

The Journalist Josef Joffe Reflects on Sources of German Pride (2001)

Abstract

Based on his vast international experience, journalist Josef Joffe comments on the predictable polarization of the public over the question of whether Germans ought to be proud of their country. He rejects a revival of boisterous nationalism and instead suggests a quiet satisfaction with the civilizing learning processes of the postwar period.

Source

German and Proud

Of what? Of Democracy, European integration, and turning away from old arrogance

Someone who really has money doesn't show off; someone who's really proud of his country, child, or work doesn't beat his chest with pride. Gorillas beat their chests for courage; it's a gesture of insecurity. "I am proud to be an American" or "Je suis fier d'être français" are statements one hears quite rarely in unbroken nation-states. In America, the star-spangled banner flies over the post office as casually as the colorful pennants at gas stations in this country. In France, too, the republican gesture lacks the tinge of pathos; it's blue-white-red normality. Casual normality in the Federal Republic as well? Not yet. This is evident from the most recent burst of outrage from the "chattering class," which comes somewhere between Castor (still being talked about) and BSE (half-forgotten).^[1] One might as well have copied this scenario from the hard drive ahead of time, seeing as it's unfolding in the familiar, tried-and-true pattern. Someone (Laurenz Meyer of the CDU) professes: "I'm proud to be German." Whereupon someone else (Jürgen Trittin of the Greens) suggests that he might just as well out himself as a skinhead. Now the outrage starts to froth and encourage copycats. And so Guido Westerwelle (FDP) also displays his national pride, and the federal president (SPD) confesses that he's actually not all that proud of his country. In the end, the choruses are once again solidly united on the left and the right and are angrily trying to strip each other of the right to sing. How nice that in this disorderly world we can at least rely on the formation of camps – as most recently during the uproar over [Joschka] Fischer, when the German biography-war neatly consolidated the old ranks.

When the Politics of Emotion replace the Business of Politics

All just campaign noise? It's that, too. After all, the opposition has to try desperately hard to find any sort of theme that hasn't already been co-opted by the nimble New Center. Yesterday the Schröderites were still bravely engaging in reform politics; today, with 2002 fast approaching, they're once again doling out plenty of presents to their clientele. Under these circumstances, the Union can hardly attack from the left in order to promise the "little man" security against the unstoppable change. So it attacks from the right, which gives it the advantage of not needing to pitch programs and individuals, but only symbols. National pride doesn't cost anything, and it doesn't demand that tough choices be made between hostile leadership figures within the party and contending interest groups within the country. In this way, the politics of emotion easily replaces the business of politics.

And yet, whoever wants to interpret this quarrel over national feelings as mere surface-noise between the camps fails to grasp its full dimensions. In other countries, the statement "I am proud to be X" would not even be quoted, let alone torn to shreds. In Germany, however, there is no such relaxed stance, nor

can there be. Worse still: words like “relaxed,” or even “uninhibited,” are coded words, which, when paired with “the past” or “the nation,” signal nothing other than inhibition. They are the favorite words of those who would love to dispose of the one and re-mystify the other – in the service of a half-baked metaphysics that makes the broad, national “We” into a fortress against “the Other” and “the Foreign.” Whoever says “uninhibited” is dishonest.

But whoever readily turns “nation” into “nationalism” and denounces “patriotism” as “national arrogance” is also dishonest. Those are lethal arguments on par with “skinhead-Meyer.” Is it the iron duty of democrats to let the Skins steal every word? That would mean granting them victory ahead of time – leaving it to the scoundrels to define what is politically correct. Instead, democrats must flesh out the concept correctly. If a German wants to be proud of this Federal Republic, he need not go fishing in brown muck – not in resentment against others, not in murmurings about *Volk* and fatherland.

He can point out that in a soil contaminated with authoritarianism and totalitarianism, a democracy has taken root that is, in some respects, more liberal than its French or British counterparts. The past? Even after 56 years it is not being disposed of; memory and obligation have become the *raison d'état*. An overmighty state? Power is more vigorously fragmented only in Switzerland. Marginalization of foreigners? The right to citizenship through naturalization has asserted itself alongside the archaic principle of ethnicity – it came late, but it came after all. Germanomania? The answer is provided by a single word: Europe.

If anyone wants to be proud of these accomplishments, let him, because even the wildest dreamers would not have thought the Germans capable of them in 1945. Yet this would be a special kind of pride: one that does not exhaust itself in smugness or arrogance, least of all in arrogance towards “Others.” Such pride would also have the pleasant advantage of freeing the person declaring it from the need to beat his chest like a nervous gorilla. He would not need this self-reassurance and would regard his nation with the equanimity of Americans and Frenchmen. And with an affection that’s more than a vital but bloodless “constitutional patriotism.”

Constitutional patriotism is the interchangeable loyalty to rules that can be demanded by every liberal constitutional state. Affection, however, is the answer to the question: Why am I living under this law, and not another? It is a quiet answer – delivered with the very equanimity that the “zealous class” in this country still lacks. But progress has been made when a former Juso head by the name of Schröder^[2] “is proud of his country,” of “its democratic culture.” We can readily live with that kind of pride – as can our neighbors and friends.

NOTES

^[1] Here, Joffe makes reference to two popular themes in the contemporary media: the Castor transports of radioactive waste and concern over BSE (Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy), commonly known as “Mad Cow Disease” – eds.

^[2] Chancellor Gerhard Schröder was once involved with the Young Socialists [*Jungsozialisten* or “Jusos”] – eds.

Source: Josef Joffe, “Deutsch und Stolz”, *Die Zeit*, no. 13, March 22, 2001.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap

Recommended Citation: The Journalist Josef Joffe Reflects on Sources of German Pride (2001), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/a-new-germany-1990-2023/ghdi:document-3429>> [April 29, 2025].