

ORGANIC MONUMENTALISM

A lot has been written about whether Hitler was "modern" or "antimodern"—which has always struck me as a rather fruitless debate, given the ambiguity of the terms. Does modernity mean technical finesse? Secular or rationalized institutions? Gender and/or racial equalities? A certain aesthetic style or attitude toward urbanization? Things that are sort of recent?

Nazism should not, of course, be regarded as totally foreign to the "modern" world we live in, something alien and otherworldly, but there is also a "back to nature" aspect of its ideology, expressed (for example) in the push for natural foods and "rural values" and much else that smacks of an imagined Teutonic yesterday. There is a twisted mix of enlightenment and romance in this view of the world: many in the Hitler camp were opposed to cities, to "the artificial," and to several central trends in twentieth-century physics (notably quantum mechanics and relativity theory), but there is also a kind of retread classical/technical monumentalism that we must appreciate. A stadium designed to seat half a million people—the largest in the world—lies unfinished and rotting in Nuremberg, a testament to the Führer's passion for monumental spectacle. Grandiose plans for intercontinental ballistic missiles, rocket-powered bombs and planes, and high-speed freeways are all reflections of this monumentalist vision, as are the era's ambitious cancer registries and mass screening programs.

Monumentalism also pervades the Nazi organic impulse. The largest swastika in the world today, for example, is a grove of conifers planted in a farmer's field near Berlin in the form of a huge, one-hundred-meter *Hakenkreuz*. More than sixty years after planting, the design emerges every autumn, as the surrounding deciduous trees change colors. It is visible only from the air.

Another interesting example of this organic gigantism can be seen in the Nazi era's promotion of herbal remedies. From 1934 to 1937, the amount of land devoted to herbs and healing plants (*Gewürz- und Heilkräuter*) increased by more than a factor of ten—from 820 hectares to 3,896 hectares (a hectare is about two and a

half acres). Cultivation was especially strong in the forests of Thuringia and north-central Germany, but every part of the country was involved.⁴² Popular magazines celebrated the importance of natural foods and drugs, and professional apothecaries took steps to evaluate the efficacy of medicinal herbs. Schoolchildren were urged to gather local herbs, and military men even took an interest. Naturopathic medicine aroused so much excitement that academics felt obliged to warn against the potential hazards of gathering such plants. (Natural botanicals often contain strong chemicals, and prolonged exposure—from contact with the skin through gathering or processing—could and did result in poisonings.)⁴³

In the late 1930s, SS botanists under Himmler's direction established extensive herbal gardens at Dachau to grow spices and botanicals for experimental purposes and for distribution to the SS and Wehrmacht. Germany's first concentration camp eventually boasted the largest medico-botanical research station in the world, with a thousand prisoners cultivating, drying, and packaging herbal medicines and spices from two hundred tediously tilled acres on the "Dachauer Moor."⁴⁴ According to Auschwitz commandant Rudolf Höss, the *plantage* produced almost all of the army's seasonings for the duration of the war. The operation was a profitable one, earning hundreds of thousands of marks for the SS every year—so profitable, in fact, that it was continued for several years after 1945 as a local cooperative, employing hundreds of former KZ prisoners.⁴⁵

I am a historian of science by profession, and if there is one thing members of my clan like to stress, it is that scientific ideas do not flourish in a vacuum. Ideas often have a "value-slope" (Iain Boal's felicitous phrase), are pushed or pulled by social forces in odd and intricate ways that reveal an often torn or permeable membrane between science and society. In the Nazi era, one expects to find intellectual efforts tied somehow to larger nationalist, xenophobic, and racio-purist currents. I have already mentioned many examples, but there are, of course, many others. In the Nazi conception of landscape architecture, for example, native indigenous plants were to be favored over exotic species. Trees in the Reich were supposed to be tall and unyielding, not bent or "degenerate" like