The Sick Man

by Theodore Dalrymple (August 2025)

A família enferma (Lasar Segall, 1920)

I was surprised to discover recently that there was a group loosely described as musical that goes by the name “The Sick Man of Europe.” As you might expect, theirs is music to bang your head against the wall to, and the lyrics are not very optimistic:

I’m consuming myself
We’re living off death.

Everything turns to dust
Everything becomes filth.

There is, of course, a romance in such despair and nihilism: contentment cannot compete because it does not dress itself all in black or claim to be prey to a deeper or more profound emotion than it really has. The nihilist is inclined to think that his nihilism by itself confers or is a claim to profundity.

The Sick Man of Europe is an old expression, attributed to Tsar Nicholas I, who was referring to the Ottoman Empire, towards which his intentions were far from curative. Ever since, the term has been applied to whichever country in Europe seemed to be doing the worst: for even if all the countries in Europe were doing badly, there is always one that was doing worst. My own country, the United Kingdom, has of late decades been quite often the sick man of Europe.

I remember the first time in recent decades in which Germany was described as the sick man of Europe. It came to me as a surprise, almost as a shock. Ever since I can remember (which is now quite a long period), Germany had been among the most successful countries, economically, in the world. In the late 50s, a friend of my mother’s in America subscribed on our behalf to the *National Geographic* Magazine, and one of the first articles I remember—I think its was is 1959—was about the West German *Wirtschaftswunder*, or economic miracle. German national pride having been decisively separated from the exertion of military power or prowess, the country’s energies were concentrated entirely on economic productivity, with enormous and impressive success. When one reads of the condition of Germany at the end of the war, by which time much

of it had been reduced to rubble (though it is still a matter of debate as to how much that reduction actually contributed to the Allies' military victory, the general consensus, which I find instinctively implausible, being that it continued little or very little), it is a cause of wonderment and admiration that within a comparatively few years the country should again have become a major economic power. Marshall Aid, it is often said, played an important part in the country's economic renaissance, but I think it must have been peripheral. The fact is that you can pour billions into a country, but if the country is not capable, for whatever reason, of benefitting from it, the aid will make no difference; and if it is capable, it does not really need it. The soil must be fertile for the seed to germinate, and no amount of seed will turn a desert into a meadow.

For many of the most recent years, Germany was held up to us in Europe, including by itself, as a model of economic and political wisdom, probity and foresightedness. Capital and labour there were not engaged in the kind of zero-sum war on which they had been engaged in Britain, for example, or in France. Capital and labour were not antagonists but associates. Such consensus was mature. It abated conflict, it reduced inequality but also poverty, it made for the efficiency of companies, large and small. It was the guarantor of social peace and general prosperity. Other countries were profligate and deserved their intermittent economic crises. They had only themselves to blame for not having followed the Germans' model.

If there is one thing worse than being lectured to by Germans, it is being lectured to by Germans while suspecting that they are right. Germany had surpluses like other countries had deficits. It had low inflation and low debt. Its budget was balanced, but its health system was good and it had a very good model of education, particularly technical education. Without abandoning its glorious tradition of academic

learning, it managed to educate the less academically gifted in the skills required by industry, so that they were not left to feel inferior, as they were in other countries. In short, Germany was a sane and balance country. Not very long ago, an influential book was published in Britain pointing out the maturity and seriousness of Germany by comparison with the fractious, almost childish condition of Britain. The solution to Britain's problems—which I think are evident just by walking down the street of any British city—was to become more like Germany. Why can't a woman be more like a man, asked Professor Higgins in *My Fair Lady*. Why can't the British (or the French or Italians, for that matter) be more like the Germans?

It is always pleasant to have one's ideas overturned, for it is reassurance that one is not yet quite brain dead—an important consideration at my age (75). I had this pleasant sensation while reading Wolfgang Münchau's excellent book, *Kaput: The End of the German Miracle*. Unfortunately, it was written and published before the advent of Mr Trump to the White House, but I don't think that this event would have affected very seriously his basic thesis.

The first thing to say about his book is that it was written in English and one cannot but admire a man who writes so fluently in a language that is not his own. I know that there have been great writers who have written in languages that were not native to them—Joseph Conrad, for example, who was one of the very greatest English prose writers of all time, which is to say since English prose existed, and that English was his third or possibly his fourth language. But I, who have struggled with foreign languages and could just about make myself understood in written French or Spanish, cannot but admire Mr Münchau for his English that one would not know was not native to him.

He is a sensible man, not a fanatic of any kind. It is his view that German decline, which seems to have been so sudden

to casual observers, is not of recent date, even when the statistics did not look bad. The German state is highly corporatist, such that the government, the industrialists, the unions, the universities, the civil service, the journalists and broadcasting media, are all in bed together, so to speak. Germany is a country that suffers more than most from groupthink, the tendency of people to confirm each other's opinions, provided it sticks to the mean, and to regard anything else as outlandish and almost as the product of mental defect.

It all seemed to work for quite a long time. Germany was rarely in the news, or at least the headlines, and this was all to the good: a country is in the news when it is in crisis, not when everything is ticking along smoothly enough. In short, Germany was boring, which with all due respect is how most of its neighbours would like it. The Germans themselves valued consensus because, when there is no such consensus, there is trouble.

A corporatist society, however, is inflexible. It cannot change course quickly when the need arises. Moreover, its decision making is centralised, which can on occasion be advantageous—if the correct decision is made. One example of this was the French decision to develop nuclear energy. The country is now the largest exporter of electricity in the world, and 70 per cent of its electricity is generated by nuclear power stations. In the present world situation, this seems very far-sighted.

But when decisions in a centralised or corporate system are wrong or foolish, things can go very wrong indeed. Germany, according to Mr Münchau (and not just him) bet against the digitalisation of the economy, with the result that it lags seriously behind other countries in the most up to date technologies. (Germans joke that when they are on the train to the Netherlands, they know they have entered—there is, of course, now no border post between the countries—when their

mobile telephones begin to work.) The whole establishment was united in its blindness.

Complacency is a large part of the explanation for this inertia and the failure to predict or recognise future trends. Germany continued to do what it had long done supremely well, but the problem was that this belonged to the economic past, not to the future. It also thought—again according to Mr Münchau—that its enormous trade surpluses were a sign of nothing but strength and political good sense and therefore clung on to making them for dear life. It neglected to invest in its own infrastructure which is now conspicuously bad. The roads and bridges are crumbling, the trains (which I remember as punctual to the point of obsession) are now the worst in Europe for keeping time.

Germany is not the first country in the world to have suffered from complacency. Because Britain was the first country in the world to industrialise, and was for decades the workshop of the world, it did not see any need for change, or that other countries would soon catch up and surpass it. The Germans, by betting on an unchanging or eternal Chinese market, did not realise that the Chinese would soon not merely buy their products but copy them and find a way to manufacture and improve on them. They were like an author who entrusted his manuscript to a known and habitual plagiarist.

There is another problem, one that Germany shares with many western countries, namely an ageing population and a birthrate below replacement level. But it is also reluctant to a country of mass immigration, and is unwelcoming even by other countries' standards, which are not necessarily high. Mr Münchau, who moved to England to work, was not always welcome: but there was nevertheless more openness to him a foreigner than he would have found as a foreigner in Germany. If he went for a job in England and was the best man for it, no one would refuse to give it him because he was a foreigner. I must say that it came as something of a relief—and a surprise—to hear

my country favourably compared in some respects to another, which is to say another that is not totally negligible.

I think Mr Münchau is rather too sanguine about the effects of much greater immigration into Germany would have. He seems to take the view that an immigrant is an immigrant, as a man is a man, and to that extent it matters not where he is from or what cultural baggage he brings with him. He has an economistic view of mass immigration: 500,000 workers are needed, so you import 500,000 workers, as you would import any other commodity if needed.

But humans are not sacks of cereals, or even megawatts: and even the importation of those two commodities has strategic implications. After all, Germany made itself dependent on Russian gas at discount prices in order to keep up its manufactures for export (in an act of almost incredible stupidity, Germany closed its functioning nuclear plants just at the time when energy became scarce and expensive, a suicidal act which the morally corrupt Mrs Merkel permitted merely to save her coalition and preserve herself in power, and which will justifiably earn her the derision of her countrymen for a very long time). I think Mr Münchau has blind spots of his own—as, no doubt, we all do.

But if Mr Münchau's diagnosis is in general correct, as I have little doubt that it is, it serves as a warning to many other countries—including the United States, which, because of its long period of dominance, has had and has complacencies of its own. Of all allied qualities that are destructive of power, that if hubris and complacency is the worst. Underlying that, no doubt, is our old friend and enemy, human nature.

That is why Roman emperors had a clown whispering in their ear, to remind them of their mortality. Not that they took any notice.

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Theodore Dalrymple's latest books are *Neither Trumpets nor Violins* (with Kenneth Francis and Samuel Hux) and *Ramses: A Memoir* from New English Review Press.

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