Fritz Stern Reflects on the Political Development of the Federal Republic (1999)

Abstract

In his acceptance speech for the Peace Prize of German Publishers, the American historian Fritz Stern reflects upon the positive development of the Federal Republic during the second half of the twentieth century. Stern had to flee Germany during the Nazi dictatorship.

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This ceremony is the last in this century and the first in the new Berlin Republic. We unavoidably run up against past and present, for they are inseparable. There is no end of history, nor can a line be drawn under it, there is no wholly new beginning. I nevertheless welcome the newly proclaimed Berlin Republic with much confidence and a little unease. The first 50 years of the Federal Republic justify the confidence. The unease stems from the name; why must German democracies be limited by or identified with cities: Weimar, Bonn, Berlin? This merely underscores the unwanted discontinuity. Why not at long last a German democracy of the kind that some people here in the Paulskirche wanted and for which so many later fought? In his moving speech on June 17, 1988, the former president of the Federal Constitutional Court Roman Herzog expressed a desire for “modest tones“—modest tones about the German question. Berlin is known for many things, but modest tones are not prominent among them.

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We stand at the end of the most horrific century in European history — such a past does not pass. It is present in all of our countries, understandably enough, especially powerfully in Germany. We are rightly admonished not to forget, but these voices invoke no guilt for the current generation. What we need is responsibility, heightened by the knowledge of past mistakes and crimes. We can learn from the past, including that the outcome of history is open, that it is shaped by human beings. The belief in historical inevitability is a dangerous error. It tempts us into passivity.

In former times, the study of history was regarded as a cornerstone of cultivation. Great dramatists brought history onto the stage, and historians enjoyed something approaching a monopoly on narrating the known past. Playwrights and historians agreed on one thing: History is a human drama, and knowledge about the past should enrich and elucidate our lives.

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Historians are no longer the chief custodians of the past; they share responsibility with the directors of the new media who are now taking possession of the past, often with unavoidable reductions and avoidable distortions. The profession has also retreated into ever more narrow specialization, frequently jettisoning literary ambition as of secondary importance.

What German historians have achieved in the past 40 years of critical confrontation with the past is admirable, however. Today we have a far more nuanced view of the German past than ever before. There always have been and always will be disputes among historians, but what has been achieved—ties to international research, consonance with professional colleagues abroad— will not be lost.

We are living today under the banner of a culture of remembrance, in which the memories of individuals as well as public, ritualized memory assume an important place. The 1980s saw the advent of a wave of commemorative days recalling the terrible times; President von Weizsäcker's speech on May 8, 1985 was one of the most impressive appeals to commemorate the victims of German violence. "Protecting our feelings, by ourselves or others, gets us nowhere." The change of generation is an additional factor: The people who felt the full impact of extreme times are leaving the scene and want to bear witness, including on behalf of those who had to leave this life as silent victims. The 100 million Europeans who died an unnatural death in this century remain in our memory.

New research on entanglement in previously unsuspected areas of German and European life have intensified critical confrontations with the past. Many of our countries already find themselves in the midst of historical revisionism, which means that people are dealing with the dark sides of the past in order to correct the traditional image, which was usually one of decency.

All revisionism brings new divisiveness with it. Germany, which bears the heaviest burden, was the first to begin with this revisionism; we must hope that this hard-won openness will persist. German history will always be contested, and this means all of German history, and especially that of the Third Reich, which was neither an accident nor a historical necessity, neither an exception nor the destination of German history. It is not easy to arrive at a balanced assessment of one's own past. On the eve of Swiss National Day, I heard President Ruth Dreyfus say that she thought of her country with "gratitude and pain." These words seemed to me to introduce a new and persuasive tone in Europe's political language; they described difficult but necessary mixed feelings.

Memory and history are related yet profoundly different. Memory clings to symbolic events, an image from the past adheres to us. Memory may be powerful and yet it can be imprecise, it keeps us alert but only leads us to the threshold of historical understanding. Memory is not an exploratory reconstruction of the past. It may be that a merely remembered past, as a substitute past, keeps an ahistorical age under its spell.

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My desire to integrate memories of the past into a broader, mostly European, understanding of history corresponds to past realities as well as future necessities. The call for a comparative history of Europe is old and has little to do with present-day Brussels, although one of its first proponents was the Belgian historian Henri Pirenne. In his 85th year, the doyen of German historians Leopold von Ranke began writing a universal history. Historians, it is claimed, become better with age and experience—perhaps some comfort in light of otherwise flagging powers. We should begin to tackle the new tasks earlier than Ranke did.

Nazism weighs upon all of us. It does not go away, and in some dark corners we can see that the attractions of the ethnically pure national community are still present today. The crimes are part of universal memory; the question "How was it possible?" will not become obsolete, and any attempt to escape into "normality" is fruitless. The unleashed sadism with which European Jewry was annihilated is rightly referred to as a break with civilization. It happened in the long night of organized savagery.

I have said often and everywhere that any instrumentalization or trivialization of the extermination of the Jews, any forgetting of the millions of other victims, is a crime against the victims themselves. We can better honor the victims by attempting to reconstruct the world from which they were torn, and which usually died along with them, through historical research, thus preserving them in collective memory—and precisely this task is being pursued in a remarkable manner in present-day Germany.

It is, however, inevitable that Auschwitz will forever remain a site of German inhumanity and

unimaginable evil. In the, for me, most persuasive and moving representation, in Primo Levi's *If This is a Man*, written as a warning that what happened once can happen again, he recounts a memory of his first day at Auschwitz, which seems to me to be an admonitory memorial for all time. Levi describes the terrible transport by cattle car and being tormented by thirst, and continues: "Driven by thirst, I eyed a fine icicle outside the window, within hand's reach. I opened the window and broke off the icicle, but at once a large and heavy guard prowling outside brutally snatched it away. 'Warum'? I asked him in my poor German. 'Hier ist kein Warum' (there is no why here), he replied, pushing me inside with a shove."

This "There is no why here" is contempt for all things human, it is verbal annihilation. The "Why" is the existential question that every human being poses to his or her God or fate. If we forbid the question, we refuse the answer, and then we certify a person's non-being and absolute lack of rights. Job implored his God, asking, "How long wilt thou not look away from me, nor let me alone till I swallow my spittle? ... Why hast thou made me thy mark? Why have I become a burden to thee?"

For me, this refusal of a "Why" is the genuine expression of totalitarianism; it reveals the deepest sense of the system: the negation of western civilization. Human beings are exposed to absolute tyranny. The "Why" is not just the primal existential question, but also the foundation of any legal system; it generates the beginning of thought, the impetus to scholarship, to fruitful argument. The western world has survived the fight against intolerant orthodoxy, has liberated itself from the Inquisition, and this openness and freedom, which begins with an unconditional "Why," has made possible its advantage in intellectual and political life. This was the very rock of humanity that totalitarianism sought to destroy. Was Nazism not also the abomination of a murderous orthodoxy, of an acclaimed, technologically perfect inquisition? Bolshevism generally contented itself with mendacious answers to the "Why."

The refusal of the "Why" has a wider, more universal significance for us. We have overcome totalitarianism and thereby lost the enemy who automatically, as it were, secured our virtue. Previously we could content ourselves with the feeling that we were not like them. Today we need other yardsticks. Do we take the responsibility for the "Why" seriously enough, as a right of maturity, a fundamental claim of human dignity? Questioning should begin in the family, with encouraging curiosity in children, and should continue in working life and reach a high point in political life. But it is precisely here that our democracies exhibit a great deficit.

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We can imagine the great challenges that Europe will face in coming years, especially the new Germany, as the continent's most powerful country. The times when the Federal Republic could be described as an economic giant and a political dwarf are long past, but I am not so sure whether this political dwarf was not a carefully garbed successful juggler. Ten years ago, I spoke of Germany's second chance: At the end, as at the beginning of the century, Germany held the leading position in Europe—at the beginning in a Europe that dominated the world, and at the end in a Europe relatively weakened by German wars, but liberated internally from the civil wars that had marked its modern history. A war between Europe's great powers is unthinkable today, for the first time in history. The faith in peace has changed much of the European mentality. Old virtues such as self-sacrifice—often abused by senseless militarism— have faded. What is needed now is public spirit or what the French call *civisme*, as well as civil courage, a doubly foreign term in the German world. Whether and how the second chance comes to be used is an open question; I will limit myself to a brief wish list, to concerns and hopes that may help Germans to make use of this second chance.

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It has often been said that we could also have learned from the experiences of the GDR, that reunification could have awakened a process of rethinking in the old (western) federal states, too. There are also

outstanding and indeed enviable instances of political leadership in the new (eastern) federal states; the outside world hopes that they will meet with understanding and help in their struggle against criminality, against anti-democratic tendencies of all stripes. I know that political criminality with fascistic leanings exists in America as well, that Nazi racial propaganda is now being exported from America to Germany. The word “skinhead” demonstrates, after all, that it is a general phenomenon, the flipside of an open society.

I also wish that the new Germany, despite difficulties and disappointments, will feel a greater spurt of joyful gratitude, not just for what has been achieved, that is, for the initial solidification of a political culture in freedom, protected by a universally accepted constitution. Gratitude, too, for reunification under the most favorable conditions. No, thankful recognition as well for those who retained their decency in the time of Nazi terror, and for those who sacrificed their lives in desperate, heroic resistance— to leave a moral legacy to the nation. Also and especially recognition for the hundreds of thousands of citizens of the former GDR who took to the streets to demand their freedom—without knowing whether or not Honecker would take a hard line and repeat the tragedy of Tiananmen Square.

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I wish this country a fairer, liberal culture of conflict: open debates about the most controversial problems of the present and past, discussions without ad hominem accusations, without vague, hurtful allusions, such as we saw in the so-called *Historikerstreit*. Keeping secrets is dangerous: Resentments take root in society; when they remain unspoken, they go even deeper. There are many talk shows; in my country, at least, they usually remain on the surface and problems are talked to death.

A famous German philosopher reportedly complained that his partner talked so much that he had no chance to think. Someone asked him what she talked about. She doesn’t say, he answered. That could happen to any soap-box orator. The political class has lost much of its credibility: They talk too much and say too little. They forget that citizens are adults and approachable. The peoples of Eastern Europe have defended themselves against ideological deception, fighting for the right “to live in truth.” A Europe of democracies existed once before– immediately following the First World War; they disintegrated very quickly. The situation is far more favorable today, but we would do well not to trust in our immunity to dangers. Yesterday’s utopias—Bolshevism and Fascism—were drugs of political anesthesia; privatizing drugs is no solution.

Liberal democracy is always in danger. Even in times of prosperity we stagger from one financial crisis to the next, and no one can guarantee that the globalized free market will not one day fall into a crisis that spreads new misery and leads to false remedies like illiberalism and protectionism. Any form of insecurity promotes extremism and criminality; such conditions entice people into believing in the necessity of authoritarian leadership.

Ralf Dahrendorf correctly noted that it “is our task to reconcile competitiveness, social cohesion and political freedom,” a task, as he wrote, that was tantamount to squaring the circle. If the necessity to remain competitive further weakens social cohesion, freedom is also endangered. The end of the century, which was shaped differently by Germany and America, dramatically altered the situation of this nation once again. The self-evidence of German willingness to assume a full role in the Kosovo war signals the recognition of new responsibilities within and outside of Germany. The Bundeswehr in the Balkans, together with the units of former enemies, seals a new order. German initiatives to broker peace and German efforts on behalf of a stability pact in southeastern Europe are further evidence of the new situation. Germany will assume ever greater responsibility in reshaping Europe and expanding European integration. The new republic should remain the chief representative of the interests of the Central European countries, especially Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic: The vision of Europe led the way for these nations, and they supported German reunification in spite of terrible memories. Now it is

time to negotiate their complete membership in Europe as quickly as possible. Europe may suffer from an absence of leadership because the will to lead is lacking; the role of the primus inter pares will fall to the new republic—a new responsibility for German diplomacy.

The configuration of German-American relations will also become more difficult. It would be easy to adhere to the pieties: to insist on old friendship and loyal gratitude and to forget that here, too, there were times of mutual distrust and conflict. When the Bonn Republic was established America was a protector and model. The current republic is far less dependent on America as a protecting power, and the model has faded. It may seem tempting in the short term to fall into the old anti-American clichés and blame the shrinking of a German sense of identity on US-driven globalization. But images of the enemy are simply convenient truculence. Transatlantic relations, never smooth, will become more turbulent; perhaps Berlin will have to assume the role that Bismarck once claimed for himself: that of honest broker, although some people doubted whether such a thing exists.

Two comments in closing. A special wish for to the younger generation: We old folks have gone through a lot and achieved something, but we leave behind a world that is neither ideal nor enlightened. We did have one privilege that we would like to pass on: A more or less unbroken relationship to the great thinkers of the past. This may sound pretentious, but it is simply intended as a reminder of all the human wisdom contained in the thought of the last millennia. I hope the younger generation can enjoy what is known, despite everything, as the European cultural heritage. Try to escape from time to time to the proverbial desert island with a well-chosen book: It nourishes the mind and the soul like nothing else.

Certainly, there are moments in life when the commandment of the “Why” loses its relevance. In moments of physical danger, obedience may be a saving necessity. In love there is often no “why.” Just as there is none for a gift such as that presented to me today. But my unexpected good fortune at being able to appear in the Paulskirche demands reflection: How did I actually come to be increasingly involved in postwar German life? In retrospect, it is clear to me that my childhood predestined me for this: Nazism was the lesson in my political education that formed my emotions. I owe an important part of my later life to this childhood and youth, which was cut short by early experiences. Nazism unleashed my love of freedom as a human good, a prerequisite for all other goods. Heine was right: “Love of freedom is a prison flower”; I wish nonetheless that it could bloom everywhere.

I could not dissociate myself from the drama of German history; it has helped to shape my work. My new engagement with German matters was not an easy process. I had to go through a kind of “denazification,” that is, I had to be persuaded that German history cannot be judged from the perspective of 1945 alone. But the memory of people from my childhood who even then were committed to a liberal Germany came to my aid. The construction of postwar Germany did not emerge out of nowhere; people rightly invoked old, albeit weak traditions. In recent decades I have increasingly dealt with German affairs, but also maintained a distance in order to see dangers more clearly and occasionally warn against them.

German friends have allowed me this kind of shared intellectual experience, and so I could remain faithful to the disappointed dreams of my parents. And if I can mention but one name here, it would be Countess Marion Dönhoff, whose friendship has been a liberating and life-defining gift; she has shown us how to transform personal loss into incalculable benefit for others, and she communicates reconciliation with Prussian simplicity. I am deeply indebted to my German and European friends. For me, German-American understanding is an imperative of history, politics and my own life. I am the citizen of one country, but my love belongs to two languages, equally imperiled, and to an old culture, equally neglected. My gratitude belongs to the country in which my children and grandchildren were able to grow up in freedom, and to the country that once rejected me, and to which I am connected anew, which allowed me to feel this gratitude clearly, and to experience friendship as a life-giving gift. I thank you.

Source: Fritz Stern, “Dankesrede,” Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels, 1999. Börsenverein des Deutschen Buchhandels. Recording (in German) available at: https://www.friedenspreis-des-deutschen-buchhandels.de/alle-preistraeger-seit-1950/1990-1999/fritz-stern

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