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Teaching German Culture

I want to divide my discussion of teaching German culture into two parts. The first is a brief theoretical discussion of what we mean when we talk about German culture in both Germany and the United States; the second is a more practical discussion of the implications of my theoretical discussion for the teaching of German culture at American universities. My reflections are tailored specifically to German culture but no doubt also have relevance, albeit with variations, for the teaching of other cultures.

I: What Is German Culture?

Quite simply defined, German culture is the culture of literate citizens of the Federal Republic of Germany. My definition presumes that there is some common cultural core largely known to the vast majority of literate German citizens. This definition is intended to be descriptive, not prescriptive: It asks: What *do* literate German citizens know? not: What *should* they know?

My definition of culture here relies heavily on E. D. Hirsch's popular but controversial 1987 book *Cultural Literacy*, which, among other things, postulated the existence of a broad national culture largely shared among most literate Americans. What Hirsch postulated for Americans is also true of Germans. Hirsch's suggestion that there is such a thing as a broad national culture, and that this culture is the central cornerstone of the modern nation itself, is largely echoed in more recent literature about the constructedness of nations and their cultures, from Ernst Cassirer through Benedict

Anderson to Homi Bhabha. As Anderson wrote in his influential book *Imagined Communities*, "Nationalism has to be understood...by aligning it not with self-consciously held political ideologies, but with large cultural systems that preceded it, out of which — as well as against which — it came into being."¹ And as Bhabha writes, "Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind's eye. Such an image of the nation — or narration — might seem impossibly romantic and excessively metaphorical, but it is from those traditions of political thought and literary language that the nation emerges as a powerful historical idea in the west."² In his 1983 *Nations and Nationalism* Ernest Gellner had written,

The cultural shreds and patches used by nationalism are often arbitrary historical inventions. Any old shred or patch would have served as well. But in no way does it follow that the principle of nationalism itself, as opposed to the avatars it happens to pick up for its incarnations, is in the least contingent and accidental. Nothing could be further from the truth than such a supposition. Nationalism is not what it seems, and above all, not what it seems to itself. The cultures it claims to defend and revive are often its own inventions, or are modified out of all recognition.³

Citing Gellner, Hirsch suggests that "every national culture is...contrived," and that "national cultures were formed on many of the same principles as national languages," that is for reasons of standardization, homogenization, and communication across large and diverse territories. But Hirsch warns that the fact that national languages and cultures are contrived does not make them artificial, let alone unreal. Quite the contrary. National languages and national cultures are very real. Language and nation and culture and nation form a very distinct, albeit constructed, unity.

One other important thing has to be said about the national language and the national culture: within the borders of the nation, they become mainstream; outside the borders of the nation, they are foreign. This seemingly obvious fact has an important consequence sometimes forgotten in discussions of multiculturalism: what is mainstream in one country is not necessarily mainstream in another, and vice versa. At the end of his book on *American* cultural literacy, Hirsch appended an audacious sixty-page list of all the things that a literate American can be expected to know. He subsequently published an even more audacious *Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* in which he sought to define each of his terms as a literate American could be expected to know them. If a similarly audacious and practically-minded German scholar had compiled a corresponding list for Germany, the list would have had a great deal of overlap, but also significant areas of differentiation. The German list, for instance, could be expected to include such dates on Hirsch's list as 1914-1918 and 1939-1945, but it would not include the dates 1861-1865, and it would no doubt also contain the dates 1618-1648, 1848, and 1870/71. The German list would include Johann Sebastian Bach

but not Stephen A. Douglas. And the German list would obviously also include a wealth of material not included in the American list. All in all, Hirsch's American list contains several hundred items relatively specifically connected to German culture, from "Auf Wiedersehen" toward the beginning to "Zurich" at the very end, indicating that the two sets of mainstream culture — German and American — contain significant areas of overlap. In addition, both sets contain elements — such as scientific and numerical information — largely present in all mainstream cultures the world over. But in the areas of history, literature, and the arts the two sets are significantly and overwhelmingly different, and it is precisely this kind of difference, as well as a host of other, seemingly more trivial customs and traditions which form a core culture that can be thought of as specifically national.

Americans are used to thinking of their mainstream culture as a world standard and of all other cultural mainstreams as marginal. It is quite true that mainstream American culture has had and continues to have a profound influence on other mainstream cultures, much to the shock and dismay of many, such as the French New Right philosopher Alain de Benoist, who declared in 1987 that behind Euro-Disney, for instance, "is an entire universe, a Disneyworld in the making. A world that resembles the Planet Earth dreamed of by the Americans: a world pacified and tranquil, infantile and transparent; a world in which one can view reality through rose-tinted glasses."⁴ The American political scientist Benjamin R. Barber refers to this global Americanization as "McWorld."⁵ But in spite of de Benoist's fears, that totally Americanized world is far from a triumphant reality, particularly in the wake of the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the American economic meltdown of 2008. Even in Marshall McLuhan's so-called "global village" nations continue to exist, and along with them separate and distinct national cultures.⁶

To state that there is such a thing as German culture is not to deny the existence within Germany of subcultures of any sort — regional, generational, ethnic, class-based, etc. But it is to state that those subcultures are less important in defining and constructing the German nation. Every German is also a member of at least one or two other subcultures, but in seeking to discover what we mean by German culture, we are looking for what connects most literate Germans together in a nation, and, conversely, what separates them not from each other but from the literate citizens of other nation-states, such as the United States or France or Japan.

II: How Do We Teach German Culture?

As teachers of the German language and German culture in the United States primarily to American college students, it is our duty to try as much as possible to bring those students to a level where they can, if they so choose, function in Germany (or in Swit-

zerland or Austria) in more or less the way that literate Germans (or Swiss or Austrians) function. Of course we are severely handicapped in our attempts to do this. Germans are acculturated in all sorts of ways, not just in the German classroom. But Americans are acculturated as Americans, not as Germans, and therefore the German class is likely to be one of the few places where they can receive a counteracculturation into German cultural literacy. Obviously there is no way American-based college teachers of German are going to be able, even in four years of fifty-minutes-a-day-three-times-a-week training, to imitate what German families, newspapers, books, websites, schools, televisions, clubs — in short, the entirety of the German social milieu — achieve in the first two decades of a literate German's life. Therefore it would be unreasonable to expect our college students to perform at the level of German university students. But I think it is not too unreasonable for us to expect our majors to be able by the end of their college careers to perform culturally and linguistically at the level of German high school students. We don't have to teach all the things that overlap between the two mainstream cultures; we merely need to teach what is different.

If cultural literacy becomes the goal of an education in German or German Studies, then the primary consequence is that German teachers are no longer pedagogical specialists teaching either language or literature. Rather, it becomes their primary duty to teach for cultural literacy, which includes, besides the German language, German history, German art history, German music history, the history of German science, and German civics. If German teachers do not teach these subjects, no one else will, and students will, as a result, remain culturally illiterate.

Of course no German teacher can be an expert in all of these fields, and therefore no German teacher can be expected to give deep analysis in them; nor would most students want such deep analysis. But if we are educating for literacy, we do not need great depth; rather, what we need is passing familiarity with a relatively large amount of information.

Education for cultural literacy implies a significant break from the traditional paradigm of teaching German in the United States. In the United States the study of German was for a long time generally divided into the study of presumably pure "language" in the first two years and the study of supposedly pure "literature" or "culture" in the last two years of an undergraduate education. The unhealthy and rather artificial distinction between "language" and "literature" or "culture" has been discarded more recently, but it still continues to exist in many curricula. The distinction tends to foster the idea that "language" is a fairly cut-and-dried affair, the simple matter of mastering a code (a code implicitly related to the master code of English), unrelated to any kind of a cultural context. Once that code has been learned, students can go on to read texts in more or less the same way they have learned to do in English.

The "language"- "literature" or "culture" distinction is harmful at both the lower and the upper levels of undergraduate education. At the lower level it leads to the con-

textless and contentless study of a code, as if German were not a language spoken in Germany by Germans who bring a wealth of cultural contexts and connotations to almost every word they speak — just as Americans do in English. At the upper level the traditional isolated study of literature is both unrealistic and harmful. It is unrealistic because it assumes students are studying German with the primary goal of reading German literature, a dubious assumption at best, at least for most students that I know. It also implies that the only path to take after learning the presumed language code is the study of high literature, as if that were all Germans did with the German language. As if that were not bad enough, the traditional exclusive focus on literature assumes that students with only two years of study of only "language" are *capable* of reading and discussing at a high level, the way one might in an American literature class — also a very dubious assumption. The isolation of literature is harmful because it prevents students from being exposed to the much broader range of elements that compose German cultural literacy, and also because it obscures the very helpful impact that the study of literature can have on students' language acquisition. Finally, the division between the lower and the upper levels of language study leads to a need to "bridge the gap" between pure language and pure literature, thus creating unnecessary problems in the articulation of a coherent undergraduate curriculum.

In a curriculum organized around the notion of cultural literacy there would be no gap because there would be no distinction between the lower levels and the upper levels. If the system up until about ten or fifteen years ago — and in some programs even now — resembled a blown up bridge with a large gap in between, a curriculum organized around the notion of cultural literacy would resemble what happens when a stone is dropped into a body of water: a series of concentric circles expanding outward. Each circle would contain all the information contained in previous circles, but it would contain more as well. When students with no speaking knowledge of German enter the German class on the first day, they would still learn "der," "die," "das," and all the other specific bits of "pure language" they are learning now. But they would learn them with a purpose: to place them in a German cultural context. In addition to "pure" language, students would learn a wealth of cultural knowledge surrounding and supporting the "mere" words.

The only assumption that one might make about students in a program oriented toward cultural literacy is that they study German because they are attracted to its strangeness, to its foreignness, to the fact that it is different from what they know. Rather than pretending that students will be able to function in German in more or less the same way and with the same assumptions they have when they function in English — some current textbooks do this in the belief that it will make students feel more comfortable —, we should acknowledge on the first day that German is different from English, and that Germans are different from Americans; and we should give students credit for daring to study a foreign language and a foreign culture by not constantly

patronizing them with reassuring familiarity. To be sure, aspects of German culture, such as parts of the Christmas festival, will seem familiar. But many other aspects will seem quite foreign. If students were afraid of a little alienation, they would not be in the class in the first place. In fact it is quite probable that many students seek out a foreign language and a foreign culture precisely because it gives them a kind of alienation effect in an American world that seems so reified to so many of them: the study of a foreign language like German makes familiar to them that which is foreign, but, even better and more important, it makes alien to them that which is all too familiar. This is Brechtian pedagogy.

As American teachers of German, we can and probably should seek to take some of the edge off of this alienation effect by acknowledging the tremendous impact of German immigration on our own country, particularly in the nineteenth century. It would probably be useful to spend at least some time studying that impact on American politics and customs, from working class radicalism to the American university system. In many regions, such as in Pennsylvania, where I live, it is also possible to connect up with ongoing if weakened German traditions. I am not just talking about Oktoberfests and Lederhosen here; I am talking about real impact on American culture and an understanding of the role of immigration in our American history. That the contemporary "immigration problem" is so frequently presented as new bespeaks tremendous ignorance not only of our own national history but of our own family histories as well.

Teaching for cultural literacy means that we will give Powerpoint presentations on German art history, that we will play important pieces of music to students and give them assignments in the art and music libraries. It means that we will spend time going over the German electoral and party system with them. It means that we will study German geography with them. It means that we must study German history. We ought to do this from the very beginning, in the first semester, so that students can recycle and repeat from year to year. That is how Americans learn American cultural literacy, and it is how they will also learn German cultural literacy. When we read texts — and we should read many of them, because that is what literacy is all about —, we will certainly read works of creative literature and poetry, but we will also read magazines, newspapers, advertisements, and political speeches. We will also try to inundate students with German electronic media, because even if we don't live in McLuhan's post-Gutenberg galaxy, some of our students seem to. At the upper levels we will continue to have some courses primarily devoted to literature, but rarely as an end in itself: always with a view toward literature's role in the totality of the German cultural system, and with an understanding of the way that reading literature helps in very concrete ways to improve students' language skills. If by the end of four years we have gotten students to a point where they can successfully negotiate *Der Spiegel* or *Frankfurter*

Rundschau, or E. T. A. Hoffmann's *Der goldne Topf* or Thomas Mann's "Tonio Kröger," we will have done a good job, I think.

Why has cultural literacy not yet explicitly become the primary focus in German education at American universities? Probably because many of us university teachers like to think of ourselves as specialist researchers even in our teaching. Given institutional pressures to specialize, what that means practically for most of us is that we become specialists in either language or literature, again preserving that unhealthy distinction even if we want to overcome it. But in our teaching we cannot afford to be specialists, because that is not what our students need. Our students need generalists, and so we need to be pragmatic generalists, at least in our teaching, if not in our research. For those literature specialists who fear the loss of their subject, let us not forget that literature has always played a special, privileged role in the construction of German national consciousness, and that no education for cultural literacy can afford to neglect that role; and let us also remember the role that literature plays in honing students' language skills. Literature must and will continue to be taught, because it continues to play an important role in Germany, and in language learning.

What about multiculturalism? From what I have already said, it is pretty clear that teaching German for cultural literacy in the United States *is* multicultural education because German mainstream culture is not American mainstream culture. If students can grasp the fact that there are mainstream cultures out there in which American mainstream culture is in fact marginal and foreign, they will have understood a great deal. As we educate students in mainstream German culture, we also need to make students aware that there is nothing natural or given about the specific content of the German mainstream; that Germany is a diverse country with all sorts of subcultures and ethnic minorities, and that German mainstream culture draws from many of those subcultures and minorities, as well as from foreign cultures, such as our own American culture. However we need to make it clear that the constructedness of the German mainstream does not make it any less real than the constructed but very real American mainstream they are accustomed to. We certainly do not need to pretend that average Germans are more multiculturally aware than they are. Students might be understandably disconcerted, for instance, if they were to spend a semester studying the literature and culture of *Afro-Deutsche*, only to go to Germany and discover that many Germans do not know what *Afro-Deutsche* are. This does not mean, of course, that we should not study ethnic minorities; only that we owe our students as accurate as possible a picture of German society as a whole, and of the role of minorities within German society. We should not simply take an American template, however well-meaning and multicultural, and apply it to German culture as if somehow German society were the same as American society. While some American teachers familiar with the debates about multiculturalism in this country might wish that multicultural education were as widespread in Germany as it is here, the fact is that it is not, probably

because Germany itself simply is not as multicultural as the United States. We can problematize that fact and ask why it is so, but we need to be realistic with our students about the situation in Germany.

Notes

¹ Homi K. Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 1

² Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration*, p. 1.

³ Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 56; cited in E. D. Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), p. 83.

⁴ Alain de Benoist, "Vers l'indépendance," in *Le Defi de Disneyland* (Paris: Le Labyrinthe, 1987), p. 89, cited by Pierre-Andre Taguieff, *Sur la Nouvelle Droite: Jalons d'une analyse critique* (Paris: Descartes & Cie, 1994), p. 301. My translation.

⁵ Benjamin R. Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld* (New York: Times Books, 1995).

⁶ Marshall McLuhan, *War and Peace in the Global Village* (San Francisco: HardWired, 1997).