

CHAPTER 8

GERMANY

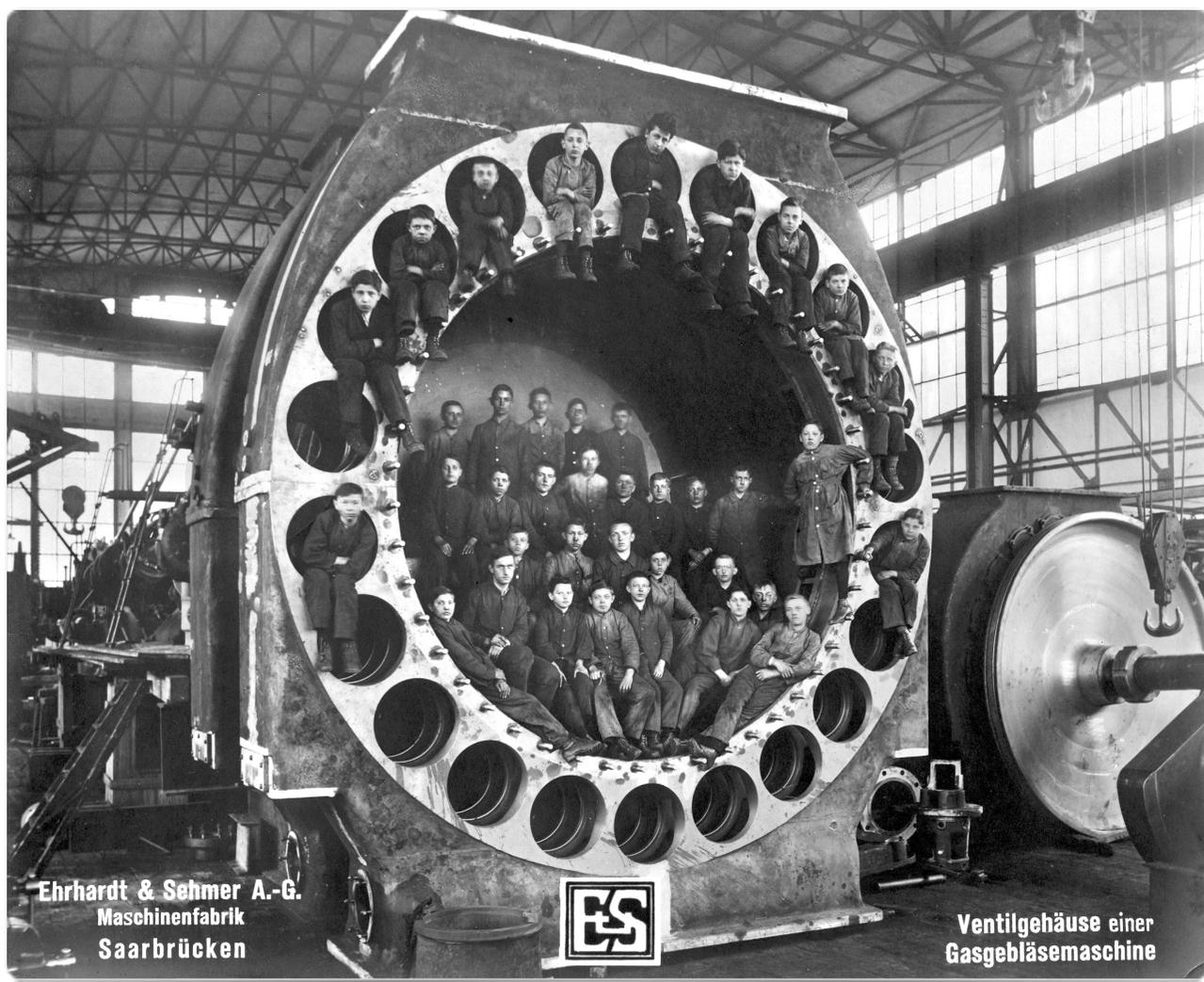
Putting Male and Female Bodies in Their Places: Arenas and Theatres of Educational Reform

*Karin Priem
Frederik Herman*

Industry-related educational reform initiatives in Germany during the first third of the 20th century provide the wider frame of reference for this essay. Those reforms included hygiene and healthcare initiatives, factory dormitories and villages, childcare and youth welfare projects, and vocational training, all of which were directed at mining and steel industry workers and their families. In our contribution, we focus on two photographs selected from a collection of more than one thousand photographs that chronicle the process of industrialisation in the Saarland, a German region famous for its once booming steel production and mining industry.¹

The photographs can catch the viewer's eyes because the way the bodies are displayed differs tremendously from traditional studio portraits. More specifically, the bodies and the material environment, in both photographs, are intertwined by complex methods of spatial framing and composition. The photographs thus appear as arenas of arranged bodies modelled by a material matrix, and simultaneously referring to symbolic connotations and cultural formula.

The first photograph shows male apprentices staged within the circular structure of a huge valve system. Some of the human bodies even appear like bolts in the metal structure of the outer frame of this apparatus. This strong interconnectedness



Ehrhardt & Sehmer AG, valve body of a gas-powered blast furnace blower, c. 1930 (Landesarchiv Saarbrücken, B1403/2D)

represents a binding entity of physical labor, processed raw materials, machinery and a sense of belonging on the one hand, and social stratification on the other hand. In addition, this formation may symbolise both the structured time of the precisely running clockwork of modern productivity and endless cyclical time, a possible reminder of the continuous flow of generations of workers. The apprentices, displayed as the future generation of proud workers with a strongly internalised work ethic, visually highlight societal progress through education and its promises for the future.

The second photograph can be analysed as a visual complement to this impressive wheel of progress. The structure of the photograph is that of a Greek theatre: the basin may well represent the central court, or orchestra, which serves as a foreground for the front stage (*proskenion* and *paraskenia*) and the main stage (*skene*). The arcadia-like arrangement of girls on the front stage highlights the *skene* with the pyramid-like formation of human bodies crowned by a gracious female figure surrounded by an arch of light. In fact, the choreography of bodies in the background and the swimming pool as a site of *katharsis* may very well, as in the first photograph, foster a belief in societal progress and social reform.



*Swimming pool of the Röckling Steel Plant, c. 1910
(Werksarchiv Saarstahl AG, WE 7610)*

The photograph therefore combines different aspects of the educational reform: it refers to rational technologies of body hygiene and at the same time reveals idealistic cultural patterns that are glorifying Ancient Greek and Roman times as crucial elements of educational thinking. In addition, hygiene-oriented education and its machinery seem to fit well into religious visions of purity and moral cleansing.

Staged as a quasi-sacred bathing ritual and part of hygiene-oriented educational interventions, the scenery may represent the transition from a contaminated way of life to an enlightened form of existence. As for the various references to the Greek model of a theatre, it can be added that the photograph was taken from the perspective of the priest of Dionysus – the god of wine, drama and fertility – who usually sat in the centre of the front row of the audience. This very perspective connects to the light and dark coloured water generally symbolising female fertility and sexuality, respectively. In addition, the circular formation of bodies positioned on different levels of this theatrical scenery displays a human lifecycle from birth to death.

It can be concluded that both photographs employ a visual rhetoric of modernity that combines established cultural formula with science- and technology-based visions of educational reform and societal progress. In both photographs human bodies are literally connected with and formed by industrial or hygiene apparatuses, which rather stress the mechanisms and functions of a social body than the cheerful interactions within a group. Nevertheless, the symbolic layers of what is on display emphasise, and connect to, traditional and harmonising features. In fact, the photographs do not provide a space of critical observation or inquiry, as they clearly determine and frame how the arenas and theatres of ‘progressive reform’ should be perceived, and most probably legitimise education as a means to create an ideal future.

¹ Zimmermann, C. (2004). *Saarländische Industriefotografie. Ein Bildarchivführer*. Saarbrücken, Saarland, Germany.