finally goes ga-ga" (Vol. II, No. 3: 16). Here he alludes to Ezra Pound's admiration and campaign for Mussolini. Williams paints a picture of a man full of grandiosity, a man stuck in the past who compares "the beating down of the Spanish patriots by Germans, Italians and the Franco rebels [...] to the draining of some obscure swamp in the African jungle" (21). Williams's tongue-in-cheek tone highlights the hilarity of Pound, the egomaniac, but also pays tribute to a great literary mind. He simultaneously praises and criticizes Ezra Pound's *Canto XXX* with its haunting beauty and call for purifying the world of all ugliness. The poem illustrates Pound's fascination with death in conjunction with his rejection and disgust of "ordinary" humanity and Williams sadly recognizes Pound's concept of beauty as a mere rendering of lines, a purely literary element divorced from any humanity. Pound, Williams argues, asks us to kill all democracy [...] to kill all freedom of the uninstructed mind, to deny all psychologic and biologic basis for the necessity, in a healthy society, for a free choice. (22)

Williams's plea for life and against the annihilation of humanity led by the German, Spanish, and Italian fascists is also reflected in Muriel Rukeyser's poem "Ajanta" in the same issue. Rukeyser found inspiration in the Indian Ajanta caves where Buddhist monks between the second and sixth century B.C. celebrated their love of life through spiritual paintings. She visits the caves "wanting my fullness and not a field of war / for the world considered annihilation" and she finds "between the space of the body and the space of the universe" a reality filled with creation. "So came I between heaven and my grave [...] to this cave where the myth enters the heart again [...] and death, the price of the body, cheap as air" (25).

A voice that is heard in many editions is Walt Whitman. In his own contributions, Mann often evokes Whitman who represents for him the premiere American voice. His admiration for Whitman is expressed in "The Present Greatness of Walt Whitman" an article in the April 1941 issue of *Decision*. Whitman and his vision of Americanism made a strong impression on Klaus Mann and his generation who

saw Whitman as a national spirit, an “American voice” (Vol. I, No. 4: 14). It was, according to Mann, European youth after WWI who saw Whitman’s voice bridging a transatlantic gulf and bringing hope, a “promise for the future [and] undreamed-of possibilities” (16). Mann relies on Whitman in his response to Henry Luce’s essay “The American Century” that was widely circulated and received broad attention.⁷ It first appeared as an editorial in Luce’s magazine *Life* in 1941, and even though Klaus Mann sees Whitman’s idea of America’s athletic Democracy reflected in Henry Luce’s article, he strongly opposed Luce’s concept of Americanism, which he saw as a form of nationalism. Luce called for an end of US isolationism which for him meant Anglo-American world domination at the close of the WWII:

We must accept whole-heartedly our duty and our opportunity as the most powerful and vital nation in the world and in consequence to exert upon the world the full impact of our influence, for such purposes as we see fit and by such means as we see fit. (Luce)⁸

Mann points out that Whitman on the other hand foresaw an “American Century” that was “spiritual and heroic” and “should emerge as the vanguard and nucleus of a universal federation of democracies” (Vol. I, No. 4: 28). Just like Mann in 1949, Whitman’s social-cosmic view urged his countrymen not to be the powerhouse that Luce was evoking but to be the brain of the New World. Mann saw in Luce’s appeal to world dominance by America a dangerous form of nationalism and clearly separates Whitman from the imperialist view Luce evokes.

Whitman is our poet [...] he is the prophet of a coming synthesis of individualist pride and collectivist discipline; rooted patriotism and spontaneous internationalism; cosmic intuition and progressive reason. [He is] the greatest moral and spiritual force democracy has at its command to meet the challenge of totalitarian aggression. (Vol. I, No. 4: 21) For Mann, Whitman reconciles while Luce separates.

An important issue for Mann was the idea of transcending national boundaries and in particular “intensifying the relations between the American and European spirit” (8). Again and again the concept of a “new humanism and universal democracy” appears in his writing, and he sought out writers and thinkers from Europe, America and South America who would address these issues.⁹ The theme of the editorial generally set the tone of the volume pointing at important contemporary issues and creating a forum for an exchange of ideas. Mann’s editorial of the second issue of *Decision*, (Vol. I, No. 2) carries the title “The City of Man” and devotes the issue to the book by the same title.¹⁰ *City of Man* came out in 1940 proposing to increase a sense of universal mission and responsibility in American youth. The book is a collection of various manifestoes signed collectively by a large number of famous thinkers and writers with the subtitle *Declaration on World Democracy*. “The first idea of an American Committee on Europe arose as early as October 1938” (8) as a response to Roosevelt’s call for a “moral order of peace” (7). In his editorial, Mann concentrates on the term “Americanism” used in the manifesto. Although he agrees with the concept of America as transcending limitations and giving hope to a new order, he is very critical of the manifesto’s “hazardous” statement that there will be or needs to be a “New Testament of Americanism [which identifies] itself with World Humanism” (10). The *City of Man*, Mann argues, should be a worldwide organization of peace and increased social justice. It may be that the United States would host this center of a future *City of Man* yet “it is questionable if one should stress such a possibility or likelihood in a ‘Declaration on World Democracy’ coming from this country and addressed (at least theoretically) to men and women, young and old, all over the world” (10). The tendency he sees is again, as with Henry Luce, American dominance and the potential for abuse of power.

As mentioned before, *Decision: Review of Free Culture* was highly praised in intellectual circles but suffered from a lack of American sponsors. Albert Einstein and Thomas Mann supported the project but as Klaus Mann bitterly concludes, America was not very interested in “Germany’s Guilt and Mission” (the title of an article by Thomas Mann, published in *Decision* in July 1941). In the last issue in 1942 as

well as in letters and diary entries Klaus Mann expressed disappointment and doubts in America where “All men are not equal!” “Nicht-Bürger werden von amerikanischen Patrioten keiner Antwort gewürdigt” (American patriots do not view non-citizens as worthy of an answer) (Gregor-Dellin, 475). He again turns to Walt Whitman and laments the loss of Walt Whitman’s ideal of democracy. “America as Walt Whitman visualized and praised it [...] has utterly failed to come into actual being. [...] I don’t see any reason to hope that America will live up to her tremendous mission” (Mit dem Blick 77). After the war was over, an atmosphere of distrust and disillusionment beleaguered many exiles. A major reason was the actions of the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) created in 1938. The HUAC’s anti-communist investigations aimed at fascists turned against communist insurgency after WWII. Ardent anti-fascists like Klaus Mann and his sister Erika Mann were accused of being ‘premature anti-fascists’ due to their journalistic activities in Franco’s Spain. It is a peculiar term and was often used for veterans of the International Brigades who fought against Franco and fascism in the Spanish Civil War. The FBI used the label ‘Pre-mature Anti-Fascist’ as a code word for ‘Communist’ since whoever opposed fascism before WWII was suspected of being a communist subversive. To quote from Bernard Knox:

It was the label affixed to the dossiers of those Americans who had fought in the Brigades when, after Pearl Harbor (and some of them before) they enlisted in the US Army. It was the signal to assign them to non-combat units or inactive fronts and to deny them the promotion they deserved.

This label haunted Mann and his diary entries and letters depict an increasingly bitter man. He saw himself surrounded by smugness and ignorance from both camps – the isolationists a la Goebbels and the interventionists a la Luce. He was aware that a part of his bitterness derived from the failure of his journal, which he had hoped would participate in the discussion of a new world order. He felt personally attacked by people not backing his venture, breaking promises or shrugging him off like Marshall Fields or Dorothy Thompson (Hotelzimmer 238-239). As Golo Mann later learns, New York writers did not feel that this “German” was the one to represent them and to edit an American journal. (Gregor-Dellin, 629-661). Despite a humorous self-reflective tone in the essay from 1942 “The Last Decision”, one can sense a serious undertone of hopelessness and a reevaluation of the concept of Americanism he had praised so highly. (Hoffmeister 235-241. Grunewald 76-80)

In conclusion, let me take a look at Klaus Mann’s concept of a total defense program. “The totalitarian challenge calls for a total defense program” (Vol. II, No. 2: 27). That statement by Klaus Mann introduces an article criticizing the prevalent anti-Nazi films that came out of Hollywood by 1941. A total defense system implies a plan, an organization, a web or network set against the controlling network of Nazi power and corporate power. The Nazis had organized a state from top to bottom by totalitarian force where everyone had one function – to serve the cause of purifying the Germanic race and ensuring its supremacy in the world. The defense against such a death-terror organization with its mechanical reproducibility of men, of culture, called for its dialectical equal, which in a democratic fashion has many faces. The face Klaus Mann paints is the literary artistic voice that transcends the borders between art and life, between high culture and popular culture and sheds light on the German exiles’ engagement with American cultural, social and political forms. It is in his view the duty of the artist to voice protest since it is he who speaks to the questions of life. “It is the task and natural function of the intellectuals, of independent writers, scholars and thinkers, to visualize and outline the structure of a new society” (Vol. I, No. 2: 7).

ENDNOTES

¹ The following is a short list and by no means comprehensive: *Internationale Literatur*, Moscow 1931-1945; *Die Sammlung*, Amsterdam 1933-1935; *Die Neuen Deutschen Blätter*, Prag 1933-1935; *Die Neue Weltbühne*, Prag/Paris 1933-1939; *Das Neue Tage-Buch*, Paris 1933; *Die Welt im Wort*, Prag 1933; *Das Wort*, Moskau/Zürich 1936-1939; *Mass und Wert*, Zürich 1937-1940; *Decision*, New York 1941-1942

² *Die Sammlung*, September 1933–August 1934. Thomas Mann speaks of “dokumentarischer Dauer” after the exile journal *Die Sammlung* had to fold. Founded and edited by his son Klaus Mann, the first issue appeared in Amsterdam in September 1933. The idea came from his friend, the Swiss photojournalist Annemarie Schwarzenbach who due to family issues decided to withdraw from the project.

³ *Decision*, January 1941–April 1942. “*Decision* is not devoted to the problems of exile but to the problems of civilization” (Vol. II, No. 2: 5). “The totalitarian challenge calls for a total defense program.” (Vol. II, No. 2: 27)

⁴ Some contributors were: Thomas Mann, Heinrich Mann, Bruno Walter, Stefan Zweig, Peter Viereck, Sherwood Anderson, Ernest Boyd, Wystan Auden, Christopher Isherwood, Muriel Rukeyser, Ivan & Claire Goll, William Carlos Williams, Arthur Schnitzler, Max Lerner, Franz Werfel, Max Ascoli, Janet Flanner, Wallace Stegner, Bertold Brecht, Hermann Kesten, Carson McCullers, Andre Gide, Annette Kolb, Jean-Paul Satre, etc.

⁵ Klaus Mann, born in 1906, is known to many as the son of the Nobel Prize winner Thomas Mann and as the writer of the novel “Mephisto” which was successfully made into a film in 1981 by István Szabó. He was openly gay, battled with drug addiction most of his adult life, went into exile in 1933 and emigrated to the US in 1938. He enlisted in the US-Army in 1942 and received his US citizenship in 1943 a month before being sent to Europe where he worked as a translator and wrote for the US Army paper *Stars and Stripes*. As a writer, he published extensively: novels, autobiographies, plays, essays and anthologies as well as two literary journals. He died of a drug overdose in Cannes in 1949.

⁶ “[...] an inexhaustible reservoir where all races assiduously capitulated forgetting their innate nature like bad habits” (Brecht). My translations unless otherwise noted. Bertolt Brecht Werke: Journale 2. Vol. 27. Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1995; pp. 50-1.

⁷ The article also appeared in: Luce, H. R: "The American Century" Hogan, M.J. (1999).

⁸ *Life* February 7, 1941.

⁹ Special issues with a Latin-America Anthology, International Anthology and French Anthology were Vol I, No. 5 and 6 and Vol. II, No. 5-6.

¹⁰ City of Man: a declaration on world democracy. New York: Viking Press, 1940. The “Committee on Europe” had its inception in 1938 and published its views in this book issued by Herbert Agar. Some of the authors are: Herbert Agar, G.A. Borgese, Hermann Broch, Thomas Mann, Reinhold Niebuhr.

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