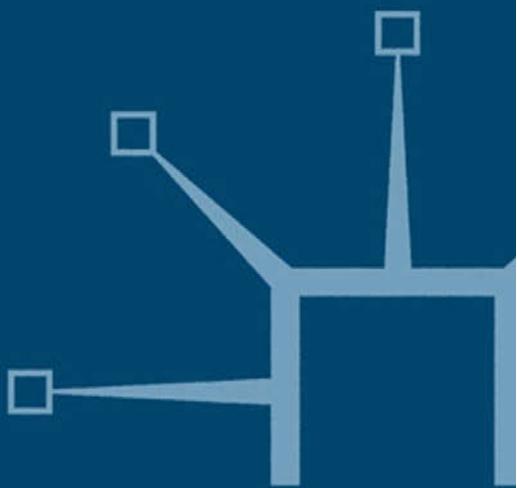


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The German Melting-Pot

Multiculturality in Historical Perspective

Wolfgang Zank



THE GERMAN MELTING-POT

Also by Wolfgang Zank

WIRTSCHAFT UND ARBEIT IN OSTDEUTSCHLAND

The German Melting-Pot

**Multiculturality in
Historical Perspective**

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First published in Great Britain 1998 by

MACMILLAN PRESS LTD

Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS and London
Companies and representatives throughout the world

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-349-40258-8

ISBN 978-0-230-37520-8 (eBook)

DOI 10.1057/9780230375208



First published in the United States of America 1998 by

ST. MARTIN'S PRESS, INC.,

Scholarly and Reference Division,
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010

ISBN 978-0-312-21303-9

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Zank, Wolfgang.

The German melting-pot : multiculturalism in historical
perspective / Wolfgang Zank.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-312-21303-9 (cloth)

1. Pluralism (Social sciences)—Germany—History. 2. Minorities—
—Germany—History. I. Title.

HM276.Z36 1998

306'.0943—dc21

97-42336

CIP

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Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 1998 978-0-333-71041-8

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To Ulla

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1 Introduction

GERMANY – A MULTICULTURAL NATION-STATE

Fifty years after the end of the Second World War, Germany seems to have reached the stage of boredom, at least seen from the perspective of the international media. Some years ago this was still quite different: unification was a dramatic event in itself, and it immediately provoked fears of a Greater Germany which would dominate Europe (if not start a new war); racist attacks on foreigners seemed to confirm the worst expectations. But then the level of xenophobic violence declined again, the right-wing party *Die Republikaner* ended with a poor 1.9 per cent at the national elections in 1994, and Helmut Kohl continued as chancellor. At present (1996) there seems to be nothing at hand which could bring internal German affairs back onto the front pages of the international media.

The relative calmness is in certain aspects surprising, given the point that Germany is divided by deep cultural contrasts, some of which in other places mark the front lines of civil wars. The word 'culture' is used here in a broad sense, as an ensemble of values, norms, symbols and 'images' which structure people's perception of the world. The cultural differences in Germany are most visible in the foreign immigrant population (roughly 7.5 million people),¹ particularly in the Turks. But also the three million *Aussiedler*, ethnic Germans from Eastern Europe, have been bringing different values to Germany; they often came from remote rural areas which remained largely untouched by the cultural mainstreams which have shaped (West) German society since 1945. Asylum applicants have been coming from countries as distant as Ghana and Sri Lanka. Not so important in quantitative terms but of a certain symbolical value is the immigration of Jews from the former Soviet Union (relatives included, about 45 000 up to 1996).²

The impact of immigration upon German society can perhaps best be illustrated by the following calculation: if the German refugees and expellees who after 1945 came from the former German territories are counted as immigrants as well, then by 1989 one-third of all inhabitants of West Germany were either immigrants, or

descendants of immigrants.³ And in 1992 in relation to her population, Germany was the largest immigration country in the world.⁴

But also among the 'innate' Germans deep cultural gaps are noticeable. One of these gaps divides East and West Germans. Forty years under different social systems have left marks on the mentality of both populations. Much older of origin but still traceable is the confessional gap which separates Protestants from Catholics. This cultural divide has lost much of its previous sharpness because religion in general has lost importance. But still, about three-quarters of the German population believe in God or in a Higher Being. For 52 per cent of the West Germans religion is 'rather important', or even 'very important'.⁵ On the other hand, about a quarter of the population does not believe either in God or in a Higher Being, and the proportion is rising.⁶ That means that life and death, the world beyond the reach of experience and science, the 'last realities' (Max Weber) look completely different for different groups of Germans.

Repeatedly history has been the source of emotional debates, not to say agonizing polemics. One example was the sharp controversy in 1995 about the role of the German army in the Second World War (a misused heroic fighting force, or the largest criminal organization in German history?).⁷ When looking back, Germans often see completely different things.

All Western societies, not the least West Germany, have been transformed by a 'Silent Revolution' (Ronald Inglehart)⁸ which led to a decline of 'materialist' and a growing importance of 'post-materialist' values. Sociologists have grouped German society into several different social milieux (see below); even in small areas an enormous variety of lifestyles, attitudes and values can be discerned.⁹

Simply as a matter of fact, Germany is a multicultural society.¹⁰ But strangely enough, this cultural diversity hampers cooperation and the division of labour only to a limited extent. There are tensions, disrespect, violence, but seen in proportion, the overwhelming day-to-day normality is an undramatic living together, or at least side by side. The answer to this mystery partly lies in the fact that Germany *in some aspects* is quite *homogeneous*, more homogeneous than the other large EU member states Great Britain, France, Spain and Italy. The parliamentary democracy and the basic characteristics of the social order have practically no enemies and political extremism is quantitatively weak. Hidden extremist propensities and resentments among the population are difficult to measure but

comparative research has produced no evidence that they are more widespread in Germany than in the other EU countries.¹¹

Germany is also homogeneous in the sense that there is no separatism, not even regionalism. Many Germans feel a deep sense of regional identity, and the German regions vary very much from each other as to customs, mentalities, food and drinking habits, architecture or dialect. But regional identity easily goes together with a national identity, here understood as a sentiment of belonging to one nation. There is no political movement which could be compared to Sinn Fein or to Scottish Nationalists, to Corsican separatists, to ETA or to the Lega Nord. No German political party was founded in order to represent the interests of one region only, let alone to make it independent. Not even the Bavarian CSU (*Christlich Soziale Union*) can be grouped under this heading; the CSU is mainly the Bavarian branch of the CDU/CSU. Not even in East Germany where in 1991 86 per cent of the population felt they were treated as second-rank citizens¹² was there a base for a regional party. No political party demands the reversion of unification, not even the post-communist PDS (*Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus*), which is strong in East Germany and weak in the West, but defines itself as a German party.

Also, in linguistic terms, Germany is rather homogeneous today. There are, apart from immigrants, a few people who speak a non-German idiom as their first language (Frisians, Danes, slavonic Sorbs). But these linguistic minorities amount to only about 0.1 per cent of the population. The German language is divided into dialects, but the knowledge of German standard speech is so widespread, its status so uncontested that few problems arise. No one demands that Low German or Bavarian should be made the official language to be taught in school or to be used in court. In this respect Germany fundamentally differs from the other large West European countries; in Germany there is nothing which could be compared to Gaelic or Welsh, to Breton or Provençal, to Catalan, Galician or Basque, or to Sardinian. The solid position of German standard speech is a result of Germany's relatively strong educational system, but it reflects also the rather unproblematic relation between the regions and the central power; if there were regionalism or separatism, the activists of these movements certainly would claim that, say, Bavarian or Rhenanian constitute proper languages in their own right.

To sum up, Germany today displays a rich variety of cultural

currents, but is nevertheless quite homogeneous in certain fields. The cultural diversity seldom impedes cooperation and coexistence, and it is not in contradiction to a sentiment of belonging to one nation. Therefore, Germany can be labelled a multicultural nation-state. Nation is here understood as: a group of people who are citizens of one state and who are connected by a feeling of belonging to one group.

German society is confronted with the problem of integrating a wide range of different cultural groups. In a historical perspective this problem is not new. By about 1895, Germany was divided by deep cultural cleavages into four large *social-moral milieux* (see below) which were closely affiliated to competing political parties: a conservative-agrarian Protestant milieu in northern and northeast Germany, a bourgeois-liberal, predominantly urban Protestant milieu, a Catholic milieu and a socialist workers' movement.

Besides these four macro milieux there were several other groups with separate cultural identities. Many people spoke a non-German language, the Jews were a very successful religious minority, while many artists and writers met in bohemian groups and mentally lived in their own world. And Germany was already in 1895 an immigration country.

If we go another two hundred years back in time, to 1695, the picture is no less multicultural. At that time Germany, as a nation-state, did not exist. There was, however, a loose confederation called the 'Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation'. The formal head of this confederation was an emperor, but the political power rested mainly with the princes of the numerous territories. This 'Holy Roman Empire' comprised huge territories which today are part of Czechia, Belgium, France, Italy, former Yugoslavia and Poland, and the linguistic pattern varied accordingly. But the German-speaking parts did not constitute a linguistic unity because the population at large used mutually incomprehensible dialects. German intellectuals were active in creating a standard speech, but the educated and ruling classes mostly used French or Latin. And given the massive impact which religion had upon daily life and the perception of the world, the confessional gaps deeply separated mental worlds.

Multiculturalism is not a peculiarity of German history, 'for any nation of even middling size had to construct its unity on the base of evident disparity' (Eric J. Hobsbawm).¹³ The specific content of the multicultural cocktail has been different at different historical times, and so have been the mechanisms which allowed

(with uneven success) for the integration of the different groups. But the basic problem, namely that societies must integrate culturally different groups, has been almost constant in modern history.

THE PITFALLS OF BIOLOGICAL ANALOGIES AND 'NATIONAL IDENTITIES'

The emphasis which is placed here upon multiculturalism might surprise readers who are familiar with the concept of national identity.

Certainly, the members of one nation share the feeling of belonging to one group, one nation. The development of this sentiment in Germany is one of the subjects of the present book. This group sentiment has been a factor of paramount political importance. The nation-state and its laws constitute the framework of society. Government and taxation are accepted as legitimate as long as it is the *national* government which empties the pockets, and not a foreign one. Everything which seems to threaten the nation-state provokes fierce reactions. This is one of the reasons why the process of European integration has often run into difficulties.

The common feeling of belonging to one nation is affirmed daily by symbols. The flag, the national football team, the language, the navy, the queen or president, the currency, the anthem – there is a long list of items with which the citizens can identify, and which symbolically express their commonness. And if some hostile individuals mistreat one of these symbols, for instance by burning the flag, many citizens who have never met before can simultaneously feel severely hurt. Particularly in times of war this group feeling becomes of paramount importance since most people automatically tend to rally round their own government, and against the people living in the neighbouring country. This is the reason why shaky dictatorships have a tendency to look for outer conflicts.

The feeling of belonging to one national group and the symbols by which this group-feeling is expressed can conveniently be summarized under the term national identity.

The borders of the nation-state also constitute a barrier for human solidarity. High taxation and social contributions are accepted as long as they are used to remedy misery *within* the national borders. But in all European countries it is politically very difficult to raise even modest sums of taxpayers' money for development

aid to Third World countries where misery is much harsher.

The nation-state also constitutes a hindrance to communication since the media to a great extent focus on internal affairs. This partly reflects the group feeling: what happens to 'others' is not so important. But it is also less important in an objective sense: if one's own government raises taxes or introduces speed limits, it has direct consequences for one's own situation, whereas similar decisions in the neighbouring country are at best of indirect importance. Furthermore, political campaigning must be directed towards fellow-nationals – they can vote at the next elections; the citizens of the neighbouring country cannot.

In most cases the national boundaries are also language barriers, and the language differences reinforce the inward bias of communication. Many people do not have sufficient command of foreign languages to read foreign newspapers or follow foreign TV. In many cases language, in an almost 'natural' way, seems to separate those who belong to one's own group from those who do not – one kind of people one can easily talk to, others one cannot, at least not without further training. Language therefore often becomes a powerful symbol of national group-feeling.

The inward bias of communication means that the people in the neighbouring countries often appear somewhat nebulous, which creates good conditions for the development of national stereotypes. National stereotypes are still very widespread and are therefore important cultural factors. This inward bias also means that many writers, actors and singers have an audience which ends at the national borders and the images they create are practically unknown in neighbouring countries. To mention one example, there is hardly a Dane who doesn't know the singer Kim Larsen, but outside Denmark hardly anyone has heard of him. The existence of authors, singers and images which can be found more or less in only one country eases communication and hidden allusions among the compatriots, a fact which in turn reinforces the 'we-feeling'. Moreover, political systems are different from country to country, and this often implies different political styles. A Danish politician would cause a scandal if he used the aggressive rhetoric which often characterizes American election campaigns.

But all this does not imply that the members of one nation are themselves culturally homogeneous. Two persons can easily talk the same language, be citizens of the same nation, feel themselves compatriots and have a knowledge of some authors and songs in

common, but nevertheless be quite different. The one might be atheist and rationalist, the other deeply religious; the one open-minded, the other xenophobic; the one humanist, the other misanthropic; the one very erotic, the other afraid of sex. Every European country displays an immense variety of cultural features: many different religions and confessions, xenophobia and open-integrationist attitudes, hard masculine values as represented by John Wayne and Arnold Schwarzenegger side by side with more balanced attitudes, feminism and traditional female roles, heterosexuality and homosexuality, crude materialism and spiritual values, tough industrialism and ecologism, and so on. Practically all countries are complex aggregates of cultural features.

It follows that, when writing about cultural features, the use of the definite article (*'the French'*, *'the Germans'*, *'the Russians'* . . .) is an unmistakable sign of incompetence.

On the other hand, all Western countries have an immense variety of cultural features in common. This is due to common traditions such as Christianity or the Enlightenment, but also due to continuous contact and exchange, a process which has been enormously amplified during the last decades. For many generations Homer, William Shakespeare and Leo D. Tolstoy have been part of the cultural baggage of the educated strata in Germany, and today John Wayne, Mick Jagger and Agatha Christie are integral parts of German mass culture.

Countries differ from each other not because they are of a different 'nature' but because the components of the cultural aggregates have a different weight. Terms such as 'French culture', 'English culture' or 'German culture' make sense only as labels for different aggregates. As regards Western European societies, the mixture of the components is quite comparable; an empirical social scientist sees a 'similarity of family' among these countries.¹⁴

Therefore, although the *illusion* of homogeneous nation-states is quite widespread, it is not possible to find a coherent set of cultural features which would be 'typical' for one particular nation in the sense that it unites the whole population (or at least the overwhelming majority), and in the sense that the one set of cultural features constitutes a, say, French as opposed to German 'national identity'. This is, however, the way many authors use the term national identity.¹⁵ Understood in this way, the 'national identity' is a fiction. To underline the fictive character of *this kind* of 'national identity', it is set in inverted commas. If used without inverted

commas, terms of collective identity cover only the group feeling and the symbols by which this group feeling is expressed; it explicitly does not include cultural homogeneity.

Many researchers have found it appropriate to model the components of culture as a kind of onion: the *symbols* of the culture are at the outermost layer, *heroes* and *rituals* are to be found in the deeper layers, and at the centre of the 'culture onion' the *values* are situated, constituting the very core of the culture.¹⁶ Using this model, it follows that language and other symbols which unite nations are on the outside; they are quite superficial. As regards norms and values, the core of culture, nation-states show an immense diversity; conversely, what separates one nation from the other is at the superficial level, whereas most core elements are common across the borders.

Often, however, these onion models have a confusing effect: by modelling symbols, rituals, heroes and values in a suggestive graphic model as *one* onion, they create the misleading impression that that there is *always* an intrinsic connection between values and symbols; people who use the same symbols for communication must have the same heroes and values. This is perhaps a valid assumption for studying the aboriginal cultures on New Guinea or Ashanti culture in West Africa. But this assumption of necessary congruence between symbols, rituals, heroes and values is absurd in connection with modern nations. Here all kinds of evidence show that people who use the same symbols (mainly the language) may have completely different rituals, heroes and values. Models which have been useful in anthropological studies of primitive societies can be very misleading when used on modern societies.

As far as the present writer can see, if 'national identity' is used in an excessive way, implying cultural homogeneity, one mistake is invariably made: material which might be valid to characterize one part of a nation gets over-generalized. The methodology often consists of finding some texts, or some forms of qualitative evidence, and claiming that these texts are characteristic of the 'national identity'. There is, however, one crucial point: how representative are these quotations? In general representativeness is simply stated as fact.

A short review of the characteristics of representative research might be helpful.¹⁷ One method consists of finding a sample of people who are a model of the whole population with regard to several characteristics. This means that the sample must include both men and women, and that age groups, social layers, the different