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The National, the European, and the Cosmopolitan

‘Goethefeier’ 1932 and the Problem of Contesting Categories in European Culture

Faced with a tumultuous political position in the world right before the national socialist takeover in Germany, the German government and the Goethe Society of Weimar celebrated *Goethefeier* in 1932 – the hundredth death anniversary of German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1842). The organisers aspired to make it a world-festival (*Weltfeier*) – an international occasion to champion the notion of ‘German national genius’ and the supremacy of Germany as the ‘nation of poets and thinkers.’ The French response to it was embittered by territorial conflicts around the occupation of Rhineland. The rector of Paris-Sorbonne claimed, it was time for the French to rehabilitate Goethe from the Germans. Earlier, Friedrich Nietzsche termed Goethe an ideal ‘good European.’ Therefore, in the age of bitter national rivalries, what did it mean for the German nation in the early 1930s to celebrate a world-festival dedicated to a ‘good European’? How did the organisers and the receptive audience of *Goethefeier* 1932 manoeuvre certain crucial questions: which nation owns a cultural figure? Who is in a position to rescue that figure? Drawing from a wide array of archival findings, this lecture is a methodological reflection on a set of conceptual questions: what is strictly national, what is European, and what is cosmopolitan / global in the study of European cultural processes?

Public Lecture

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