Clumsy Democrats: Moral Passions in the Federal Republic

Till van Rahden

To Michael Geyer

“It seems strikingly clear that there has never been a society in Germany. People live without form or focus; they lack shape (and are disordered within). Everything is there, but nothing is in its proper place.”

(Siegfried Kracauer, 1956)

“The Germans are idealistic, conscientious and devoted to duty, whether or not it leads them in the right direction.”

(Woman’s Guide to Europe, 1954)

Twentieth-century Europe was marked by two extremes: the descent into war and genocidal dictatorship on the one hand, and the return to peace and democracy on the other.¹ Throughout much of the 1920s and 1930s democracy, the rule of law, and

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¹ Mark Mazower, The Dark Continent. Europe’s Twentieth Century (New York, 2000); on twentieth-century Germany see especially Konrad H. Jarausch and Michael Geyer, A Shattered Past: Reconstructing German Histories (Princeton, 2003), and Alon Confino, Germany as a Culture of Remembrance: Promises and Limits of Writing History (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, Press, 2006). The second quotation is from Olivia Meeker, “The European Male. Different Approach, Same Old Subject,” in Eugene Fodor ed., Woman’s Guide to Europe, Continental edition (New York: Fodor’s Modern Guides, 1953), pp. 60-69, p. 64. As Canada Research Chair in German and European Studies the author is indebted to the Social Sciences and the Humanities Research Council. Many thanks also to The Max Planck Institute for Human Development, Berlin, the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities, Bad Homburg, and The Freiburg Institute of Advanced Studies for a chance to discuss earlier versions of this article, and to Seyla Benhabib, Paul Betts, Charles Blattberg, Nicholas Dew, Andreas Fahrmeir, Mark Greengrass, Dagmar Herzog, Holger Nehring, Aribert Reimann, Lucy Riall, Natalie Scholz, Annette Timm, Nina Verheyen, and Oliver Zimmer, as well as the journal editors for their willingness to listen to and engage with the working out of the ideas presented in this article.

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liberalism seemed outdated to many in Western and Central Europe as well as in the United States. Indeed, in his interpretation of twentieth-century European history, Mark Mazower has argued that the idea of liberal democracy “was virtually extinct” by the late 1930s.² Given the renaissance of liberal democracy an exploration of postwar European history in light of larger questions about the inherently fragile nature of democracy as a way of life is a task for scholars interested in the future of representative government, the rule of law, and of the idea of a liberal polity.³ And yet, a noticeable hesitation is discernible among historians in addressing larger questions about the contingent nature of democracy. My aim is to encourage more studies that explicitly explore the contingency and fragility of representative government and the rule of law. Given the somewhat elusive nature of such large questions, the arguments advanced in this essay are best understood as tentative, even speculative, but hopefully as suggestive. As an attempt to foster a genuinely historical understanding of liberal democracy the following reflections freely draw on recent scholarship on postwar Germany.

Against the backdrop of recent interpretations of the interwar and war years that emphasize how widespread the disenchantment with representative government and the rule of law was all over Western Europe (as well as in the United States), this essay draws on the concept of “moral history” to shed new light on postwar German history.⁴

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Key questions include: How did concepts of civility, morality and manners, of trust and civic virtue foster or threaten the “unsocial sociability” of citizens (Immanuel Kant)? How were bonds of belonging imagined and formed and what role did they play in producing a sense of the self? When and why were these bonds torn? How did moral dramas, conflicts over manners, and controversies over ethics—in the wake of genocide and total war—shape the larger story of a fledgling democracy that was the Federal Republic?

Democratic Passions and Nazi Morality

To invoke the concept of moral history is not to suggest that we would do well to write the history of postwar Germany from the vantage point of contemporary morality. Nor should moral history, as Michael Geyer and John Boyer have pointed out, be “mistaken for either a judgmental and incriminating or a melodramatic history.” Instead, the concept directs our attention to how central conceptions of morality, moral passions, and moral practices were to the search for democracy in the shadow of man-made mass death. “Above all,” Geyer and Boyer note, “moral history engages in a debate on violence. It finds its supreme challenge in an age that is marked by genocidal confrontations.” If moral history sheds light on how “institutions, groups of people, and individuals … renew the social bonds that constitute communities and nations and the integrity of their ‘body politic’,” such an endeavor is indispensable to the analysis of postwar German history and perhaps postwar European history generally.5

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Languages of morality invoke the juxtaposition of good and evil, the distinction between right and wrong, and the difference between vice and virtue. Yet are such binary oppositions primarily based on reason, as Habermasian proponents of a discourse theory of ethics seem to imply? In his inaugural lecture of 1965, “Knowledge and Human Interest,” postwar Germany’s most influential political philosopher called for a rational basis for collective life which could only be achieved when “social relations were organized ‘according to the principle that the validity of every norm of political consequence be made dependent on a consensus arrived at in communication free of domination.’” In both substance and style such arguments raise the question whether fantasies of the “forceless force of the better argument” are perhaps best understood as a form of magical thinking embedded in the austere rationality that was characteristic of postwar German political theory. Particularly to foreign commentators, Habermas...
seemed like “a rationalistic utopian who measures the crooked timber of humanity against standards gained by viewing it *sub specie emancipationis*.”

Discourse ethics, it seems, evaded the question of moral incommensurability through an attempt to make passion the slave of reason. This school of moral philosophy is perhaps best understood against the background of post-Fascist sensitivities that responded to a specific (historical and, therefore, contingent) understanding of Nazism as the triumph of passions over reason. And, if so, are distinctions between right and wrong as well as conceptions of justice and freedom more fruitfully conceptualized as political passions, as what David Hume labeled “moral sentiments”?

Hume believed that moral distinctions result not from sober reasoning but derive from feelings of approval and disapproval. Morality, he emphasized, is “more properly felt than judg’d of.” In response to controversies over whether conceptions of vice and virtue were innate or conventional, the Scottish philosopher argued that whereas some

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ethical distinctions were “natural,” others were “artificial.” The latter, like justice, fidelity, modesty, and good manners, were artificial in the sense that they grow out of the quotidian encounters among citizens, be they impersonal, harmonious, or contentious. Yet, if artificial virtues are “entirely artificial, and of human invention” (338), such moral sentiments are simultaneously a prerequisite for, and a result of, the quotidian encounters and conflicts between citizens, practices Immanuel Kant would soon label the unsocial sociability of citizens. The “artifice” of moral sentiments that grow out of civic sociability gives rise to a form of “restraint” that is not “contrary to the passions,” but “only contrary to their heedless and impetuous movement.” Artificial virtues such as justice and good manners therefore cannot transcend the natural “partiality of our affections,” but allow citizens to develop the elementary skills of restraining and checking selfishness and resentment (314).  

Even if Kant rather than Hume served as the guiding light of postwar German moral philosophy, the Scottish philosopher’s reflections on moral sentiments are helpful for our understanding of a democratic polity in the shadow of violence. For, if Hume is right, insights into the emotional basis of morality and the passions that inform conceptions of justice and equality are critical to any analysis of the fragile nature of liberal democracy. Such ruminations may seem superfluous to those who view democracy as a formal system of governance. They seem indispensable, however, if one subscribes to a pragmatist conception of “Democracy as a Way of Life” or a thick constitutionalism informed by a “Liberalism of Fear.” As Judith Shklar put it, this is a nonutopian liberalism that abandons the idea of “a summum bonum” toward which everyone should strive, and instead begins “with a summum malum,” namely “cruelty


11 For the three decades between 1960 and 1990, the “Philosopher’s Index” lists a total of 445 German-language essays on ethics; among these scholarly publications 93 invoke Immanuel Kant whereas only 4 invoke David Hume. For the following two decades, the same index lists 1458 German-language essays on ethics out of which 240 refer to Kant and only 9 to Hume. A look at essays published in English also suggests a preponderance of Kant; the ration, however, is far less striking: 919 to 353 for the period between 1960 and 1990, and 1499 to 513 since 1991. World Cat lists exactly one German-language publication on “David Hume” and “Ethics” as subject headings published between 1950 and 1980, as opposed to 84 on Kantian ethics. The ratio for books published in English in the same period is 63 on Hume and 136 on Kant.
and the fear it inspires, and the very fear of fear itself.”\(^{12}\) In light of the far-reaching destruction of civil society, the pervasiveness of violence, not to mention genocidal warfare prior to May 1945, it is remarkable that—within barely two to three decades—(West) Germans not only came to accept a “thin” conception of democracy, i.e. as formal system of governance, but increasingly embraced a “thick” conception of democracy. This unlikely renaissance of democracy would have been unthinkable had they not begun to cherish “Democracy as a Way of Life”—to borrow the felicitous phrase of Sidney Hook. In 1939, at the height of the disenchantment with democracy during the interwar years, the pragmatist philosopher argued that democracy needed to be based on “an affirmation of certain attitudes” that were “more important than any particular set of institutions”: the belief in the “intrinsic … dignity” of every individual, the belief “in the value of difference, variety and uniqueness,” and a “faith in some method” by which conflicts between irreconcilable and incommensurable moral passions can be hedged in and regulated.\(^{13}\)

To speak of moral history and allude to the concept of morality within a genuinely historical analysis of postwar Germany reflects a conscious decision not to perpetuate the seemingly self-evident and well-established distinction between ethics and morality. Instead, I am particularly interested in what happens when we call into question the distinction between morality, often associated with restrictive if not repressive regimes of bourgeois or petty bourgeois morality, on the one hand, and the allegedly more respectable and dignified realm of ethics, on the other. What I encourage is therefore not an analysis of abstract ethical ideals but an exploration of the entanglement of, and the shady areas between, on the one hand, manners and civility, and on the other, sociability and the political. Historians, in other words, need not turn into philosophers; instead they have something to offer to the minority of moral passions.


philosophers who, as Mary Douglas put it, “have tried to incorporate into their account of morals the notion that humans are social beings and that their essential moral ideas (not just the local, culturally specific, and dispensable ones) are the result of negotiated conventions,”—and therefore the product of history.14

There are, conventionally, two ways of reasoning about morality. One tries to arrive at viable generalizations regarding what should be valued, usually under all circumstances and by all right-minded people—as long as they don a Rawlsian “veil of ignorance”. This is known as normative reasoning. Another attempts to describe the morals, ethics and evaluative procedures that individuals and occasionally communities in fact adhere to, putting aside the question of whether those values are really worth having. This line of reasoning is descriptive rather than normative. Although this distinction between normative and descriptive ways of reasoning appears to be self-evident, the boundaries are often blurred.15 Scholars of moral history cannot be expected to set their own moral passions aside. Close to three centuries of reflections on not just the inevitability, but the necessity of inherently subjective viewpoints and vantage points for any form of historical knowledge suggests that this is impossible. Instead, the challenge historians of moral sentiments face, is how to transform their own moral passions and fears into what Siegfried Kracauer identified as the key qualification for scholars in the humanities, namely “moral ingenuity.” In “History: The Last Things Before the Last” Kracauer argued that an adequate study of the historian’s world “calls for the efforts of a self as rich in facets as the affairs reviewed.”16 If he is right we need to carefully draw on our own fantasies and fears, desires and demons that emerge out of the moral dramas and moral incommensurabilities of our present rather than putting them aside when we write the history of moral passions in postwar Germany.

To study the entanglement of democracy and intimacy in postwar Germany from the vantage point of moral history seems particularly compelling in light of the fact that historians have begun to reject interpretations of Nazism (as well as fascism and Stalinism) as amoral and barbaric. In recent years, Claudia Koonz, Alon Confino, Peter

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Fritzsche and Raphael Gross have emphasized that the Third Reich drew on ethical concepts and moral passions, that Nazism possessed “a ‘moral foundation’—at least in the eyes of Nazis and their followers.”

It is misleading therefore to interpret the Holocaust as the result of “weakened moral values.” On the contrary, as Confino has noted, moral passions “helped create the extreme war conditions.”

The monstrosity of Nazi crimes should not distract us from an analysis of how central passions of love and fear, dreams of salvation and redemption as well as concepts of justice and liberty, humanity and peace were to Nazi morality. Unless we acknowledge the moral foundation of Nazism we cannot begin to understand the twisted paths Germans took as they came to embrace democracy as a way life.


18 Confino, “Fantasies about the Jews,” p. 300.

When embarking on such an endeavor, we would do well not to lose sight of national specificities: once the focus shifts to those countries of Western Europe that were to play a key role in the early postwar search for democracy and reconciliation, it becomes clear, for example, that Germany and Italy share certain peculiarities that set them apart from their partners with whom they built the European community—such as Belgium, the Netherlands, and France or Britain. True, by 1930, a general disenchantment with the idea of liberal democracy could be found all over Western Europe as well as in the United States. It was “remarkable,” the French essayist Paul Valéry noted in 1934 in a special issue on “Dictatures et Dictateurs” of the quarterly *Témoignages de notre temps*, that “the idea of dictatorship is as contagious today, as the idea of freedom was in days gone by”. (“Il est remarquable que la dictature soit à présent contagieuse, comme le fut jadis la liberté.”) What is peculiar about Germany (and Italy) within the context of Western Europe is not that they were only fragile democratic polities in the wake of World War I, but that both societies willfully destroyed parliamentary rule. Nazism and Fascism, whatever their differences, were “homemade” North and South of the Alps. Both countries voluntarily dismantled representative government, the rule of law and liberal institutions generally and opted for dictatorship, a charismatic leader and a style of politics that was at once utopian and paranoid and which would lead to mass-murder, total war, and, in the case of Nazi Germany, genocide.

I. In the Wake of Real Evil

From their earliest formulations, democratic citizenship rites and concepts of civility have reflected at once the tension between diversity and civility as well as the entanglement of democracy and intimacy. On the one hand, they demand some

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renunciation or sacrifice of prior allegiances to family or region, religion or estates; on the other hand, human and civil rights allow for, and encourage, expressions of “democratic individuality” (George Kateb) that give rise to an intricate structure of difference within which cultural tensions, political enmities and economic conflicts can be negotiated. Indeed, the challenge for any democratic polity lies in the ability of its citizens to construct a public space that both encourages the “unsocial sociability” of citizens and recognizes their right to be different.

If some of the following arguments are relevant for a more general understanding of liberal democracy, there are also elements to the story that are peculiar to postwar Germany. Unlike other postwar Europeans, West Germans could not invoke a rich memory of popular resistance against Nazism in order to salvage national traditions. As a result, their sense of moral catastrophe and rupture was more pressing. Building on the large body of scholarship that has explored how Germans and Europeans got into fascism and Nazism, war and genocide, this essay draws on Dan Diner’s argument that postwar German (and European) history is an era after a “rupture with civilization,” a breach that seemed to call into question if not to invalidate liberal or secular humanist, Christian, conservative or socialist conceptions of morality. When the war ended and the camps were liberated Lord Acton’s dictum of 1895 that “the moral law is written on the tablets of eternity” seemed like it had been made centuries ago. At the very moment when humiliation, cruelty, and mass murder on a scale well beyond the power


of human imagination tested Acton’s moral certainties they proved ephemeral and unreliable. In light of the most violent and destructive period in German history, many would have agreed with Adorno’s poignant observation that postwar reflections on morality would have to start with an “attempt to make conscious the critique of moral philosophy, the critique of its options and an awareness of its antinomies.”

The insight that the cataclysmic violence of the war years challenged any sort of moral certainties let alone a Eurocentric moral triumphalism was not a distinct feature of critical theory but a pervasive sentiment in postwar Europe. Take the Polish writer Tadeusz Borowski who survived more than two years in Auschwitz and other camps. In May 1945, he found himself as one of millions of DPs just outside Munich, in a West Germany that he recalls as an “incredible, almost comical, melting-pot of peoples and nationalities sizzling dangerously in the very heart of Europe.” Like other survivors, Borowski “did not know where to turn” and found himself under the command and protection of “young American boys, equally stupefied and equally shocked at what they had found in Europe.”

They had come like the crusaders to conquer and convert the European continent, and after they had finally settled in the occupation zones, they proceeded with dead seriousness to teach the distrustful, obstinate German bourgeoisie the democratic game of baseball and to instill in them the principles of profit-making by exchanging cigarettes, chewing gum, contraceptives and chocolate bars for cameras, gold teeth, watches and women.

Along with three other Polish survivors of the camps, Borowski managed to escape American tutelage and secure an apartment in Munich in the fall of 1945 where they hosted a “certain Polish poet … his wife and mistress (a philologist)”. At the time, Borowski was at work on his book, *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, short stories about daily life in Auschwitz. When he shared a draft with the famous poet, the latter found it “much too gloomy and definitely lacking faith in mankind.” In a word, Lord Acton’s moral certainties clashed with the moral sentiments of the witnesses to the life of the concentration camps:

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The four of us became involved in a heated discussion with the poet, his silent wife and his mistress (the philologist), by maintaining that in this war morality, national solidarity, patriotism and the ideals of freedom, justice and human dignity had all slid off man like a rotten rag. We said that there is no crime that a man will not commit in order to save himself. And, having saved himself, he will commit crimes for increasingly trivial reasons; he will commit them first out of duty, then from habit, and finally – for pleasure.

We told them with much relish all about our difficult, patient, concentration-camp existence which had taught us that the whole world is really like the concentration camp; the weak work for the strong, and if they have no strength or will to work – then let them steal, or let them die.

The world is ruled by neither justice nor morality; crime is not punished nor virtue rewarded, one is forgotten as quickly as the other. The world is ruled by power and power is obtained with money. To work is senseless, because money cannot be obtained through work but through exploitation of others. And if we cannot exploit as much as we wish, at least let us work as little as we can. Moral duty? We believe neither in the morality of man, nor in the morality of systems. In German cities the store windows are filled with books and religious objects, but the smoke from the crematoria still hovers above the forests.  

Another commentator who believed that the cataclysmic violence of the mid twentieth century constituted a rupture in the history of morality and was best understood historically was Hannah Arendt. In a public lecture of February 1965, she based her reflections on moral philosophy on the insight that both Nazism and Stalinism had called into question the seemingly self-evident distinctions between right and wrong. Such certainties, she noted had collapsed almost overnight, and then it was as though morality suddenly stood revealed in the original meaning of the word, as a set of mores, customs and manners, which could be exchanged for another set with hardly more trouble than it would take to change the table manners of an individual or a people. (740)

Yet if Stalinist Russia was a case in point, “German developments” were “much more extreme and perhaps also more revealing,” Arendt argued: “There is not only the gruesome fact of elaborately established death factories and the utter absence of hypocrisy” among those “involved in the extermination program. Equally important, but perhaps more frightening, was the matter of course collaboration from all strata of German society.” (743) The dazzling riches of the economic miracle could not exorcize the ghosts this moral cataclysm had engendered. “We witnessed the total collapse of a
‘moral’ order,” Arendt argued, and the “sudden return to ‘normality,’ contrary to what is often complacently assumed, can only reinforce our doubts.” (744-745). Postwar Germans needed to face their complicity in “real evil,” in “sadism, the sheer pleasure in causing and contemplating pain and suffering.” This “vice of all vices” needed to be distinguished from “radical evil” which “comes from the depths of despair” and is embodied by Lucifer “the light-bearer, a Fallen Angel.” To confront the historical realm of “real evil” as opposed to the literary and philosophical realm of “radical evil,” she concluded, leads to “speechless horror, when all you can say is: This should never have happened.” (761 and 763)

And yet this inversion of morality had happened, and it is therefore hardly surprising that moral doubts, fears, and questions were at the heart of larger postwar European obsessions of how to establish stable democracies and “avoid repeating the political breakdowns of the interwar period.” Against this backdrop, then, this essay is a plea for a moral history, a history of how Germans and Europeans freed themselves from the experiences of mass murder and mass death, and how they came to embrace democracy as a way of life. I am less interested, in short, in revisiting the political effects of the economic miracle or of American military and cultural presence, than in opening up new avenues for studying the unexpected “political miracle” of West Germany’s “democratic moment” within the context of Western Europe’s “Velvet Revolution” of the 1950s and 1960s (Mark Lilla). Whereas many studies explore the six postwar decades within a framework of Americanization and Westernization or Sovietization, Liberalization or Democratization, I would like to call attention to the more peculiar aspects of German history since the “Zero Hour.” As a point of departure I think we need to abandon these concepts. Such inherently teleological and normatively charged categories, alas, have a way of changing from valiant attempts at interpretation into opiates. “Conscientious historians,” Siegfried Kracauer noted, should try to make do

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without such “ideological props or crutches”, an observation that is particularly lucid and relevant in the field of moral history.\textsuperscript{32}

**II. Hemiplegic Citizens – Postwar Peculiarities**

If the quest for “normality” characterized other postwar European societies as well, fantasies of normality took on a peculiar flavour in postwar Germans’ search for democracy as a way of life. While citizens of most countries pride themselves on being different, postwar Germans since 1949 have longed to be normal. In 1960, the liberal journalist Klaus Harpprecht noted that German fantasies about their “exceptionalism” (*Besonderheit*) had withered after the total defeat of 1945. Postwar Germans “have had enough of standing apart, in splendid or miserable isolation.” If they spoke about the past, they viewed it as a “time of life-threatening illness (and indeed, whenever ‘the past’ is mentioned, unspecified, then what is meant is the war and the Nazi era).” To hold such memories at bay, Germans had developed a “boring longing for normality.” Foreign observers, therefore, were surprised that they could no longer distinguish Germans in the restaurants of European capitals from other continental Europeans *at first glance*. . . as they now looked like everyone else, though perhaps they could be recognized *at a second glance*, since they wanted to be even more unremarkable than the others.\textsuperscript{33}

Small wonder than that critics of the European Union would quip that the label European was no more than a “euphemism for Germans traveling abroad.”\textsuperscript{34} More than


anything postwar Germans wished to be like everyone else, to blend into Socialist or Western modernity, to become invisible citizens of a post-national Europe on either side of the Iron Curtain. Not surprisingly, the quest for normality turned out to be at once elusive and futile. Many turns in postwar German history reminded citizens of the ephemeral and inherently unstable nature of normality and the peculiar place of their country within larger trajectories of Socialist and Western modernity.

Postwar Germans’ peculiar desire to become “normal” calls for methodologies and analytical approaches similar to those of scholars who explore stories of magic and miracles, of monsters and saints to understand late medieval and early modern cultures in their ways of envisioning normality and enforcing norms. Perhaps specialists in contemporary history can learn a thing or two from medievalists and early modernists who have developed methodologies and narrative techniques that assign a key role to the “creative and disruptive presence of ‘the other’—the outsider, the stranger, the alien, the subversive, the radically different—in systems of power and thought” (Natalie Zemon Davis). What this essay seeks to provoke is an historical awareness of particularities, of individualities, oddities, discontinuities, contrasts, and singularities, of diverse ways of belonging and being a citizen in the postwar Germanies.

This essay at once takes seriously and questions the growing sense that the history of postwar Germany can be interpreted as an astounding “success.” I am less interested in challenging Axel Schildt’s, Edgar Wolfrum’s or Hans-Ulrich Wehler’s argument that we should view the Federal Republic as a “Successful Democracy” or the notion that contemporary Germany is a “stable democracy” than in side-stepping such reasoning. As a source of inspiration for an analysis of the peculiarities of postwar

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36 Axel Schildt, *Ankunft im Westen: Ein Essay zur Erfolgsgeschichte der Bundesrepublik* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1999); Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte* Bd. 5: Bundesrepublik und DDR
Germany it is perhaps useful to turn to travelogues and letters in which émigré and rémigré commentators reflected on their postwar experiences which are often informed by a unique combination of intimate familiarity and deep knowledge on the one hand, and a sense of existential estrangement on the other.\textsuperscript{37} To foreign observers such as Israeli journalist Amos Elon, who visited the Federal Republic and the German Democratic Republic during the Frankfurt Auschwitz trial in 1965, postwar Germany seemed less like a successful democracy than a country in the shadow of violence and genocide. “Millions of people live in this new world of prosperity and yet the atmosphere is less than metropolitan,” Elon noted early in his amazing travelogue “Journey Through a Haunted Land,” first published in 1966:

Well-dressed, well-fed people crowd the sidewalks, fill the streamlined subways and spacious streetcars … The homes of the rich are decorated with bearded Chagall Rabbis, on canvas or on paper. Formidable old knights’ castles, where the Nazis once trained specially selected youths … ‘to look at a thousand corpses without batting an eyelash’ (Himmler) today flourish as whimsical hotels for romantically inclined tourists. Nearby international student centers conduct symposiums on ‘French-German understanding’ or for ‘Christian-Jewish cooperation’.\textsuperscript{38}

All over Germany a “harmless present camouflages a noxious past,” Elon emphasized. The booming cities of the Ruhr to him seemed like “a double exposed negative: a pretty modern Technicolor photo superimposed on the black-grey shadows


of a massacre” (p. 49). To the Israeli journalist, in short, a pervasive “moral schizophrenia” marked public life in this fledgling democracy: “At official receptions in Bonn,” he noted, World War II decorations and service medals “clink and shine on the breasts of the prominent. What clinks inside? The same decorations sat on the chests of men who stood guard in Auschwitz (awards that were won there because their recipients were good at throwing cyanide gas into sealed chambers packed with screaming naked human beings).” (pp. 20-21)

Whereas Elon’s metaphors may have been stark and his assessment bleak, doubts about the democratic future of postwar Germany were common currency between the mid-1940s and the early 1970s. When the “Cultural Association for the Democratic Renewal of Germany” (Kulturbund zur demokratischen Erneuerung Deutschlands) invited Theodor Heuss as the first West German politician to address an audience in Soviet occupied Germany in early 1946, he chose March 18 as the date for his speech in Berlin. On the day the revolution of 1848 had begun in Prussia, the future president of the Federal Republic offered his reflections “On Germany’s Future.” No matter how powerless Germans may seem in light of the total defeat of 1945, Heuss argued, they were free to decide about their future, not in the sphere of politics and the economy, but in the “spiritual and moral realm” (“Im Raum des Geistig-Moralischen”). The twelve years of Nazi rule had tainted every aspect of German life and culture. No matter how many citizens were now claiming to be dyed-in-the-wool “democrats,” any attempt to construct a better polity would fail unless they realized that they were in fact absolute beginners and would have to “learn to spell out the word democracy from scratch.”

In 1961, looking back on the first twelve years of the Federal Republic, Jürgen Habermas claimed that the young democracy was in fact an “Elective Monarchy” (Wahlmonarchie) about to succumb to a renewed Fascist temptation. The ubiquitous “veil of de-politicization (Schleierung der Entpolitisierung)” was triggering a “well-known social-psychological dialectic …: that the politically indifferent masses could in fact be superficially politicized by means of coup-de-main plebiscites, and mobilized under the guidance of a rigidly authoritarian régime.” Independent of other differences, many intellectuals noted the extent to which the shadow of total war,

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genocide, and moral catastrophe lay over the fledgling democracy. “Whoever lived through the 30s and 40s as a German,” the melancholy conservative Golo Mann said in a speech before the World Jewish Congress in August 1966, can never again fully trust his nation; he cannot trust democracy any more than any other system of government; he can never again fully trust humanity, and least of all that which optimists used to call the ‘meaning of history’. He will remain, regardless of how hard he may and should try, sad to the depths of his soul until he dies.40

Indicative for postwar German doubts about the viability of the Federal Republic as a democratic polity were, for example, anxieties over the making of morally mature citizens as well as the “moral makeover of Germans” as reflected in controversies over etiquette, childrearing, (civic) education, and cultural diplomacy since 1945.41 In 1948, the first volume of the “Yearbook of Education,” to appear after the end of the war, for example, noted “an interruption in Western civilization, with all that that implies; the question to be answered in the next ten years is whether this has been an interruption or a downfall.” As might be expected such anxieties had not disappeared by 1958. Obsessions over the moral development of toddlers, the development of ethics in early childhood or the moral disorientations and possible aberrance of teenagers, fueled the intellectual passions of scholars like Lev Vygotsky, Jean Piaget and Alexander Mitscherlich, Benjamin Spock and Arnold Gesell in the immediate postwar years, and of Lawrence Kohlberg and Jürgen Habermas in the closing decades of the twentieth century. What such a list of luminaries obscures, moreover, is how thousands of movers and shakers in countless family and educational associations contributed to such debates. In 1952, Karl Borgmann, the editor of the monthly Caritas and a key figure in the Catholic laicization movement, argued that many Christians continued to support an ideal of the family that was “modeled on bygone conceptions of the state, in which citizens were governed from above and thus sentenced to enforced inactivity.” In the January issue of the Catholic monthly Frau und Mutter, which then boasted more than half a million subscribers, Borgmann emphasized that for children to learn to “experience freedom and to live by” this ideal early on, the family should not take its


cues from the ideal of “absolute monarchy” or, worse, “dictatorship.” Whoever defended patriarchal-authoritarian forms of child-rearing pretended not to know that those responsible for Nazi crimes had come from “‘orderly’ families and not from the margins of society.” Fathers who had raised their children with “authoritarian [...] and violent methods” had been the midwives of the Nazi dictatorship. Those who kept treating their children “wrongfully” had to be aware that these children would themselves “turn into oppressors” as adults Borgmann cautioned: “Some henchmen of the concentration camps came evidently from so-called ‘orderly’ families”.

Throughout the postwar period the struggle over how best to inculcate and practice the moral sentiments that would allow mature citizens to serve as guardians of a democratic future gave rise to numerous cultural, educational, and scholarly institutions. These ranged from the “Max-Planck Institut für Bildungsforschung,” especially under the directorship of two Jewish rémigrés Saul B. Robinson (1916-1972) and Wolfgang Edelstein (born in 1929) as well as Dietrich Goldschmidt (1914-1998), of partial Jewish background, to the ever-expanding plethora of lavishly funded foundations affiliated with political parties, like the Friedrich Ebert- or the Konrad Adenauer-Stiftung, as well as to the Bundeszentrale and Landeszentralen für politische Bildung.


43 During a series of conversations in Berlin in July 2009, Wolfgang Edelstein was kind enough to provide me with a sense of the institute’s history between its founding in 1963 and the late 1970s. According to the institute’s long-time director its focus on questions of moral development reflected larger concerns about the viability of liberal democracy after a “rupture with civilization”; see also Dietrich Goldschmidt, “Unter der Last des Holocaust 1945-1989: Entsetzen, Trauer, bemühter Neuanfang,” in Neue Sammlung, 29 (1989) no. 2, pp. 145-160. In memoria um Dietrich Goldschmidt: Reden auf der Akademischen Trauerfeier am 16. Oktober 1998 (Berlin: Max-Planck-Institut für...
generously financed flagships of postwar German cultural diplomacy such as the Alexander von Humboldt-Foundation and the German Academic Exchange Service, the Goethe-Institutes or, as the perhaps oddest of them all, the German Historical Institutes which are indicative of how the Federal Republic consciously rejected nineteenth-century strategies of cultural hegemony and self-promotion. Programmatically they emphasized exchange and dialogue instead in an attempt to assuage fears about the persistence of a “German Question.”

If oddities and particularities, miracles and monsters, freakish episodes and bizarre stories serve as sign posts for a larger understanding of postwar German history we begin to realize that it might be fruitful to conceive of the Federal Republic not just as an unschooled and unlearned, but rather as a “Clumsy Democracy” (unbeholfene Demokratie). In struggles over the legacy of the Nazi past and the memory of World War II, debates about reparations and the presence of Jewish “fellow citizens” (Mitbürger), Islam in the public sphere, immigration and xenophobia, in controversies over a shared culture (Leitkultur) and the moral foundations of democracy, postwar Germany’s lubberly citizens and doltish elites rarely missed an opportunity to put their feet in their mouths, thereby marking another stage in the elusive quest for “normality.”

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According to M. Rainer Lepsius a peculiar trait of early twentieth-century German history was the “dramatization of moral boundaries” between distinct cultural groups. Few of these milieus survived the cataclysmic violence of the first half of the twentieth century. Whereas moral boundaries no longer seemed as dramatic in the postwar decades, they, however, became all the more impermeable. When the journal *Magnum* invited the luminaries of the time to assess the first twelve years of the Federal Republic in light of the preceding twelve years of Nazi Germany Helmuth Plessner, who survived as an émigré in the Netherlands, responded that Germans on both sides of the Iron Curtain suffered from “hemiplegia:”

only with this difference: what Marx is achieving on the other side through a kind of synthesis of catechism and field service regulations, is coming about here by voluntary self-control [*freiwillige Selbstkontrolle*]. Thanks to their turn to the West and their struggle for European unity, there is agreement about the rules of the game in which differences are being resolved: everything is kept in careful proportion. The churches and the political parties have divided between them the vacuum left by the demise of the Nazi dictatorship, and have achieved a balance of power in which toleration, but not tolerance, is part of a formalistic liberalism. Each group, in its own way authoritarian or totalitarian, defines itself in negative terms vis-à-vis others, and there is an agreement to avoid pushing the boundaries of the possible.

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Plessner was not the only émigré thinker to notice that something was odd (and perhaps amiss) in the quotidian life in postwar Germany. In the summer of 1956, on the occasion of his first visit to Germany since he had fled Nazism in 1933, Siegfried Kracauer articulated similar sentiments as Plessner.

We were in Germany only for three days: two in Hamburg and one in Freiburg, where we visited old Bernhard Guttman. We’d had enough after that. The attendant in the Hamburg hotel must certainly have been a keen SA man, but it’s best not to ask. Other than that, everyone was quite civil to us, the young are curious (and know nothing); there is some really good material here. We shudder at the thought of staying there,” Kracauer noted on October 27, 1956, in a letter to his close friend and fellow émigré Leo Löwenthal, “for another reason: It seems strikingly clear that there has never been a society in Germany. People live without form or focus; they lack shape (and are disordered within). Everything is there, but nothing is in its proper place. So they behave in ways that are insincere and overly artificial, use stilted language, and are completely insecure. They are not so much human beings as raw material for human beings. In short, I don’t trust them.  

A lack of form (and of “politesse”) and an impermeability of moral boundaries also marked daily life in the Federal Republic. The few scholars, such as Friedrich Tenbruck, who have explored quotidian encounters between postwar Germans, have pointed to the “remarkable insecurities and irritations” that shaped the public sphere. Postwar (West) Germans tended to mingle with those who shared their morality and their politics and refused to socialize with those whose politics they might hate and whose morality they might look down on or even despise. Random encounters with strangers rarely gave rise to genuine curiosity and instead led to the exchange of embarrassed platitudes. “People seek homogeneity and are highly selective in their associations, and display marked signs of idiosyncracy,” Tenbruck noted in 1974.

They clearly find it difficult to open themselves up to new ideas, people, or cultural exchanges [. . .] Contacts between people are unproblematic and tolerant in a very ordinary way, but there is a lack of the kind of permeability in which individuals can express themselves, take each other seriously and interact with each other.  


So pervasive and seemingly self-evident is the tendency only to mingle with kindred spirits that historians in today’s Germany are surprised, baffled and even irritated to find that antagonistic intellectuals such as Jürgen Habermas and Wilhelm Hennis collaborated closely for many years and that public adversaries like Adorno and Arnold Gehlen cultivated an intimate friendship once outside the limelight.\(^\text{50}\) Foreign observers especially were struck by the peculiarities of German academia, a world of learning they otherwise admired. In the view of scholars like the Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung, a culture of ceremonial courtesy left no room for playful politesse in exchanges with German scholars, especially senior colleagues who often displayed an odd combination of megalomania and an inferiority complex fueled by resentful parochialism.\(^\text{51}\)

Whenever Galtung interacted with colleagues from German universities and research institutes, he was surprised by the pervasiveness of a peculiar intellectual style that he labeled ‘‘teutonic thinking’ […], not so much because of its form as because of its seriousness, the relentless energy, the zeal with which this type of activity is pursued.’’ As a consequence, jokes were ‘‘considered frivolous and indicative of lack of faith in what one says.’’ Rather than embracing a lighthearted pragmatism, German academics flaunted ‘‘non-humorous cold eyes and non-smiling faces’’ as they emphasized theory and deduced empirical arguments from a ‘‘small set of basic principles.’’ Because the scholarly community consisted of several warring factions, Galtung’s German colleagues spent much time on ‘‘issuing certificates, classifying other systems, articles, books, authors, groups, schools etc.’’ Within these factions members would ‘‘develop a special esoteric language’’ that is ‘‘considerably better for in-group than out-group communication.’’ On the exceptional occasions on which members of warring factions met, discussions between members of different tribes were ‘‘negative and destructive.’’ ‘‘In general there is an assumption of undeclared war between speaker

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and audience.” Hence the lack of curiosity and the inability to create a “relaxed and friendly atmosphere.” Among adherents of the Teutonic intellectual style scholarly conversations were therefore “a series of monologues rather than a real dialogue […] It is as if each participant is seated on the top of his system, clinging to his little (or big) alp,” declaring in an “unusually high-pitched voice” that “his alp is the only one.”

III. Clumsy Encounters—Moral Obsessions

One need not accept every turn of Tenbruck’s or Galtung’s arguments to realize that postwar Germans were not exactly masters of a playful politesse. Few and far between were those who practiced Henri Bergson’s insight that a *politesse des manières* and a *politesse de l’esprit* drew on a republican love of equality and “an intellectual subtlety” (*une souplesse intellectuelle*) that enables citizens to live with enmity and aversion and to cultivate forms of sociability that allow them to grasp what they cannot embrace.\(^{52}\) The ability to converse with strangers, the capability to talk to one’s adversaries, the capacity to regulate conflict, aversion and even enmity, the faculty to acknowledge and navigate political passions and moral incommensurability; such elementary skills of public life in a liberal democracy were (and perhaps are) anything but the *forte* of postwar Germans who preferred utopian dreams of moral harmony over an acceptance of moral diversity as the inevitable effect of individual freedom.

As a concept that is less an analytical category than a shorthand to draw our attention to a complex set of questions, “moral history” allows us to understand why the divide between the realm of politics and the private sphere has been more than usually unstable and contested in periods of revolutionary upheaval and dramatic political change like postwar European and particularly postwar German history. Utopias and obsessions, fantasies and fears about the political ramifications of private life have been central to how postwar Germans imagined themselves as citizens of a democratic polity. Over the course of the postwar decades the basic premise predominated: The basis of the political, the beginning and the end of politics, was neither enmity or competition, nor the idea of peace or of the common weal, but rather the private realm. Against this

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background one can begin to make sense of the peculiar simultaneity of obsessive exchanges over how best to establish democracy as a way of life and the clumsiness that postwar Germans displayed in these very controversies. These obsessions therefore perpetuated the clumsiness in encounters between citizens—experiences that in turn fueled their fears and anxieties.

It is therefore hardly surprising that some of the best studies on the second half of the twentieth century (no matter how diverse the subject matter under review may seem at first) have all explored the nexus between democracy and intimacy and have thereby provided the groundwork for a history of moral passions in postwar Germany: Debates about gender relations and the family, child-rearing and paternal authority, controversies over sexuality and abortion, heteronormativity and the rights of gays and lesbians, disputes about consumer culture and Germany’s place within the world at large, debates over the meaning of victimhood and trauma, quarrels over the memory of Nazism and the Holocaust, controversies over immigration and national identity, as well as arguments over the role of religion and diversity in the public sphere—these obsessions essentially revolved around the idea that the fate of postwar German democracy depended on specific private practices and moralities.  

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