Heinrich Böll on the Psychological Impact of the Economic Miracle (1960)

Abstract

In this brief account of a midnight taxi ride to the train station, the leftist Catholic writer Heinrich Böll critiques Germany's suppression of Nazi guilt and expresses his loathing for the popular greed and ethical disorientation exhibited by most Germans during the "Economic Miracle."

Source

In This Country

As we were driving to the main train station at midnight, a heavy silence hung between us. Our conversation had failed. The visitor had expected precise information from me about the Federal Republic, but I wasn't able to offer precise information about such an imprecise country. Finding a formula for this multifaceted entity called the Federal Republic would have been impossible even for Einstein. To one of the visitor's questions—"What actually makes the people here today different from those in 1933?"—I replied, "Nothing, of course," then added a tiny correction: "People now are doing better financially than back then." The question: "Are there still Nazis in the country?" My response: "Of course. Did you expect that a simple date—May 8, 1945—changed people?"

On the way to the train station—without being asked again the question that had been posed hours earlier—I added, "In this country, you will never hear anyone say that Germany was defeated. You will always hear that it collapsed. With the words 'after the collapse' people refer to the time from May 1945 up to the currency reform, or in retrospect they call it 'before the currency reform.' The period from June 20, 1948, to today is called 'after the currency reform'; casually, it is put in simpler terms: 'before and after the currency,' whereby 'before the currency' also refers instinctively to wartime, when money was flowing. We are living in year 12 of 'the currency.' Before the collapse, we had the Nazi period, which itself breaks down to six years of peace and six of war." […]

The visitor didn't answer. The taxi driver was also silent. He was in a bad mood; after waiting three hours for a customer, the ride was only DM 4.80. The prospect of having to wait another three hours—that can certainly sour a person's mood. Taking a cab is unpopular in this country, like telephones and checkbooks. These useful innovations still carry an air of wastefulness. […] Someone in this country who "pulls out" a checkbook can expect to be regarded as affluent, although a checkbook costs only seventy-five pfennig. And the fifty checks it contains are very useful in the sport that must be played as a warm-up, so to speak, should one wish to be credit worthy. The sport is called "keep your account moving." If you move two thousand marks fifty times, it makes one hundred thousand, and that is a handsome turnover. Turnover is everything. It brings credit, it increases to maybe six thousand, and then this amount, moved a hundred times, makes a turnover of six hundred thousand. You just have to know how to move your account: back and forth and back again. The soap bubble cannot be allowed to burst. No wonder that, in a country where the common prejudice against calculations and mathematics is still in style, those who practice this sport diligently have good prospects of success. Adam Riese was for naught.[1] Being good at figures is almost regarded as a stigma. If it were known how good Goethe was at arithmetic! The streets were empty this September night, only a few municipal service vehicles were out driving around. The roller brushes of the street sweepers were turning quietly, the motors of the street-washing trucks hummed softly. The taxi driver took the cigarette that my visitor offered, thanking him.

He would never have offered one to the passenger—and perhaps this insight is part of a formula. Not because he was stingy, but because in this moment the passenger represents to the driver something that is simultaneously worshipped and scorned in this country: a customer. Put in economic terms: a consumer. We are a nation of consumers. Neckties and conformism, shirts and non-conformism, everything has its consumers. The only important thing is that—whether shirt or conformism—it must be presented as a brand-name item. Neither the instinct nor the experience of the consumer is enough to determine quality. So people demand proven quality. But proven quality is expensive. […]

I eagerly anticipated the moment when our taxi would turn onto the street that one inevitably has to take on the way to the main train station. The buildings give off an aura of dignity and grandeur, the best stone is utilized in the best Nazi-Party-Congress style, according to the motto: "It can't get any sturdier than this." Governing and building are one and the same, and this street makes clear who builds in this country. As you drive through in a taxi, the taxi driver, just to be sure, shoots a glance at the shoes, clothing, and face of the passenger, to see if the popular comment regarding this building is fitting: "All of this was built with our money."

[…]

When we got out at the station, the taxi driver was shocked at the size of the tip my visitor gave him: two marks on five! And that from a customer he had deemed worthy of his comment. Had he been wrong in his appraisal of us, would it have been better not to make the comment? Were we Communists or did we think he was one? Careful! Unfortunately, his shock turned into sycophantry. How carefully he lifted the visitor's bag out of the trunk! In this country people appreciate generosity as little as they do thriftiness. Money is burdened with a large dose of sentimentality. No wonder, in a country where poverty is no longer either a mystical home or a place to fight the class struggle. In the heads of even the so-called intellectuals the terms "impoverished," "good," and "worker" are still one and the same. Consequently, since the workers are no longer impoverished, there is no more poverty, and the workers cease to be good. Those who are called "social" are the exceptions. It has not occurred to anyone that anti-social behavior might have an equivalent among the satraps. Anyone who lights a cigarette with a hundred-mark note can expect more admiration than contempt or hatred. […]

The only threat that scares a German *today* is that of declining turnover. As soon as this threat is in the offing, panic ensues and all signals are set on high alert. There are so very many very smart, very clever, eloquent young people who are informed in a way that is unsettling, who are educated and see connections, who know as much about the Third Punic War as they do about Faulkner. But I ask myself where their resistance begins or would begin. They are afraid of neither Adenauer nor Ollenhauer.[2] If you draw their attention to tiny concessions, they cite an instance that is much more dangerous than the former is or the latter could ever become: Lieschen Müller,[3] this mythical being who seems to me to be a figment of their guilty conscience. Lieschen Müller and turnover are closely related. Anyone who threatens turnover has a chance to provoke the Germans. The death of their neighbors and friends did not teach them to value life. Pain has not become wisdom; grief has not become strength. They are needy in an absurd way, since in the face of the constant threat they are not even capable of really enjoying their relative prosperity. The hunger of the years "before the currency" did not even make them wise enough to truly enjoy the blessings of the moment; the misery did not even give them a certain zest. The person whose memory goes back only ten years is considered sick or deserves to be put into a deep sleep, so he can gain new vigor to reawaken for the present. [In the Third Reich] a handful of potatoes, a kiss in the hallway, a political comment among nonparty members—that was the price of a human life. Maybe the secret of this extinguishing of memory lies in the nature of the unknown formula that allows our life to *split* into the time before and after the currency reform.

These are the kinds of things I had wanted to say to the visitor, but I never found the words in our conversation. A quick handshake, a "goodbye," and the train left. […]

Being a German means being threatened in a Paris hotel for being one and, on the return trip, sitting on the train across from a young French fascist who tries to compliment one on the rigor with which antisemitism was pursued in this country. It means not being able to join in when the French talk about Algeria. Perhaps one will only be permitted to speak when as many people are killed there as were murdered under German rule in Europe between 1933 and 1945. Who keeps track of this mysterious account of the nations? Who determines the price of a human life? Will a look decide this tomorrow? That dark stock exchange that dictates the price, where will it lead? The threat in the Paris hotel, of course, is directed precisely against

the German who brought a handful of potatoes to a Jew in hiding, and the British customs official holds in his fingers—as though it were the ID card of a leper—the passport of precisely the German who did not continue the denunciation. If there were any rudiments of collective guilt in this country, they would have appeared precisely at the moment when the sale of pain, grief, and memory began with the "currency reform."

It is horrible that there are more than enough occasions to get angry in and about this country. But who should be the object of this anger? They swallow everything. In a report about a car accident, they could perhaps be shown the death of their own neighbor on a television screen; they would be startled, maybe even say, "don't I know him?" and then wait for the next image. In the next currency reform, their money could be revalued at 100 to 0.10, and the assets of the clever correspondingly higher. People would sigh, complain a little, but then they would soon roll up their sleeves and work, work, work. In this way they can bring about a few more miracles and won't need to fear that anyone might get upset about the unknowns in the equation. The inverse of the miracle of the [multiplying] loaves is the miracle of stealing bread to survive. The faces of the experts who can explain the miracle with simple words are as empty and dead as the moon. […]

NOTES

[1] Popularly known as Adam Riese (1492–1559), Adam Ries was a German mathematician who published one of the first widely available arithmetic texts—trans.
[2] Erich Ollenhauer (1901–1963) headed the German SPD from 1952 to 1963. He unsuccessfully ran for Chancellor in 1953 and 1957, both times losing to Konrad Adenauer (CDU)—trans.
[3] "Lieschen Müller" is a name used to refer to a typical female German citizen; she and "Otto Normalverbraucher" are similar to the American "Mr. and Mrs. John Q. Public."—trans.

Source: Heinrich Böll, "Hierzulande," in *Werke. Essayistische Schriften und Reden*, vol. 1, 1952–1963. Cologne: Verlag Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1978, pp. 366–75. Courtesy of Verlag Kiepenheuer & Witsch GmbH & Co. KG, Cologne.

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