

## Chapter 8

# The Cult of Genius and Its Critics: Edgar Zilsel and Otto Neurath



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**Abstract** Edgar Zilsel and Otto Neurath were among the few intellectuals who subjected the concept of genius to critical examination during the first half of the twentieth century. Although they lived during the same time and their intellectual and political biographies cross at numerous points, Zilsel and Neurath worked on their examinations at different times. Zilsel first dealt with the topic in 1918 in his remarkable book, *Die Geniereligion (The Religion of Genius)*, and then again in 1926, in more detail, with a work on the origin of the genius concept: *Die Entstehung des Geniebegriffes (The development of the idea of Genius)*. Neurath, on the other hand, addressed the topic only after he emigrated (in 1934 resp. in 1940) and in a different historical context: he dealt with the figure of the genius in connection with his reflections on the causes of National Socialism and its positive ideological acceptance within wide parts of German (and Austrian) society. Despite different starting points and, at least partly, different cognitive interests, their texts and thoughts on the concept of genius have a lot in common, that is, despite the different thematic, cultural, and political contexts of their reflections, both Edgar Zilsel and Otto Neurath understood that the idea of genius was not only a cultural question but also a political one.

**Keywords** Vienna circle · German *Sonderweg* · Religion of genius · Cult of personality · National Socialism · German climate

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## 8.1 The Cult of Genius

The idea of genius was a very influential concept at the turn of the twentieth century. History writing at this time focused frequently on the depiction of great, genius-like men. The biographies and life stories of inventors and discoverers, researchers and statesmen, emperors and generals, as well as religious founders and artists, were popular and successful. Both fictional and factual biographies of geniuses were met with great interest by the reading public (Köhne 2014, 58–113). This interest in genius was not a new phenomenon, however, having already experienced a heyday during the Romantic era. In the nineteenth century there were, for instance, biographies of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe that praised their object as an unreachable great man; and Goethe himself had celebrated Shakespeare as a singular genius many decades before. Many biographies of geniuses written by poets, scholars, and scientists were published at the turn of the twentieth century. In *Genius and Character (Genie und Charakter, 1900)* historian of literature Robert Saitchick portrayed Shakespeare, Lessing, Goethe, Schiller, Schopenhauer, and Wagner. A publisher's list of genius biographies from 1900 – *Geisteshelden* – included (in addition to those mentioned above), Carlyle, Darwin, Jahn, Luther, Mozart, and many others (Köhne 2016, 116).

The celebration of genius-like individuals was not only a cultural but also a social and political phenomenon. Books on genius focused not only on poets, composers, scientists etc. The idea of genius was also an important element in the field of social organization, its hierarchy and order. Only one of the many examples is the three-volume history of the *Wandervogel* Movement by the controversial writer and philosopher Hans Blüher (1912a, b, c), in which he describes a male association characterized by outstanding, charismatic and ingenious leaders. Politically, the affirmative discourse on genius was *anti-democratic* in nature. It often went hand in hand with an elitist criticism of the masses, which was an important part of intellectual culture. Right-wing intellectuals such as the Austrian economist and sociologist Othmar Spann strongly polemicized against democratization and egalitarianism (Sontheimer 1962, 215).

Only a few intellectuals, such as the almost forgotten Julian Hirsch (1914), recognized the problem and started a critical discussion. Among those who subjected the concept of genius to critical examination during the first half of the twentieth century were Edgar Zilsel and Otto Neurath. Although they lived during the same time and their intellectual and political biographies cross at numerous points, Zilsel and Neurath worked on their examinations at different times. Zilsel first dealt with the topic in 1918 in his remarkable book, *Die Geniereligion (The Religion of Genius)*, and then again in 1926, in more detail, with a work on the origin of the genius concept: *Die Entstehung des Geniebegriffes (The development of the idea of Genius)*. Neurath, on the other hand, addressed the topic only after he emigrated (in 1934 resp. in 1940) and in a different historical context: he dealt with the figure of the genius in connection with his reflections on the causes of National Socialism

and, if you will, its positive ideological acceptance within wide parts of German (and Austrian) society.

Despite different starting points and, at least partly, different cognitive interests, their texts and thoughts on the concept of genius have a lot in common. Moreover, they knew each other and had an intellectual exchange over a long period of time. In the interwar years, Neurath occasionally referred to Zilsel's sociological approach to the phenomenon of genius (Neurath 1930/1981, 364; 1931/1981, 499–500), and he even did so in a wartime essay (1941/1981, 912). Additionally, there are also references in his correspondence. In a letter to Bernhard Reichenbach (a brother of Hans Reichenbach), he wrote “that one could not find a hypothesis, which can use the term ‘GENIE’ consistently” and added: “There is a good paper by Zilsel on that subject. He has shown, that ‘GENIES’ appear, where certain occupations are acknowledged as proper by the ruling group” (Otto Neurath to Bernhard Reichenbach, April/May 1944, 12).<sup>1</sup> It is surprising, therefore, that Otto Neurath never explicitly referred to Zilsel's books and articles in his later writings that addressed this topic. Neither are there references to genius in the Neurath-Zilsel-correspondence between 1934 and 1940,<sup>2</sup> and there is no collection of earlier letters between the two.

## 8.2 Edgar Zilsel and Otto Neurath

There are only a few biographical texts on Edgar Zilsel such as those of Johann Dvořák in the introduction of his edition of *Die Geniereligion* (Dvořák 1990, 7–40) and the biographical chapter in his book on Zilsel (Dvořák 1981, 19–31). Additionally, there are an introductory essay by Wolfgang Krohn and Diederick Raven in their collection of Zilsel's essays, *The Social Origins of Modern Science* (Krohn & Raven 2000), and the memories of his son (Zilsel 2004), which were published in Friedrich Stadler's collection of essays, *Vertriebene Vernunft (Exiled Reason)*. The latter focused on the years in exile in the USA, where Zilsel eventually committed suicide in 1944. Only a few years ago, Christian Fleck (2015, 251–294) examined Edgar Zilsel's years in the USA.

So who was Edgar Zilsel? Born in Vienna in 1891, the son of a lawyer, he worked as an actuary after finishing his studies at the University of Vienna (philosophy, mathematics, and physics, graduating with a doctorate in philosophy in 1915). Later, he passed his teaching certification exam, started working as a secondary school teacher, and took a leave of absence in 1922/23 to teach courses at the *Volkshochschule* (adult education center) and lead specialist study groups (Filla

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<sup>1</sup>Correspondence Otto Neurath and Bernhard Reichenbach, Papers Otto and Marie Neurath, *Handschriftensammlung*, Austrian National Library (Ser.n. 1223–39 and 1223–40).

<sup>2</sup>Correspondence Otto Neurath and Edgar Zilsel (Microfiche), Papers of Otto Neurath, Institute Vienna Circle, University of Vienna (Source documents: Noord-Hollands Archief, Haarlem, Wiener Kreis Archief, Inv.-Nr. 321).

2001, 369). In 1923, he submitted his habilitation thesis at the University of Vienna. The basis of his thesis was his two-part manuscript, “Beiträge zur Geschichte des Geniebegriffes” (Contributions to the History of the Concept of Genius). The habilitation committee was divided in its opinion of his thesis (Stadler 1997, 569–571). In particular, the philosopher Robert Reininger and the educationalist Richard Meister were against Zisel. In their view, Zisel’s text focused too strongly on economy, was much too rationalistic and had, in the end, almost nothing to do with what they defined as philosophy. Most probably, however, there were not only purely scientific reasons. Meister, for instance, was a firm opponent of the progressive school reform advocated by Zisel. Also, both Reininger and Meister were part of a secret society-like, anti-Semitic interest group (called “Bärenhöhle” or “bear cave”) whose purpose was to prevent Jewish, liberal and Marxist scholars from being hired at the University of Vienna, as the work of Klaus Taschwer, in particular, has demonstrated (Taschwer 2015). The left Jewish intellectual Edgar Zisel was thus apparently a victim of this effort to exclude scholars from academic life on the basis of their worldview and family background. Zisel eventually withdrew his *Habilitationsschrift* and this prevented him from pursuing a career at the University (Dvořák 1990, 8–13; Taschwer 2015, 125–127).

During the interwar period, Zisel worked as an instructor at the adult education centres in Ottakring, Simmering and Leopoldstadt, as well as holding teacher-training courses at the Pedagogical Institute of the City of Vienna. He also participated in the discussions of the Vienna Circle and is often associated with the left wing of this group, together with Philipp Frank, Hans Hahn, Rudolf Carnap and Otto Neurath. According to the Manifesto “The Scientific World-Conception”, he was not a member but among the “authors close to the Vienna Circle” (Stadler & Uebel 2012, 107).

Between 1934 and 1938, he worked at various secondary schools (because his work in the adult education sector was no longer funded under the Austrofascist regime). In the year of the *Anschluss*, in 1938, he fled with his wife and son to England, and from there, travelled to the USA in 1939 (first to New York and later to the West Coast), where he committed suicide on March 11, 1944 (Dvořák 1990, 13).

The German philosopher of science, Wolfgang Krohn (1985), has divided Edgar Zisel’s work into three groups: first, there are the publications on the origins of the modern “ideal of personality” (*Persönlichkeitsideal*) and the cult of genius; second, there are the sociological analyses of ideologies; and third, there are his contributions to the origins of modern science. It can hardly be overlooked that, while these fields can be considered separately from one another, when taken together they reveal a clear program of research.

Otto Neurath was born in Vienna in 1882. He studied philosophy and economics among other subjects in Vienna and primarily in Berlin. Neurath first became known as a sociologist and, above all, as an economist. For instance, he is considered to be the founder of “war economics” and was a leading representative of the socialization theory after the end of the First World War. In Munich, he was appointed by the

Bavarian government as president of the Central Economic Office and started – but eventually failed – to socialize the economy (Sandner 2014, 122–143).

In the 1920s, he became a leading member of the Vienna Circle – to describe him as a “philosopher” is problematic – and a visual educator: he was the initiator and propagator of a picture language that originally bore the somewhat cumbersome name of “Vienna Method of Pictorial Statistics” and would later in the mid-1930s become known worldwide as *Isotype* (International System of Typographic Picture Education) (Burke et al. 2013).

Neurath was extremely active politically. He gave courses at the social democratic workers’ university (*Arbeiterhochschule*), and wrote regularly for socialist periodicals (Sandner 2019). Consequently, he emigrated in February 1934 and lived first in The Hague from 1934 to 1940, and then in Oxford (where he founded the Isotype Institute) from 1941 until his death on December 22, 1945.

Edgar Zilsel and Otto Neurath had many things in common: Both were associated with the Vienna Circle, both were active in popular and workers’ education, both were convinced socialists and compared notes with leading socialist politicians and political intellectuals such as Otto Bauer, the chief-theoretician of the Social Democratic Workers’ Party (SDAP) of Austria. The point of relating these short biographies is to illustrate the different stages of life they were in when they worked on their concept of genius.

### 8.3 Zilsel: Religion of Genius and Cult of Personality

Edgar Zilsel published his book *Die Geniereligion (The Religion of Genius)* in 1918. It was a time of radical change. In the same year, the Republic of German-Austria was founded. For the first time in Austrian history, there was universal suffrage and a number of progressive social policy measures (such as the eight-hour working day) were realized. The labor movement based its program on Marxist theories, and as a mass movement together with the Social Democratic Workers’ Party (SDAP), it was, without doubt, a powerful political player. In February 1919, the SDAP won the first post-war elections. At the same time, conservatism dominated in the Austrian provinces and, even in Vienna, right-wing intellectuals heavily criticized parliamentary democracy both before and after 1918. For right-wing conservatives such as Joseph Eberle (and many others) a political system that was dependent on the will of the masses was not capable of leading a community to order and achievement. Only a dictator could do that. “Eberle questioned the intelligence of the masses and lamented the weakness of a democratically elected government” (Wasserman 2014, 40). The anti-democratic right strictly believed in the need for a *Führer*, as Kurt Sontheimer pointed out in his classic book on antidemocratic ideas in the Weimar Republic (Sontheimer 1962, 268–269). In this respect, the political debates in the young Austrian Republic were comparable. Obviously, there was not only a *Red Vienna* (Gruber 1991) but, especially in the intellectual field and in the academy, there was also a *Black Vienna* (Wasserman 2014).

Although not explicitly in his work on the concept of genius, Zisel would continue to refer to this intellectual climate throughout his writings, especially in his articles for the theoretical journal of the social democratic movement, *Der Kampf (The Struggle)*. His very critical double-review of Karl Jaspers (*Die geistige Situation der Zeit*) and Hans Freyer (*Revolution von rechts*) is only one example (Zisel 1932).

Edgar Zisel planned his monograph *Die Geniereligion* as part of a larger intellectual project. There was an announcement in the original edition of 1918 which indicated the publication of a second, “historical-critical” part in the near future, including a table of contents. It took until 1926, however, until a different book, *Die Entstehung des Geniebegriffes*, appeared. In its preface, Zisel announced further publications on the topic (1926, v) but it remained his final book.

The book *Die Geniereligion* is divided into three parts: “The Dogmatics of the Religion of Genius” (*Die Dogmatik der Geniereligion*); “Genius Worship and the Genius Ideal” (*Die Genieverehrung und das Genieideal*); and “On Metaphysical Values. The Ideal of Objectivity” (*Über metaphysische Werte. Das Ideal der Sache*). The first two parts are divided into several subsections, in which the author presents the key terms of what he characterizes as the dogmatics of genius. These terms include posterity and the contemporary world, the brotherhood of genius, the notion of profundity, objectivity versus personality (*der Gegensatz Sache-Persönlichkeit*), the relation of genius worship and tolerance, the ideal of personality (*Persönlichkeitsideal*), hero worship and finally the significance of the genius ideal for human culture. Written in an entirely ironic or sometimes polemical tone, the book primarily criticizes the widespread admiration of genius of the time based on Romantic ideology that, according to the thesis, necessarily entails contempt for the masses.

In the subsection “Views of Posterity and the Contemporary World” (*Nach- und Mitweltvorstellungen*), Zisel examines how the genius’s work is essentially directed toward posterity, and not his contemporaries. The genius’s significance can only be recognized by later generations. Closely entwined with this emphasis on posthumous fame, the image of the misunderstood genius, unrecognized by his contemporaries, proves upon closer examination, as Zisel points out, to be the exception: most of the artists and scholars who were highly respected in 1918 had been also admired in their own day. This posthumous fame offers the ingenious artist or author some solace for the apparent lack of recognition. The public, on the other hand, reacts with religion-like admiration to the suffering of the genius in the face of his contemporaries’ scorn. The misunderstood genius can thereby become a martyr. Such an analysis supports Zisel’s identification of the worship of genius as a religion.

“The Brotherhood of Genius and the Notion of Profundity” (*Die Brüderschaft der Genies und der Tiefenbegriff*) form a further part of the dogmatics of genius. Was there a brotherhood of genius? Many geniuses failed to respect each other, as Zisel illustrates with the help of several examples. How does one recognize a genius? Since the masses were “genius blind,” in the opinion of the dogmatists of genius, and the geniuses themselves were not always able to recognize one another

as such, a third class of people were needed – the experts, the connoisseurs, the literati:

They are superior to mediocre people. They themselves are unproductive, but they mediate between their men and the masses, so some of the glorious radiance of the genius shines on them: one could call them the priests of the religion of genius. They are described, if not as ingenious, then at least as congenial. (Zilsel 1918/1990, 87)

This group often dismisses the discord among geniuses themselves as merely superficial, for geniuses are bound together by something entirely different: profundity (*Tiefe*). The concept of profundity, according to Zilsel, provides both the kernel and the protective shell of the brotherhood dogma. Thus, geniuses are united in profundity. For Zilsel, however, this profundity (of thought, of feeling, etc.) is nothing other than a term to conceal the lack of (academic) standards and surrender in the face of the question of truth.

Whoever values profundity more than truth perhaps makes a virtue out of necessity and elevates the lack of any objective standard to a principle; in this way, it is quite easy to rhapsodize about profundity. (Zilsel 1918/1990, 94)

But when people speak of profundity, Zilsel suggest, they are referring to the thinker, not the thoughts. It turns out

that the reasoning underlying the dogma of the brotherhood of genius is scarcely better than that of the dogmas of posterity and the contemporary world. We are now justified in doubting whether humanity can be so conveniently divided into the two classes of genius and the masses like the somewhat crude concept of the great man would like us to assume. (Zilsel 1918/1990, 100)

Because genius enthusiasm is always enthusiasm for an exceptional individual, a personality (*Persönlichkeit*), and never a matter or a cause (*Sache*), the genius worshipper, according to Zilsel, is *per se* the biased person (*unsachlicher Mensch*). But how are genius worship and tolerance related? The genius worshipper's concept of tolerance is ambivalent, for while tolerance is shown towards the genius, opponents are greeted with nothing but utter intolerance. At least as long as it does not concern another genius, a hostility between geniuses, like the one that existed between Friedrich Nietzsche and Richard Wagner. Genius worship, according to Zilsel, is based on the ideal of personality (*Persönlichkeitsideal*):

It is no surprise that the superior detective, the misunderstood artist, and the great inventor and naturalist are so popular in our films because they are also exceptional individuals (*Persönlichkeiten*) who, to the great satisfaction of the audience, can look down on their allies and opponents one moment with contempt and the next with compassionate love. (Zilsel 1918/1990, 133)

The concept of genius is thus based on a neglect of objectivity (*Sachlichkeit*) in favour of the experience of personality (*Persönlichkeitserlebnis*). What does this cult of personality mean for society and culture?

At first, the enthusiast believes the world has been turned upside down when operetta composers fare better than philosophers; then he feels it is morally superior to have tradesmen who want to spend their hard-earned money on the 'Merry Widow' attend a performance of the Ninth Symphony instead; and, finally, he is filled with indignation that a people go to



war out of petty interests rather than for Goethe, Beethoven, and Kant. To an unbiased mind, it seems that the tradesmen should spend their money on what makes them happy, that petty interests are the only ones for which petty-minded people will risk their lives, and that there is no delusion more dangerous and inhumane than taking something physical away from one's fellow man in order to pay him back with something metaphysical. If questions of war and peace were considered more in terms of "superficial" reasons of utility, if questions of the political and social order were regarded with less contempt for the masses and less metaphysics of personality (*Persönlichkeitsmetaphysik*), then this would be to the greater good of every human society. (Zilsel 1918/1990, 185)

Genius, however, can only serve as an ideal and role model if it is not unattainable:

Therefore, it appears that rather than focusing on the contempt for the masses, the far more important task today is to lend all those countless fellow humans ridiculed as mediocre by an unclear enthusiasm the *courage* to live life once again according to our harmless and carefree amusements – even when they are bourgeois – and to let dispassionate people (*sachliche Menschen*) dare to show their faces without fear of being accused of being superficial. (Zilsel 1918/1990, 190)

Zilsel's preference for objectivity (*Sachlichkeit*) over personality (*Persönlichkeit*), which is diametrically opposed to Karl Kraus's aphorism "Good opinions are worthless. It depends on who has them", raises a crucial question.<sup>3</sup> How should the value of a matter or a cause be judged? What are the criteria for determining "value"? Contrary to a powerful trend of his time, Zilsel's answer is clearly negative: nature is incapable of answering this question for us. For there are no values in nature. Those who stumble through the world of things and classify them according to their measure of merit miss their mark and inflict violence on living nature. Man alone assigns values, and thus all his value judgments are subjective and relative. Yet values can only be obtained by critical, rational, and objective (*sachliche*) examination. Zilsel warns against absolute values, however. Those who do not express absolute enthusiasm (for the genius), do not harbor absolute contempt for the masses.

In his later book of 1926, *Die Entstehung des Geniebegriffes*, Zilsel analyzed the development of the idea systematically from ancient world to early capitalism. The book is written less polemically, and the focus on the factual is expressed also in its written style. Although he published no more books on genius afterwards, Zilsel addressed the subject in a number of political essays. He discussed the relationship between the *Führer* (which he paralleled in some respects at least with the genius) and the masses, between individualistic and collective perspectives on history (Zilsel 1930a); and he analyzed the metaphysics of the genius as a sociological phenomenon (Zilsel 1930b) as well as an expression of Romantic ideology (Zilsel 1933). Interestingly, there are no references to the concept of genius in his articles on National Socialism, which he published pseudonymously (Richter 1933a, b).

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<sup>3</sup>"Gute Ansichten sind wertlos. Es kommt darauf an, wer sie hat" (Kraus, 1919/1986, 224).



## 8.4 Neurath: Genius and German Climate

It seems that Neurath, on the other hand, first took up the topic during his exile in England. Strictly speaking, however, this is only half the truth. Already in 1910, Neurath edited and translated together with his wife, feminist and socialist Anna Schapire-Neurath, Francis Galton's book *Hereditary Genius* into German (Galton 1910). The German title was *Genie und Vererbung (Genius and Heredity)*. It is often credited as a co-translation but Anna Schapire-Neurath had long since established herself as a professional translator, and Neurath's English at the time was still rather poor, so it was, most probably, her translation. In this book, Galton – in contrast to the Austrian philosopher Otto Weininger, for example – linked genius and ingenuity with heredity. In their introduction, both Otto Neurath and Anna Schapire-Neurath agreed with the author's thesis on genius and heredity but praised also his view on eugenics (Neurath & Schapire-Neurath 1910). The interesting feature about this is that these ideas do not show up in the later work of Anna Schapire-Neurath nor Otto Neurath despite their favorable foreword to the translation of Galton's book.

Otto Neurath's discourse on genius in his exile years was very different from this. Although he has an extremely long list of publications, there are hardly any texts among the hundreds of titles that bear any connection to this topic. The only exception are late newspaper articles. And yet this topic plays an enormously important role in his letters during his English years and in some of his unpublished texts. The term he used to talk about this topic was "German climate", which referred to an intellectual climate and tradition that, according to Neurath, had undergone a specific development in Germany (Sandner 2011, 2014, 284–290). The debate on a German *Sonderweg* (special path) comes to mind when reading his texts, although Neurath never used the term himself (and, in fact, it was introduced only after his death). Neurath wanted to show that certain attitudes and opinions had been able to develop in German literature and philosophy that, while not necessarily leading to National Socialism, had served as a base for it and could help explain why the Nazi-ideology was accepted so readily and positively by wide sections of society.

In a certain sense, Neurath was also reflecting on his own story or biography. A distinctive characteristic of his exile correspondence was that he was continually asking friends and acquaintances about their shared past in Vienna (Sandner 2014, 287–288). It could perhaps be said that he is thinking here of Ernst Mach's critique of the concept of self and its continuity, stability, and unity and applying it to his own biography.

In the exile years, Otto Neurath concerned himself with National Socialism. He had been observing for years from the outside, so to speak, first from the Netherlands and then from England. Otto Neurath's published texts offer only a small glimpse into the extent to which the reasons for the rise of National Socialism occupied his mind. While he did publish two articles pseudonymously in an emigrant newspaper, *Die Zeitung – Londoner deutsches Wochenblatt (The Newspaper – The London German Weekly)* (Schlosser 1944; Feltner 1945), the true importance of this topic to him first becomes apparent in the correspondence of this time. It offers a clear

picture of the intensity and the amount of energy he invested into advocating his thesis and trying to convince other people of it. His correspondence with German socialists Carl Herz and Bernhard Reichenbach, with former Viennese friends such as Dora Lucka or Josef Frank, with his sister-in-law Rosa Schapire, and with many others is full of reflections on the “German Climate.”<sup>4</sup> In addition, there exists a whole series of unpublished texts in which he addressed this issue and dealt with it in a variety of ways.<sup>5</sup>

In brief, his thesis was as follows: the rise and rule of National Socialism and its great support and acceptance among the people were the result of a specifically “German Climate.” According to Neurath, the two main features of this “human climate” – which, incidentally, was the title of one of the two articles mentioned above – were the idea of the genius and the categorical imperative. Throughout the history of culture, the figure of the genius had always been the embodiment of the extraordinary, the metaphysical, and sometimes even the demonic and was generally exempt from the rules of society. A genius could do things that ordinary people were not able or not allowed to do. He often associated the cult of genius specifically with Goethe – both as the author of *Faust* as well as a genius-like figure in the history of literature. The other, closely related side was Kant’s categorical imperative in which, as Neurath emphasized, the individual’s fulfillment of duty was valued higher than his own conscience. He was convinced that this mix of genius cult, on the one hand, and duty and obedience, on the other, created the foundation for the positive acceptance of National Socialist ideology.

Published in February 1945, the article “Das Genie und der kategorische Imperativ” (“The Genius and the Categorical Imperative”) is an unusual, essentially literary text (Feltner 1945). It focuses on three protagonists – Karl, Arthur, and Anna. The story is told in the first person from the point of view of Arthur (Arthur Feltner being one of the author’s pseudonyms), but it is largely a conversation between the three in direct speech. Neurath, who clearly shares Karl’s views, is obviously recreating a situation that he himself has experienced innumerable times as his letters, as previously mentioned, bear witness. Karl is Otto Neurath’s middle name, and he wrote several articles under the name of Karl Wilhelm in 1918/19. At one point, Karl says: “For the extraordinary person, deemed so by the others, the normal rules do not apply. He is the genius person, the demonic person, the person with intuition.” And the others? “They have their ‘categorical imperative,’ the feeling that they have to violate their own self if moral law requires it” (Feltner 1945, 7).

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<sup>4</sup>Otto Neurath to Josef Frank (1219/5), Otto Neurath to Dora Lucka (1221/37-42), Otto Neurath to Bernhard Reichenbach (1223/40), Otto Neurath to Carl Herz (1220/11), Otto Neurath to Rosa Schapire 1224/2–6). All documents are part of the Papers Otto and Marie Neurath, *Handschriftensammlung*, Austrian National Library.

<sup>5</sup>Neurath, Otto: “Das menschliche Klima Deutschlands” (204/ K. 65); “Eine Aussprache über das deutsche Klima” (204/K. 66); “Deutschlands menschliches Klima I: Der geniale Mensch und der kategorische Imperativ” (204/ K. 67). All documents are part of the Otto Neurath Papers, Noord-Hollands-Archief, Haarlem, Wiener Kreis Archief; “Vom deutschen menschlichen Klima” (Papers Otto and Marie Neurath, *Handschriftensammlung*, Austrian National Library, Ser.n. 42.317).

Of course, Neurath's analysis of the "German Climate" was not limited to Goethe or Kant; he also repeatedly quoted at length from authors whose world view was either closely related to that of National Socialism or who could be instrumentalized in this way, like Otto Weininger, Friedrich Nietzsche, Paul de Lagarde, Julius Langbehn, Hans Grimm, Oswald Spengler or Houston Stewart Chamberlain. His attack, however, struck at the heart of German literature and philosophy. But what exactly did Neurath's human climate (be it German or Austrian or English) mean? He was very skeptical about the idea of equating a human climate with a national character. However, he insisted that there was a close connection between certain features and attitudes expressed in philosophy or literature and the behavior of people. The human climate was a kind of ensemble of different attitudes and patterns of behavior. The fact that the climate of a country influenced the people living in it did not necessarily entail that all the people had read the respective literature. Of course, this was not the case. However, it did allow the literati to draw on these thoughts to justify their actions while the masses were made acquainted with these thoughts through the newspapers or in school. In one of his unpublished papers, he describes this mechanism as follows:

It seems a more likely hypothesis that kind and friendly German boys and girls may become influenced by the over emphasis on certain things in the tradition of the 'best' German literature, and so be indirectly prepared for Nazidom, rather than that we subscribe to the Vansittart theory,<sup>6</sup> that on an average Germans are butcherbirds by birth. (Otto Neurath: Education in Occupied Germany – Intricate Problems. Otto Neurath Papers, Nord-Hollands-Archief, Haarlem, Wiener Kreis Archief 205/K. 74)

Neurath's thesis received only very limited support. Even the editors of *Die Zeitung (The Newspaper)* were careful to distance themselves in an introductory paragraph and hardly any of the people with whom he corresponded fully shared his views – some, in fact, were violently opposed. The correspondence with Rosa Schapire is only one of many examples.<sup>7</sup> Neurath, however, insisted on his view and wished to convince all those who were skeptical or opposed to his thesis on German climate.

The thesis of a specific "German climate" that led along a *Sonderweg* (special path) to National Socialism has certain weaknesses. If the Austrian climate was different, why did its people support National Socialism—not less than the Germans? Although Neurath seems to have been fully aware of Austria's role in National Socialism, the concept of the genius did not play any role in what he called the "Austrian human climate" (Schlosser 1944, 9). If a "human climate" develops over generations – could there be any chance for a short-term re-education? Against the background of his experiences with National Socialism, Neurath wanted, at any

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<sup>6</sup>Robert Lord Vansittart, former Permanent Under-Secretary of the British Foreign Office, expressed the view in his books *Black Record* (1941) or *Bones of Contention* (1945) that the majority of Germans were "unsuited to democracy" and that the outbreak of the Second World War could be attributed to their historically conditioned, exceptional aggressiveness.

<sup>7</sup>Correspondence Otto Neurath and Rosa Schapire, Papers Otto and Marie Neurath, *Handschriftensammlung*, Austrian National Library, 1224/2–6.

rate, to reconsider the entire mental, cultural and intellectual tradition. Neurath's approach here was radical in the truest sense of the word: he traced the inhuman, often irrational and metaphysical, back to its roots, with the aim of not only drawing straight lines to totalitarianism but also of showing which dispositions facilitate acceptance of National Socialist thinking and prevent the inhuman from being met with firm opposition. Of course, much of what fell "victim" to this attempt was considered "holy" by friends and former kindred spirits and was an essential part of their education and culture. In this way, Neurath partially maneuvered himself if not into isolation, then at least into a niche in which only a few friends and acquaintances were willing to follow him.

In the course of this analysis, Neurath also began to reconsider his own history. Especially in his correspondence with people whom he knew from his time in Vienna, he repeatedly asked his correspondents to supplement and confirm his memories. He asked about people and events in Vienna, about moods and mentalities, and over and over again, about anti-Semitism. The correspondence with his old Viennese friend Dora Lucka is probably the best example.<sup>8</sup> He came to see himself more and more now in his previous role as an outsider of a dominant political and cultural climate in which there was little sympathy for his views.

## 8.5 The Critique of Genius and Its Political Relevance

The "genius" was addressed as a godlike being, a demiurge, or Christ-like figure who, at the same time, labored in the pursuit of modern science and knowledge, wrote Julia Köhne in her book on the *Geniekult* around 1900 (Köhne 2014, 528). According to Zilsel, the discursive existence of the "genius" functioned on the basis of religious-dogmatic conditions and the postulated belief, admiration, and enthusiasm of the idolizing group. Zilsel described the "Geniereligion" as a response to de-sacralizing trends, as at once a conscious and unconscious strategy, created mostly by scholars and researchers, to justify anti-egalitarian politics and metaphysics. For him, the dominance of the "notion of the genius personality and of profundity" indicated a "severe danger" for the age (Zilsel 1918/1990, 234; Köhne 2016, 117). Otto Neurath connected the idea of the Genius directly with National Socialism but in contrast to some earlier writings, he did not refer explicitly to Zilsel's concept anymore. It was, of course, a great difference between the approaches that Zilsel published his books in 1918 and 1926, while Neurath reflected on the genius in the light of the experiences with Fascism and National Socialism. In contrast to many other émigrés, he insisted on the relation of German culture and Nazi barbarism. He rejected approaches that at first glance seemed to closely resemble his own such as

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<sup>8</sup>Correspondence Otto Neurath and Dora Lucka, Papers Otto and Marie Neurath, *Handschriftensammlung*, Austrian National Library, 1221/22–35, 1221/37–42.

that of Robert Vansittart, although he did not completely reject the Vansittart thesis of a particular German tradition of militarism and brutality.

However, there may be a surprising closeness of (parts of) his approach to that of someone whom he repeatedly included as a typical representative of German culture: Thomas Mann. Initially, Neurath referred to the author of *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man* (*Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* 1918). The later Thomas Mann, however, the emigrant, stressed the role of philosophical idealism, Romanticism and the romantic school as ideal preconditions for the Nazi ideology (Görtemaker 2005, 196–205, Mann 1945) – as Neurath did as well. Despite the different thematic, cultural, and political contexts of their reflections, both Edgar Zilsel and Otto Neurath understood that the idea of genius was not only a question of culture. It also had heavy political consequences.

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