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Transitions of a Myth? The Idea of a Language-Defined *Kulturation* in Germany

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The idea of a nation predominantly based on often vaguely defined cultural values and standards has a long history in Germany, rooted in the development of a supra-regional, widely accepted variety of German, as a standard ‘High German’. This essay focuses on the development of the concept of a language-based cultural nation in Germany, particularly in the 18th and 19th century, but will also analyse recent provocative debates on national culture and identity which are, as affirmative developments or deprecatory deformations, negative or positive transitions of the original idea. The concept of a *Kulturnation* determined by language that brings together the *Vaterland* ‘fatherland’ and the *Muttersprache* ‘mother tongue’ in a matrimonial relationship is still evocated and could be of new interest for debates on integration with respect to the refugee influx to Germany since 2015. However, the question arises: Are all of these celebrations not only repetitions of an outdated and even dangerous myth?

1. German *Kulturnation*: an ‘innocent meaning’?

The idea of a nation predominately and constantly defined and determined by specific cultural values, standards, and norms is closely linked to questions on national identity and affiliation, and the idea is once again featuring prominently in contemporary debates on the subject.¹ In October 2008, Horst Köhler, who was President of the Federal Republic at the time, delivered a speech on the occasion of the Day of German Unity titled “Cultural Nation of Germany.” In his commemorative speech, President Köhler pointed out the significance of culture as an important constituent of national unity. Culture, he said, was a pool of memory, experiences, and knowledge. All in all, only Germany’s cultural legacy could define what it meant to be German (cf. Köhler).

In a public speech delivered in the same month, Chancellor Angela Merkel called culture, language, and the arts the ‘unifying ties for our Germany’² *einigen-des Band für unser Deutschland* (“Zehn Jahre Beauftragter der Bundesregierung”). Whether intentionally or not, with these words she alluded to a long tradition of anthropomorphist family metaphors referring to Germany as the *Vaterland* ‘fatherland’ and to the German language as *Muttersprache* ‘mother tongue’ that serves as the prerequisite for national unity. Already in 1679, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, the famous philosopher of the monads, wrote about language as the tie, which “unifies people in a strong albeit invisible way” (798)³. In an interview with *Deutschlandradio*, the former President of the German Parliament, Wolfgang Thierse, reminded listeners of the “beautiful and great meaning of the word” *Kulturnation* (2015), which had been an “unschuldiges Wort” ‘innocent saying’

before National Socialism misused it, as it had focused originally not on race or biographical origins, but on a common language as the most powerful entity to unify the people of a nation. Günter Grass, the winner of the 1999 Nobel Prize in Literature and one of the strongest critics of the political and economic process of German reunification, emphasized in August 2010 that throughout all his life he had believed in a unitary German *Kulturnation* (Hage and Thimm).

It was this notion, which—especially by means of a common language — brought together all Germans, not only those who had lived in different political systems in East and West but also those beyond German borders.⁴ This analysis was semi-officially codified in the Unification Treaty between the FRG and GDR in 1990, which stressed that arts and culture had been a basis of the continuing unity of the nation in the years of the German-German separation. Furthermore, even the international relevance and prominent role of Germany were dependent not only on political and economic efforts, but particularly on its status as a nation defined by its culture (*Art. 35, 1*). The 2007 policy statements of the two biggest conservative parties in Germany, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Christian Social Union (CSU), reveal clear commitments to the “Bildungs- und KulturNation Deutschland” (‘educational and cultural nation of Germany’) by linking it to the European context and, again, referring to the unifying tie which made it necessary to follow the principles of a *Leitkultur* ‘leading culture’ as a prerequisite for the successful integration of migrants (*Freiheit* 13, 21, 31, 42–44). According to the policy statement of the Bavarian-based CSU, the leading culture is dominated by a Christian-Occidental canon of values, cultural traditions, and the German language (*Chancen* 43, 144).

The question arises: Why are these cultural-nationalistic assessments and attitudes with emphases on a leading culture still so relevant in a country which, after the devaluation and shameless exploitation of cultural traditions during the National Socialist period, adopted—to quote a term by Dolf Sternberger (13–16) and Jürgen Habermas (643–673)—a ‘constitutional patriotism’ “Verfassungspatriotismus” with a clear commitment to Europe? It seems that the narrower perspective of a belief in a nation with common cultural values worthy of preservation and protection was unable to be replaced by or transformed into an identification with the more cosmopolitan perspective of a European identity.

This essay does not aim to offer a new theory of nationalism or to give an exhaustive comparison of the different kinds of national concepts and nationalisms in Europe throughout the centuries. Focusing on the 18th and 19th century, I will try to show the intellectual history of the specific concept of the German *Kulturnation*—a nation or fatherland that is inseparably determined by and connected to a language perceived as the standard language, as the mother tongue. Finally, I will discuss the opponents of this concept in the German past and present, who focused and, surprisingly, sometimes still focus on biological-genetic determinations of national affiliation. The idea of a German *Kulturnation* might actually

never have been as innocent a saying as Thierse claimed, but it still has a certain potential for improving the integration of minorities that are discriminated against.

2. Terms and Theories: Nation and Nationalism

The Latin word *natio* indicates the affiliation of people to a region, a tribe, or a family by way of being born in that region, tribe, or family. Its mainly political reference and connotation is a phenomenon of modern times, which distinguishes the term *nation* from what is meant in German by the word *Volk*—the people. *Nation* in a modern sense can be defined as a human community or alliance of will, dependent on a fundamental consensus about specific cultural, social, and political values, norms, and aims, which are perceived as quantities or items that distinguish the members of the nation from the values, norms, and aims of others.⁵ This consensus of a shared worldview creates *national identity*. A *national movement* would therefore be a movement of a population group creating a specific *national ideology* in order to strengthen a *national consciousness* in the people and to achieve national autonomy for and within a certain territory.

The distinction between *Staatsnation* ‘state-defined nation’ and *Kulturnation* ‘culture-defined nation’, which Friedrich Meinecke made in his book *Weltbürgertum und Nationalstaat* (1908), influenced much of the later scholarship on nationalism in the German tradition. While, according to Meinecke, a *Staatsnation* is mainly based on a political history and a constitution recognized by its members, a *Kulturnation* is based on accepted and shared cultural and religious traditions and goods—such as a common language. Therefore, a *Staatsnation* can comprise population groups that differ from each other with respect to their performances and perceptions of cultural values and aims.⁶ The moment of a decision and expression of will is essential for the nation-building of a *Staatsnation* (Herzfeld 10).

Meinecke’s distinction is useful when talking about tendencies in nation-building. However, the borders of both processes and realities are not rigid: Both kinds of ‘nation’ show elements of each other. Even moments of expressing the will of a national movement—like the *Rütli-Schwur* in Switzerland—became a part of that what Jan Assmann, referring to the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, called ‘cultural memory’, a concept which is itself a form of collective memory in the sense that it is shared by a number of people while conveying to these people a collective cultural identity (1993, 34).⁷ In particular since the 1980s, scholars researching nationalism and nations are much more cautious with respect to ontological terminologies and hyperbolic reifications. Deeply influenced by postmodern theories, Hobsbawm (1990), Billig (1995), Anderson (2006), and others assess nationalism as a product of industrial social organization and nations as social constructs based on invented traditions. Nations and nationalism are products of “social engineering” (Hobsbawm 10) or “cultural artefacts” of larger communities, which are—according to Benedict Anderson—simply ‘imagined’ as they are not necessarily based on face-to-face contact between its members (Anderson 14–15).

Although some scholars presume premodern roots of nations (Smith 187–191; Armstrong 3–4), the most current researchers follow Ernest Gellner’s assumption that it is nationalism that engenders nations (1983 55)⁸ and not vice versa. The most important task of academics should be to analyze the different manifestations of national imaginations, also because they are often composed of a-historic myths, as Gellner stresses (48–49).⁹ These myths, however, are installed by ruling elites and intellectuals, even by historians of nationalism who tend to ignore what Eric J. Hobsbawm calls the ‘view from below’: “The assumptions, hopes, needs, longings and interests of ordinary people, which are not necessarily national and still less nationalist” (10).

The English-American tradition of studies on nationalism interprets the term “nationalism” primarily as an impartial and operational term in order to explain the motivations, characteristics, and developments of national movements. In contrast to this approach, German scholars such as Hans-Ulrich Wehler (2001), Otto Dann (1994), Peter von Polenz (1988), and Andreas Gardt (1999) insist on maintaining the distinction between ‘patriotism’ and ‘nationalism.’ Whereas patriotism indicates the praise of certain common cultural and social values, norms, and aims, without necessarily devaluating those of others, nationalism is inclined to devaluate or to deny the cultural, social, and political identities of others. In its extreme form, nationalism fights the identities of others, picturing these as a danger to the imagined superiority of the language, political system, or economy of the antagonistic nationalist group.

Globalization and the challenges of migration have put the idea of transnationalism on the agenda again (Vertovec). Transnationalism refers to the increasing and multiple relations and interactions of individuals, groups, or institutions across the borders of nations, for instance by worldwide networks. Transnational phenomena go hand in hand with translanguaging processes (Heller 539–553) and the increasing importance of multilingual societies, not only unveiling that the ‘monolingual habitus’ within a nation (Gogolin) is a normative illusion but also showing that each and every individual is affected by an inner multilingualism (dialects, sociolects, idiolects, etc.).

Although some scholars such as Hobsbawm (1990) and Billig (1995) warn against overestimating the role of language for the process of nationalism, most agree that—as Gellner says—“the culture in which one has been taught to communicate becomes the core of one’s identity” (1983 61).¹⁰ For this purpose, the paradigm shift of the linguistic turn is essential. Gellner states: “Language is, as Vico saw, more than a tool of culture, it is culture” (195). Thus, culture shall be understood here in its widest sense—as the entirety of all human ways of thinking, feeling, and acting—as opposed to nature. When defined more closely, it is a semi-otic coordinated system of mindsets, values, and symbols with different contents depending on the social context and is structurally dependant on space and time. To accumulate and mediate this system, one needs language. Language is not only

a neutral medium of communication or, to express it more analytically, a system of signs and rules. It serves as the pronouncement of self-awareness, the formation of one's own identity. Language is thus always also a window into the non-reversible self of the subject.

3. Founders and Foundations: Literary-philosophical Basics of the Concept since 1770/11

The German national movement was essentially an emancipatory movement against congealed political and cultural traditions of the elites (cf. Dann 1994 17–18). Wilhelm Dilthey coined the theorem of the 'German Movement' for the minority of mostly non-aristocratic men of letters and intellectuals who developed under the influence of the Enlightenment and formed the spiritual breeding ground for the project of a national unification.¹² This cultural reorientation of the 1770s, which Goethe called the "deutsche literarische Revolution" (51), did not necessarily aspire to a political nationalization of Germany (one only needs to think of Goethe's sympathy for Napoleon), but it undoubtedly contoured what was meant to be understood by the attribute 'German.' *German essence*, *German spirit* and *German language* were now opposed to the traditional dominance of French philosophy, culture, and language, especially in the aristocratic circles. The radical shift away from the French classic period, which until then had been the cultural *en vogue* of high society, demanded a substitute. Instead of Voltaire, one now read Shakespeare, the theatrical genius of the Anglo-Saxon 'brothers,' whilst celebrating motifs from German mythology and German history. The new canon shows that education was now increasingly understood as a means of integrating into a society that was not organized exclusively according to class.

The German component was emphasized mainly in five ways: a) literary-linguistically in terms of the development and promotion of a civilized written German; b) mythically by preferring myths of the Germanic language area as sources for literature; c) idealistically-metaphorically by binding the mother tongue and the fatherland together, d) socially by appreciating the narration of the common people; and e) politically by demanding a self-confident language policy. Any analysis of language nationalism and patriotism must take into account Benedict Anderson's thesis that the decay of the sacred classical languages in Europe, mainly of Latin, and the phenomenon of "print capitalism" of periodicals and books have not only accompanied but strengthened national movements (37–46). It is certainly true that Gutenberg's invention of letterpress printing in 1450 and Martin Luther's succeeding translation of the bible into German, published in the 1520s and '30s, together with the enormous increase in the number of publications after, changed the status of the vernacular. Both have been key steps in the establishment of High German as a written standard language. In this process, Germany indeed followed a *Sonderweg*, a 'special path' (cf. Wehler 2003, 17–18) as the influence of the bourgeoisie remained low in comparison to other European nations. On the

other hand, the role of the *Bildungsbürger* ‘cultural citizen’, as a substitute for the political power missing at that time, was very pronounced (cf. Kocka 48).

But what were the benchmarks for those who were oriented towards a united Germany? Which part of the denominational, territorial, and dialectal triple division promised the greatest potential for a consensus? The religious division of the Reformation was an unalterable fact, and the final target of a territorially united Germany was not suitable as a short-term project. What was left was the language.

A German literary language, which was perfected in the end by Goethe and Schiller, became more and more a ‘social symbol’ (Linke 9–11), which made *Bildungsbürgertum* and *Bildungsdeutsch* appear in a reciprocal context (Mattheier 42). The idea of the nation as language-nation of educated people replaced that of the universal-sacral coherence, which had constituted the imperial idea of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation (Frühwald 129–141). This concept formed an essential part of the German history of ideas and it is—as the quoted speeches of Merkel, Thierse, Köhler, and other politicians reveal—still effective. Like the humanistic educated citizen, most German Romantics saw themselves as Universalists: Not only Germany but the entire world had to be romanticized by poetry.¹³ Their approach did not aim to bring about a Europe dominated by Germany, but a realm that was able to combine the profane and the sacral, the natural and supernatural.

Due to its geographic position in the middle of Europe, August Wilhelm Schlegel perceived the Germans as mediators between nations par excellence as well: as their language incorporated both spheres—the southern sphere of sensuality and the northern sphere of rationality—German could be an “allgemeines Organ der Mittheilung für die gebildeten Nationen” ‘general voice of communication between educated nations’ (336).¹⁴ It cannot be stressed enough how influential this idea became for the self-image of German artists. Even more than hundred years later, in 1918, Thomas Mann, in his novel *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* (111), paints a picture of Germans being the most mediating and cosmopolitan people who find their grandeur in culture and not in politics. The same year the First World War ended, which had been initiated mainly by the German and Austrian Empires, Thomas Mann did not hesitate to stress that the German people could not love politics, as German humanity would always go against the political element (cf. 30).

However, the factual political situation in Germany at the time of Novalis and Schlegel in comparison to other European nations is far too obvious. France achieved its national unity with the incorporation of Burgundy and Brittany in the 16th and 17th centuries at the latest, while the English crown had already attained a dominant position of power with the rule of the Tudor dynasty in the 15th century. In contrast, in 1797, Schiller and Goethe still asked in one of the *Xenien*, the epigrams that they wrote together: “Deutschland? aber wo liegt es? Ich weiß das Land nicht zu finden” ‘Germany? Where shall that be? I cannot find it.’ (qtd. in Alt 342). The ideal sphere of cultural progress is seen in opposition to the realistic

sphere of the missing political unity or clear-cut geographical borders. The poets conclude their short poem with the sentence: “Wo das gelehrte beginnt, hört das politische auf” ‘Where the educated Germany starts, the political one ends’ (qtd. in Alt 342).

The lack of political power is compensated for by cultural innovation. The other nations are neither threatened by nor forced to accept the German model; however, sooner or later they will opt for it according to their free will. The aim of a factual nation-building process, therefore, is replaced by the higher destiny of the entire human race. Or, as Schiller and Goethe put it in another famous distich of their *Xenien*: “Zur Nation euch zu bilden, ihr hoffet es, Deutsche, vergebens./ Bildet, ihr könnt es, dafür freyer zu Menschen euch aus” ‘To become a nation, you, Germans, hope in vain. Instead—and this you can do—educate yourselves to be able to enjoy greater freedom as human beings.’ (qtd. in Alt 342).

However, verses like these had the strongest impact on people not outside, but inside of Germany. The unique chance for all minorities in Germany which had been excluded until then was indeed this novel idea of a linguistically safeguarded and self-assuring nationality. Jacob Grimm expressed this idea in the preface to the epochal national project of the ‘German Dictionary’ in the rhetorical question: “Was haben wir denn gemeinsames als unsere sprache und kultur?” ‘what else do we have in common but our language and culture?’ (LXVIII), summoning the readers in the same vein: “Deutsche geliebte landsleute, welches reichs, welches glaubens ihr seid, tretet ein in die euch allen aufgethane halle eurer angestammten, uralten sprache, lernet und heiligt sie und haltet an ihr, eure volkskraft und dauer hängt an ihr” (LXVIII).¹⁵

In evaluations of this kind, the anthropomorphic family metaphors for language and homeland were endowed with commensurate connotations: The tongue of the mother was perceived as the soft, nourishing entity while the land of the father was seen as the strong, chthonic element. *Connecting link*, *tie of unity*, and *buttress*, *landmark*, *liberator*, and *fatherland ersatz*: the list of metaphorical *topoi* for language as a projection screen of community-constituting expectations is extensive, and they dominated the discourse on language in the 19th and in the beginning of the 20th century (Stukenbrock 447–448). To Wilhelm Grimm and other linguists of the 19th century it appeared as the last and ‘strongest tie’ or as the ‘pillar which holds a fatherland together when all other supports break’ (519).

Before the cultural concept of the educated citizen could finally establish itself, the extraordinary role of language had to be substantiated systematically and philosophically. This could not be achieved on the basis of traditional philosophies. A linguistic turn in science needed to follow the Copernican change of the world-view created by Immanuel Kant’s Enlightenment philosophy. Language, which even Kant did not consider worthy as a major topic, had to be brought into play as a protagonist. This reorientation can be linked particularly well to one name: Johann Gottfried Herder. His ideas, together with the later language concepts of Wilhelm

von Humboldt, provided the theoretical basis for the concept of the nation determined by its language.

Deeply influenced by the language philosophy of Johann Georg Hamann, who assessed language as a unity of reason and sensuality (cf. Nadler 287), human thinking to Herder is constituted linguistically and equally involves both sensory perception and spirit. Similar to Humboldt, the philosopher Herder believed that every language and all thinking contain an individual view of the world—Humboldt referred to it as *Geisteseigenthümlichkeit* ‘peculiarity of the spirit’ (42)—which is specific to the spirit of a language. The nonscientific idea of a *Sprachgeist* (‘linguistic spirit’), a *genius linguae*, was seen as a kind of persistent baseline characteristic of each language: As an invisible organic force which was either naturally, grammatically, semantically, or even nationally active and thereby also interpretable. This idea became extremely popular especially in the 19th century during the period of Romanticism and lost its reputation with the first linguistic turn and Ferdinand de Saussure’s demand to analyze the system of a language rather than speaking just about the etymology of words (Saussure).

In the process of cultural constitution qua language, the individual becomes aware of his distinctive individuality. At the same time, the mother tongue as a common experience—as a form of and a window into the thinking and feeling of a group—creates national identity. Herder’s succinct chiasmus: “Jede Nation spricht also, nach dem sie denkt, und denkt, nach dem sie spricht” ‘Every nation therefore speaks as it thinks and thinks as it speaks’ (1877 18)¹⁶ combines both components, language and nation, most closely and practically intertwines them into a complementary ideology. Languages need nations which speak them, and nations cannot exist without speaking. Language, literature, and history of a people are elementary for national awakening and emancipation. The development of a literary language with a canonical corpus promotes national self-discovery, because for Herder both the question of the national belonging of the individual and the moral quality of the community can be measured by an idiom, which has been recognized as a common good.

The most perfect expression of the character of a mother tongue can be found in the poetry of the uneducated common people, whose essence Herder tried to discover and preserve in his collection of German folk songs *Volkslieder nebst untermischten anderen Stücken* of 1778/1779¹⁷ (in the 1807 second edition under the title *Stimmen der Völker in Liedern*). Popular poetry produces the particular distinctive worldview of every nation; it contains its *origins*, since every national poetry reflects its assembled cultural knowledge from its beginnings: “Wer in derselben Sprache erzogen ward, wer sein Herz in sie schütten, seine Seele in ihr ausdrücken lernte, der gehört zum Volk dieser Sprache” (Herder 1881/1888 287).

Since a nation is educated and formed by its language, the future project of a united German nation could be realized by resorting to the cultural goods of the past. For this purpose, national status closely depends on its idiomatic status. It was

obvious to Herder that the emotionally perceived homeland or fatherland requires a widely spoken national language, which surmounted the borders of political territories and social classes. In 1795, he remarked:

Ohne eine gemeinschaftliche Landes- und Muttersprache, in der alle Stände als Sprossen eines Baumes erzogen werden, giebt es kein wahres Verständniß der Gemüter, keine gemeinsame patriotische Bildung, keine innige Mit- und Zusammenfindung, kein vaterländisches Publikum mehr... Wenn die Stimme des Vaterlandes die Stimme Gottes ist, so kann diese zu gemeinschaftlichen, allumfassenden, und aufs tiefste greifenden Zwecken nur in der Sprache des Vaterlandes tönen; sie muß von Jugend auf, durch alle Classen der Nation an Herz und Geist erklingen seyn. (Herder 1877 288)

According to Herder, human beings had language before they became intellectuals or highly educated persons. Therefore, in his study about the origins of language, the concept of the mother tongue is essential. It is the manifestation of one of the primordial stages of first language acquisition and childhood, and its emotional effects last in every person for his or her whole life (Irmscher 2001 116–117). The emotionalization of the ideology of the mother tongue did not start with Herder, but was enhanced by his philosophy of language. It was accompanied by a change of family concepts at the end of the 18th century when the emotional connections between children and parents were emphasized more and more. National individuality contributes to the future wellbeing of mankind.

This already gives an idea of what Herder understands by the term *Humanität* ‘humanity’ which is so important for him. The meaning of this term extends beyond the translations ‘mankind’ and ‘humanity’, since it is not only aimed at the individual human character and an attitude vis-à-vis one’s fellow men which is free of prejudice, but also assigns to every nation the task of forming a community of values showing solidarity with other nations (cf. Irmscher 1994 190–191). Nationality and humanity are factors that are mutually dependent. Humanity does not stand against human nature, but is in fact the implementation and realization of the nature of man. He stresses that no one should praise his own nation by devaluating others. This tolerance fits into his program of collecting not only German folk songs, but also Nordic and American songs: “in Herder’s view, literature—folk poetry in particular—is created inside a collective tradition that is open to stimulation from different cultures” (Lampert 171).

Mainly with Herder’s (but also with Humboldt’s) language models, the exponents of the German Movement had gotten the theoretical ammunition which they could use time and again in the political battles leading to national unity. Even if the united nation was a dream of the future, it was language that showed the way. For the time being, the idea of the nation could hibernate in the realm of language. The organism of the culture-nation was to grow following the organic pattern of its language. According to Humboldt, language is the forming organ of the thoughts

(cf. 53) and the emanation of the spirit (cf. 17). Language also promised to be the forming organ of the nation as well as of its history of ideas and its spirit. Since it preserved and transported the intellectual treasures of the people, its form had to be cultivated, investigated, and mediated accordingly. The correlation between language and nation, between mother tongue and fatherland, which had thus been theoretically well established, was interesting for national movements and national ideologies in three main aspects:

- a) Language contains the nation since it contains the cultural and spiritual knowledge of the people.
- b) Language substitutes for the nation if the latter no longer exists as a political fact.
- c) Language establishes the (de facto non-existent) nation anew by nationalizing the people and enabling it to re-form the nation.

4. Transitions and Negative Transformations: The Political Implementation and Nationalization of the Concept until 1871

The official end of the empire nation in 1806 was a long-foreseen but nevertheless big caesura—and this, together with the Wars of Liberation against Napoleon, left a strong impact on many German poets and their assessment of cultural values such as language, which they strived to show as something purely German. During the resistance against Napoleon from 1813 until 1815, the nationalism of the German Movement adopted more and more radical attitudes.¹⁸ But even after Napoleon had at last been defeated in 1815, the demands for a united national state voiced during the Wars of Liberation remained unfulfilled. The loose federation of states that existed until 1866 could not be a surrogate for unity. A specifically German impetus for filling the void in power politics through educated language was becoming evident. The transition from the originally cosmopolitan idea of a language-defined *Kulturnation* to a narrower and narrower nationalization was initiated.

Johann Gottlieb Fichte's fourteen speeches *Reden an die deutsche Nation*, (1807–1808), are a committed and equally controversial plea for the German nation and national language. With them, Fichte wanted to establish a new national self-confidence. Fichte's speeches are addressed to the 'entire German nation' and to everybody within a geographical area 'as far as the German tongue is spoken' (cf. 228). His fourth and fifth addresses, which deal in particular with the language aspect, discuss the 'main differences between the Germans and the other people of Germanic origin' and their 'consequences' (cf. 44–92). Fichte's comparative approach remains antagonistic and judgmental from beginning to end. His analyses are in fact based on his own language theory, and one can find general investigations of language from him, but he never loses sight of the actual target: The demonstration of the national and cultural value of a specific language by means of a syncretic devaluation of other idioms.

Fichte's nationalistically exclusive linguism could be aimed in principle against all foreign languages.¹⁹ By devaluating the idiomatic performance of the 'other Germanic tribes' (cf. 75), he counts in principle all other peoples of Germanic descent, consequently also the Anglo-Saxon Britons. However, his predominant target is to the West of the Rhine. Here—between France and Germany—runs the demarcation line of essential antipodes: geographical, political, and cultural. By redirecting the German states' conflict with France after Prussia's devastating defeats against Napoleon into the cultural field, the professor of philosophy at Jena tries to win battles which were long lost militarily: „Die Verschiedenheit [...] besteht darin, daß der Deutsche eine bis zu ihrem ersten Ausströmen aus der Naturkraft lebendige Sprache redet, die übrigen germanischen Stämme eine nur auf der Oberflächlichkeit sich regende, in der Wurzel aber tote Sprache“ (Fichte 72).

Compared to the authentic and vital 'protolanguage' German,²⁰ it is particularly the Romance French that appears as a more or less poorly organized collection of shortcomings. The consequences for the literary oeuvre of the people of the dead language, which is spoken without being reflected in the culture, are catastrophic: Such people have neither proper poetry (Fichte 81) nor a mother tongue (71) nor a national language.²¹ In spite of some concordances, especially with Herder, Fichte gave decisive impulses to turn the originally rather cosmopolitan-universalistic oriented correlation between language and nation into the idea of a higher valued exclusivity of the German language nation.

What applies to the early phase of the educated citizenship around 1800 already is this: The cosmopolitanism of education successively mutated to a national citizenship through education. A cultural nationalism which articulated itself linguistically was, however, at first not a consequence of but a condition for the formation of a nation. But since unity—even in 1871—could only be realised in the *kleindeutsch* sense without Austria, the volume of nationalistic utterances remained high in the subsequent nation. What Nietzsche had feared after the Prussian victory against France—'the extirpation of the German spirit in favour of the German empire' (cf. 2)—seemed to have become reality. The collective identity, ordered by the state and created with haste, was looking for possibilities of delineation.

In the Hall of Mirrors in Versailles, where the German princes proclaimed the German imperial state, the dictum of a New High German linguistic standard was proclaimed implicitly. Now, the German should be separated culturally from what was non-German or *undeutsch*. In the course of the increasing nationalization of society, the importance of language shifted from a 'cure' for the political and social disruption in the sense of Jacob Grimm to the 'distinguishing feature' (Reichmann 393) of a relatively closed, identifiable group with motives for exclusion. This finally brought the class- and prestige-creating dimension of the German Movement to bear: The interpretation of High German to a "lingua ipsa Germania" (Gardt 2000, 171) and the accompanying ideal of a purity of the standard language defined the

level of language prestige, and the language's prestige in turn determined the social prestige of a speaker or a language group.

A single variety from the region around Hannover became the leading variety; a singular cultural dimension was raised to the *Leitkultur* 'leading culture'. Although this also resulted in tendencies to devalue Low German and its vernaculars, the main target group of discrimination in the 19th century became more and more those who seemed to fail to uphold the standard intentionally by continuing to speak a mysterious vernacular: German Jews. Although they themselves and liberal thinkers might have pointed out again and again that Yiddish was a language based on Middle High German vocabulary—it was in vain. All racial thinking aside, the first step into dangerous territory had thus been taken: The hierarchical typology of values of the languages made it possible to experience the inner values of the people who spoke that language. From that point, there were only a few steps left from the tendency of deducing the inside from the outside to the division of German society itself into insiders and outsiders.

5. Rejection and Renunciation: The National Socialist Devaluation of the Concept of a Language-Defined Nation

Since the beginning of socio-linguistic analysis, thinkers have criticized the overemphasis of the role of language in national identity and unity by privileging other influences such as climate, culture, mind,—and also race. However, it is worth remembering that the loudest and later most powerful exponents of race and racism in the 20th century, the National Socialists, were quite reluctant or even defensive in one of the most popular fields for the development and strengthening of identity. It is well known that Adolf Hitler and Joseph Goebbels disliked and finally rejected the language purism towards foreign words by the "Allgemeiner deutscher Sprachverein" which had perceived itself as the 'SA of the mother tongue' (qtd. in Weber 29).

By the end of the 19th century, the vast majority of German Jews had been successfully acculturated, also by perfectly mastering High German. Therefore, the National Socialist anti-Semites had to deny the dominant effects of language for national affiliation. The traditional argument of 'Kulturantisemiten', those anti-Semites reasoning their racist hostility towards Jews by focusing on alleged cultural differences, such as Richard Wagner, Houston Stewart Chamberlain, or Hans F. K. Günther, had claimed that the Jews, as members of an inferior race, could never master German as properly and purely as the Germans naturally did, that therefore their pronunciation, their linguistic 'tone', would always reveal them. Although this strategic argument was not given up completely, the focus was changed. Anti-Semitic voices such as Theodor Fritsch's journal *The Hammer*, the anti-Semitic journal in circulation the longest prior to 1945 (1902–1940) (Kremer 2007, 398), stressed again and again that the inferior Semitic race was using language just like an exchangeable *Rock* 'garment' or *Kleid* 'dress'—even if this garment or dress did

fit properly. It was put on made-to-measure so that the wearer could sneak incognito into the world of the superior Aryan race and infect it with the Jewish spirit (Kremer 2013, 403–409).

Influenced by Herder's and Humboldt's philosophy of language, which equated 'language' with 'worldview' 'Weltanschauung', this notion had substituted the missing political unity of Germany until 1871 and continued to be powerful especially amongst the German educated classes. The National Socialists did not only refuse this concept of the German culture-defined nation determined by its language, they tried to eliminate it completely. Even Fichte's chauvinistic but nevertheless non-racist language nationalism was something most of the National Socialists did not adopt. Hitler explicitly devaluates the significance of culture and language, already in 1924 in *Mein Kampf*, in which he writes: "Es ist aber ein kaum faßlicher Denkfehler, zu glauben, daß, sagen wir, aus einem Neger oder einem Chinesen ein Germane wird, weil er Deutsch lernt und bereit ist, künftighin die deutsche Sprache zu sprechen und etwa einer deutschen politischen Partei seine Stimme zu geben" (428).²²

Absolute preconditions for this were, firstly, the preference of a chauvinistic race construct, and secondly, the rejection of a bourgeois understanding of language which tied the nation to the national language and linked competency in the national language to the right of belonging nationally. Culture is not considered a phenomenon controlled by the human will, but a mere derivative of physiological processes. It is the composition of the blood that determines the type and quality of the respective worldview, psychological qualities, languages, and ways of talking. The laws of this composition pervade the inner and outer essence of every man, his phenotypic characteristics, his thinking, feeling, acting, his oral and written language performance. It is exactly Humboldt's idea that language was "die ewig wiederkehrende Arbeit des Geistes, den artikulierten Laut zum Ausdruck des Gedankens fähig zu machen" 'the permanently repeated work of the spirit to make the articulated sound capable of expressing the thought' (36), which Hitler had already attacked in 1924 as the actual 'lie' of the humanistic language and culture model: "Sie [die Sprache des Juden, A. K.] ist ihm nicht das Mittel, seine Gedanken auszudrücken, sondern das Mittel, sie zu verbergen. Indem er französisch redet, denkt er jüdisch, und während er deutsche Verse drechselt, lebt er nur das Wesen seines Volkstums aus" (337).

The anti-Semitic strategists repeated the range of the allegedly conspicuous signs of the inferiority of the Jewish race, which was hiding behind all their ever so perfect mastery of the New High German standard language. The formula for this ideology was: Races and not languages determine individual and collective values. To master a language does not mean to belong to a race or ethno-biological community—on the contrary: Excellent cultural and linguistic performances can be used to hide biological inferiority. This is the climax of all radical renunciation of the original concept of a language-defined *Kulturnation*, its final, but twisted

transition: The National Socialist ideology was the attempt to dig a grave for the concept of a language-defined German *Kulturnation* from which it should never emerge again. But it did, as the comments of Angela Merkel, Wolfgang Thierse, Horst Köhler, and Günter Grass have proven. The transitions and transformations of the concept did not stop here. Even the debates on biological determinations are re-emerging in Germany. Of course, the talk is no longer about race, but about genes.

6. Return of a Myth? Thilo Sarrazin and the Renaissance of Biological Theories

Thilo Sarrazin, SPD-member, former Berlin Finance Senator and member of the board of *Deutsche Bundesbank*, had often made the headlines, in particular with provocative theses about migrants and recipients of social security in Germany.²³ However, only his book *Deutschland schafft sich ab. Wie wir unser Land aufs Spiel setzen* (late summer 2010) sparked a fierce public controversy in Germany. This was due to a claim that linked the intelligence and identity of an entire country to genetic determinants.

Sarrazin took credit for breaking open the alleged taboo that ‘men are different—namely intellectually more or less gifted, lazier or keener, more or less morally stable—and that no amount of education and equality of chances can change this’ (9). The ‘healthy assertiveness as a nation’ (18), which, according to Sarrazin is constantly on the retreat, is endangered. Sarrazin stresses that ‘80% assumed heredity’ (98), together with a high birthrate of people with a low educational standard (amongst which Sarrazin counts families with a Turkish and Arab migration background in particular) and a low birthrate of those from educated classes, is continuously lowering the cultural and spiritual potential of Germans. Therefore, the autochthonous Germans are becoming more and more stupid, thereby making themselves obsolete in a globalized world that depends above all on top mental performance and innovation (cf. 18, 93, 393).

Many of his conclusions and remarks are highly problematic and have been criticized even by those he cites as authorities, such as the assertion that science had definitely proven a genetic determination of intelligence up to 80 percent (cf. Stern)²⁴ or that a specific Jewish gene existed which is responsible for an alleged higher level of intelligence amongst the Jews (Seibel Schumacher, and Fahrn). For Sander L. Gilman, Sarrazin’s assertions and the theses of others on the context of genes and collective intellectual performances are dangerous expressions of a new, second age of biology, which is partly adopting and partly transforming the arguments of the first age of biological and racial theories of the 19th century (cf. 47). Rather than creating a new myth—of the scientifically proven dependence of group intelligence on genetic determination—Sarrazin adopts and transforms an old one.

But even without considering these subsequent debates, Sarrazin's publication is a serious attack on the originally liberal idea of the German *Kulturnation* that he, paradoxically, pretends to defend. With his thesis that genetic parameters are predominant for intellectual capacities and implementations, he contradicts his elegy of a forthcoming decline of the occident, which he bemoans in his exaggerated nightmarish vision of a Germany in 100 years. With respect to the decline of the level of the German language and culture in this dark future he remarks: "Das Deutsche in Deutschland verdünnt sich immer mehr, und das intellektuelle Potential verdünnt sich noch schneller. Wer wird in 100 Jahren 'Wanderers Nachtlied' noch kennen? Der Koranschüler in der Moschee nebenan wohl nicht" (Sarrazin 393).²⁵

Sarrazin, however, wishes to save German as the language of the majority and to protect the understanding of national identity for forthcoming generations, so that 'my successors even in 50 or 100 years will be able to live in a German country in which German is the lingua franca and in which men can feel as Germans' (392). This feared process of a cultural decline of Germany can neither be stopped nor reversed by intensive education and integration of the mass of lower and uneducated classes mainly of Arab and Turkish origin. Furthermore, he completely ignores the essential cultural, linguistic, social, and economic contributions, for instance, of the German-Turkish community to German society within the last 60 years: the fact that transcultural processes can be productive for both sides (Wiese 41–58). Sarrazin's argument is so notable since it focuses on a concept which was once extremely popular in German history and is also responsible for disastrous developments: It is the thesis that it is not primarily culture and language which form and maintain the mentality and social identity of man and, in turn, of national societies, but that biological parameters predominate and predispose.

7. Conclusion

The tradition of the criticism of metaphorical references to the idea of a particularity or even uniqueness of the German concept of a culture-defined nation—which, on the one hand, is described as a unifying bond for German society while paradoxically existing quite independently from political and economic factors—has to be taken into account. Gretz and other young historians have assessed Wehler's German *Sonderweg* 'special path' thesis as a rather uncritical adoption of an inverted myth or self-stylization of the German *Bildungsbürgertum* (Gretz 9). Furthermore, it has to be taken into consideration that contemporary interpretations of culture, influenced by more and more significant processes of globalization and migration, are much more focused on the diversity and reciprocal impacts and interferences of various cultures and identities which form a transcultural rather than multicultural society (Weltsch 308). Some might still focus on island mentalities, long for small worlds of cultural and territorial spaces, or mourn

their loss. However, nowadays we are connected and interconnected to an unprecedented extent. We are no longer islands (Kremer 2015, 15–16).

In particular, the globalized economy and new ways of communication as a result of the internet have changed not only the view on transnational spaces but also on the importance of language. These new forms of transnational multilingualism or multilingual transnationalism created “constant tensions between standardization (and monolingualism) and flexibility and diversity (and multilingualism)” (Heller 544). All transitions the former chapters dealt with—whether they have been transformations, renewals or replacements—are steps forward, while still looking backwards: transitions influenced by the past and partly even stuck in the past. Considering that, the idea of a language-based *Kulturnation* seems even more like an old-fashioned myth, unfeasible for current challenges of integration like the influx of mainly Muslim refugees especially from Syria and other Arabic countries to Germany since 2015.

However, myths do not stop being influential just due to the fact that they were invented. The concept inscribed in the term *Kulturnation* is still valid, as the speeches of Merkel, Thierse, Köhler, Grass, and many others decision-makers and thinkers reveal. As cultural memory is one of the most essential reasons for and repositories of the foundation and affirmation of cultural identity of individuals, groups, or nation-defined states (Assmann 110–111), national myths have to form part of these processes of memorization. The phenomenon of ‘imagined communities’ by which, according to Benedict Anderson, a nation was invented does always incorporate national myths as manifestations of discourses (Calhoun 3).

While National Socialists had attempted to eliminate the idea of a language-defined *Kulturnation* by replacing it with the construct of a hierarchy of races, some recent publications give the impression of a revival of biological determinations of group identities and biogenetic measurements of group intelligences. Thilo Sarrazin’s *Deutschland schafft sich ab. Wie wir unser Land aufs Spiel setzen* was one of the most prominent attacks on the originally liberal idea of the German *Kulturnation*. By lampooning the *Bildungsoptimisten* ‘education optimists’ (188), he takes up a position which, brought to its logical conclusion, would mean the end of the concept of a nation or state which opens its gates to everyone who is willing to respect the constitutional laws and to learn the standardized language of communication (according to Herder and Humboldt, with an explicit consideration of the importance of the command of other languages and the protection of each and every mother tongue).

Some might argue that this would just mean the replacement of one myth—stressing the significance of biological effects—by another myth that focuses on the dominant significance of language and the cultural heritage for national identity and membership. Even if this were true, the historical development in Germany has shown that it is far more advisable to rely on the latter myth than on the former.

Notes

¹ Scholars such as Otto Dann who hoped that the boom of this term has now come to an end (Dann 1987 316) had to confess that this expectation proved to be an illusion (Dann 1996 49).

² Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

³ The German original quote is: “Das band der sprache, der sitten [...] vereinigt die menschen auf eine sehr kräftige wiewohl unsichtbare weise.”

⁴ A belief that was sometimes confirmed, but more often rejected by scholars of the former German Democratic Republic. In 1984, a whole publication attempted to counter the thesis of a united German cultural nation (Hexelschneider and John).

⁵ Quite helpful is Anthony D. Smith’s definition of a nation as “a named and self-defined community whose members cultivate common myths, memories, symbols and values, possess and disseminate a distinctive public culture, reside in and identify with a historic homeland, and create and disseminate common laws and shared customs” (184).

⁶ A good European example for a state nation or a state of nations would be Switzerland, which indeed comprises different population groups communicating in four official standard languages (Italian, French, German, Rhaeto-Romance, and one vernacular: *Schwyzerdütsch* ‘Swiss German’).

⁷ They are preserved and re-enacted by political and cultural institutions such as schools, universities, clubs, political parties, libraries, archives etc. (Assmann 2010, 110–111).

⁸ Gellner’s core thesis is: “It is nationalism which engenders nations, and not the other way around.”

⁹ According to Gellner, the assumption that nations were “a natural, God-given way of classifying men [...] are a myth; nationalism, which sometimes takes pre-existing cultures and turns them into nations, sometimes invents them, and often obliterates pre-existing cultures: that is a reality, and in general an inescapable one” (48–49).

¹⁰ The idea that this personal identity—related to the mother tongue in the more innocent meaning of a language taught and spoken within the family—is linked to the construct of a standard language as a national and politically unifying mother tongue, is, however, another story. Home is not necessarily the homeland, and especially not automatically the fatherland. It was indeed a special and even unique story in Germany, which brought forth these concepts. This is, of course, also a story of ‘imagination,’ indeed of a phenomenon that scholars like Gellner and Hobsbawm would characterise as a national storytelling of myths. But here we want to understand the historical genesis of these myths and how they were expressed.

¹¹ Chapters 3 and 4 are based on my dissertation (Kremer 2007 23–75).

¹² The term itself comes most probably from Hermann Nohl, at first used in his 1911 publication *Die deutsche Bewegung und die idealistischen Systeme*. Preliminary thoughts on its content and connotation have been provided by Wilhelm Dilthey in his inaugural lecture in Basel of 1867, titled “Die dichterische und philosophische Bewegung in Deutschland 1770 bis 1800.” (cf. Dann 1987 308–340).

¹³ Cf. for instance the fragment „Christenheit oder Europa“ of 1799 by the romantic poet Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenberg), in which Novalis emphasizes the cultural pariah role of Germany: “Deutschland geht einen langsamen, aber sichern Weg vor den übrigen

europäischen Ländern voraus. Während diese durch Krieg, Spekulation und Parteigeist beschäftigt sind, bildet sich der Deutsche mit allem Fleiß zum Genossen einer höheren Epoche der Kultur, und dieser Vorschrift muß ihm ein großes Übergewicht über die anderen im Lauf der Zeit geben.”

¹⁴ Cf. there, too: “Universalität ist unsere wahre Eigentümlichkeit: es ist auf nichts geringeres angelegt, als die Vorzüge der verschiedensten Nationalitäten zu vereinigen, sich in alle hineinzudenken und hineinzufühlen, und so einen kosmologischen Mittelpunkt für den menschlichen Geist zu stiften.”

¹⁵ Translation in English: “Germans, beloved fellowmen, irrespective of your realm or confession, enter the hall of your ancestral and very old language which has been opened for all of you, learn and sanctify it, follow it closely, the people’s forces and perseverance depend on it.”

¹⁶ Cf. Irmscher 198.

¹⁷ About Herder’s program of language as a “Bildnerin der Nation,” which is preserved particularly in the poetry of the common people, cf. Dann 1987 319–322.

¹⁸ Cf. for instance Theodor Körner’s martial poem “Aufruf” of 1813: “Drauf! ruft die Freiheit, drauf!/Hoch schlägt dein Herz, hoch wachsen deine Eichen,/Was kümmern dich die Hügel deiner Leichen?” (qtd. in Conrady 400)

¹⁹ Fichte’s devaluation of the idiomatic performances of those who do not understand and speak German counts in “other peoples of Germanic descent”, so also the Anglo-Saxon Britons (75).

²⁰ Cf. “Zum Behuf einer Schilderung der Eigenthümlichkeit der Deutschen ist der Grundunterschied zwischen diesen und den andern Völkern germanischer Abkunft angegeben worden: dass die erstern in dem ununterbrochenen Fortflusse einer aus wirklichem Leben sich fortentwickelnden Ursprache geblieben, die letztern aber eine ihnen fremde Sprache angenommen, die unter ihrem Einflusse ertödtet worden.” (Fichte 328)

²¹ It cannot be the language of an existing nation in the sense of a national language, since its static character prevents it from showing in it “the entire history of formation of the nation retrogressively” (Fichte 71–72).

²² Translation in English: “It is a hardly understandable error in reasoning that, let us say, a nigger or a Chinese [just like a Jew] becomes a German because he learns German and is prepared to speak the German language in future.”

²³ Only as two examples amongst many other articles: Onken; Schulz.

²⁴ Sander Gilman stresses how highly controversial this claim of a common Jewish gene is discussed amongst geneticists (49); compare also Rosenthal; Woodhead.

²⁵ Translation in English: “Who in a hundred years from now will still know Goethe’s famous poem ‘The wanderer’s night song’ [a famous poem by Goethe, A. K.]? The student of the Koran in the neighboring mosque most probably not.”

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