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Author(s): A. D. Moses

Source: *German Politics & Society*, Summer 1997, Vol. 15, No. 2 (43), One Nation—Which Past? Historiography and German Identities in the 1990s (Summer 1997), pp. 91-95

Published by: Berghahn Books

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23736469>

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Cultural Ideologies and Historical Legitimation: A Comment on Antonia Grunenberg

A. D. Moses

History, University of California, Berkeley

Few people have done more than Antonia Grunenberg to inject reasonableness and common sense into that interminable exercise of navel-gazing and introspection that we in the United States know as the debate on German identity. For this reason, it is worth setting her paper in the context of the broader argument she makes in various publications.

In 1992, Grunenberg edited and introduced a book called *Welche Geschichte Wählen Wir?*¹ which presents the proceedings of a conference at which leading left-liberals discussed the issue that is the theme of today's symposium. But lest we think Grunenberg and her colleagues were conspiring to fashion a *Geschichtsbild* (image of history) of their own to impose on the nation, she informs the reader that the title of the conference and book was meant ironically. In this regard, she is following Manfred Hättich who in 1974 warned that

What these days is portrayed as critical history is mostly nothing more than a counter-image (*Gegenbild*) against the traditional historical images. That they thereby remind us of forgotten or repressed facts and interpretations is not disputed. But a replacement of one reductionism by another is still not enlightenment. A critical historiography of any consequence would investigate how it actually was, and what the influential historical images were; it would resist, however, the cultivation or creation of its own historical image.²

All narratives are partial and ideological, that of the left as much as of the right. Grunenberg was entreating her colleagues, as she is today, to relativize their leftist *Geschichtsbild*, which, in keeping with the antifascist narrative, tends to see the Federal Republic of German (FRG) of the 1950s in one-dimensional terms as "restorative regime," whose political, social, and economic inheritances from Nazi and pre-Nazi times rendered it vulnerable to a fascist reversion. As is well known, this undifferentiated picture of the immediate postwar years provided the moral impetus for the antifascist orientation of the student movement and New Left of the 1960s. Only with their intervention in the public sphere, they claimed, was the Nazi past taken seriously.³ But the 1950s was also characterized by a seri-

ous anti-Nazism, Grunenberg points out, despite the undeniable continuity of a fascist subculture. The antifascist picture fails to grasp the complexity of Germany's path to liberal democracy, partly because of antifascism's tendency to see liberalism merely as a precursor to fascism.

Although she may not welcome the association, Grunenberg's point is reminiscent of Hermann Lübbe's contention that it was only possible to found the Federal Republic on an implicit deal, in which a population comprising ardent Nazis and their supporters agreed to back the new liberal-democratic system in exchange for "communicative silence" about their activities between 1933 and 1945.⁴ This argument, which was greeted with considerable indignation in the early 1980s,⁵ is now standard among historians of varying ideological positions. The same scholars have stressed, however, the costs of integrating the "perpetrator generation" on such terms. Was the moral rebellion of the next generation so surprising when old Nazis occupied powerful positions in government, education, business, and the professions?⁶ From this perspective, a conservative antitotalitarian position,⁷ which tends to condemn outright the "student rebellion" of the 1960s, stands in need of historical reflection as well.

In Grunenberg's account, antifascism and antitotalitarianism are understood historically as the foundation myths or cultural ideologies of the two German successor states, and, moreover, as quintessential products of the Cold War. Now that the Soviet Union has disappeared and Germany is united, she suggests, we should leave these myths behind and address the issues at hand with more relevant conceptual equipment. This sounds right to me, although it should be pointed out that the winners in 1989 were the truculent adherents of totalitarian theory rather than the antifascists, notwithstanding the counter-intuitive argument of Paul Berman about the continuity between 1968 and 1989.⁸ And totalitarian theory is living another of its nine lives today in the debate over the Stasi past of East Germany. Be that as it may, just what the new conceptual equipment should look like remains to be answered.

We are given a hint in her latest book, *Antifaschismus: ein deutscher Mythos*,⁹ where Grunenberg declares, tempered Habermasian that she is, that although antifascism can no longer provide the necessary orientation, nor can liberalism. For the pluralism of liberal societies remains indentured to what she calls the paradigm of the "anti"—antifascism, for example—that appeals to those instincts in us that might be tempted by authoritarian and totalistic solutions to the problems of modernity. Lib-

eralism never gets beyond the oppositional assertion of personal or group interest; and vital, democratic cultures cannot be sustained on this basis. The polarized positions need to be set aside by transforming oppositional discourse into a “deliberative” mode in which mutual recognition is accorded to our *Gesprächspartner* (interlocutor) and the democratic middle is strengthened. This transformation is effected after one’s own commitments have been shown to be one-sided or arbitrary. Grunenberg has made it her purpose, therefore, to undercut “dichotomous thinking” in Germany by exposing the mythical or at least historically contingent nature of its contending ideologies. She did this in her antifascism book, and she has done it again today. In this regard, I should be interested to know whether Professor Grunenberg thinks the Anglo-Saxon democracies are deliberative in her sense of the term. For if not, then their immunity to the totalitarian political solutions that have tempted to continental Europe requires another explanation.

We are still left with the question of what the middle ground might look like—how we can square the circle of reconciling universal values and a particularistic identity (as all identities are)? The search for the center has been an enduring quest in German political culture, and here it remains as elusive as ever. And yet, I think Grunenberg’s apparent hesitancy to articulate a concrete vision is consistent with her passionate proceduralism. The content is in the form. The past, it was recognized, does not teach unambiguous lessons, and writing history, particularly national narratives, is necessarily one-sided. There is no one answer, correct perspective, or omniscient viewpoint. The best we can do is highlight the various dimensions of German national and historical consciousness in the interests of “communicative action,” and certainly not ourselves construct a unitary version of the past for public consumption.

Just as important, her position recognizes that national and historical consciousness are not as available for formation by elites as we may think. The sociologist Bernhard Giesen has written recently that the unification of Germany in 1990 robbed intellectuals and the *Bildungsbürgertum* (educated elites) of the shaping power over national consciousness, because the long-standing creative tension between the cultural and political nations was overcome.¹⁰ If this is indeed the case, then we need to think some more about how national consciousness develops. There is a clue in the fact that Germany was united at just that moment when the populations of East and West Germany were developing their own distinct identities, and when, had the German Democratic Republic (GDR) survived another

decade or so, they might have become as foreign to one another as Germans are to Austrians. The point is that while historical memory is to some extent at the disposal of elites, in so far as they shape interpretive patterns, the other ingredient of national consciousness is not: namely time. Time possesses its own autonomy, a fact that is the center-point of Ernest Renan's argument about national consciousness in his essay, "What is a Nation?"¹¹ A nation, he famously wrote, is a "daily-performed plebiscite," but the readiness to affirm, rather than to reject, the political order is based on the existence of historical memory of common life. And that takes time. East and west Germans of the middle and older generation do not share such an experience, and no amount of "history construction" by writers, of whatever political hue, in the feuilleton sections of the country's leading newspapers and journals can change that. The younger generation, by contrast, does. Today's eighteen-year-old has lived a third of her life in the new Germany. Here time and daily "deliberation" in a democratic country—Grunenberg's proceduralism—will provide the content of a new German identity. It is with the younger generation, perhaps, that the internal wall might be broken down.

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1. *Welche Geschichte Wählen Wir?* (Hamburg: Junius, 1992).
 2. Manfred Hättich, "Geschichtsbild und Demokratieverständnis," in *Die Zweite Republik: 25 Jahre Bundesrepublik Deutschland—eine Bilanz*, eds., Richard Löwenthal and Hans Peter-Schwarz (Stuttgart: Seewald, 1974), pp. 905–926.
 3. For a sophisticated example of this view, see Dietrich Böhler, "Die deutsche Zerstörung des politischen-ethischen Universalismus. Über die Gefahr des—heute (post) modernen—Relativismus und Dezisionismus," *Zerstörung des moralischen Selbstbewußtseins: Chance oder Gefährdung?*, ed., Forum für Philosophie, Bad Homburg (Frankfurt a/M: Suhrkamp, 1988), pp. 166–216.
 4. Hermann Lübke, "Der Nationalsozialismus im deutschen Nachkriegsbewußtsein," *Historische Zeitschrift*, no. 236 (1983), pp. 579–599.
 5. Helmut Dubiel and Günther Frankenberg, "Entsorgung der Vergangenheit: Widerspruch gegen eine neokonservative Legende," *Die Zeit* (18 March 1983).
 6. Norbert Frei, *Vergangenheitspolitik: Die Anfänge der Bundesrepublik und der NS-Vergangenheit* (Munich: Beck, 1996), 9; Ulrich Herbert, "Zweierlei Bewältigung," in Ulrich Herbert and Olaf Groehler, eds., *Zweierlei Bewältigung: Vier Beiträge über den Umgang mit der NS-Vergangenheit in den beiden deutschen Staaten* (Hamburg: Ergebnisse, 1992), p. 15; Hermann Graml, "Die Verdrängte Auseinandersetzung mit der Nationalsozialismus," in Martin Broszat, ed., *Zäsuren nach 1945: Essays zur Periodisierung die deutschen Nachkriegsgeschichte* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1990), pp. 169–183.

7. For the origins of this approach, see Jean Solchany, "Von Antimodernismus zum Antitotalitarismus: Konservative Interpretationen des Nationalsozialismus in Deutschland, 1945–1949," *Vierteljahrhefte für Zeitgeschichte*, vol. 44, no. 3 (July 1996), pp. 373–394.
8. Hermann Lübke, *Freiheit statt Emanzipationszwang: die Liberale Traditionen und das Ende der marxistische Illusion* (Zurich: Edition Interform, 1991); Paul Berman, *A Tale of Two Utopias: The Political Journey of the Generation of 1968* (New York: Norton, 1996).
9. *Antifaschismus—ein deutsche Legende* (Reinbeck: Rowohlt, 1993).
10. *Die Intellektuellen und die Nation* (Frankfurt a/M: Suhrkamp, 1993), pp. 253ff.
11. Ernest Renan, "What is a Nation?" ed., H.K. Bhabba, *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 8–23.