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Rainer Zitelmann: Reunification and German Self-Hatred (1992)

Conservative journalist Rainer Zitelmann argues that leftist intellectuals are responsible for propagating a sense of German self-hatred. He views this as debilitating not least because it distances the intelligentsia from the people. For Zitelmann, left-wing self-hatred not only stems from the Nazi past, but also, and above all, from a frustrated zeal for enlightenment and a frustrated sense of mission. He also criticizes the Left for creating a discourse in which German division was viewed as an acceptable permanent solution.

Reunification as Trauma

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Among the unification-opponents Grass, Habermas, and Kuby, the condemnation of German history and the expression of disappointment about it are crucial for the view that the supposed “transcending of the national” in West Germany was, after all, a delusion. Perhaps Grass, Habermas, and Kuby are merely the honest and non-opportunistic mouthpieces of the majority of West German intellectuals, who, for decades, have transfigured German “double statehood” into the final state of German history, one that bestows everlasting happiness.¹ Only a few strayed from this consensus. One of them, Martin Walser, noted in October 1988: “The majority of spokesmen, on the left and the right, participated in rendering the division reasonable . . . There is probably little at this time that left-wing and right-wing intellectuals agree on more than this: that the division is acceptable.”² An undivided Germany, as Walser stated in October 1989, was “for writers, intellectuals, philosophers . . . either the least important or least desirable thing. Those among us who do not want to accept division are said to lack soundness of mind, both intellectually and morally.”³

The dream of the end of the nation-state was by no means only a left-wing dream. Many liberal and Catholic-conservative intellectuals in West Germany also felt that the division of Germany was more of an opportunity than a burden. Still, it would seem that the conservative-liberal

¹ On this, see Jens Hacker, *Deutsche Irrtümer, Schönfärber und Helfershelfer der SED-Diktatur im Westen*. Berlin and Frankfurt am Main, 1992.

² Martin Walser, *Über Deutschland reden*. Frankfurt am Main, 1990, p. 100.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

intellectuals have come to terms with the end of double statehood much more quickly and much less problematically than the leftists. At least they could point to the fact that everything they had been saying about Socialism/Communism turned out to be true. The victory of the liberal and free-market system over the Socialist planned economy is something the liberal-conservative intellectuals could also experience as the triumph of their own creed over Socialist fantasies.

For the Left, the situation looks different. In the seventies and eighties, the Left had attained cultural hegemony in the intellectual discourse in West Germany. Habermas noted, with satisfaction, a “Leftward Shift of the Political Spectrum,”⁴ though he simultaneously voiced his concerns that this leftward shift could undergo a revision in the face of the most recent developments. This concern is further reinforced by speculations about the mental consequences of unity. Habermas fears that the “post-material values” articulated by the “new social movements” and the “culture of protest” sustained by them could be pushed into the background as a result of the unification of the two German states (p. 76 f.).⁵ The “altogether progressive transformation in motives and attitudes” (p. 77) among the West German population could suffer a setback from reunification, “because the GDR has not yet gone through the dramatic transformation of values that has been occurring in West Germany since the late sixties” (p. 78). One has an inkling of what Habermas is talking about: visions of multiculturalism, feminist utopias, progressive anti-Fascism, and committed anti-anticommunism – that is, all those attitudes that have been part of “good manners” among the “enlightened” and “critical” public since the West German cultural revolution of 1968 – find little resonance in the former GDR. For the German Left, the year 1990 was difficult and depressing in every respect. The SPD with its anti-national chancellor candidate was crushed in the Bundestag elections, the Greens (West) even failed to return to parliament, the German Communist Party and its auxiliary organizations slid into an existential crisis.⁶ All of a sudden, people were speaking not only about the crimes of the National Socialists, but also about those of Communism. And this even though an anti-anticommunism had been gaining strength in West Germany since 1968, whitewashing conditions in the Communist countries and making it taboo to bring up crimes committed in the name of Socialism.⁷ Until now, the Left carried itself with a consciousness – largely uncontested in the intellectual debate – of moral superiority. “The Right” found itself constantly needing to justify itself, because it was continually linked with the negative continuities of German history or even with the crimes of National Socialism. The Left, by contrast, pervaded by an awareness of being in accord with an unstoppable historical trend, saw itself as the sole guardian of positively connoted values and inclinations, such as

⁴ Jürgen Habermas, “Die Stunde der nationalen Empfindung. Republikanische Gesinnung oder Nationalbewußtsein?” in Habermas, *Die nachholende Revolution*. Frankfurt am Main, 1990, p. 163.

⁵ Jürgen Habermas, *Vergangenheit als Zukunft*. Zurich, 1990.

⁶ On this, see Manfred Wilke, “DKP und PDS nach dem Ende des deutschen Kommunismus,” in Uwe Backes/Eckhard Jesse, ed., *Jahrbuch Extremismus und Demokratie* 3 (1991), pp. 147-58.

⁷ This also applies to large portions of West German research on the GDR. For a critical take on this, see Eckhard Jesse, “Wie man eine Schimäre zum Leben erweckt,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, August 24, 1990; Konrad Löw, “Die bundesdeutsche politikwissenschaftliche DDR-Forschung und die Revolution in der DDR,” *Zeitschrift für Politik* 38 (1991), pp. 237-254.

enlightenment, emancipation, and humanism. The “progressives” were thus on the right side of history; the national and conservative forces, however, were the reactionaries. Historical development had already rendered its merciless verdict on them or would soon be doing so. All these certainties seemed to have vanished with the events of 1989 and 1990.

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In his book *Der deutsche Komplex* [*The German Complex*], Rolf Stolz, the onetime co-founder of the Greens and the initiator of the “Leftist Germany discussion,” warns against underestimating the phenomenon of left-wing German self-hatred: “The Germans as life-not-worth-living; Germany: part absolute political impossibility, part Europe’s cancerous sore. That is the condensed, overwrought feeling of self(hatred) that thus far has only taken hold of a certain milieu in this radical form, but that is already an actual mass phenomenon in its milder form.”⁸ It is surely an exaggeration to speak of a “mass phenomenon,” but it would in fact be a mistake to dismiss self-hatred as a phenomenon among only small marginal groups with the extreme left-wing scene. And so Michael Schneider concedes: “Apparently, there is no more stubborn relic of the German past than left-wing German self-hatred, which is not foreign to me either.”⁹ There is reason to doubt, however, that left-wing German self-hatred should be understood primarily as a “relic of the past.”

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Left-wing self-hatred is not only a result of the Nazi past, but also, and above all, the result of a frustrated zeal for enlightenment and a frustrated sense of mission. The Left feels like the real representative of the “objective interests” of the “masses” of the population. The masses, however, did not and will not listen to the Left. Many books and essays in left-wing magazines have been published on the question of why the “masses” fail to recognize their own interests and act against them. This experience was all the more painful since it corresponded with an enormous, highly “committed” missionary zeal. The frustration over a sense of mission that was basically going nowhere caused many leftists to feel distant from their own nation, and it even produced in some a massive antipathy that could turn into hatred. This is a crucial root of the self-hatred, which is actually not self-hatred in the true sense of the word, because people do not hate themselves but rather the “rest of the people.” You see, people speak of “the Germans” as though they themselves do not belong to them. And indeed: they do not feel part of them. People have excluded themselves and feel both comfortable and very uncomfortable in this exclusion.

This is also a social gap, namely a gap between the intellectuals and the people. As Günther Nanning accurately observed: “The class chasm between the intelligentsia and the people is

⁸ Rolf Stolz, *Der deutsche Komplex. Alternativen zur Selbstverleugnung*. Erlangen, 1990, p. 43.

⁹ Michael Schneider, *Die abgetriebene Revolution. Von der Staatsfirma in die DM-Kolonie*. Berlin, 1990, p. 112.

becoming wider and wider . . . We intellectuals are filled with an absolutely correct humanity, which costs us nothing. The people, noting this, are filled with an absolutely justified mistrust of us intellectuals . . . A good portion of the high- and middle-brow media is occupied by theme: we don't like our nation. Our nation is stupid and fascistoid. The high- and middle-brow media devotes almost no space to the question: What's the matter with our intelligentsia? Why can't the intelligentsia stand the people? Does the reason for this mutual lack of understanding between intellectuals and the people lie only in the fact that the intellectuals are enlightened and the people blind?"¹⁰

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Source: Rainer Zitelmann, "Wiedervereinigung und deutscher Selbsthaß," *Deutschland-Archiv* 25, Nr. 8 (1992), pp. 811-20.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap

¹⁰ Günther Nenning, *Die Nation kommt wieder. Würde, Schrecken und Geltung eines europäischen Begriffs*. Zurich, 1990, p. 96 f. A similar question is raised by Paul Noack in his stimulating study: *Deutschland, deine Intellektuellen. Die Kunst, sich ins Abseits zu stellen*. Stuttgart, 1991.