

## On the Fourth Issue of Weltbühne

*Berlin, August 18, 2025.*

The relaunch of Weltbühne earlier this year has, from its very first issue, been accompanied by controversy and uproar. That was to be expected when a new magazine enters the media landscape with the ambition of challenging the established giants of journalism. Especially with an editorial duo as politically opposed as ours.

The uproar itself is a telling reminder of what unites the German feuilleton (i.e. cultural establishment) and the social media mob alike: it erupts whenever narrowing boundaries are questioned, whenever social developments outside the majority opinion are explored, or when even democratically legitimate minority positions are challenged. For us, this uproar is an invitation to discourse, a passionate, but ultimately respectful exchange of positions. Philosophically, it draws from industry and science: mistakes lead to knowledge, and knowledge leads to progress. The strict avoidance of mistakes, by contrast, leads only to stagnation.

With the current, fourth issue of Weltbühne, we will no doubt provoke uproar again. Partly because of the selection of brilliant minds such as Ralf Stegner and Michael Brie, leading thinkers of their respective parties – the Social Democrats and the Left – who have long positioned themselves independently of the prevailing zeitgeist.

Or take, as a prime example of the German feuilleton's own uproar, the world-renowned artist Ai Weiwei, disinvented by Die Zeit, whose previously unpublished text now appears in Weltbühne. In it, he pays his respects to Germany with dignity: sovereign, yet unsparing.

At the same time, we ourselves have, through our still-evolving editorial processes, particularly the coordination between the two publishers, sparked another controversy. Would David Engels' contribution have made it into the issue had all the information been on the table? Probably not. And yet here it is: an essay on AI as a possible substitute for human relationships. It is less the text itself than the author's person and political orientation that trigger debate, not only among our editors. At the same time, the presence of such a contribution opens up an opportunity: to confront a much-discussed contrary position directly. Readers are free to negotiate their own stance. And we are confident that social democratic and leftist positions hold their ground effortlessly.

How far Weltbühne should or should not give space to thinkers associated with the intellectual right is a question we debate intensely. We are not alone in this; these questions of boundary-drawing also define the political discussion itself. What is clear to us, however, is that positions which seek to curtail universal freedoms, propagate exclusion, or classify people based on origin or identity will find no place in our pages.

This also raises the question of how best to honor the legacy of Tucholsky, Ossietzky, and Budziszlawski in the 21st century. Put in market terms: is Weltbühne at risk of being a deceptive label, merely a façade, or, conversely, would the absence of right-wing positions reduce us to a one-dimensional leftist zeitgeist magazine? Are we one voice, or many?

We also reflect on what follows from drawing rigid lines of exclusion versus cultivating debate. Back then, before the end of the first Weltbühne, rigid exclusions ended in catastrophe.

# **Die Weltbühne**

Perhaps Ai Weiwei himself offers a hint, when asked why he lives and works in Kyiv. His answer: "Where else? Ukraine is under pressure, and the oppressed must be supported." It mattered to him to state clearly how grateful he is to Germany and the West for the freedom he enjoys as an artist. That democracy carries with it freedom of art and freedom of expression. And that these universal values must be defended not only in Ukraine.

The Editors