

INTRODUCTION

The Importance of Being German: Narratives and Identities in the Berlin Republic

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Anniversaries provide moments for taking stock. In the wake of the so-called Supergedenkjahr of 2014—the year of numerous significant commemorative events for Germany, including the fall of the Berlin Wall and of German unification—it seems particularly timely to engage with debates about what it means to be German. Such retrospection is now an established and widespread part of the German habitus, and the number of organized moments of contemplation—moments that say as much about the present as the past—has multiplied since unification.¹ Within Germany and beyond, the question of what it means to be German is frequently being asked by those who want to define local, national and international agendas for the future and to redefine agendas of the past. Representing an individual, a community or a nation involves the construction of narratives and identities, a process now often informed by sophisticated understandings of image and audience, of beliefs and branding. In fact, the numerous facets that make up an image of “Germany” have, for the most part, been perceived affirmatively; in recent international polls Germany has been the country seen as most likely to have an overwhelmingly positive influence on the world.²

Investigating what it means to be German in the twenty-first century while avoiding unproductive essentialism and universalism is challenging. It requires an analysis of German society and identity that problematizes secure reference points and notions of completeness.³ It entails a persistent



awareness of the cultural, political, and disciplinary backgrounds of the critic. And it demands both a recognition of the use of different reference cultures and an interrogation of the value of mobilizing German case studies. Following such a path makes it possible to consider the overlapping dimensions of contemporary German identity and their multiple implications for intellectual, political, and social life both within and beyond Germany.

Within such a framework, and focusing on structures, institutions, individuals, and narratives, the contributions in this volume suggest world-views, ways of being, and ways of representing Germany to the world. They examine contested notions of Germanness through a focus on material practice and highlight tensions between everyday experience, politics, and rhetoric. The volume brings competing narratives of German confidence and insecurity to the fore, while the multidisciplinary range allows for the investigation of diverse markers of identity and for divergent representations of future aspiration and present reality. Such investigation is important because representations do not simply reflect, but also construct our lived experience.⁴

The articles collected here continue a cross-disciplinary conversation that began as part of a three-year research project funded by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) at the University of Birmingham entitled “Zeitgeist: What does it mean to be German in the twenty-first century?” The homogeneity that is implied by the problematic term *zeitgeist*⁵ provoked reflection about patterns of German self- and external definition as well as about similarities and differences in our methodological approaches to aspects of Germanness. At the same time, the “vagueness of definition [of the term *zeitgeist* and] the openness of its referent” foregrounded “a present that is unsurveyable in its pluralism of cultural narratives and values.”⁶ The project negotiated the paradoxical yet productive “*zeitgeist* in Babel,” which the languages of different disciplines, approaches, and foci brought with them in the context of an awareness that we, the researcher-participants, were no less a product of our own era than Hegel intimated, when he claimed that it was impossible for someone to escape the “spirit of the time.”⁷

This special issue opens with three investigations of the crisis in the Eurozone. The analysis by Rainer Hillebrand suggests that a change in perspective is necessary in order to understand Germany’s approach to the crisis. Specifically, he argues, the crisis must be looked at through the lens of the economic model dominant within Germany—ordoliberalism—rather than from the Keynesian viewpoint of its neighbors. Ordoliberal values are then read by Charlotte Galpin as the basis of notions of European solidarity in Germany, as represented through political and media discourse. Galpin

shows convincingly that Germany is pursuing its national interests from within changing discourses of European identity rather than in opposition to them. Next, Isabelle Hertner and Alister Miskimmon examine how the German government has sought to narrate the story of the causes of the Eurocrisis, suggesting that it has so far constructed a paradoxical and incoherent narrative that has convinced neither those in Germany nor beyond.

At the heart of narratives of the self and the nation is, of course, language. The following three contributions thematize issues of language use and highlight would-be gatekeepers of German. William Dodd argues that contemporary debate about linguistic purism has taken on new significance because of the prominence of folk linguistics on the internet. Dodd sees this as necessitating not only new modes of engagement for academics but also clearer self-definition by institutions involved in language research. Online spaces, as well as the traditional institutions of education and citizenship, are the focus of Patrick Stevenson's contribution on multilingualism in Germany. He investigates practices of "creative orality" and the recontextualization of German in the face of increasing dimensions of social diversity. That diversity is then explored by Máiréad Nic Craith's examination of literature in German by writers with a migration background. Analyzing both the influence of the German language on the identity of authors and the authors' influence on the German language, Nic Craith explores how relationships to the language create categories of ownership, exclusion, and belonging. These three articles foreground how contemporary Germany has not only become "a playground for cultural enrichment," but also somewhere that has to manage tensions between "diverse cultural manifestations and lifestyles existing in close proximity to one another."⁸

Debates about the German language and the economic situation in Germany are, as these contributions show, often mediated by responses to German history. It is to the representations of the past that the subsequent three contributions turn. In their article, Helmut Peitsch and Joanne Sayner problematize theories of memory that have become dominant in Germany. They suggest that when such models are invoked in the remembrance of the Nazi and German Democratic Republic (GDR) pasts, they obscure the role of the state and promote conceptualizations of national identity, which exclude the lived experiences of former East Germans. The institutionalization of certain forms of remembering is the subject of Sara Jones's and Jonathan Bach's contributions on representations of the everyday in museums about the GDR. Jones evaluates different strategies within three state-funded museums in Berlin and highlights a tension between state-mandated narratives about the GDR past and pedagogical approaches on the ground

that seek to elicit more productive interactions with visitors. Bach looks, in contrast, at the role of contemporary private museums that memorialize everyday life under GDR socialism. He maintains that such sites provide important social spaces for the ongoing transformations of the lives of former East Germans, offering valuable opportunities for working through experiences of the past and present.

Berlin quintessentially represents multiple German histories, the diversity of the German population, and the variety of German cultural output. As such, it is often explicitly or implicitly invoked in discussions about contemporary Germany. Wilfried van der Will investigates the complex institutions of cultural policy that shape the creative imaginary of the capital city. He examines the tensions inherent in claims about Berlin's cosmopolitan (*Weltstadt*) status and the political and economic limitations on the city in practice. Berlin's status as a world center for film is the focus of Rob Burns's article. On the basis of his examination of films representing pre- and post-unification Berlin, Burns concludes that the city is portrayed in an overwhelmingly negative light, which, he claims, it is possible to read more broadly in terms of German self-perception in the twenty-first century. Leila Mukhida nonetheless gives some insight into the positive potential of contemporary German arthouse film from the group sometimes called the "Berlin School." Using Walter Benjamin to frame her analysis, she argues that a distinctive mode of observational realism in Valeska Grisebach's *Sehnsucht* serves to productively resensitize viewers to violence. Such a film therefore provides an important political intervention in today's digital media age, and can be read as an example of committed art in contemporary German-language culture.

Notes

1. Harald Schmid, "Kommodos Gedenken: Die Erinnerungskultur des vereinten Deutschlands," *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik* 11 (2008): 91–102.
2. Gregory Paschalidis, "Overcoming the Past: Cultural Outreach and Postwar Germany" in *The Routledge Handbook of German Politics and Culture*, ed. Sarah Colvin (London, 2015). See also the Anholt-GfK Roper Nation Brands Index of 12 November 2014, in which Germany came first: <http://www.gfk.com/news-and-events/press-room/press-releases/pages/germany-knocks-usa-off-best-nation-top-spot.aspx>, accessed 28 January 2015.
3. Katharine Woodward, "Introduction" in *Concepts of Identity and Difference*, ed. Katharine Woodward (London, 2002), 13.

4. Stuart Hall, "Introduction" in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall (London, 1997), 25.
5. Brockhaus, "Zeitgeist, die sich in den Erscheinungen eines Zeitalters offenbarende Gleichartigkeit der geistigen Haltung, des Stils, der Lebensform und Ideen" (Wiesbaden, 1957), 435.
6. Ingeborg Hoesterey, "Introduction" in *Zeitgeist in Babel: The Postmodernist Controversy* (Bloomington, 1991), xiv.
7. As Glenn Alexander Magee notes, the term zeitgeist is usually attributed to Hegel, although the original context was slightly different: "No man can overleap his own time, for the spirit of his time [der Geist seiner Zeit] is also his spirit." Glenn Alexander Magee, *The Hegel Dictionary* (London, 2010), 262.
8. Wilfried van der Will and Rob Burns, "Germany as Kulturnation: Identity in Diversity" in Colvin, pp. 198–217 (see note 2).