The Social Democratic Intellectual Peter Glotz Warns against a False Normalization (1994)

Abstract

Alarmed by the neo-conservative call for "re-nationalization," the leftist intellectual Peter Glotz polemicizes against those who revive nationalist currents under the guise of restoring a "normal" German identity. In making his argument, Glotz attacks the eccentric and controversial filmmaker Hans-Jürgen Syberberg.

Source

The Arming with Identity

An ethnological analysis of German normalization-nationalism: the example of Hans-Jürgen Syberberg

1.

The danger already lies in the seemingly innocuous sentences that can be uttered by certifiably democratic ladies from the executive committee of the Protestant Church Congress, or by the guileless East German educated classes, senior physicians from Rostock or lawyers from Dresden who are experienced home musicians: "We can't run away from our identity," they say sensibly, or: "After the reunification of Germany we need an all-German identity once again." Or they make such aggressive statements that level-headed nationalists with FRG experience are prompted to play down the matter: "Forty-five years of reeducation have cured East and West Germans of their identity." Out of this "small" identity-philosophy (which has little to do with Hegel's large one) a German normalization-nationalism, a reconstruction, is currently emerging through the concentrated efforts of a still half-concealed, reputable, non-Nazi Right. Those involved reach back before Hitler and differentiate themselves from the vulgar anti-Semitic and anti-democratic terror of the Nazis with clear, sincere words. But can such a leap land you anywhere else but in Wilhelmism, in the tradition before 1871, in the highly industrialized, technologically advanced, ambitious, competent power-state with the mandate of a state located in the middle [of Europe]? And didn't that state end – even without Fascist morons, for that matter – in the European snake pit of 1918, in the poisonous, armed-to-the-teeth competition between beastly rival states?

Granted, the situation has become confused. Even individuals who are largely beyond suspicion, for example, members of the SPD leadership, are talking about the "neglect of the national by all of us": identity philosophy. The struggle of French and German filmmakers against Hollywoodization – a struggle over identity. Don't the Croats have an original right to their nation, which has been oppressed for so many years? Even the left-wing Basque nationalists are sending friendly telegrams to Zagreb. Is the dominance of American mass culture not a genuine problem? We now ask ourselves: Can we continue to celebrate the energetic resistance of Black Nationalism when we curse the glorification of violence and the sexism in the punk of East German skinheads? On the other hand – can one really stifle the entire emotionalism of rock only because it can also be put in the service of fascistic feelings – rape fantasies, homophobia, combat-boot brutality? Haven't we regarded the deliberate separation of feminists as politically correct until now? What, then, can be said against German identity, seeing as the French (Augstein writes about it every week) and the Poles (the freedom-hero Walesa!) are much more nationalistic than the Germans?

On the one hand, this much is true: self-attributions, political subjectivities, feelings of belonging together, mutually interlinked methods of communication are unavoidable, legitimate. Nations are empirical, not ideological. On the other hand, the mythification of shared history, language, conquest, and culture contains the seeds of xenophobia and nationalism. Even a minor fuzziness of vision can turn us Germans into criminals again. Alexander Kluge's clever and simple formula applies to the shoulder-shrugging lack of concern on the part of the normalizers: "*In Gefahr und großer Not bringt der Mittelweg den Tod*" ["In danger and great distress, the middle way brings death"]. The middle way of our recent, newly intensified guilelessness, cleverly called "pragmatism."

2.

I will dissect normalization-nationalism by using the example of film director Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, admittedly a somewhat eccentric figure. Arnulf Baring, Jochen Thies, Reiner Zitelmann, Brigitte Seebacher-Brandt, or Christian Meier, the middle-of-the-road people working in this vein, would shudder. Why the melodramatic protest against "victor's aesthetics" and "re-education"? Why the pretentious, highly cultured, neo-classical attitude? Why (for heaven's sake) even the anti-Semitic undertones (whoever joined the Jews and the leftists was successful …)? All nonsense, they would say – the first thing we'll do is rid the Germans of the idea of having learned something special, the "*Sonderweg*" ["special path"], the unnaturally affected sense of guilt; we are pragmatizing them into Frenchmen and Englishmen. Along the margins, one might also manage to rebuild the Berliner Stadtschloss and rehabilitate a few Prussian virtues, but please, no overstatements, otherwise the Dutch will cry, Habermas will write an essay, and the leftist-liberal mainstreamers of yesterday will regain the upper hand in *Spiegel*.

But Syberberg is not one-of-a-kind; rather, he's a symptom: the highly sensitive, unstrategically candid representative of the identity philosophy of a German educated middle class that has been gaining strength again since reunification. He has one foot in the splendid national-revolutionary camp, in the Matthes and Seitz culture, among the right-wing Foucaultians, and the other foot deep in the traditional inner life of that band of German teachers who sing the famous song: "The Yanks took away our Hölderlin/Bratwurst and replaced it with Negro music and the hamburger." Syberberg's Wagnerian anti-Semitism (an arrogant resentment of the aesthetics of Adorno, Bloch, Benjamin, Marcuse, Kracauer) might still be disregarded; the admirers of Steffen Heitmann have not yet roused themselves to go there, perhaps they will never do so again. Apart from that, as early as the turn of 1989/90, Syberberg was already offering what Botho Strauß and Alain Finkielkraut only let out in 1993, and what the weaker graduates of the integrated upper grades, frightened by unemployment, AIDS, and Polish car thieves, will only be thinking in 1995, at the earliest. The normalization-nationalism represented by the eccentric but by no means untypical (and by no means unimportant) artist Syberberg contains six ingredients, six discourses.

(1) There is, first, the very usual mythification of history, that is, the excision of tales of heroes and suffering, the "epics," the great symbolic narratives in which the national icons are molded.

[…]

(2) The second learning step is the occupation of land [*Landnahme*], another well-known construct. Here Syberberg has a thing for Prussia, which not every normalization-nationalist will want to go along with, "Prussia as Europe's backbone," Prussia as Kleist-land ("Kleist killed himself when he saw his land in misery and saw no way out for himself"). Effective and plausible, however, is the assertion of an indissoluble link between land and "human cultures." What matters is "memory" – "regardless of who is still living there." […]

(3) The third motive is authenticity and ethnicity, the argument in favor of "nature" and against the

"plastic world," against "cheap, convenient, quick throw-away products like punk, Pop, and junk," that's to say, the damning verdict – so popular among nationalist circles all over the world – against mass phenomena and against cultural phenomena. […]

(4) The celebration of "genuineness" and "originality" is joined by the class discourse; nothing new, of course, most recently rehashed in the German-speaking region by Hans Sedlmeier (Loss of the Middle), Emil Staiger, and dozens of others, yet of constitutive importance for the national biotope. […]

(5) Typically German, and therefore only partly comprehensible to other national movements, is the romanticizing of the East, combined with the theory of the German "middle-mandate" [*Mitte-Auftrag*].[1] "*Schwer der Gang, härter die Winde*" [Tough the road, harsher the winds] versified Syberberg – "and anyone who went East knew what awaited him." The tie to the West is downplayed, equidistance is propagated: "And if we don't want them, not the Americans and not the Russians?" The future of Germany: "To be the one in the middle." Picking up on old geopolitical concepts, the great European power Germany is oriented toward the East and the Southeast. […]

(6) That leaves the oldest and yet at the same time the most utopian discourse, which still faces the toughest opposition among us, even from hard-core normalizers: the critique of total peace, or to turn it around: removing the taboo from war. "War in the old sense," writes Syberberg, "was also a cultural phenomenon. It corresponded to the natural being of settled humans." There are virtues that shine especially brightly in war. […]

3.

What this means is that talk of "identity" is dangerous. After reunification, the Germans are in the midst of the process of reconstructing a national identity, but in the sense of a backwards-looking revision (which leaves out Hitler). Where that's likely to end is obvious: with the defiant ethnocentrism of the maxim "Germany first." With a return to the socially conservative domestic morality of a misconstructed national state. With normalization in the sense of a robust reduction of complexity, in short, with Tonio Kröger's longing for blond Inge, for the "pleasures of the common." At the end of the twentieth century, a return to its beginning, a laconic gyroscopic movement of history over fifty million dead – bluntly put, that would be either nauseating or terrifying.

Of course, that doesn't mean that the word "identity" *has* to be poisoned. That is insinuated by Diedrich Diederichsen's statement: "He who demands, creates, or venerates identity without fundamental necessity is a Fascist." To be sure, this idea conveys the correct insight that the struggle for survival among "nations" under assault, be they peoples, races, youth cultures, or sexual and religious minorities, is more legitimate than the separation of dominant cultures so that they might fully develop and assert their peculiarities. The outraged reply of an irate normalizer – "You want to grant the gay community the same thing you want to deny the Germans" – is something one could still deal with. But it's unavoidable that groups (that is, "nations," "communities," "movements") develop subjectivities, social constructions, forms of coherence. The problem is not the "nation" and its "patriotism," but the sharpening of patriotism into a *weapon*.

That's why it would not be German-national if the Germans – like the French – agreed on a canon, a core curriculum, provided that Heine, Börne, Glassbrenner, and Tucholsky were as much a part of it as the Weimar Classics. That's why it would not be cultural chauvinism if the German and French film industries were given places to show their products, provided this protectionism did not carry with it the elitist arrogance against Pop, mass culture, and American art. That's why the careful nurturing of the Rhaeto-Romanic language for a few thousand Swiss citizens is not a nationalistic whim, but the preservation of diversity.

The issue is to hold firm to Herder's idea: every language, every culture, every code is a thought of God. At the same time, the issue is also to rebuff Fichte's idea: German against Welsh, purity against intermixing. The Enlightenment utopia that the world would be best if all people spoke the same "world language" is impoverished. The nationalistic utopia that the world will be healed by a given nation's essence is dubious, terroristic. Europe, this zone of mixing peoples par excellence, must live without such decals.

What remains is the anxious question about the reunited Germany. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, I fear, is no crackpot, no outcast, but a vain-incautious avantgardist. He picked up political raw material that was lying in the streets, unnoticed, for forty years – and he has a knack for making connections. Don't environmentalists share his contempt for the plastic world? Can't antagonistic feelings toward jazz and American pop culture be skillfully attached to the leftist critique of the cultural industry? Isn't it possible to sell the dissolution of the bond to the West as pan-European idealism under the motto "We love Vaclav Havel and Lech Walesa"? Germany is moving, Germany must move. But where to?

NOTES

[1] In an article in *Die Zeit*, author Peter Glotz described Germany's "middle-mandate" as "the idea that Germany has a mission in the East." See Peter Glotz, "Wir Deutschen sollten uns klarmachen; die Nachbarn misstrauen uns weiterhin," *Die Zeit*, June 24, 1994 – eds.

Source: Peter Glotz, "Die Bewaffnung mit Identität", in *Die falsche Normalisierung, die unmerkliche Verwandlung der Deutschen 1989 bis 1994, Essays*. Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1994, pp. 42–50.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap

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