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Articles

A "NATIONAL POLITICAL IDENTITY CRISIS" IN THE FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY?

By Stephen Kalberg, Harvard Center for European Studies

A widespread discussion around the theme of a "national identity crisis" has been taking place in the Federal Republic over the last 15 years. An intense debate has also arisen on the subject of one of its sub-themes: the question of a national political identity crisis.[1] This article examines the origins and major contours of this latter crisis and inquires whether it is, if scrutinized in reference to the issue of political stability, as severe as the prolonged discussion would lead us to believe.

A national political identity crisis never arose in the immediate postwar years. The energies of Germans throughout the fifties and early sixties were focused primarily on the reconstruction of a shattered economy. Rebuilding the nation and providing for basic needs constituted the dominant and all-encompassing concerns. Of those who pondered the Federal Republic's political development, many looked uncritically toward the United States. An extremely positive view of this country's political culture was widespread. The task set out for the Federal Republic, it was widely believed, involved an adoption of American institutions.

All this changed in the late 1960s. The Federal Republic had become, by this time, a wealthy

and even affluent society, indeed one prepared at last to assert itself on the international political stage. Its wealth provided the basic prerequisite for a large-scale redirection of energies away from fundamental survival issues and toward more abstract problems, such as the formulation of a clearer national identity.

At the same time, the original hope that a positive national political identity could be formulated through an emulation of American political institutions became increasingly problematic. In fact, the view that the United States could serve as an ideal model for the Federal Republic to follow became more and more discredited, particularly among the younger and more educated segments of the population. The heretofore uncritical attitude toward this country shifted drastically, to such an extent that by the late 1970s the United States had become for many a negative role model. The critique assumed a comprehensive stance: American political, economic, and cultural institutions were all dissected and found wanting.

A number of developments in the political arena served to undermine the idealized view of American political institutions. Whereas the Watergate scandal

became perceived in the United States as a purifying experience, many West Germans, along with other Europeans, generally understood it as an indication of a fundamental weakness in the American political system. To many Germans, the Vietnam War and the behavior of the United States toward its Latin American neighbors exposed American political institutions as thoroughly corrupted by the imperialistic character of monopoly capitalism. This negative perception of American politics was strengthened when, in the 1960s and 1970s, West German students and intellectuals became acquainted with the work of C. Wright Mills and others which indicated an extreme centralization of economic and political power in the hands of a few. American political institutions further lost their utopian aura when many citizens of the Federal Republic became aware that the levels of crime and violence in American society far exceeded those in Europe. Finally, the perceived general incompetence of the last three American presidents in the domain of foreign policy was starkly confirmed in the minds of many by the deployment of middle-range missiles in Europe.

Simultaneously, younger citizens of the Federal Republic came to cast a skeptical eye upon American economic institutions. The underdeveloped character of the American social welfare state indicated, to many, economic backwardness, especially in light of the new awareness in West Germany of the massive discrepancies in American society between rich and poor. American capitalism, perceived as totally unregulated in behalf of humane values, fostered a "survival of the fittest" mentality and a "dog-eat-dog" competitiveness fundamentally alien

to the ideals of democracy, justice, and compassion.

Finally, the perception of certain aspects of American mass culture by younger intellectuals also tended to indict the United States as a credible model for the Federal Republic to follow. This resulted in part from the traditional hostility of the German Bildungsbürgertum to mass culture as such, though in part also from the widespread belief that unregulated capitalism in the United States had intensified the onslaught of the consumer society to such an extent that Americans had become manipulated individuals incapable of autonomous decision-making. The caricature of American life as presented in its soaps and evening serials (such as "Dallas") confirmed an already widespread image of the typical American: a pathetic and unwitting victim of laissez-faire capitalism who had become hollow, calculating, and devoid of any ethical consciousness.

On the one hand, this manifold indictment indicates that, particularly among the educated in the younger generation, the entire surplus of good will and trust toward the United States built up in the immediate postwar period has been largely spent. On the other hand, the intensity and duration of the critique of American society from the late 1960s to the present has shown clearly that West Germany is a decidedly different country; advanced industrialism has not meant, despite the great influence of the United States, a simple convergence and homogeneity. Indigenous traditions in each culture remain strong and must be understood as possessing autonomous aspects and historically rooted legitimacies.

If the American role model is no longer a viable standard for the development of West German political culture, what German traditions can serve to replace it? We confront certain problems when we ask this question.

First, Germany as a nation-state in the modern sense existed only for a relatively short period (1871-1945) and must be viewed, if the long-term perspective is taken, as an historical interlude. Moreover, prior to the Federal Republic, the civic culture and the democratic values had remained decidedly underdeveloped; Germany had never experienced stable parliamentary government.

Second, Germany has never been the beneficiary of strong national political symbols. Traditionally, integrative symbols have been ones of high culture alone, of Kultur and the Kultur-nation: literature, music, philosophy, and art. German heroes toward whom no ambivalence is found -- Goethe, Schiller, Kant, and Hegel -- are all located within the domain of high culture. This directly opposes the American experience, where political actors available as ideal figures to all constitute the major figures of national integration: the Founding Fathers, Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt, and Kennedy.

Third, in contrast to earlier epochs, this weak sense of national political identity is no longer offset by a clear sense of national cultural identity. While Goethe and Schiller may still be read in the Gymnasium, modern music, film, dress and TV serials are very often not German but American. Modern -- as opposed to traditional -- popular culture in Germany is largely American. At the same time, the notion of a

German Kultur-nation, which heretofore provided a degree of symbolic integration, is dead.[2] For these reasons, it seems unlikely that a new national political identity in the Federal Republic can locate its sources in a firm national cultural identity.

Nor can a new national political identity discover its roots in the state. Unlike in the United States, the state is predominantly viewed as an agency -- an arena where given societal and cultural values are debated and fought out -- rather than as itself the creator of integrating values. As Helmut Schmidt said several years ago when addressing a group of clergymen, "I am here just to implement the values that you must define and articulate." Indeed, in the wake of renewed attention to the period of National Socialism by the younger generation and numerous political scandals, suspicion of prominent politicians who attempt to assert leadership appears widespread. Partly in response to this suspicion, the Greens have institutionalized a procedure by which their seats in the Bundestag are "rotated" among party members.

In sum, the development of a positive, national political identity out of an imitation of American society, a cultivation of indigenous German political and cultural traditions, or leadership by the state seems to me extremely unlikely. Indeed, as a result of the American political system's loss of prestige, the decline of the notion of a Kultur-nation, and the state's inability to play a strong integrating role, it appears at times that the old polarities are once again arising from their graves and becoming manifest as they did at the turn of the century when the romanti-

cism of the Jugendbewegung and the Kulturpessimismus of conservatives [3] stood opposite the Fort-schrittsgläubigkeit and democratic movements emanating from the left. A tremendous vacuum exists in the national political culture of the Federal Republic, one visible in a number of empirical indicators.

Germans, in international comparison, score low in national pride. As shown in a 1983 survey, only 23% of the younger generation were proud of being German, as opposed to 37% for all age groups. According to surveys taken in 1982, a high proportion of youth shows a willingness to emigrate -- 34% -- and only 35% indicate a readiness to fight for their political system. Moreover, hardly any symbols of integration can be found in contemporary Germany: the national holiday is highly contested, ceremonies play only a minor role, and no attractive capital city exists.

Nonetheless, despite this very clear national political identity crisis, the problem may not deserve as much commentary and bemoaning as it has received in the Federal Republic in recent years, particularly if this theme is examined in reference to its potential to unleash political instability. In certain ways no other nation is better equipped to deal with the problems presented by a weak national political identity without becoming unstable.

First, Germany has been a nation for only a relatively short period of its history. Much of that period has been either authoritarian or chaotic, and is remembered as such. Thus, a distinct ambivalence exists right from the start regarding the issue of a strong national political identity. Second, and more im-

portantly, regional or Länder identities have always been relatively strong in Germany and have served, in a sense, as a means of coping with an ambivalent and underdeveloped national political consciousness. A strong revival of regionalism is now taking place, as manifest in a new-found identification with local dialects, wines, cuisine, poetry, music, and customs. In the course of German history, attachment to a region and the almost mystical notion of Heimat have played much stronger roles in German literature than have the concepts of "nation" or "nation-state."

Germany is well prepared to deal with a weak national political identity for another reason: the privatization of German life and its continuing focus upon family, Freunde, and Stammtisch. These have traditionally constituted the arenas of real importance in life rather than the political realm. Although this privatization has been weakened in the postwar years, it nonetheless remains strong when viewed comparatively, forming a certain counterweight to any sense of loss perceived as a result of the underdeveloped national political identity.

Moreover, the underdeveloped sense of national political identity in the Federal Republic has several positive features, indeed ones which intellectuals in particular would be unwilling to sacrifice. An awareness of the world outside its boundaries is comparatively high in the Federal Republic. Daily and weekly newspapers carry comprehensive reports on events in other countries. This international tenor to West German journalism can be understood in part as compensation for an underdeveloped national politi-

cal identity and as an attempt to shatter the provincialism of regional identities. This broad attention to the rest of the world might well be sacrificed if the Federal Republic acquired a strong national political identity. In addition, the underdeveloped sense of national political identity protects the citizens of the Federal Republic quite effectively against worries regarding the unfolding of a new nationalism and the directions in which this might lead.

The creation of a positive national identity that implies political and social stability -- and Germans need to be reminded of this far less than Americans -- is a long and slow process that involves severe cultural changes. Having started from scratch in 1949 and overcome legacies that Americans have been spared and can scarcely imagine,[4] the Federal Republic has come a very long way on the path toward representative democracy, one that has been strewn with obstacles at every turn. Admittedly, all is not as it should be, and the burden of an incomplete political identity is not an easy one to live with; the Federal Republic is, far more than the United States, ein schwieriges Vaterland. [5] Nonetheless, in light of the accomplishments of the postwar period, the foreign observer is somewhat baffled by the extremely critical, one-sided, pessimistic, and even cynical tenor of the prolonged discussion on this theme in West Germany. An entire Weltschmerzindustrie [6] seems to have developed around this subject. Given the obstacles they have had to overcome, it is amazing that the West Germans have done so well. Indeed, the citizens of the Federal Republic have acquired a modern political culture despite a negative national

political identity. Doing so has involved a number of major accomplishments:

A) Conservatism in West Germany is now integrated into the democratic political process and is no longer anti-democratic and authoritarian, as was the case prior to World War II.

B) Anti-democratic movements from the left have also been assimilated into normal political channels. Thus, the Federal Republic has largely institutionalized polarized world views into parliamentary discussion. This is an accomplishment that the American nation can scarcely appreciate, given a single and consensual world view anchored in a unique lack of ambivalence regarding capitalism, competition, upward mobility and functional (sachliche) relationships.

C) Many citizens of the Federal Republic have become skilled for the first time in German history at using democratic means -- demonstrations, rallies, marches -- to assert political pressure upon elected officials. The "alternative culture" has been instrumental in this respect.

D) West Germans are well on their way toward developing a further set of skills necessary for the complete acquisition of a civic culture. These include all those intermediate skills between voting and demonstrating that allow the institutionalized application of political pressure: the spontaneous formation of interest groups and citizens' movements to assert political pressure at all levels of government upon elected officials, and the use of the petition and referendum rights. The mastery of these skills will eventually force the established political parties to amend practices that restrict participation.

Perhaps another ingredient is necessary for a stable political culture, one that is seldom noted in the academic journals and one that the West Germans have not yet developed far enough: a sense of optimism regarding the possibilities of asserting an impact upon political processes, namely an optimism that views "present" decisions as capable of being altered and improved upon in the future instead of as cast in concrete for all time. Such an optimism protects individuals who experience the normal setbacks and frustrations in political life from arriving at the conclusion that withdrawal is the only solution. Such a withdrawal, and the defeatism that accompanies it, always exists as the first step toward a questioning of the political system's legitimacy as such.

The incurable and unique "naive optimism" of the Americans -- that is, a subjective belief in their capacity to influence political processes that outlasts all objective defeats, as well as the conviction that problems can be solved -- may be the most difficult aspect of a stable political culture to acquire. Acquisition of this optimism may be particularly difficult for the Federal Republic: its political culture, characterized by an ambivalence toward pragmatism and romanticist inclinations, understands the political realm in utopian terms as a search for perfection.

If this optimism, as well as the intermediate skills just mentioned, could evolve, if the German economy succeeds in providing jobs for the younger generation, and if the established parties show a greater willingness to facilitate access to power by political newcomers, then even groups now outside normal political chan-

nels and extremely critical of the status quo will become integrated into a democratic -- and stable -- political system.

FOOTNOTES

1. For example, cf. Jürgen Habermas (ed.), Stichworte zur geistigen Situation der Zeit, 2 vols., Frankfurt 1980; Martin and Sylvia Greiffenhagen, Ein schwieriges Vaterland, Munich 1979; Wolfgang Pohrt, Endstation: Über die Wiedergeburt der Nation, Frankfurt 1982; Helge Pross, Was ist heute Deutsch? Wertorientierung in der Bundesrepublik, Hamburg 1982; Kurt Sontheimer, Das Elend unserer Intellektuellen, Hamburg 1976; Bernard Wilms, Die deutsche Nation, Cologne 1982.

2. The long-term, potentially destabilizing influence of this situation -- destabilizing because it inhibits the unfolding of distinctly German cultural values and systems of existential meaning adequate to their understanding of the modern predicament -- cannot be examined here. Again, due to indigenous traditions, Germans are not willing simply to adopt American materialism and the Horatio Alger dream as the basis for their world view.

3. Interestingly, romanticism and Kulturpessimismus have now shifted to the left side of the political spectrum.

4. Having never experienced feudalism, Kulturpessimismus, or a strong leftist tradition, the United States has the luxury of being spared such polarities.

5. Greiffenhagen and Greiffenhagen, Ein schwieriges Vaterland.

6. I am indebted to Hans Vorländer for this expression.

A German version of this article can be found in Asthetik und Kommunikation (Fall 1986).