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# Review of Goethes politisches Denken und Handeln im Spiegel seiner Amtlichen Schriften: Eine politikwissenschaftliche Analyse

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# Review of Goethes politisches Denken und Handeln im Spiegel seiner Amtlichen Schriften: Eine politikwissenschaftliche Analyse

## **Abstract**

Goethe's *Amtliche Schriften* document in great detail the many responsibilities he undertook during his public service in Weimar, which began in 1776 and continued for decades following his return from Italy. Whether one is familiar with this side of Goethe or desires to learn more about it, Wolfgang Pollert provides a welcome contribution to this area of Goethe studies, one which still remains largely unexplored. As the title suggests, Pollert's study is not a literary analysis. While there are a few brief references to *Faust*, *West-östlicher Divan*, and the *Wilhelm Meister* novels, the author concentrates primarily on Goethe's official writings and related texts. He situates them within the larger contexts of both Weimar and Goethe's lifelong engagement with politics. The first five sections, which vary substantially in length, cover the following topics: "Der historische Hintergrund," "Goethes Jugendzeit," "Von Frankfurt nach Weimar," "Goethe und die Politik überhaupt," and "Goethe in politischen Ämtern." These eighty-seven pages provide a backdrop against which to view Goethe's decision to accept the position of Geheimer Legationsrat offered to him by the then eighteen-year-old Duke Carl August, eight years his junior. The last of the sections listed above gives a concise summary of Goethe's duties during the decade leading up to his Italian trip. In addition to his seat on the Privy Council (*Geheimes Consilium*), Goethe was tasked with overseeing the *Bergwerkskommission*, *Wegebaudirektion*, *Kriegskommission*, and *Ilmenauer Steuerkommission*. Throughout his study, Pollert emphasizes Goethe's prowess in financial matters, which he utilized with respect to his duties in Ilmenau, where he dealt extensively with taxation and the revival and operation of its mine.

## **Disciplines**

European History | European Languages and Societies | German Language and Literature

## **Comments**

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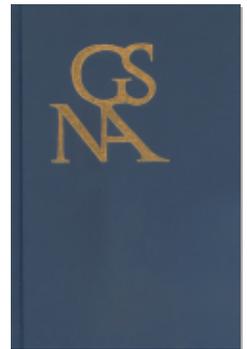
**Goethes politisches Denken und Handeln im Spiegel seiner Amtlichen Schriften: Eine politikwissenschaftliche Analyse (review)**

William H. Carter

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of the book justifies its beginning *in medias res*, since the general thesis emerges quickly enough and since little is presupposed from chapter to chapter. The reader comes away both with a thorough background in varying interpretations of *Elective Affinities* from two centuries, as well as a new perspective on the text—a welcome addition to already voluminous scholarship and an altogether auspicious beginning to Bucknell University Press's "New Studies in the Age of Goethe."

Stanford University

Adrian Daub

Wolfgang Pollert, *Goethes politisches Denken und Handeln im Spiegel seiner Amtlichen Schriften: Eine politikwissenschaftliche Analyse*. Munich: Akademischer Verlag München, 2004. 349 pp.

Goethe's *Amtliche Schriften* document in great detail the many responsibilities he undertook during his public service in Weimar, which began in 1776 and continued for decades following his return from Italy. Whether one is familiar with this side of Goethe or desires to learn more about it, Wolfgang Pollert provides a welcome contribution to this area of Goethe studies, one which still remains largely unexplored. As the title suggests, Pollert's study is not a literary analysis. While there are a few brief references to *Faust*, *West-östlicher Divan*, and the *Wilhelm Meister* novels, the author concentrates primarily on Goethe's official writings and related texts. He situates them within the larger contexts of both Weimar and Goethe's lifelong engagement with politics. The first five sections, which vary substantially in length, cover the following topics: "Der historische Hintergrund," "Goethes Jugendzeit," "Von Frankfurt nach Weimar," "Goethe und die Politik überhaupt," and "Goethe in politischen Ämtern." These eighty-seven pages provide a backdrop against which to view Goethe's decision to accept the position of Geheimer Legationsrat offered to him by the then eighteen-year-old Duke Carl August, eight years his junior. The last of the sections listed above gives a concise summary of Goethe's duties during the decade leading up to his Italian trip. In addition to his seat on the Privy Council (Geheimes Consilium), Goethe was tasked with overseeing the Bergwerkskommission, Wegebauverwaltung, Kriegskommission, and Ilmenauer Steuerkommission. Throughout his study, Pollert emphasizes Goethe's prowess in financial matters, which he utilized with respect to his duties in Ilmenau, where he dealt extensively with taxation and the revival and operation of its mine.

Goethe's efforts to revive the mine at Ilmenau represent his greatest undertaking during his time as a public official. Pollert dedicates a lengthy section to "Goethe, Ilmenau und die praktische Politik," in which one sees the trials and tribulations associated with this mining venture. Goethe first visited the mine in 1776 during his first of twenty-eight trips to Ilmenau. On February 24, 1784, residents celebrated the reopening of the mine, and Goethe gave a short speech. After a religious service the locals and their children proceeded to the groundbreaking ceremony. Pollert describes Goethe's role as follows: "Schreiber reichte Goethe eine bergmännische Keilhau, mit welcher der Herr Geheimrat den ersten Hieb vollbrachte, worauf die Menge eine dreimaliges 'Glückauf' ausrief. Anschließend wurde aus jedem Stande einer zum Hieb mit der Keilhau aufgefordert, auch die Kinder mußten sich beteiligen" (103). Unfortunately for all involved, neither religious conviction nor good fortune would lead to the lasting success of the endeavor. A combination of fiscal problems and an underground collapse ultimately brought about the end of the Ilmenau mine.

As noted above, Goethe also oversaw tax matters in Ilmenau. Goethe's *Amtliche Schriften* in this area show his interest in the history of taxation as well as his efforts to simplify the tax system, which was inefficient, had been prone to abuse by tax collectors, and unduly burdened the poor. Following his first encounter with Ilmenau taxation issues in 1777, he remained actively engaged in this area until 1805. In a July 10, 1793 letter, Goethe writes: "Über Ilmenau freue ich mich. Wenn die Vor- und Ausarbeitungen des Steuerwesens vollbracht sind wird es ein angenehm Geschäft seyn das Ganze zusammenzuziehen zu ordnen und einen Plan für die Zukunft zu machen" (132-33). By highlighting Goethe's sustained engagement with Ilmenau, Pollert broadens the scope of critical inquiry and adds a further dimension to the study of Goethe's literary works.

After his return from Italy, where he had followed the progress of the Ilmenau mine from afar, Goethe undertook a variety of new official duties. While he retained his seat on the Privy Council, he turned his attention to the Schloßbaukommission, Wasserbaukommission, Theaterkommission, and a special department called the "Oberaufsicht über die unmittelbaren Anstalten für Wissenschaft und Kunst in Weimar und Jena." Goethe and his colleagues were also involved with various aspects of the University in Jena, where Schiller, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel taught between 1794 and 1807. Following a short section dedicated to the Italian journey, Pollert introduces the second phase of Goethe's public service and considers some of the more controversial views he espoused, for instance, his efforts to limit freedom of the press. He does not, however, address W. Daniel Wilson's *Das Goethe-Tabu: Protest und Menschenrechte im klassischen Weimar*, a book that certainly deserves consideration within this context. Pollert then (re)turns to the official writings, providing a useful introduction to them and the unique challenges that they pose to scholars not versed in the *Stilus curiae* in which they are written and which itself became a point of discussion within the Privy Council. Despite the Duke's wish to reform the use of *Kurialstil*, there was resistance from all sides.

Over the course of the next hundred pages, Pollert describes Goethe's *Amtliche Schriften* from both before (1776-86) and after the Italian trip (1788-1819). In addition to the topics mentioned already, Pollert details Goethe's role in city planning and project management during the 1790s. In the area of arts and sciences, the following were under his purview: a drawing school, institutes for botany and chemistry, a number of libraries, a natural history museum, an anatomical cabinet, an observatory, and a veterinary institute. Pollert briefly considers some of Goethe's letters and diary entries related to his public service, then concludes with an analysis of his politics from a contemporary perspective. He takes as case studies documents relating to the Ilmenau mine, taxation and finance, the textile industry, and the *Fürstenbund*. While a great deal more could be said of Goethe's politics, the ca. 150 official documents that Pollert analyzes demonstrate that during his tenure in Weimar, Goethe had abundant opportunity to test his old motto, which Pollert cites in two of his letters from July 1782: *Hic est aut nusquam quod quaerimus*. This adage, borrowed from Horace, applies well to Goethe's decades of public service and its related documents.