

## ***Specters of the past and German identity: some remarks on the role of cultural institutions within the construction of national identity.***

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In the next 30 minutes or so, I would like to make some remarks on the role cultural institutions in Western Germany have had within the construction of national identity since 1945, and it will finally touch upon some useful empirical research results within this field of study.

Starting even well before the end of the Second World War, Germans as well as the occupying allied forces had already developed programs and schemes for a new, now democratic start of a German state after the fall of Hitler's *Drittes Reich*. Many of the plans, constructed by exiled Germans under the wings of the allied forces, are - not surprisingly - based on the first constitutional efforts for a democratic state in German history: the *Weimarer Republik*, the Republic of Weimar, in which - by the way - it was the constitution itself, that finally gave way to the destructive right wing forces and made it possible for Adolf Hitler to gain absolute power. Although there were many other ideas about a new democratic start of after-War-Germany, this vision of a constitution based to a great extent upon the political foundations of the Weimar Republic, was generally supported by the allied forces, among which the American influence was most powerful. So, again not surprisingly, the debates in the late 1940s between first of all the allied Ministers of Foreign Affairs, later on between a group of influential German politicians of that time within the so called "Parlamentarischer Rat", in which the form of a future German State was discussed and developed, followed this preference for Weimar as basis. But, finally, there were three major differences between the constitutions of 1914 and 1949, concerning the power of the president, that was considerably reduced, restrictions for political parties, that want to join the elections (the so called *5%-Klausel*) and the possibility to have the chancellor resign from his duties, provided that there is a new candidate and sufficient support.

Now, obviously, with the construction of these political outlines of the new state and with the foundation in the year 1949 of on the one hand the Eastern and Western Germany on the other, discussions about a new German self awareness and even more so the nationwide debate on national identity did not come to an end. On the contrary, an ever-increasing amount of contributions to the debate from different parts of society - although mostly intellectual - has emerged since then.

The question of a new, democratic national identity after the war that is discussed in this debate has of course always been connected with the role Germany played during the war. There are early examples of German intellectuals, who just after 1945 try to understand/come to terms with this role and who want to attach consequences for Germany to their description. To name just two: in the year 1948 Karl Jaspers published his well-known "Die Schuldfrage" and Theodor W. Adorno wrote his "Minima Moralia" and "Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft", in which (and I quote Günter Grass here from his paper, I'll come back to later) "zum ersten Mal Auschwitz als Zäsur und unheilbarer Bruch der Zivilisationsgeschichte begriffen wird."

But, besides these early examples, also later periods in German history after the Second World War are characterized by a strong interest in describing what is supposed to be Germany's national identity, again and again linking it to the previous period, they wanted to react against, the period of the Hitler-regime. If we take a closer look into these after-war-

discussions on identity, it becomes clear, that the atrocities of the past and their implications for present and future times are dealt with in different ways, according to the different generations involved: born before the war and involved in building up the nation in the 1940s and 50s, born during or just after the war and joining the discussion on identity in the turbulent 60s and 70s, or born *then* and thinking about what Germany stands for after 1989.

At this point I would like to borrow (boldly enough) the terminology Jacques Derrida uses in his article "Injunctions of Marx", in which he introduces the term hauntology, as an, in my opinion, elegant (but not really necessary) image or handle to grasp the background of a central issue within the identity debate, without - I must stress - linking it too strongly to Derrida's work itself.

Since the first publication in 1994 of his "Injunctions" there have been many efforts to describe literary and cultural traditions as such hauntologies. Derrida's article, first of all a political text, aiming at establishing a less theoretical approach of Marx, also includes a clear notion of what an academic scholar might undertake, when confronted with the past, as Derrida argues, an inevitable situation as influential concepts, authoritative individuals or intense experiences from the past cannot be forgotten or buried. On the contrary, they are best described as constant re-appearitions or revenants that haunt later generations and force them each time these *specters* appear anew to act accordingly. This fits well into the notion of a national debate in Germany after the devastating experience of what one might call the 'trauma of guilt'. The role of let us say the literary scientist is to explore new ways of dealing with the past. To quote Derrida: "The latter would finally be capable, beyond the opposition between presence and non presence, actuality and inactuality, life and non-life, of thinking the possibility of the specter, the specter as possibility. Better (or worse) he would know how to address himself to spirits. He would know that such an address is not only already possible, but that it will have at all times conditioned, as such, address in general. In any case, here is someone mad enough to hope to *unlock* the possibility of such an address."

During the almost 60 years since the Second World War has ended, the debate all generations have so far contributed to, has been constantly given an boost by events or social phenomena, that can be seen as such specters of the past. Within this debate, cultural institutions played a key role, and they still do. I'd like to take a closer look into three of them and will talk about the problematic reform of the educational system, the role of the press within the well known 'Historikerstreit' and the way, the past is still of dominant importance in the writing of many German authors.

### **German educational system and Denazification**

Not long after the division of occupied Germany in 4 territories, the allied forces started to restructure and reorganize German society. Following their own policy in their own territory (in spite of mutual agreements), the French and Americans turned out to be most convinced of the importance of a reorganization of the educational system and even developed programs to this end before the war was over. A quick look at the educational system under the Hitler regime makes clear, why French and American reformers were so convinced. Hitler and his National-Socialists gave preference to teachers who already taught a form of pre-national-socialist so called "Deutschkunde" during the Weimar Republic. The rest was forced to adapt to this kind of indoctrination behind the school-desks, or risked loosing his/her job, which resulted in a wide mix of highly fanatic Hitler-adepts and teachers who managed to adapt as little as possible.

Surely, this system had to be changed after the War. Obvious signs of real changes taking

place could already be seen as soon as 1945, stressing the urge to restructure, as some universities in the French zone (Tübingen and Freiburg) opened their doors, knowing that the success of a new ideology depends to a high degree on the acceptance by the youth, meaning school children and students. Hitler had already proven the usefulness of this principle, and now the allied reeducation of the Germans ran along a similar path.

This, as far as the theory of reeducation is concerned. If we now look at the real accomplishments, this policy could achieve in the years after the war, then the theory doesn't seem to have been very effective at all. Real changes in the school system only occurred in the late 1950s and 1960s. Before that, school children were still brought up using books their parents had used in school too, learning from teachers, who were used to talk about Germany's national-socialism as the only possible truth.

So, what went wrong? Why could not the changes be carried out? To answer this question, we need to look at the reeducational programs that were created: not surprisingly, they mainly focused on "Deutschkunde", which meant that especially literature as a school subject underwent a lot of changes within these plans for reeducation. As far as "Deutschkunde" is concerned, even emperor Wilhelm II thought, that the youth should be taught how to be a good German (whatever that may mean), and I quote: "Wir sollen junge Deutsche erziehen und nicht junge Griechen und Römer." So already then, a feeling of national belonging, even nationalism, was enforced through the school system (instead of let's say the classic, humanistic ideals of tolerance and peacefulness). During Weimar times this focus even got worse, so the system could grow out to be a kind of national-socialist didactic program, in which terms like "Rasse" and "Volk" gained their difficult and heavy laden meaning. A remarkable fact: when between 1981 and 1983 former teachers were asked, if they had noticed any difference between the way "Deutschkunde" was taught before or after 1933, they generally stated, that they hadn't noticed any change at all. And we might add, in spite of the changes, formulated by the allied forces, "Deutschkunde" and the "literary education remained for more than a decade what they had been for a long time.

Reasons for this delay were many and complex. But a few stand out, and they are well known. There is the process of restoration and conservatism during the first years of chancellor Adenauer's government, there is the Cold War and connected to that, the strong anticommunism in Western Germany at that time. Together they held up the process of democratization, they blocked the confrontation with a fascist past, so the educational reforms were hardly carried out and the process of reeducation came to an early end, which had its concrete implications for the average school day.

Literary education meant: avoiding confrontations with the past, although this was a political demand. Instead, schoolchildren read - according to anthologies used in school - texts of earlier idyllic, sort of Biedermeier, not realistic but romantic periods, whereas contemporary authors (who dared to write about the war period) only appear in the late 50s and the beginning of the 1960s. Also exiled authors (like Heinrich and Klaus Mann or Alfred Döblin) were not listed in these early anthologies. Instead, the children could read some authors of the so called 'Innere Emigration' considered to be safe (that is to say: conservative) enough, like Hans Carossa, Ricarda Huch and Werner Bergengruen.

As far as 'Deutschkunde' is concerned, here the new educational policy should have been to rehabilitate the Enlightenment with its ideals as the foundation of democratic thinking. But, as I stated before, irrational traditions were stronger. Furthermore, there were some practical problems too to support this delay. First, the allied, or let's say, the American denazification

made 90% of the schoolteachers lose their job. So, many schools were, to say the least, short of staff and were forced to fill the gap with teachers who had taught before the Second World War or who had been fired by the Nazis and were still alive. In the year 1947 more than 50% of schoolteachers were over 60 years old. And still, schools were 25% short. And secondly, there was a shortage of paper and consequently - restrictions in the distribution, which caused new schoolbooks to be printed only slowly and in relatively small amounts.

These delaying problems could only be overcome gradually. But reforming forces gained more and more power, whereas the conservative side had to lose their steady ground bit by bit. No sooner than halfway the 1960s, literary education could finally gain a form that suited a democratic society and was able to find the balance between tradition and modernity. So, to keep in mind: the reception of literature in schools was highly influenced by the will and the possibilities to carry out changes needed. And it was therefore of great influence within the question of establishing a new identity in Western Germany.

### **The role of the press; the 'Historikerstreit' and the 'Gen-Debatte' of the late 90s.**

Looking at another example, that was highly influential, takes us to one of the central debates between historians in the 1980s: the so called 'Historikerstreit', that illustrates (and please think here of these images of 'specters' I talked about) how present times can still fall under the spell of the past.

In the year 1982 Helmut Kohl became the new German chancellor, and he stated, that part of his new politics would be normalization or regulation of coping with the recent past. The academic translation of this viewpoint is represented by the historian Ernst Nolte, who tried to put the persecution of the Jews into certain perspective, but at the same time putting it down, triggering reactions of his critical readers. Jürgen Habermas was one of the more prominent opponents of Nolte and published in 1986 in the weekly newspaper "Die Zeit" an article in which he argued, that such a trivialization is intolerable, as the German self image after the War can only fully develop, if it pays appropriate attention to the terrible acts, committed on behalf of the people. Then they are part of, in Habermas's words "die eigenen, identitätsstiftenden Traditionen", the traditions that determine what it is to be German. Only after this publication in the press, the 'Historikerstreit' broke loose in the way we remember it today. It was even sometimes called "The Habermas controversy". Publishing it in the press meant, that it was made accessible to a wider audience that could and did participate. So the discussions left the realm of the academic world and opened up through the press to every day society. And again, the nationwide debate was fed.

As was the case a few years later after the publication of Daniel Goldhagen's "Hitler's willing Executioners" and during the debate on genetics, opened up by Peter Sloterdijk, in which both sides of the Historikerstreit were again facing each other with new strength. Moral questions on German identity in relation to historical events came up and again the press contributed in making the debate nationwide with articles from both sides and titles such as: "Was ist Deutsch? Sloterdijk und die geistigen Grundlagen der Republik" or "Der Kulturkampf. Günter Grass, Jürgen Habermas - und ihre Widersacher".

### **Literature: Grass as example.**

Talking of Grass and cultural institutions: poetological reflections in German literature are part of a long tradition that includes Schiller's "Nachdenken über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung", Friedrich Schlegel's view of a romantic universalistic poetry or for example Heinrich

Heine's critical review of the Romantic School. More than a decade after the Second World War, in the year 1959, the University in Frankfurt am Main and the Samuel Fischer Verlag decided to invite writers to reflect upon literature in the light of this tradition in order to overcome the lack of poetological reflection in this after-War-period. Institutionalized as the "Frankfurter Poetikvorlesungen", year after year leading authors commented upon German literature, their own writing and the role of literature for the background of Germany's past. And it didn't take long before some other universities followed in these footsteps, such as München, Paderborn and Graz.

Now, in the year 1990 Günter Grass was invited to present the "Frankfurter Poetikvorlesung". In it, he gives an overview of his writings for the background of these famous words of Adorno, I mentioned earlier, that were often misunderstood as the prohibition to write any poems at all after Auschwitz: "[...] Nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch, und das frißt auch die Erkenntnis an, warum es unmöglich ward, heute Gedichte zu schreiben." In his presentation, called "Schreiben nach Auschwitz" Grass describes, how he himself misinterpreted Adorno and refused to stop writing, moreover, he rebelled and found new inspiration in his own misinterpretation. Central topic of his presentation is the understanding, that all the atrocities, Germany was responsible for and that can be summarized under the notion of "Auschwitz" (he himself does so), mean a break in German history, after which it seems impossible for Grass to stop writing about it. This is typical not only for him as a writer, born before the war and indoctrinated as a member of the Hitler-Jugend, but also for his whole generation. He argues, that as a young artist - as well as many of his generation - he didn't want to reflect at all upon the possibility of not writing about (or should I say: after) the past. In his words: "Zwar verstand man sich selbstredend und ohne Risiko als Antifaschist, aber für grundsätzliche Bedenken, diktiert in alttestamentarischer Strenge, Bedenken dieser Art: Kann man nach Auschwitz Kunst machen? Darf man nach Auschwitz Gedichte schreiben? - für eben dieses Bedenken nahmen sich viele meiner Generation, nahm ich mir keine Zeit." And the later author knows, it would turn out to be impossible for him, and it should be for others too, to stop writing after Auschwitz. At the end of his presentation, he states quite clearly: "...dem Schreiben nach Auschwitz kann kein Ende versprochen werden, es sei denn, das Menschengeschlecht gäbe sich auf." He remembers that finishing his "Danziger Trilogie" (Blechtrommel, Katz und Maus, Hundejahre) in 1963 made him feel, as if he had been able to draw a line under this difficult part of German history. "Mit dem Roman 'Hundejahre' [...] war vorläufig meine Prosaarbeit beendet. Nicht dass ich erschöpft war, doch glaubte ich voreilig, mich von etwas freigeschrieben zu haben, das nun hinter mir zu liegen hatte, zwar nicht abgetan, aber doch zu Ende gebracht." But the following years proved him wrong, as he had to find out: German society and politics gave him reason enough for associations with German identity, the so called German question and national history, so Auschwitz simply had to stay present as a specter of the past, haunting people and demanding reactions. To quote Grass once more: "Wir kommen an Auschwitz nicht vorbei. Wir sollten, so sehr es uns drängt, einen solchen Gewaltakt auch nicht versuchen, weil Auschwitz zu uns gehört, bleibendes Brandmal unserer Geschichte ist und - als Gewinn! - eine Einsicht möglich gemacht hat, die heißen könnte: jetzt endlich kennen wir uns."

As you remember, I mentioned the title of a recent article in a paper about Grass and Habermas and their opponents ("Der Kulturkampf. Günter Grass, Jürgen Habermas - und ihre Widersacher"). This is a combination of names, that doesn't come as a surprise. Grass, seen as the influential and exemplary literary contributor to identity questions in Germany, stressing the

importance of engagement, and Habermas, fighting for the use of "Vernunft" within the republic, both are, especially after 1989, hammering on the role of Auschwitz as the test of German identity, because, as Grass states, the Germans have not been able to come to terms with the question of guilt, constantly using in their search for after-War-identity the open dimensions of what Grass called "Schreiben nach Auschwitz". To quote him once more: "Ich glaube, dass die Nachkriegsliteratur in beiden deutschen Staaten dazu beigetragen hat [dass die Deutschen mit der Schuldfrage nicht fertig geworden sind]. Sie hat die Vergangenheit zum Thema gemacht, und das hat doch eine gewisse prägende Wirkung gehabt. Ich möchte es einmal absurd formulieren: das Glück der Niederlage, der absoluten Niederlage, zwingt zum dauernden Nachdenken, und auch die Literatur konnte und kann sich dem nicht entziehen."

For the sake of time, I will skip my remarks on this other work Grass wrote, called "Mein Jahrhundert", that also illustrates Grass's position and that I mentioned in my abstract, to be able to say a bit more about this period after 1989. But I am glad that we could take a closer look into one of his works, that deals with German literature and identity and that can be seen as an exemplary description of the way literature can contribute to a national debate on identity, whereas, I must say, when exploring the ins and outs of national identity, it is worth anyhow, to pay close attention to the role of cultural institutions that were able to give a boost to broad discussions.

Now, to end my presentation, some remarks on a book, published in the year 2001, called "Deutschland Trendbuch", in which an empirical survey is used to draw conclusions concerning certain trends in German society. A quick look at the questionnaires used and the results will show, that the discussions and, to say it once more, the 'specters' I was talking about, are still very vivid in everyday society. The survey was carried out by the IPOS in Mannheim (Institut für praxisorientierte Sozialforschung") and was said to be representative for that part of the German population that had reached the age of 18. 1502 Germans filled out the questionnaire between the 6th and 24th of November 2000. It became clear (amongst many other things) that the awareness of Germany's own history is dominated by the period of the Hitler regime.

When asked: "Do you think, Germany should stop confronting itself with the national-socialist period?", more than half (52%) answered "No". Furthermore, the participants were convinced - and that is certainly linked to confrontations with the past - that Germany has learned from its history. More than 60% of the people asked, shared this opinion, which might be a good end of this presentation.