

Florian Bock:  
Der Fall »Publik«

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In Catholic collective memory even today, the weekly newspaper *Publik* is considered *the* symbol of the conflicts over diversification and democratization within German Catholicism. The controversies about the paper's »fate« that occurred at the time resemble those over the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* or the Essen *Katholikentag* (Catholic Annual Congress). The story of *Publik* epitomizes the contested reception of the Second Vatican Council in Germany at the end of the 1960s. This study examines the history and memory of that controversial case, illuminating for the first time the genesis, progression, and effects of Vatican II upon Church and Catholicism in Germany.

The »Catholic Weekly Newspaper« project (Katholische Wochenzeitung or KWZ) began in 1965 with an initiative – inspired by the euphoria over Vatican II – by Hans Suttner. Suttner, a lawyer, managed nearly single-handedly to take in a majority of bishops and lay representatives for his idea of a supra-regional, sophisticated weekly newspaper that would present a part of the »Church in the world of today« and demonstrate the »ordering of the world in the spirit of the Gospels.« When the first edition of the paper appeared in April 1968, managing director and publishing house director Suttner wrote (with a view to the still extensive Catholic press landscape): »This newspaper will endeavor to be a Catholic paper in the kind of elemental manner that enters almost no-one's consciousness anymore when 'Catholic' is mentioned.«

This appeal to the roots of the word »catholic« in the sense of a turning toward the temporal world, of openness and a »profile of arguments,« broke with old Catholic bogeymen and structures, such as the presumed *Erbfeindschaft* (hereditary enmity) between the Catholic Church and the »liberal« press but also the notion of a denominationally self-contained church press. The KWZ also sought to address nominal Catholics who were unchurched and even non-Catholics. It opened up to a new contemporary culture of dialogue with the temporal world and was intended to epitomize the *aggiornamento* of Vatican II by setting out guidelines or even acting as a kind of »ship's pilot.« Unfortunately, and despite diametrically opposed developments in society, most of the bishops and laypeople continued to assume the existence a kind of basic Catholic consensus on the essential issues confronting society in the Federal Republic. They viewed *Publik* as the journalistic instrument for a mutual discussion of religious, political, and cultural themes. In such false expectations lay the roots of the project's ultimate failure.

Consequently, *Publik* became an object of dispute. While the bishops criticized the »red numbers« in the paper's sales balance as well as content of its pages, *Publik's* supporters defended the »spirit of the Council« against the interventions of the Church hierarchy. These conflicts exemplified the differing orientations within German Catholicism. A younger, intellectual editorial team attempted to assert their own interpretation of the conciliar *aggiornamento* against the resistance of a majority of bishops and despite a declining willingness

to buy the paper on the part of the readers. In practice, this meant that the newspaper was increasingly seen as »progressive« and »left-leaning.« *Publik*'s editors sounded out the boundaries of Catholicism in the Federal Republic but their conceptions of what was meant by »church« went beyond what the majority of German Catholics were willing to accept. As a result, *Publik* found itself caught between forces of »discontinuity« and »reform« in a controversy over the reception of Vatican II. At the cusp of the »modern« 1960s, an excess of expectations on one side collided with a defensive posture on the other.

In November 1971, the German Bishops' Conference ended the controversial media experiment and discontinued the paper. Motivated by large protest actions, individual groups from within the *Leserinitiative* (readers' initiative) *Publik* eventually attempted the systematic setting up of a successor paper »from below.« For younger Catholics in particular, *Publik* had long since become a symbol. In 1972, *Publik-Forum* was launched, a newspaper that – perhaps owing to its clearer theological and political orientation – inflamed the passions of German Catholicism far less and was therefore also less present in the public debate.

By going beyond the limits of an organization history of *Publik*, the present study enables new insights into the reception of the Second Vatican Council in a Germany on the threshold to the post-modern age.