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The Theologian Richard Schröder Calls for Democratic Patriotism (1993)

While contemplating the emotionally charged concept of nationhood, East German theologian Richard Schröder reflects on the complicated meaning of “being German.” He locates it in a common responsibility for history and mutual solidarity, and grounds it in citizenship rather than ethnicity.

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### **“I am a German,” what does that mean?**

What do we mean when we, East Germans and West Germans, now say: “We are Germans”?

My answer: *nothing special, but something specific*. After all, when someone says: “I’m a cabinetmaker,” he is not claiming that this profession is far superior to all others; rather: among many honorable professions this just happens to be *my* profession. I know something about this one; I don’t know anything – or at least, less – about the others. Even though we Germans lived for forty years in *separate* states, the commonalities between us are evidently much greater than those between Serbs and Croats, who, after all, lived together in *one* state for 73 years (with one four-and-a-half year interruption). Indeed, the many millions of refugees who left the GDR during the past forty years *de facto* laid claim to this self-evident belongingness. Hardly any of them went to Austria, or Switzerland, or the United States. Of course, one reason was no doubt the uncomplicated reception they were given in the Federal Republic, but another reason was surely that the Federal Republic was neither a foreign nor a strange country. It was the millions of GDR refugees who, in spite of the Eastern policy of separation, constantly created new connections between East and West. The departure of every refugee, the ransoming of every prisoner, the “unification” of every family meant separation from friends and relatives who were left behind, and new contacts were thus constantly created across the border, though these contacts were, of course, experienced more intensely in the East than the West. There a person was more likely to emigrate to Australia than go to the GDR.

In this sense, the statement “I am a German” is more modest than the statement “I am a citizen of the GDR,” for the latter implied – at least officially – the claim of belonging to the best state in the history of Germany and of representing historical progress, as it were: “*Am sozialistischen Wesen soll die Welt genesen*” [Let socialism heal the world]. It wasn’t good that some used it to

flatter themselves. We Germans are nothing special, but are something specific, not above but alongside other nations. We have an especially large number of neighbors. That obligates us to be especially neighborly.

What, then, is the specific something that unites us as Germans? It is not a substance that we need to display in its entirety and must keep pure as “Germanness.” It is a *shared liability*. We are liable for our shared history with its heights and depths, and we are answerable to each other for our common future.

By the heights, I mean our culture. We, the Germans, are obligated to preserve it as a part of the culture of Europe and of mankind, not only for ourselves, but also for others. We can expect this from one another: that we preserve ourselves and our culture for others, while others preserve themselves and their culture for us. Culture comes from *colere*, which means: to cultivate. By the depths, I mean the historical guilt of the Germans. Some may deny that such a thing even exists: historical guilt. What do I have to do with what my ancestors did? The answer: the descendants of the victims see us as the descendants of the perpetrators. The Jews or the Poles can expect that we will not invoke the dubious blessing of having been born after the fact, as though nothing horrible ever happened in our country. Conversely, we can expect that the Jews or the Poles will not hold us personally responsible for what happened. Being liable for the historical guilt of our ancestors means that in dealing with other nations we acknowledge and take into consideration what happened. Understanding between nations does *not* come about by following Schiller’s recipe: “Be embraced, millions,” let us erase the past; rather, it only comes about if we acknowledge what happened between the nations and together search for a sensible relationship to what was. And, once again, this much is true: whether we want to be or not, our neighbors tell us, Easterners and Westerners alike, that we are Germans in this regard, too. The reputation that the Germans have among their neighbors is part of the reality of every German, in fact, quite a potent part.

However, we are not only liable *to others* for German guilt, but are also answerable to *each other*. That Germany was divided after the Second World War, that Stalin installed Ulbricht in the East and the two German states took such different paths – the reason for this is found in the lost World War that Hitler started, and in the fact that the victorious powers treated their respective zones very differently. That the two German states each got the kind of government and economy that they deserved is sheer nonsense. In 1945, all Germans found themselves in the same misery. Only those who escaped from the Soviet Occupation Zone or the GDR can say that they consciously chose the West – for very different reasons, incidentally. This doesn’t mean that those who remained welcomed or approved of the state of affairs. For the most part, they had reasons for staying *in spite of* and not *because of* the situation. Still, there’s a temptation that’s almost impossible to resist: that of not having to find fault in absolutely everything in one’s own country, for that is very exhausting. This, then, gave rise to statements like these: “There’s a lot that’s bad in the GDR, BUT we have no unemployment / no drug problem / we don’t exploit the Third World / with us, the Nazis don’t stand a chance, and so on. It was after the BUT that people became specific, not before. Upon closer inspection, some of

what came after the BUT does not hold up, other things after the BUT turn out to be the small plus of a larger minus before the BUT.

And we are jointly liable for our future. German citizens can and should be able to demand more from each other than from others in terms of attentiveness, consideration, and regard. This is where some object: others need help much more urgently. They are starving. That is correct. That means, for example, that Germany must become more active in this area than before. Precisely this presupposes that we, the Germans, jointly want this, even if it hurts. We can help Somalia; we can enter into treaties with Somalia, but we cannot unite with Somalia.

So then: we, Westerners and Easterners, are Germans, because our fatherland, our mother tongue, our history, and our culture bind us together. And that is why it is good and normal that we, united by so much, once again live together in a shared state with equal rights and obligations, and also jointly manage our common affairs. Responsibility is tied to closeness, closeness is achieved through communication. Despite forty years of separation, that is easier between East Germans and West Germans than between Germans and Vietnamese, with whom we in the East until now were supposed to be connected under the abstract heading “socialist world camp” – while at the same time, Vietnamese guest workers among us, as well as the Soviet armed forces, were kept in isolation and largely prevented from having any genuine interaction with the population.

We have enough that unites us to overcome *what separates us*. No doubt, *differences* between Easterners and Westerners will remain for a long time – let them, I say, Germany was always full of differences, just as long as they no longer separate us. Germany was always polycentric, the land of many capitals, a fatherland of fatherlands, for which a federation of German *Länder* is the most appropriate form. The GDR has divided itself again into five *Länder*, which are older than the GDR; they were broken up for base reasons back then and have now been reestablished. Incidentally, the regional element had already emerged as a uniting factor before the *Wende*, especially strongly in the south and north of the GDR.

When I say: Germany is the country I like best (even if it's not necessarily the most comfortable one), this is not nationalism of a kind that discriminates against anyone, for every person's country should be able to be his favorite. After all, I am not discriminating against anyone when I say: my children are the children I like best. For I am their only father, and that creates obligation – sometimes also in an unpleasant way. It is perfectly all right that this country and its problems are more important, more serious, and more immediate to me than those of other countries, just as it is perfectly all right that I am not indifferent to the rest of the world. And it is perfectly all right that the tone in which I speak about Polish matters is different than the tone I use for German matters. For I do not live in Poland, and therefore I don't have to behave as though I lived there. And that will change only slowly when Poland joins the EU. We must develop something analogous to interpersonal tactfulness, something like international tactfulness.

But who exactly belongs to this community, then, *who is a German*? The precise answer must be: *Whoever holds German citizenship*. It is acquired either by birth or is bestowed under certain conditions upon request. It has nothing to do with hair color, skin color, or race – it must never again have anything to do with those things, nor, as in the GDR, with a prescribed *Weltanschauung*, but only with *rights and obligation* and, to be sure, with the declared willingness to belong to this community. The person to whom citizenship is granted then enters into our community, together with his different background, culture, or religion, too. Especially for us in the East, that is nothing new at all. There was a time when Dutchmen, Frenchmen, and Bohemians migrated to Brandenburg. Brandenburg benefited from this. The Sorbs, who have preserved their Slavic culture and language, are German citizens without reservations of any kind and don't want to be anything else. And I remind the reader of the German Jews, who made such important contributions to German culture and science.

And then there are those with whom we share language and culture, but not the fatherland, I am talking about the *ethnic Germans* in Romania, for example, or in the former Soviet Union. They are not German citizens and not our fellow citizens, but they are closer to us than others in foreign countries.

Finally, there are the *foreigners who live among us*, which means that while they are fellow citizens, they are not German citizens. To them, too, we are connected with clearly identified rights and obligations.

We get into serious trouble when we work with a crowbar in this complicated area and set up false alternatives. Both things have their right and their place: Germany as fatherland, characterized by its history and culture, and Germany as a state that grants its citizens the same rights and imposes the same obligations without regard to the person; or: the *cultural concept of Germany* (cultural nation) and the *legal concept of Germany* (political nation). For the way in which we deal with one another, the legal concept must be paramount.

That I am speaking here of the cultural concept of Germany will meet with opposition from those who advocate a multicultural society. Like all slogans, this one has multiple meanings. It can refer to a cosmopolitan society that is hospitable and open to immigrants. Openness to the world is prescribed for Germany by virtue of its new location in the middle, because the east of the West and the west of the East have united. However, the world "multicultural" literally means something else, namely a society of many cultures. Cultures can be preserved only by communities and by being handed down to the next generation. Each would therefore need to have its own settlement areas, with schools and administrations in their language. The rights of national minorities are protected by such conditions, under which a culture can continue to exist. If that is not what is meant, one should not use the word. What is probably meant for the most part is that immigrants in Germany are not discriminated against because of the cultural peculiarities they bring with them. Still, one has a right to expect that they do not isolate themselves in this society but integrate. That means, for example, that it is in fact desirable for the next generation to speak fluent German and be fully accepted as Muslim Germans or black

Germans. That will change the culture of our society. We must shape these changes in a sensible way. This process, however, will increase the communication problems in our society.

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