

The debate over a "defining German culture": the Christian Democrats march to the right

Peter Schwarz
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Four weeks ago, leading German Christian Democrat Friedrich Merz raised the demand in an interview for a “defining German culture,” which foreigners coming into the country had to fit in with. Since the *Rheinischen Post* published its interview with Merz, who is chairman of the Christian Democratic Union-Christian Social Union (CDU-CSU) faction in the German parliament, the theme has dominated public discussion in Germany.

The CDU has, in the meantime, officially adopted the formula and integrated it into its “*Key Points on Integration and Immigration*”. Opponents of the concept inside the CDU-CSU have since toned down their criticism or dropped it completely. The press has devoted innumerable commentaries and special features to the topic—many of which are critical. Representatives of organisations for foreign workers and the Jewish community have strongly condemned Merz's demand.

Nadeem Elyas, Chairman of the Muslim Central Council, accused Merz of provoking shock and insecurity among the three million Muslims living in Germany. He said that Merz had accepted that xenophobic elements could abuse the slogan. Elyas referred to the growing number of attacks on Mosques by neo-fascists. Paul Spiegel raised similar criticisms, the chairman of the Jewish Central Council, at the mass demonstration for “Humanity and Tolerance” held in Berlin on November 9.

In the meantime, the CDU has attempted to disguise the reactionary character of the concept of a “defining culture” with a series of new interpretations. In the CDU's new immigration paper, “defining German culture” is described as a “culture of tolerance and living together”. Nevertheless, despite all the semantic contortions, which provide ample material for cabaret artists, there can be no doubt that the party's advocacy of a “defining culture” represents a pronounced turn to the right by the CDU-

CSU.

The mere idea that immigrants should be required to subordinate themselves to a defining culture—irrespective of how it is defined—contradicts elementary democratic principles. In this regard, even Prussia's Frederick the Great (1712-1786) was more progressive, when he announced that in Prussia everyone could find their own salvation—although practice in the Prussian state rarely measured up to this ideal. In any case, it is part of the elementary principles of any civilised society that no one should be forced to adopt a specific culture, religion or anything of a similar nature.

The demand for a “defining German culture” inevitably brings association with the Nazis and their *völkish* ideology (implying an ethnically based notion of nationhood). Even if sections of the CDU vehemently argue that the concept is not directed against the culture of other nations, but is based rather on the American and French models, where the relation to the nation is much more informal, the notion of a “defining culture” expresses an unmistakably ethnic/ *völkish* concept of the nation. National culture is regarded as something naturally given, and not as something that has historically arisen and malleable.

The concept presumes that there are inborn, genetically determined national characteristics, which have to be retained and defended irrespective of social changes. It seamlessly fits into the CDU's former campaign against dual nationality (for long-term foreign residents and those born in Germany to foreign parents), which rested on a notion of citizenship based on genetic origins and not on existing social relations. According to this conception, people in Russia whose German ancestors moved there five or ten generations ago are German citizens, while children born in Germany to Turkish immigrants who

have lived in the country for three generations remain Turkish.

The CDU's new immigration paper bases itself on the "values of our Christian-Western culture," which are characterised by "Christianity, ancient philosophy, humanism, Roman law and the Enlightenment". Political caution means the word "Judaism" has been included after Christianity, but that does not improve things. For one thing, the emphasis on "Christian-Western culture" has always been the trademark of the extreme right in Germany. And for another, the document simply leaps over the history of the last two hundred years, in which the concept of the nation has acquired its modern meaning.

In France and the USA, the concept of the nation was shaped by revolutionary events—the French Revolution, the Declaration of Independence and American Civil War. The concept possessed a political, not an ethnic content. It was directed against foreign domination and feudal reaction. It was all embracing and did not imply exclusion. Whoever supported the principles of freedom and equality proclaimed by the revolution was part of the nation, even if he or she were born in a different country or spoke a different language. Whoever rejected such principles, was excluded from the nation, even if his French family tree extended back to the early Middle Ages.

In Germany on the other hand, from the very start the concept of the nation was always of an exclusive character and had a mystical retrograde aspect. The first influential national movement developed against the Napoleonic occupation and included forces who, as well as opposing Napoleon, opposed the progressive principles of the French Revolution. If the content of German nationalism was ambivalent at the beginning of the eighteenth century, it assumed definitively reactionary characteristics after the defeat of the 1848 revolution and the unification of Germany under Bismarck in 1871. Glorification of hyper-Germanness accompanied hatred of the French, laws against socialists and a substantial dose of anti-Semitism. It was no accident that later, many eminent authorities in the sphere of German intellectual and cultural life seamlessly subordinated themselves to the Nazi regime, while the really outstanding cultural figures ended up almost exclusively abroad.

The most significant contributions to culture that arose on German soil have always been shaped by international influences. This began in the sixteenth century with Prussia's adoption of 20,000 refugee Huguenots, who

introduced the first elements of a broad culture into the German state without, however, being able to overcome its barbaric/military character. Johann Wolfgang Goethe, up until today the quintessential German poet, was profoundly influenced by the French Revolution and despised any form of hyper-Germanness. He regarded himself as a representative of world, not national literature. Heinrich Heine, the greatest lyricist of the German language, spent most of his life in exile in France.

Culture can only live and develop when it is open, prepared to continually take in new international impulses and developments in an exchange with the cultures of other countries. When the task of culture is seen to be exclusion and a defence against new influences in order to preserve what is regarded as tried and tested, then it dies and becomes reactionary. Two hundred years ago Goethe had understood this point, and it is even more pertinent in today's world of global communications.

The CDU demand for a "defining German culture" stands in direct contradiction to such a conception of culture. Instead, it is the expression of intellectual narrow-mindedness, cultural backwardness and political reaction. It represents, in fact, the basis for the suppression of all genuine culture.

That the concept has remained thoroughly nebulous and unclear throughout the course of the entire debate betrays a great deal about its real aim. It is superbly designed to mobilise crude prejudices and anti-foreigner sentiments. Fearing international reaction, the CDU is not in a position to openly propagate racist slogans in the manner of a Haider, Le Pen or Schönhuber. But with its demand for a "defining German culture" it is taking up the same line.

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