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Social and Intellectual Disputes in Architecture and Civil Engineering in Germany during the Second Industrial Revolution

Abstract

During the so-called Second Industrial Revolution (ca. 1880-1930), engineers and architects in Germany were involved in a complex process of social and intellectual emancipation. They were trying to constitute themselves as a new professional and cultural elite, in fierce competition with existing elites, and they were also becoming interested in theoretical questions about technology and its relationship to such abstract entities as history, philosophy, culture, art, and the state. In my essay, I trace this joint effort on the part of technological experts for social upward mobility and systematic philosophical inquiry through the lens of architecture and civil engineering. Specifically, urban planning and its corresponding research, policy, and building practices brought together architects' and civil engineers' agendas with larger debates about politics, nation-state building, and theories of technology and industrial culture. I first outline institutional circumstances in which German architects and engineers found themselves during the era of high industrialism, then introduce a small, elite engineering association that was founded in 1909 exclusively for academically trained engineers, VDDI, and then introduce selected texts in the VDDI's periodical on building, planning, and the philosophy of technology. Philosophy of technology manifests itself in this context as an engineer's effort to relate engineering knowledge and work to the metaphysical and epistemic teachings of a canonical philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer. This engineer's work makes explicit the tensions in which technology, engineering, and bourgeois male selfhood found themselves in the industrial machine age, and how such tensions were negotiated through attempts at defining the terms Kultur, Technik, Bildung, and Bauwerk.

Keywords