

must be hammered out. That will keep the politicians busy for many months. It appears, though, that beginning July 1, 1983, the value-added tax, now at 13 per cent, will rise to 14 per cent, thus producing some 4 billion deutschmarks per year to finance the program. That rise, however, will have to be approved by a majority of the German states, or *Länder*. There will also be, as with the Reagan administration, a cut in social benefits—an unpopular step for a Socialist party chancellor to take. Thus the cut is likely to be minor, mostly involving a freeze on pension rates. Schmidt's most controversial proposal is to raise gas and fuel prices by July 1 of this year by roughly two cents a litre. Stiff opposition is guaranteed.

Yet there also is no doubt that the program will pass in some form. Germans of all parties recognize the need for action if they are to preserve not only their standard of living but social peace. A feeling of *angst* has already overcome many Germans who had never considered the possibility that some day there might be no work for them. They are willing to make sacrifices for jobs and stability. The gluttonous days of the last years seem somewhat sinful in retrospect. There are also ominous predictions from the extreme radical Right, a small fraction of the German political scene that nevertheless manages to arouse unwarranted fears that foreign workers will take their jobs. "There were no foreigners in our land and plenty of work for all of us Germans in Adolf Hitler's first years, when he faced much grimmer prospects," thundered a right-wing Munich newspaper. Quite true. And the Fuehrer also produced thirty years of employment just cleaning up the debris of the Thousand-Year Reich.

Alfons Heck has written extensively on Germany, past and present.

EXCURSUS 4

Robert J. Myers on THE LIMITS OF TRUTH

"Truth and Its Limits: Public and Private Domains" was the theme of a recent all-day conference sponsored by the Columbia University Center for Psychoanalytic Training and Research and the Association for Psychoanalytic Medicine. "Are changes in standards of truth-telling a response to competing values, a realization that 'absolute' truth may be only a myth?" the conference asked. "Or are they signs of a pervasive developmental disability, rooted in social disorganization and family pathology? Do different realms of human behavior such as medicine, law, politics, and social relationships have their own standards of truth-telling, and can we tolerate this kind of ethical relativism?"

If the distinguished panelists are to be considered the last word on this issue, relativism carried the day. Final score: Relativism 10, Absolutism 0 (in a field of two moderators, six panelists, and two discussants). These psychotherapists, doctors, and writers considered too much truth a bad thing for both personal and public affairs. As for lying, it was seen as a sort of philosophic salve, soothing the otherwise itchy problems that might overwhelm our public and private relationships and our medical practitioners. Lying not only offers the possibility of enriching dreary, translucent lives but sometimes lubricates the track between capability and achievement.

Our consciences are formed during our first half-dozen years under the influence of family and environment. The moral system of the larger society, however, is not as static. Thus youth, inevitably struck by the "George Washington syndrome" ("I cannot tell a lie"), should not be discouraged about its prospects in the world out there; the superego may yet come 'round.

This view of truth and morals merely grazes a complicated issue. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in *Ethics*: "'Telling the truth'...is not solely a matter of moral character, it is also a matter of correct appreciation of real situations and of serious reflections upon them. The more complex the actual situations of man's life, the more responsible and the more difficult will be the task of 'telling the truth'...[C]ontinual progress in learning to appreciate reality is a necessary ingredient in ethical action." Yet it is our very capacity to lie that leads us to respect the truth, observed Willard Gaylin, president of the Hastings Institute. Said Gaylin (in agreement with Aristotle), man's full political development requires involvement in the political community, for which truth is an important but not the highest virtue.

The pressures to lie in modern society have increased for at least two reasons: (a) Certain customs and taboos (such as not discussing politics, religion, or sex) have been so eroded that social balm needs to be applied more often through evasion and deception; and (b) the world's complexity has strengthened the notion that truth is ambiguous and that privacy, manners, and even secrecy have their positive side.

The afternoon session focused mainly on the public sphere. Perhaps participants anticipated that a different standard of truth would be presented, reinforcing the dualism between private and public standards once articulated by the Italian nationalist Cavour: "If we had done for ourselves what we did for Italy, what scoundrels we would have been!" Rather, the standard for public conduct actually seemed higher than that for the private sphere. For example, Dr. Sisella Bok, author of *Lying*, dwelt on the frightening manner in which public officials can exercise power against their critics by either failing to respond to charges or withholding pertinent information—the silence that distorts truth. One recalls here Hans J. Morgenthau's lament: "For those who have made it their business in life to speak truth to power, there is nothing left but to continue so to speak, less frequently perhaps than they used to and certainly with less confidence that it will in the short run make much of a difference in the affairs of men."

Poll-taker Daniel Yankelovich, a participant, also referred to the arrogance of ruling elites, who effectively "distance" and thereby dehumanize American citizens by placing them in various nonpersonal categories—consumers, youth, women. Such elite codes, he felt, "pointed a dagger" at communal living." This distancing and dehumanizing process is also at work in international relations, particularly in regard to U.S. attitudes toward the Soviets. Senator Henry M. Jackson (D-Wash.) alluded to this on April 25 when he suggested the creation of a jointly manned communication center. At least we would be talking to each other, understanding that Americans and Russians must share life on this planet. Perhaps we would even come to recognize with Bonhoeffer the relationship between reality and ethical action.

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