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Repositioning German Identity

The quest for a viable, distinctive and stable German sense of self is an ongoing process, and the connections to the Nazi past and the legacy of the GDR remain at the center of political, historical and socio-cultural discourses. New generations of writers and filmmakers call for a reassessment and remapping of the German past and are pushing at the boundaries of cultural taboos and political correctness, delving into the complex question what constitutes the German nation today.

Visiting Germany during the summer of 2006, one came upon a country whose usual gloom and doom was supplanted by a party atmosphere not seen since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Germany was hosting the soccer world championship and had invited the entire world to drop in and experience a people that was proudly waving its flag and chanting the national anthem. The event with the official motto ‘Die Welt zu Gast bei Freunden’ offered Germany a grand opportunity to present itself as a hospitable and generous country, open, multicultural, and far from being xenophobic. For four weeks the German nation became a model of perfect harmony, united within itself and united with the rest of the world.¹ The question though was whether this sense of belonging, rarely encountered among the German people, would outlast the event or national concerns about immigration, the still visible divide between East and West Germany, and the never-ending debate about the country’s identity would not take center stage once again. Certainly not everybody was pleased with the seemingly ardent display of German patriotism, dubbed by the German media as ‘partyotism,’ and warnings about the dangers of hoisting the flag on every building and singing the national anthem, exploited and infused by the Nazis with undertones of cultural supremacy, were voiced.² It would seem that not even an innocuous event such as a soccer game would allow the German nation some respite from questions and concerns about its past. Yet, despite the criticisms of the Germans for their open display of national pride, the tournament proved to be an immensely successful boost for Germany’s image around the world.³
In the last few years, headline news from Germany have indeed conveyed an impression of a progressive and open-minded society, cooperating on a global level, and trying to build economic and political partnerships with friends and foes alike. Endeavors such as changing the German citizenship laws 4 to guiding the eurozone out of a financial meltdown in 2010 and becoming the dominant force ensuring stability among European member states, illustrate Germany’s striving to exercise a leadership role in global affairs, and, simultaneously, to lead by example. Yet, despite achievements in its domestic and foreign policy, and having been world champion in exporting goods until only recently, not all is well in the republic, at least in the country’s own perception. ‘Hat der deutsche Bürger keinen Grund zum Jammern, wird er unzufrieden,’ writes Swiss journalist Roger de Weck. 5 It is no exaggeration to say that Germans have a tendency to be their own worst critics – ‘Champions im Volkssport, das eigene Land schlechtzumachen.’ 6 The nation’s biggest pet peeves to date are the ailing economy, even though this has become a worldwide phenomenon; the enormous costs gobbled up by Germany’s unification and its rebuilding of the East; outsourcing and the disappearance of jobs caused in part by globalization; a diminishing living standard especially resulting from the Hartz Reforms and their intended restructuring of unemployment and social security benefits; widespread right-wing extremism and a growing crime rate in the former East; the debate about Turkey’s ambition to join the E.U.; the constitutionality of Germany’s mission in Afghanistan; and, last but not least, the apparently unreachable goal of obtaining a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. These days, several years after having hosted the World Cup, the nation’s aura of ‘united we can’ has been replaced with what can only be called a genuine sense of apprehension and frustration.

Germany is struggling with how it is perceived by the world around it, whether or not it has garnered global respect, and, moreover, how its own self-perception measures up to an objective and factual evaluation of its state-of-affairs. Much has been written in recent years about Germany’s identity crisis and quest for a viable, ‘normal’ national consciousness and platform. 7 From the politically controversial concept of ‘Leitkultur’ to Jürgen Habermas’s plea for a ‘constitutional patriotism,’ the debates about the meaning of national identity are fierce and multi-faceted. 8 One of the underlying issues is