

# The hue and cry in Germany over Hans Haacke's artwork *Der Bevölkerung* (The People)

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On April 5 German Bundestag deputies voted by 260 to 258 in favour of the installation of a work of art, *Der Bevölkerung* ( *The People*), by German-American artist Hans Haacke in the German parliament building. The vote was the culmination of months of heated debate in the media over Haacke's project. Recent debates in the German parliament over issues involving spending cuts affecting tens of millions of people have often taken place in an almost deserted chamber. However, for the debate over Haacke's artwork, more deputies attended and voted than was the case for the parliamentary discussion and vote on the intervention of the German army in Kosovo. What is so special about this debate and Hans Haacke's proposed work of art?

In the spring of 1998 a special arts commission appointed by the Bundestag and consisting of a number of parliamentary deputies, supplemented by a handful of art experts, commissioned Haacke to develop a work of art to stand in the northern wing of the fully refurbished parliament building. Haacke's proposal envisages a large trench filled with earth in which a neon sign illuminates the words “ *Der Bevölkerung*.” The letter type and the size of the letters in Haacke's planned installation corresponds to the main inscription which stands above the main steps of the Bundestag, but reads somewhat differently, *Dem Deutschen Volk* ( *To the German People*).

Although both German expressions are normally translated with the same word “people,” the German word *Volk* has a rather different connotation than the word *Bevölkerung*. The Nazis favoured the term *Volk* in a number of forms to emphasise their overtly nationalist and exclusive notion of German identity.

Also included in the draft for Haacke's object was the proposal that the soil for the trench bed should be

brought in equal measures by every deputy from his parliamentary constituency.

In three rounds of discussion the arts commission decided on Haacke's project and voted on two occasions for its implementation. Three parliamentary deputies, two from the CDU and one from the Greens—Antje Vollmer, who is also vice-president of the Bundestag—lodged an objection to the proposal and forced a discussion and vote on the issue in parliament. Positions polarised rapidly in the course of a few weeks with the for and against arguments being argued vigorously in the press.

A number of arguments crystallised in the course of the run-up to the debate. Some voices merely declared that the proposal was inappropriate, some went so far as to declare it “sickening.” In line with her party's espousal of ecological principles, Antje Vollmer declared that the proposal was nothing but “bio-kitsch.” But two additional arguments also emerged. First of all objections were raised by a number of parliamentarians that the involvement of deputies in transporting soil from their constituencies was a throwback to the *Blut und Boden* ( *Blood and Soil*) propaganda of the Nazis. In fact this argument is simply a red herring introduced to muddy the waters and confuse the debate (similar to the accusation in New York that Haacke had defamed the memory of the Holocaust by his installation “Sanitation” at the Whitney Museum).

Haacke has scorned any notion that his proposal involves any concession to Nazi-type propaganda. Indeed, arguing in favour of his text “The People” instead of “To the German People,” Haacke commented: “In fact the deputies have sworn an oath to the constitution and must have an interest that the inscription *Dem Deutschen Volk* is not interpreted in an

exclusively nationalist (völkish) sense. After all there are Nazis who take to the streets and beat up people who appear to be insufficiently German.”

The second objection dealt with exactly this point. A number of deputies articulated open opposition to the term used in the artwork, which they said constituted a defamation ( *Verunglimpfung*) of the Bundestag and was at the same time unconstitutional. A leading commentary on the front page of the conservative *FAZ* newspaper went so far as to accuse Hans Haacke of a “deep aversion” to the Germans, accusing him at the same time of “wanting to do away with the German people or at least strip them of their parliament”.

Expressed in this hostility to the use of the term *Der Bevölkerung* is the standpoint of many parliamentarians that the Bundestag is their own personal property and only they can decide what appears inside the building. In terms of German history and tradition there is something to this argument. The text over the entrance to the parliamentary building does not read *The German People*, but rather *To the German People*—i.e., the Bundestag (or what was the Reichstag), as the seat of German democracy, is a concession or gift to the German people (or *Untertan*) on the part of the ruling circles ( *Obrigkeit*). Implied in the text is the threat on the part of ruling circles that they reserve the right to take back their gift at any time. In opposition to the American constitution, for example, which guarantees the sovereignty of the people, German political tradition emphasises the sovereignty of the state over the people.

Most newspaper commentaries in Germany have welcomed the parliamentary debate and the vote in favour of the art project as a victory for democracy. Hans Haacke, who attended the debate in parliament, expressed his own surprise and satisfaction that the outcome of the vote was positive. In fact, irrespective of the narrowness of the vote, the handling of such issues by the German parliament establishes potentially dangerous precedents. A handful of parliamentary deputies were able to set aside the decision of their own specialist art committee (the only parliamentary subcommittee with the power to make decisions and not just to advise) and so force a discussion on the merits of a work of art under conditions where the debate was dominated by sensationalist articles in the press spiced with the rabidly nationalist comments of a

number of deputies.

The German constitution of 1949 guarantees the complete freedom of art: “Art and science, research and teaching are free.” But in this question as in all others the parliamentary deputies reserve the right to set aside or revise the constitution when they see fit.

If one lesson emerges from the hue and cry over Hans Haacke's planned project then it is that the merits of a individual work of art cannot and should not be determined and decided on by political parties in parliament. Parliamentary deputies have as much right as anyone else to argue and debate the values of artistic works. They have absolutely no right to decide what the public should or should not see. As the current debate makes clear, however, many German parliamentarians see the issue differently. Their position was summed up by vice-president (and former Maoist) Vollmer who declared at the end of her own speech against the art-work, “It is not a question of freedom of art, but of freedom for the deputies.”



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