

The Changing Face of Germany (1992)

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The past two years have seen massive changes in Germany, and these may offer clues to the violence which has now erupted across the now re-united State. The contrast between the Germany of 1992, and that experienced during a prolonged visit in 1990, was saddening.

In 1990, there was euphoria and optimism, the realisation of ideals, and a symbolic discarding of the burden of history, with the reunification. True, there was talk of tax and expense, but the German economy was booming, and, able to hold its own regardless. Above all, for me as a traveller and Auslander, there was friendliness extended towards my halting German as I went about my business.

In 1992, the friendliness had soured as I visited shops and cafes; enough also to cause concern to other non-native speakers who may have had more pressing reasons than mine for being in Germany. At the same time, economic matters including employment have been in the news, politicians have been prevaricating, the East has allowed resurgence of old grudges, both territorial and ideological, and immigrants are increasingly blamed for some or, all, of these perceived problems.

Why the changes? Primarily legislating a new Germany into existence has not succeeded with the wholehearted approval and support of the populace. This legacy of tribalism is not confined to Germany but is an ancient European phenomenon; Yugoslavia is a current example. Scapegoatism, of course, is also a characteristic of Europe as a whole, with hatred of non-conformism, and racial differences, the most obvious manifestations. These are universal human failings, of course, but this is their latter-day European manifestation.

Sadly, Germany is still seriously affected by old history, and tribal memory. In conformist societies, the individual asserts through the pecking order; conformism is a public matter, which easily identifies the non-conformists. Democracy in the ideal sense does not thrive under these conditions. The gut feeling of the conformists, (or tribal majority), carries the day; add religion, race and old grudges, and potential for strife becomes real and dangerous.

In present day Germany, other factors now cause pressure of an "us and them" nature. The EC and the threat of an external imposed uniformity is a complication. Also, the democratic principles of humanism and freedom of speech, now required to go beyond mere lip service, are causing the Government administration and implementation problems. There is a feeling that the Government is more concerned with distancing itself from these principles, and wind-sniffing the national gut-reaction. The distinction between rightful and self-righteousness still remains blurred.

Case in point: banning one extreme right organisation will achieve nothing; addressing the abuse of free speech as a whole would be more effective for the promotion and continuity of democracy. Sadly, freedom of speech in Germany was, and is, too easily seen as de facto freedom of action, and the current government procrastination in these matters is a poor example. (eg, as evidenced by the Rostock hand-clappers witnessing a race-related arson incident).

What of the future, then? Can the legacy of the Iron Chancellor from last century, of enforced unity, finally mellow and mature? Will the worst happen, such as a civil war? The protagonists will be liberals and conservatives, whether in Parliament or on the streets. Should the worst happen, however, spilling of this over the country's borders seems unlikely, as the influence of the many liberals who opted for social service over military training, and the memory of the post-war rebuilding of the last 50 years, are both very strong. Preventing a networking Extreme Right from involving extra-national forces rallying to their cause from the greater European pool of sympathisers is perhaps a much greater threat.

Money must be spent to provide jobs, this is the highest priority; then must come social education and example, and then defusing of ethnic problems will be facilitated. Modern immigration should not take the blame for older problems, especially for hasty government policies that did not balance employment and immigration. It must also be remembered that the issues of immigration are also blurred by the influx of Gastarbeitern to do the more menial work of the society.

More "ethnics" in the media, and in different levels of local and national government administration would help, especially with policy implementation and feedback. Public and school education is necessary to accompany pro-active legislation. Anti-vilification laws are only effective when the majority of the population understand and support their purpose. Promote the option of citizenship for all who desire nationality; this also must be seen as conferring a desirable and fulfilling status to the holder.

So, in summary, the unification of Germany may yet be artificial, a mixture of legislation, idealism, scapegoatism, history, territory, and economic necessity. The real unification may be yet to come, that of a true nation, rather than just arbitrarily aggregated people, united by common purpose, good neighbourliness, and a will to succeed rather than just continuing to squabble over an identity still circumscribed by race, and tribalism, and territory.

Good luck to them all; at a guess, they may only have a couple of years to make the grade before external forces like the EU and other conflicts in the region require unity of purpose to be properly faced.

Postscript 2005: Fortunately, Germany has coped with Unification, regained stability, is a world and EU leader, is dealing with a wider eligibility for citizenship, has a rising younger generation determined to acknowledge the past, for better or for worse, and is now more focused on an ever-improving future. Generational change must catch up with legislative change, especially when major cultural shifts are required, but this will only occur if there is a general will within the population to overcome the problems engendered by a troubled past. This trend is evolving strongly in Germany, thanks to the determination of that younger generation, and there are other nations that should, and could, learn from this example. **Good luck for the Future!**