How Culture Matters

Culture and Social Change in the Federal Republic of Germany

John S. Brady

Political Science, University of California, Berkeley

Sarah Elise Wiliarty

Government, Wesleyan University

In December 1995, the Center for German and European Studies at the University of California at Berkeley hosted the conference, "The Postwar Transformation of Germany: Prosperity, Democracy, and Nationhood." During the proceedings and in the edited volume that resulted, conference contributors explored the reasons for Germany's success in making the transition to a liberal democratic polity supported by a rationalized national identity and a modern, dynamic capitalist economy. In charting postwar Germany's success, the contributors weighed the relative contribution institutional, cultural, and international variables made to the country's transformation.

As participants in the conference and later reviewers of the book noted, much more attention was given to the first and third sets of variables than the second. Indeed, the cultural aspect of postwar and contemporary German politics seemed to disappear from the equation. It was in part to redress this aspect of the previous conference that the center organized a new conference in the spring of 2000, "How Culture Matters: Culture and Social Change in the Federal Republic of Germany."

The conference focused on culture as a variable in processes of social and political change in the Federal Republic of Germany. It asked the question, To what extent does culture matter in determining the outcomes of the significant developments in contemporary German politics and society? In addressing this question, the conference had two goals. First, it sought to deepen our understanding of the dynamics at the heart of three key developments in German pol-

itics by investigating the role that culture plays in each. The three areas we chose to investigate were: the continuing process of inner German unification; the development of Germany as a multicultural society; and the further integration of the Federal Republic into the European Union. Second, the conference sought to contribute to the scholarly literature on culture by relating the evidence from the Federal Republic to the larger theoretical discussion concerning culture as a category of analysis and as an explanatory variable.

Germany at the Crossroads

In terms of political democratization and economic modernization, the Federal Republic can claim tremendous success. While observers of the Federal Republic worried in the first decades of the postwar period about the democratic tendencies of West Germans and the viability of the Federal Republic's democratic institutions, they gradually came to see their fears as unwarranted. The German citizenry's investment in democracy and a liberal democratic culture deepened as the postwar period progressed, and Germans came to exhibit political attitudes very similar to the citizens of other western democracies. Moreover, their democratic institutions proved resilient and even capable of absorbing the participatory impulses that came from the new social movements, the student movement, and the Greens. On the economic front, Germany's *Wirtschaftswunder* in the early postwar period led to some great expectations about the country's economic performance. When the country's prosperity continued through the difficult 1970s, politicians and academics alike began to trumpet its success and consider the exportability of *Modell Deutschland*. Even with increasing unemployment in the 1980s, Germany fared better than most of its neighbors and did so with fewer serious economic adjustments than France or Great Britain experienced.

Yet, the Federal Republic has not had much time to savor its political and economic success. This is the irony at the heart of postwar German political and economic development. Having expended tremendous energy to establish a viable democratic political order and a prosperous social market economy, the Federal Republic, like the rest of the west, now faces political, economic, and

social challenges – globalization, regional integration, multiculturalism – that seem to demand fundamental changes in the institutions, norms, and policies responsible for Germany’s political and economic successes in the first place. “Unified Germany,” Jürgen Kocka has observed, “will not and cannot be merely an enlarged version of the old Federal Republic. Change, it seems, will extend much farther than the architects of unification intended.” (Kocka 1994, 189) Kocka’s remarks are addressed to the politics of unification, but his insight could very well apply to the general situation of the Federal Republic. Change, it seems, will extend much further than just unification. It will be the dominant theme of German politics and society for the foreseeable future.

The extent of this change and its cultural roots were the primary concerns of this conference. In recent decades, one of the central debates in the humanities and social sciences has focused on the transformation in the organization of economic production, political authority, and collective identity. Scholars have debated whether transnational economic, political, and cultural networks are replacing national economies, national sovereignty, and national identities. To what extent does the German case yield evidence for either approach? To what extent does Germany have a global economy? Or a transnational collective identity? Moreover and equally important, what role does culture – German, European, or global – play in the processes of change underway in Germany?

Culture and Politics

In recent years, the tradition of investigating culture as a unit of analysis and as an explanatory variable has been reinvigorated by scholars in the social sciences and humanities. This renewed focus on culture has gained enough intellectual momentum that scholars have spoken of a “cultural turn” in these fields. Others, confident that this renewed focus on culture is now a well-established fact of scholarly life, have declared that the human sciences are already “beyond the cultural turn.” Regrettably, the increased attention that scholars have devoted to the study of culture has not settled its status as an analytic concept. There is still widespread disagreement about

how best to define culture. The editors of a recent study, noting the vagueness of the concept of culture, ask,

Is it an aspect of life, like society or politics, or a way of defining a certain set of beliefs and practices, as in Balinese or middle-class culture? If it permeates every other aspect of life (the stock exchange, for example, depends on certain cultural beliefs and practices about money), then how can it be isolated for analysis in a meaningful way? And how can culture, which defines how a group represents itself, also contain the potential for conflict, struggle, and change? (Bonnell and Hunt 1999, 11f.)

Beyond the task of achieving a clear definition of culture, scholars interested in this area of research have insisted that much work remains to be done in the realm of basic theory building. For these scholars, the most politically salient aspects of culture need to be identified, some agreement on coding cultural variables must be established, and the relationship between microlevel cultural phenomena (such as cultural solidarity) and macrolevel outcomes (such as institutional development) needs to be clarified. (Laitin 1995, 173)

The conference addressed three themes: the autonomy of culture, cultural change, and cultural coherence. These themes are central to the ongoing discussion between scholars about the usefulness of cultural theory as a research program. What is more, these themes have figured prominently in discussions about Germany's development as a democratic nation-state. We asked conference participants to speak to these larger themes in cultural analysis as they presented their case studies.

The contributors explore these theoretical concerns across a constellation of issues central to contemporary German politics. At present, one of the more significant constellations in this regard falls under the heading of inclusion. Unification created a new nation-state, but it has seemingly not created a new people: east and west Germans remain divided by different attitudes, contending sets of values, and divergent interpretations of the historical legacies of the Federal and Democratic Republics of Germany. For more than a decade now, political elites and ordinary citizens have struggled to overcome this apparent divide and give substance to the equality and solidarity implied by east and west Germans' shared formal status as citizens of the Federal Republic. But there is also a case of the politics of inclusion that has a much older pedigree than east-west

relations: the integration of Germany's population of foreign permanent residents, the former guest workers and their families, refugees, and other immigrants that have settled in Germany over the past fifty years. Again, elites and ordinary citizens have struggled to confront this challenge, with the most recent and largest change coming with the reform of German citizenship law. Finally, the process of European integration also includes a politics of inclusion. This is true not just in terms of which states will be allowed to join the European Union and under what conditions, but also in terms of how much commonality the citizens of the new Europe are expected to have with one another. In this case, pro-Europe elites have sometimes been surprised by the reluctance of ordinary citizens to go along with all aspects of the integration process.

Different groups of people – citizens and members of the majority ethnic group in the first case, mostly noncitizens and ethnic minorities in the second, citizens of different nation-states in the third – are seeking inclusion in each process. Different solutions have also been proposed – national unity, a multicultural society, the European Union. And each process stands at a very different stage. We are not yet one full generation into the politics of unification, while the politics of immigration is already more than three generations old. Efforts at European integration were made throughout the twentieth century. Nonetheless, these tasks across different dimensions of inclusion have something in common: the construction of a shared political culture. The factors influencing this construction, the impediments standing in the way of its realization, and the potential future shape of this culture are central themes in a number of the articles collected here.

The first article, by Charles Maier, takes an even broader perspective. In an essay that examines not just German culture or culture in Germany, but the “culture of culture” more generally, Maier explores how culture can be used as a tool. The German government can use the notion of Germany as a “*Kulturstaat*” to show that Germans have overcome their noncultured interlude of 1933 to 1945. Intellectuals can use their knowledge of culture to claim, as Maier writes, “a level of intellectualization and artistic capacity that justified belonging to an elite, whether social or national.” Just as some are included in this culture of culture, however, others are excluded. As Maier notes in

closing, many people who could be participating in the public sphere have become merely audience members.

James McAdams's article focuses on more specific aspects of these concerns. His examination of the use of the files of the GDR's Ministry of State Security in postunification Germany and the role they played in the CDU party finance scandal of 1999-2001 investigates the interaction of the debates of elites and the public realm. He is concerned with this arena's relationship to the development of the attitudes and values that make up German political culture, specifically the political culture of eastern Germany. Can eastern Germans develop the attitudes and values necessary to lead fulfilled lives in the Federal Republic? McAdams argues that this development turns, as has so much in German history, on how the citizens of the Federal Republic confront the legacies of their past. In this particular instance, it is a matter of how Germans respond to eastern Germany's peculiar legacy of the twin dictatorships. The case of the Stasi files suggests that the actions of political elites can impede the progress towards including eastern Germans as full and equal members in the Federal Republic and securing norms that both groups of Germans could subscribe to. Indeed, in this instance, the political debate may have done much to reinforce the notion among easterners that they were still second-class citizens in the Federal Republic.

As McAdams notes, eastern representatives attached great significance to the inclusion of the Stasi Records Law into the inter-German accord. By making the files accessible, eastern Germans could not only confront the "epidemic of accusations about Stasi complicity" in the former GDR, they could also take a significant step toward becoming full members of German society. As Joachim Gauck argued in 1992, "The decisive challenge before us East Germans is whether or not we can muster the energy and the self-confidence not to run from our history but instead to recognize both its good and its bad sides. We have no other past to act upon, only this past ... This is the only way we will gain a sense of self-worth—and not at all by being shamefully silent about our origins."

This stance helps to explain to some degree easterners' reaction to the refusal of prominent western Germans to deploy the files in what appeared to many easterners to be a similar case: the CDU finance scandal. Easterners interpreted the refusal of western politi-

cians to use the files as a sign of bad faith and an indication that easterners were to be judged by a different and more demanding set of standards. As McAdams points out, the legal basis for acting on the Stasi files was not particularly solid. But to focus on this aspect would be to miss the larger point of the controversy. What is important is how quickly the issue was interpreted in the east-west framework. Easterners perceived Helmut Kohl's victory in court as an indication that "one of the greatest eastern victories of the 1989/90 revolution—the opportunity for widespread citizen access to the files—had been taken away from them." Easterners feared that the legacy of the revolution would be lost; the case seemed to confirm their nagging suspicion that "despite their best efforts to overcome the burden of having been born into a second German dictatorship, they were still disadvantaged by forces outside of their control."

Certainly, part of this controversy was fueled by the fact that "many easterners were simply working through unresolved questions and doubts about their own transition to a united Germany." But western politicians did not help the situation with their reactions. As McAdams notes about Kohl, "Certainly, it cannot have helped to build trust in the region that Kohl himself, the embodiment of unification, had so intransigently refused to admit his personal fallibility to culpability. How much better would it have been for building good will had the former chancellor approached the matter with humility and even a moderate degree of sensitivity for the impact of his denials on the citizens of the new Länder."

Can such a situation be avoided in the future? Can western and eastern Germans develop a framework for interpreting and negotiating political conflicts that does not quickly polarize along western and eastern lines? McAdams is not necessarily hopeful. He sees eastern feelings of inequality and disrespect continuing to drive the vicissitudes of German-German relations in the future, concluding that "it is conceivable that these attitudes will be drawn upon again and again to evaluate future controversies in German politics."

Like McAdams, David Conradt is also concerned with the evolution of the political attitudes and values of eastern Germans, although he focuses on structural variables in seeking to explain the evolution of political culture in post-unification Germany. Conradt begins with the observation that there is "no scholarly consensus on

the critical questions of east-west differences, the impact of unification on western German culture, and developmental trends in the region.” Using six ALLBUS surveys and other survey research, Conradt searches for signs of either east-west value convergence or persistent regional differences.

What he finds is a complex picture. Significant differences remain between the two regions, especially with regard to levels of support for democratic institutions. Eastern German support for democracy remains more specific than in western Germany. In other words, Conradt writes, there is “more of a ‘what have you done for me lately’ dimension in the east.” Given the historical, social, and economic gap between the two regions, this is perhaps not surprising. On the other hand, when more refined research methods are used, ones that specifically control for age and generational factors, signs of convergence are evident. Among the so-called ‘89 Generation—that is, Germans under thirty—researchers have found “very similar levels of support for democratic institutions and values and a strong rejection of dictatorship, including the old DDR.” This analysis suggests that convergence into a single culture could be occurring selectively. Still, Conradt does not yet find enough evidence to suggest that convergence is complete and thus concurs with Gabriel that there “is no core democratic consensus in unified Germany.”

In a piece that focuses on the theoretical underpinnings of the concept of culture, Laurence McFalls strongly disagrees with Conradt’s assumption that culture can be measured using survey data. Arguing against locating culture in either the subjective or the objective realm, McFalls writes, “culture is not the coincidence of subjective meanings shared by individuals situated in a given social structure. Rather, it is the set of intersubjective meanings that simultaneously establishes particular social relationships and forges the conscious understanding that individuals have of their place in those relations. Culture thus does not reflect social reality but constitutes it.” McFalls goes on to explore conversation as an analogy for culture. Both conversation and culture are intersubjective; neither is predictable ahead of time, but their meanings can be understood after the fact.

McFalls takes his next theoretical step by postulating a prototypical conversation as consisting of one speaker making a proposition

and subsequent speakers expressing some kind of opposition. The opposition statement can only be understood in the context of the conversation. The proposer, therefore, limits the range of possible opposition, while at the same time enabling the opposition to occur. With this point, McFalls expands his analogy of culture and conversation to include Gramsci's theory of hegemony. "By articulating its opposition in terms of the dominant class's proposition, the subordinate class subjectively (re)produces its subordination even as it contests its subordination."

McFalls uses his theory of culture to explain how eastern Germans, supposedly socialized into supporting socialism, could suddenly turn against and bring down their government in 1989. Using interviews from his panel study as evidence, McFalls argues that the values that eastern Germans were socialized to believe in had a flip side that allowed them to reject the regime. In his interviews, he finds evidence of both modesty and consumer frustration, of both solidarity and social mistrust, and of both a belief in equality and a pursuit and criticism of privilege. Both sides of these values were present in East Germany, allowing for an apparently stable regime to become suddenly unstable and collapse within a matter of months.

In closing, McFalls notes that the conflict-ridden process of unification has left both eastern and western Germans feeling subjectively as if they were growing apart, even as their objective behaviors become more similar, at least according to outside observers. This interesting question is deserving of further investigation.

McAdams, Conradt, and McFalls adopt the voice of the neutral observer, one who observes but does not participate in the cultural processes under study. By contrast, John Borneman adopts the standpoint of the participant observer, actively engaging the culture he examines. Borneman is concerned with how German multiculturalism is constructed; he begins his analysis with the question, What is the contemporary counterconcept of culture? Eschewing standard responses like barbarism or society, Borneman provocatively argues that *Schweinerei* is the appropriate opposite of culture, suggesting as it does "*Gemeinheit* (nasty trick), *Schande* (crying shame), *Zote* (smutty joke), or simply disorder, a filthy mess." With this starting point, Borneman visits a number of sites of cultural production in Berlin with the intent of examining how "multiculturalism adumbrate[s]"

itself and participate[s] in defining the boundaries and limits of Kultur.” Of course, this also entails discovering what becomes Schweinerei in the process.

The first site consists of a collection of state-sponsored cultural institutions, including the Institute of European Ethnology at the Humboldt University, the Museum of European Cultures, the House of World Cultures, and the Carnival of Cultures. All four are fixtures in Berlin’s cultural landscape, although they serve and attract different groups in the city. Examining curriculum reform and course offerings, touring museum exhibits, and taking part in the public celebration of Berlin’s multiculturalism, Borneman detects a similarity in the approach to culture across these quite distinct locations and activities. Missing from all is a sense of the lived experience of culture, an experience that includes conflict, dialogue, but also failures of dialogue, and untranslatable or inassimilable differences. Instead, these sites produce a static definition of culture, with the result that dialogue across cultural groups is actually hindered.

This sense of elision and lack of dialogue is also present at Borneman’s second site, a conversation with a friend Borneman originally met during his first fieldwork in the city. Here we move from the institutional to the personal, and Borneman’s narration of the encounter provides a glimpse into the way in which political debates and discourses about multiculturalism are woven into the personal experiences of individuals. Borneman’s friend recounts his personal fortunes in the wake of unification—the financial gains and setbacks, the personal triumphs and failures—in part through the prism of Germany’s politics of multiculturalism, including debates about increasing right-wing violence and the rights of homosexuals. As this conversation unfolds, it becomes clear that these larger discourses again do not necessarily reflect the lived experience of individuals who must confront these issues in their daily lives.

And this is perhaps ultimately the source of Schweinerei in contemporary German politics. As Borneman concludes, and as his ethnography supports, Germany has become a multicultural society. “Both protagonists and antagonists now position themselves having to answer to and reference the unavoidable multi-inflected cultural experience of living in Germany.” But this does not mean that the future will be conflict free or that some types of multiculturalism wouldn’t be

preferable to others. Indeed, there still remains the possibility of self-deception regarding the multiculturalism of Germany. "Self-deception with respect to this empirical reality is perhaps the real joke, a self-inflicted *Schweinerei*," Borneman writes in conclusion.

Andrea Klimt's contribution also examines multicultural Germany, but from a different perspective, that of a non-German community. Klimt investigates the Portuguese community in Hamburg, concentrating on the question of *Heimkehrillusion*, or "illusion of return," a term used to describe the beliefs of members of a migrant population that they will eventually return to their "home." Although many researchers believe that the Portuguese in Germany will never return to Portugal, Klimt argues that the reality is somewhat more complex.

Klimt's study of the Portuguese community in Hamburg reveals that the members of this community are creating transnational identities for themselves. Perhaps because approximately one-third of Portugal's citizens live outside the country's borders, both institutions and cultural norms support people's maintaining a strong connection to Portugal even though they spend decades living elsewhere. The result of Portugal joining the European Community in 1986, the implementation of free movement across inter-European borders in 1992, and increasing ease and affordability of travel is that many Portuguese have strong emotional and financial connections to both Germany and Portugal.

The Portuguese in Hamburg reject a German identity for themselves, but accept identities as both Hamburgers and Portuguese with a somewhat weaker idea of being European. This identity construction does not necessarily comfortably fit with the approaches social science has taken to these questions, but it is one we must increasingly reckon with. What if the cultures contributing to a multicultural Germany are based on enduring transnational identities? In that case, neither of the oft-used American metaphors for a multicultural nation—a melting pot or a tossed salad—can accurately capture empirical reality. Nonetheless, it is this kind of identity that the countries of the European Union will more frequently have to reckon with in the future.

In some ways Klimt is answering a question posed by Haas, Roever, and Schmidt about whether Europe is at the point of seeing "multiple coexisting identities, none of which will succeed in making

exclusive claims to the loyalty of individuals and groups.” At least the Portuguese in Hamburg do seem to have reached this point, and they seem to have reached it at least partially because of Europe.

Haas, Roever, and Schmidt begin their analysis by asking to what extent Germans differ from other Europeans in terms of public opinion. The three authors examine a range of issues, such as what kinds of decisions should be made by within the framework of the European Union, whether the EU should have the responsibility of a common defense and where the locus of identity lies, in the EU or the nation. They reveal the tensions between a Germany that is very similar to Europe on many, even most, issues and a Germany that still has some differences with Europe. The most critical difference discussed here is that ordinary Germans are somewhat less satisfied with the performance of European institutions than are ordinary Europeans.

Haas, Roever, and Schmidt follow their discussion of public opinion with an investigation into a series of recent events related to possible nationalism in German political behavior. By examining the *Leitkultur* debate, changes in the citizenship law, and the discussion surrounding the Holocaust museum, they shed light on the remaining complexity of German nationalism. For example, the Holocaust memorial ultimately chosen is a compromise that provides some satisfaction both for those memorializing to remember and for those memorializing to forget. In their conclusion they note that Germany is not alone among European countries in its struggles to deal with issues of nationalism and national identity.

In their analysis, Haas, Roever, and Schmidt reject culture as concept useful for describing change, and instead advocate understanding culture as “a repertory of symbols groups choose when they want to organize new basic habits.” In this case, culture—which they equate with identity—is best approached as a way to “delineate the baseline” for certain events, here, the process of European integration. Culture should not be thought of as causing integration, but rather as providing a context in which integration was possible.

Not surprisingly, this collection of articles does not supply ultimate answers to the questions raised at the beginning of the investigation. Yet the title of the conference—not “Does Culture Matter?” but “How Culture Matters”—affirms our belief that culture does matter, while leaving open the possibility that culture may matter in a variety of

ways. Maier writes, "Culture is what you keep up when you can no longer keep up borders." Perhaps this definition is as good as any in helping us to comprehend the role of culture and social change. Precisely because culture is about shared understandings, it is also about groups who do not share these ways of seeing things. Although these articles do not provide the last word on this topic, they do provide a useful and interesting range of approaches to the study of how culture matters in the Federal Republic of Germany.

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