Robert C. Conard

Inventing Tradition: the Holocaust and the Walser-Bubis Debate

Martin Walser’s *Friedenspreisrede* is an example of how the needs of the present determine how the past is interpreted. Considering the Holocaust in Germany as a tradition that is manipulated (re-invented) for present needs allows one to see how Walser, without denying or changing history, artfully plays with the relationship of the Federal Republic to its recent past by catering to populist demands of the recently unified nation. Walser’s inventing of tradition is at the expense of Jews, who are by innuendo accused again as they were in the Third Reich of being exploiters of Germans.

In his seminal 1983 introduction to *The Invention of Tradition*, Eric Hobsbawm claims an invented tradition need not be one conjured out of thin air. It can just as well ‘emerge’ from a ‘traceable’ event. In other words invented tradition can be either purely created for a purpose or be derived over time from a historical fact.1 This method of looking at tradition purely as a sociological reality is also in keeping with Maurice Halbwachs’s ground-breaking concept of *mémoire collective*. Halbwachs, says of his method of investigation: ‘The essential thing is that traditions simply exist at the moment they come to us. We are not looking to see what is behind them or if they are authentic. We study them for themselves as collective beliefs.’

Hobsbawm in his introduction comments further:
‘Invented tradition’ is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past (p.1).

In other words traditions create identity, serve political purposes, and are, therefore, a kind of ‘instrumentalization’ of history. To be even more precise, traditions are often the uses of collective memory. Lewis Coser says much the same thing about Halbwachs’s methodology. ‘For Halbswachs,’ he asserts, ‘the past is a social construction mainly, if not wholly, shaped by the concerns of the present.’

It is obvious that Hobsbawm’s words and Halbwachs’s theory, though not written with the Holocaust in mind, speak directly to the Holocaust in Germany, where there are competing historical narratives in public discourse. Days like November 9 (the commemoration of *Kristallnacht*) and January 27 (the liberation of Auschwitz) have been set aside as days of remembrance, and places like Dachau, Buchenwald, and
Sachsenhausen have been maintained as sites of mourning and of education. Cities like Frankfurt and Berlin have Jewish museums with permanent exhibits or galleries dedicated to the Holocaust. Germany is also a landscape dotted with plaques recalling the horrors of concentration camps and Nazi crimes. Other examples of the tradition of the Holocaust in Germany readily come to mind. But the official setting aside of dates and the marking of places do not actually in themselves determine the meaning of the ever-present aspects of the Holocaust. The results of the rituals and practices of commemorations, the laying of wreaths, and the giving of speeches cannot be foreseen and do not always have the effect their supporters hope for. It is, for example, often claimed that too many Holocaust memorials only dull one’s sensitivity to the past. Whether these institutions of memory will last, whether they will devolve into empty gestures, whether they will produce undesired effects, or bring forth reactions contrary to the intention of their promoters can not be predicted. Most traditions do in fact become hollow in time, but simultaneously retain the potential to be revived when political circumstances or group identity require it.

While sharing aspects of all traditions, the tradition of the Holocaust in Germany is, nonetheless, unlike most, in that it does more to divide the nation than to unify it. Memory of the Holocaust depends on the fact that there were in the past perpetrators and victims. Accordingly, the nation divides now into those responsible for making amends and those entitled to some form of reparation.

Since the end of World War II there has been an on-going struggle in Germany over the meaning of and the appropriate uses of remembrance of the Holocaust. In general, the Holocaust tradition there is maintained by two opposing groups: by those who seek to define and interpret the Holocaust as much as possible in ways to minimize the burden of guilt and by those who insist that the crimes of the Holocaust must be forever a part of national collective memory. In other words it is a cultural conflict between historicizing the Holocaust, seeing it as a historical event, and memorializing the Holocaust, seeing it as a moral category. To the latter group belong not only Jews, but also those many Germans who also believe that the recognition of the permanent importance of the Holocaust is a necessary element in the concept of a just German state. Over the years various strategies have been designed by both groups to achieve their ends. The Walser-Bubis debate is a product of this struggle.