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## COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND CULTURAL CONSTRAINT: HOLOCAUST MYTH AND RATIONALITY IN GERMAN POLITICS\*

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*Using a case study of official representations of the Holocaust in the Federal Republic of Germany, we address the ways in which collective memory constrains political claim-making. In contrast to the commonly held views that the past is either durable or malleable, we characterize collective memory in political culture as an ongoing process of negotiation through time. We distinguish between mythic and rational political cultural logics, and delineate mechanisms through which these logics operate as constraints: taboo and prohibition, duty and requirement. With these conceptual distinctions, we describe transformations in the memory of the Holocaust as a constraint in German political culture.*

In the spring of 1981, West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt was returning from a trip to Saudi Arabia during which he had negotiated the sale of West German Leopard 2 tanks to the Saudi government. The issue was especially delicate, not only because of the usual problems of Western Mideast policy but also because of Germany's "special" relationship with Israel (Deutschkron 1991; Feldman 1984; Wolffsohn 1988). Memory of the Holocaust had always complicated Germany's stance on Israeli problems, and the idea of Israel's sworn enemy acquiring West German tanks raised the hackles of Germany watchers the world over. Schmidt, however, was recalcitrant. For him, the opportunity to deal with another government without regard to the German past was especially important for the "normalization" of German politics that he sought both domestically and internationally.

Angered by Israeli and world reactions, Schmidt reportedly proclaimed that West German foreign policy should no longer be "held hostage" to Auschwitz (Wolffsohn 1988:42).

From the immediate postwar period to the present, powerful images of the Nazi past have shaped West Germany. Virtually every institutional arrangement and substantive policy is a response, in some sense, to Germany's memory of those fateful years. The Holocaust, moreover, has long been the standard for evaluating German political activity; indeed, as some critics have complained, Germany has a past that, for whatever reason, will not pass away (Nolte 1987).

Both Schmidt's purported statement and the general lament that the burdens of the past reach inappropriately into the present are vernacular claims about how the past affects us, or in more sociological terms, how collective memory works. West German commentators and politicians have often regarded the Nazi past as an ineluctable burden, one beset by and working through the mystical force of taboo. This view is similar to scholarly approaches that emphasize the enduring power of traditions to shape the present (Shils 1981). In contrast, many theorists of social memory have favored a presentist approach, seeing images of the past as the strategic handmaidens of contemporary needs (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). Much recent work on social memory, however, argues for a more

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complex view of the relation between past and present in shaping collective memory (Schudson 1992; Schwartz 1991; Trouillot 1995; Zerubavel 1994); Collective memory, as in Bergson's ([1896] 1991) philosophical critique, should be seen as an active process of sense-making through time.

In this paper we analyze the so-called taboos of the German past in order to understand more precisely how the remembered past shapes and constrains the present, and vice versa. What does it mean to say that the Holocaust creates taboos in German politics? How do enduring images of the past interact with present needs to shape political opportunities and limits? *In what different ways can the remembered past constrain the present, and under what circumstances are such constraints transformable?*

### NEW POLITICAL CULTURE ANALYSIS AND THE INTERPRETIVE TURN

In the following discussion, we propose a distinction between different kinds of cultural constraints: those which operate "mythically" (often associated with the power of the past over the present) and those which operate "instrumentally" (often associated with the power of the present over the past). We make this distinction in order to understand more clearly the operation of collective memory—the conceptually and politically mediated past. To do this, we turn to recent work on political culture, which has problematized the issue of cultural constraint in a way that can illuminate some of the murkier features of German struggles with memory and of collective memory in general.<sup>1</sup>

In classic works on political development, political scientists described political culture

as aggregate patterns of *psychological* orientations toward political outcomes (Almond and Verba 1963, 1980). Political culture analysis therefore was an attempt to measure the *subjective* and to argue for its importance in political life—namely for its role in maintaining democratic institutions. In an alternative view, attitudes were seen as epiphenomenal, as mere expressions of (or at the very least tools for) the more real—that is, *objective*—social structure.

In recent years, interpretive social scientists have reinvented the concept of political culture (Baker 1990; Berezin 1994; Brint 1994; Hunt 1984; Somers 1995). In contrast to older reductionisms (to both the subjectivism of earlier political culture theory and those who answered it by de-emphasizing culture), new political culture analysis defines culture neither narrowly as subjective ideas, values, or attitudes, nor disdainfully as epiphenomenal, but broadly as the symbolic aspect of all social situations. Culture is regarded as *intersubjective* and as embodied in symbolism and patterns of meaning (Alexander 1990); it is pervasive.

In noncultural conceptualizations, politics is often modeled as a struggle over resources based on exogenously defined interests. In new political culture analysis, however, it is argued that such approaches beg the original question of interest formation (Geertz 1973). Seeing social life as an ongoing *reproductive process*, new political culture analysts focus not only on how political acts succeed or fail to obtain some material advantage, but instead on how, in doing so, they produce, reproduce, or change identities. The struggle for position that constitutes politics, therefore, is always simultaneously strategic and constitutive.

To appreciate the constitutive role of political culture in social processes, scholars have focused on politics as claim-making, meaning both that claims are important and that even seemingly nondiscursive political acts are claims of sorts (Baker 1990; Hunt 1984). Nonetheless, the emphasis on claim-making should not be misunderstood as a limitless voluntarism: To mix metaphors from Austin and from Marx, people do things with words, but not in circumstances of their own choosing. Both the words themselves and the situations in which they are deployed

are structured in ways that shape individual cognition, and so to understand political culture, therefore, is to look for the ways in which political actors in various possible claims and actions and the effects of their effects.

*Political culture, as a symbolic structure, is that which is always a constitutive moment; the attempt to understand the culture is the attempt to understand the particular settings of the culture, and the logics of political action in particular settings of culture thus can be understood only in survey analysis; in particular, observed, and in particular terms as culture. As an interpretive methodology, it is to recover the sometimes changing rules that are by claims made by particular moments.<sup>2</sup>*

Central to our effort to understand the German past and present is the recognition that politics is not a static system—that is, that it is a history. Political culture is a process, not a determinant or a once-and-for-all

<sup>1</sup> Both political culture and collective memory are overgeneralizing concepts: Political cultures and collective memories are always multiple, diverse, and fluid, with different institutional fields (Bourdieu 1993) operating according to different rules and interacting with each other in different and shifting ways. We refer mainly to elite public discourse, although we situate that discourse within others as much as possible. We make no assumption that elite versions are the political culture or collective memory per se, only that they are dominant versions of each.

<sup>2</sup> Although public opinion is an important element in political culture, it is not the same thing as political culture. Public opinion is subjective, but political culture is intersubjective; they are different logical orders and different strategies. Second, elite public opinion does not correspond to their reception of public culture and its reception by politicians try to improve public opinion. Numerous examples of public opinion that contradict public opinion are not a popularity (that is, a popularity of public opinion concerns public opinion). Political culture, but not public opinion, at least our interpretive methodology, conflates the public and the government's attitude about an issue is not the government's attitude to some survey data and to some survey data as to some illustrations, and to some illustrations of public culture, which is popular culture, and



are structured in ways that transcend individual cognition, volition, and control. To understand political action as meaningful, therefore, is to look at the claims made by political actors in terms of the structure of possible claims and the structured possibility of their effects.

*Political culture, as newly conceived, is the symbolic structuring of the claim-making that is always a constitutive part of any political moment; the analysis of political culture is the attempt to understand the patterns and logics of political claim-making both for particular settings and generally.* Political culture thus can be measured only crudely by survey analysis; instead, it must be excavated, observed, and interpreted in its own terms as culture. As a result, we employ an interpretive methodology here, one that seeks to recover the sometimes hidden and always changing rules that constrain (and are shaped by) claims made by political actors in particular moments.<sup>2</sup>

Central to our effort to understand how the German past and present shape each other is the recognition that political cultures are not static systems—that is, structures without histories. Political culture is always a historical process, not a determinate set of relations or a once-and-for-all definition of the situa-

tion. Claim-making by actors in political contexts is conditioned by significant pasts as well as by meaningful presents; it is always path-dependent, though not necessarily in obvious ways. This point calls our attention to historical events of definitive importance, to how broad parameters are fixed or transformed at particular moments, and to how those moments manifest themselves or are invoked differently in subsequent contexts. Conceiving of collective memory as part of a political-cultural process thus remedies the presuppositional tendency to view it either as an unchanging and definitive past or as pure strategy, always malleable in the present.

#### MYTHIC AND RATIONAL LOGICS OF CULTURAL CONSTRAINT

As mentioned above, political commentators in Germany frequently characterize the German past as imposing taboos. Often they do so to emphasize both that a particular image of the Nazi past is considered sacred (one in which Germany is a uniquely horrible and burdened historical perpetrator) and that this image works in inscrutable (read "illegitimate") ways. Below, we seek to redeem the insight provided by this taboo label while avoiding the more polemical slant: the role of collective memory is more highly differentiated than such a blanket characterization allows. To do this, we specify two ways in which collective memory operates as a constraint: by proscription (through taboos and prohibitions) and by prescription (through duties and requirements).

##### *Proscription: Taboos and Prohibitions*

The concept of taboo as articulated by anthropologists includes, first of all, reference to some sort of avoidance practice (Douglas 1966; Pelinka 1994; Steiner 1956). All societies specify objects, conditions, people, practices, topics and ideas that are avoided under certain circumstances. Moreover, such avoidance is not merely practical or morally-neutral; rather, the designated object is treated as dangerous, disgusting, dirty, morally repugnant, contagious, degenerate, or as embodying some combination of these qualities.

<sup>2</sup> Although public opinion can be an important element in political cultures, it is not the same thing as political culture. In the first place, public opinion is subjective, whereas political culture is intersubjective; they thus belong to different ontological orders and require different analytical strategies. Second, elite-produced symbols do respond to their reception in public opinion, but no one-to-one correspondence exists between political culture and its reception, no matter how much politicians try to improve their "numbers." Numerous examples of official symbolism, for instance, contradict public opinion. Moreover, public opinion is not a straightforward measure of popularity (that is, of non-elite beliefs). Public opinion concerns public political issues, as does political culture, but surveys of attitudes (or at least our interpretations of those surveys) often conflate the public and the private: One's attitude about an issue is not necessarily what one expects the government's attitude to be. While we refer to some survey data and to some extrapolitical issues as illustrations, we focus primarily on political culture, which differs from public opinion, popular culture, and the private sphere.



Another core sense of taboo concerns its contravention. Violating a taboo is not simply an error or an expense. It is a transgression or a pollution. Under some circumstances it is socially (or literally) deadly; under others it is survivable, but not without some redemptive or cleansing effort.

These usages show that certain cultural elements operate as mechanisms of demarcation and constraint, and that these operations play pivotal roles in maintaining the symbolic boundaries specified by a given society (Douglas 1966). Because taboos help set terms of discourse and boundaries of identity, they are central to the major concern of political culture analysis: the constraints on (that is, the structuring of) claim-making in concrete settings.

Nonetheless, we argue older conceptualizations must be refined in two ways before they can contribute to the problem of collective memory as cultural constraint. First, in older conceptualizations, taboos are understood mainly in terms of social reproduction of already constituted and coherent systems. In contrast, we argue that we need to historicize meaning systems, to analyze them in terms of constitutive and transformative moments. We emphasize, therefore, the temporal dimension of taboos and their enactments. Taboos may be foundational, but to varying degrees they are developing structures: The Holocaust may create taboos in West German political culture, but these unfold along complex trajectories through time and space.

Second, much literature treats taboo as if it were part of so-called "deep structure" (Steiner 1956). According to this view, taboos manifest themselves as prohibitions in concrete settings (Freud 1946). We disagree with this mapping of deep structure/manifest enactment onto the concept of taboo and prohibition. *Taboos and prohibitions are not levels (deep structures versus manifestations) of the same phenomenon, but refer to distinct varieties of cultural constraint.*

Taboos operate through a mythic logic; such logic is especially important in defining interests because it demarcates identities and mobilizes passion about them in suasive, ritualistic forms. Taboos involve moral principles and definitional claims that are beyond debate, not because no alternatives exist, but

because these issues are not decided by rational argument. Taboos are usually obdurate: They may change gradually or may be transformed dramatically, but they make their claims as absolutes. One does not debate with a taboo; one either obeys or transgresses its proscriptions.

Prohibitions, in contrast to taboos, operate through appeals to calculative rationality and exogenously constituted interests. Their method is rationality, and their goals are mundane. Here the rules of advantage and maneuver apply. A major difference between taboos and prohibitions is that in the case of prohibitions positions and plans are abandoned when they are no longer tactically useful or when they are refuted with valid arguments. Prohibition is a politics of exigency, not of passion.

#### *Prescription: Duties and Requirements*

Constraint, of course, involves more than proscription. Without some ordering of the social flux, action is impossible. By constraining the range of options for actors in situations, culture also enables them to act in the first place—to make constitutive and instrumental claims. By extension we can imagine positive correlates to taboo and prohibition—prescriptions in addition to proscriptions. A taboo proscribes (defines what is absolutely unacceptable) whereas a duty or an obligation prescribes what is absolutely necessary. A prohibition restricts; a requirement enjoins. The relation of these concepts is displayed in Figure 1.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast to the common arguments that the Holocaust is taboo or creates taboos in German politics, we believe it is useful to specify and differentiate the Holocaust's concrete operation and development, and the contestation over it as a constraint in German political culture. Thus we distinguish between *taboos* and *prohibitions, duties* and *requirements*, and more generally between the

<sup>3</sup> The gap between the upper and the lower parts of Figure 1 indicates that contravention is not strictly a type of cultural constraint; rather, it is a response to, or transformation of, cultural constraint. Thus contravention is of a different order from, but is related to, proscription and prescription.

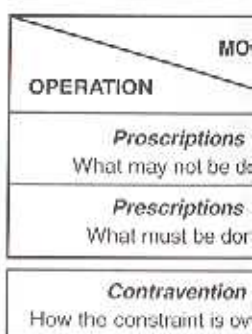


Figure 1. Types of Cultural Constraint

operation of the past as a constraint. Below, contrast the operations of constraint in German politics that understanding the two—as well as the Holocaust—is crucial for untangling German political culture through time.<sup>4</sup>

#### **HOLOCAUST MYTH, RATIONALITY IN GERMAN POLITICAL CULTURE**

Although the Holocaust is often seen as a theological moment, in its comprehension, it certainly mobilizes pressures on German politics, its moral ungraspability, and its power in German politics is not in vain. As we will see, both mythical

#### *Strategy and Morality in German Rehabilitation*

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the young Federal Republic entered many serious phases of reckoning with the Nazi past. In addition to physical devastation, C

<sup>4</sup> The following account is based on a qualitative survey and analysis of public opinion and statements by, government agencies concerning the Holocaust in West German history (our examples from that time are chosen for their value in illustrating about different kinds of c

OPERATION \ MODE	<i>Rational</i> Calculative, interested, exogenously caused, mundane, strategic	<i>Mythic</i> Moral, constitutive, endogenous, projective, definitional
<i>Proscriptions</i> What may not be done	(-) Prohibition	(-) Taboo
<i>Prescriptions</i> What must be done	(+) Requirement	(+) Duty/Obligation
<i>Contravention</i> How the constraint is overcome	(x) Refutation	(x) Transgression

Figure 1. Types of Cultural Constraint

operation of the past as *rational* and *mythic* constraint. Below, concrete examples illustrate the operations of the two types of constraint in German political culture. We argue that understanding the differences between the two—as well as their perpetual overlap—is crucial for untangling the complexities of German political culture as it is realized through time.<sup>4</sup>

#### HOLOCAUST MYTH AND RATIONALITY IN GERMAN POLITICAL CULTURE

Although the Holocaust is frequently viewed as a theological moment beyond all comprehension, it certainly makes demands and exerts pressures on German society; despite its moral ungraspability, its operation in German politics is not ineffable. The Holocaust exerts its power in German politics, as we will see, both mythically and rationally.

##### *Strategy and Morality in German Rehabilitation*

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the emerging Federal Republic of Germany encountered many serious problems deriving from the Nazi past. In addition to the pervasive physical devastation, Germans faced a moral

crisis of perhaps unprecedented proportions. Allied occupation forces confronted the defeated and destroyed German populace with the crimes it had supported, in settings including early forced tours of concentration camps, "reeducation" propaganda, and the trials of leading political and military figures at Nuremberg. All Germans in the Western zones of occupation who had been of legal age during the Nazi period were required to fill out questionnaires that were used as the basis for "denazification" proceedings. A "bad" classification was supposed to mean exclusion from all kinds of public service, although this system was viewed as a travesty by practically all sides (Brochhagen 1994; Friedrich 1994).<sup>5</sup>

Despite notorious cases in which former Nazis of various stripe managed to gain political power in the new government, Germany's new leaders had largely opposed the Nazis. A central feature of the new Federal Republic's political culture was its anti-Nazi stance, at least officially. The first major manifestation of this commitment was the Basic Law of the Federal Republic, which went into effect in September 1949. In the

<sup>4</sup> The following account is based on a systematic survey and analysis of all major issues for, and statements by, government incumbents and agencies concerning the Nazi past over 40 years of West German history (Olick 1993). We choose our examples from that more systematic study for their value in illustrating our conceptual argument about different kinds of cultural constraint.

<sup>5</sup> Many Germans regarded the entire process as capricious. "Big fish" often escaped punishment because the requirements for prosecution were stricter and the political pressures greater, while "small fish" were more easily given a "bad" classification. On the other hand, the system was widely corrupt, and many managed to arrange dubious exculpations. Furthermore, the Allied attitude toward German guilt changed dramatically as the cold war began; they saw a shift away from guilt as essential to winning Germans over to the West, and earlier policies of blame and punishment thereby became inexpedient.



words of constitutional historian Jürgen Seifert, "The Basic Law . . . manifests a rejection of the past. It was created as a bulwark that was supposed to make impossible what happened in Germany at the end of the Weimar Republic and after 1933" (Seifert 1989:40).

The Basic Law may be read as a *theory* of German history. Through both its form and its content it identified "causes" of the so-called "catastrophe" of the German past.<sup>6</sup> These included, most prominently, electoral provisions that had allowed for fragmentation at the political center, an inadequate federalism that had enabled a concentration of power, insufficient means to fight radicalism, and provisions on human rights expressed only toward the end of the older Weimar document. The Basic Law of the Federal Republic and subsequent legislation *solved* these problems *de jure*.

Indeed, the rhetoric of early leaders—especially that of the venerable Chancellor Konrad Adenauer—emphasized that these constitutional provisions rectified the problems that had allowed Germany to be "seduced" by "bands of criminals." This new constitution, Adenauer argued, combined with a more general commitment to "Western" values and institutions and with reparations to Israel (finalized in 1953), protected the new Germany from the problems of its past. These institutional and political-cultural reorientations established the Federal Republic of Germany as a "reliable nation," a central metaphor of the center-right government of the 1950s.

West Germany as a polity could not do certain things because of the Nazi past. At first, the Federal Republic could not have an army. When the Cold War began, the Allies moved quickly to rearm West Germany as a bulwark against the Soviets. Even with a new military, however, belligerence or anything but defensive operations within the territory of NATO (formed later) was strictly out of the question. As we will see, the complexities of

<sup>6</sup>The description of the Nazi years as a "catastrophe"—first popularized in an important essay by the renowned German historian Friedrich Meinecke (1950)—implies a natural disaster beyond human control that sweeps over a landscape. As such, it evokes inevitability rather than culpability.

a German military role became especially poignant in international conflicts in the early 1990s, specifically in debates over Germany's contribution to the Gulf War and to United Nations peacekeeping missions elsewhere.

In addition, knowledge of Nazi atrocities as well as the standards of the "community of nations" made anti-Semitism anathema to the new state. West Germany was constrained to support Israel unflinchingly, although frequently it did so only under various forms of duress or with substantial complaint (Deutschkron 1991; Feldman 1984; Wolffsohn 1988). Throughout the 1950s, West Germany worked hard to establish diplomatic relations with Israel, though Israel continually refused. Only after the Eichmann trial of 1961—in many respects a cathartic moment for Israel in accepting the Holocaust as part of its history (Segev 1993)—did a sufficient number of Israeli leaders feel ready for such "normal" relations with West Germany. By that time, however, West Germany was caught between two conflicting imperatives: its "special" responsibility to Israel (which led the Federal Republic to supply Israel secretly with weapons after 1960) and the so-called Hallstein doctrine (the principle that West Germany would not entertain relations with countries that recognized the existence of East Germany).

When the weapons deal between Israel and West Germany was discovered, Egypt sought to manipulate West Germany by threatening to recognize East Germany. Leaders of the Federal Republic pleaded with Arab diplomats to allow for Germany's "special" responsibility, but Egypt nonetheless invited East German leader Walter Ulbricht for a state visit. West Germany then announced its intention to establish formal diplomatic relations with Israel—Israel now wanted relations as a sign of support against Arab countries and viewed relations as Germany's moral obligation. Indeed, West German leaders justified the move overwhelmingly in moral terms rather than in the context of international brinkmanship that ultimately led to it; the move obviously involved elements of both.

Over the years, many academic and social programs also were made difficult by the presence of the past. Anthropology, for in-

stance, was tainted (roughly, "racialist") and could not even be discussed. The Nazis had used it especially concerning the extermination, have been in Germany than in other countries.

These constraints were not the same, however, as the same logics. Symbolic instrumental rationality, for all its material or ideal ends, is not constitutive and not subject to discussion altogether. In the Federal Republic, the pursuit of images of democratic presence, of regaining and creating institutional "remembrance" through historical performances, stood as rational as any. An issue such as reparations, can be explained in terms of five rationality.

On the one hand, the logic of such a gesture is not the same. Before had a state under the "voluntary" program of a preceding regime, the program had a moral dimension. Adenauer and other leaders were sure argued that so necessary, not only for the nation, but also for the nation's eyes. Adenauer realized when he claimed a moral obligation, even if we were to recognize Israel as a whole. The action's subsequent moral dimension can be explained entirely in terms of instrumental rationality through unanticipated consequences. Symbols take on a life of their own through unanticipated

<sup>7</sup>Although many historians (mostly detractors) argue that the Germans into this situation, among others, provided a moral basis, this was not the case. The gesture is still tainted and needs to be reestablished its place in the public sphere. The majority of the population did not approve of the plan, as was the case with Adenauer's cabinet.



stance, was tainted by Nazi *Rassenlehre* (roughly, "racial studies"); euthanasia could not even be discussed because of how the Nazis had used it; and medical ethics, especially concerning the rules of genetic experimentation, have been even more problematic in Germany than elsewhere over the last decades.

These constrained topics and activities are not the same, however, nor do they draw on the same logics. Sometimes they draw on instrumental rationality, aiming at either material or ideal ends; at other times they invoke constitutive and mythic foundations or evade discussion altogether. Early in the history of the Federal Republic, West German leaders pursued images of the Nazi past and the democratic present with the explicit purpose of regaining and expanding sovereignty. The institutional "remedies," as well as many rhetorical performances, may be easily understood as rational attempts to gain these ends. An issue such as reparations to Israel, for instance, can be explained in terms of calculative rationality.

On the one hand, the international weight of such a gesture is clear enough. Never before had a state undertaken such an extensive "voluntary" program to atone for the deeds of a preceding regime.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, the program had a clear moral dimension. Adenauer and other supporters of the measure argued that some such gesture was necessary, not only for cynical *raison d'état* but also for the nation's moral stature in its own eyes. Adenauer rarely failed to convince when he claimed a pedagogical purpose. But even if we were to characterize reparations to Israel as a wholly strategic maneuver, the action's subsequent life as a symbol cannot be explained entirely in terms of the instrumental rationality that might have brought it about. Symbols take on lives of their own through unanticipated consequences, un-

avoidable polysemy, and their subsequent power, which is irreducible to provenance. No matter how intensely disputed the plan had been at the time, later West German leaders referred to these reparations as a shining moment of German national rectitude.

In the presence of material restitution and institutional realignments (constitutional protections coupled with a vociferous commitment to "Western" values and security policies), leaders of the new state acted as if the concrete burdens of the Nazi period had been remedied. Indeed, the rhetoric of the 1950s is often surprisingly impudent. When occasion arose to address the Nazi past, Adenauer and his associates always emphasized that this was no longer a concern for Germany. Any other position, they argued, would imply an acknowledgment of collective guilt.<sup>8</sup> On occasions of anti-Semitic outbreaks, Adenauer belittled accusations that there were any serious anti-Semites in Germany.<sup>9</sup>

It is a long-standing commonplace of political commentary and contemporary historiography that the 1950s was a period of

<sup>7</sup> <sup>8</sup> Indeed, such an acknowledgment had been a major discussion point in negotiations over the *Wiedergutmachung* (reparations). Israeli leader David Ben-Gurion insisted on it as essential. Adenauer steadfastly refused (Deutschkron 1991).

<sup>9</sup> In response to attacks on the synagogue in Cologne and the general wave of anti-Semitic vandalism in the winter of 1958-1959, Adenauer spoke as follows in a special radio address delivered on January 16th, 1960: "To all of my German fellow citizens I say: If you catch a hoodlum anywhere, punish him on the spot and give him a sound thrashing. That is the punishment he has earned." Adenauer's point was that these attacks were the work of children and provided no insight into, or evidence of, genuine anti-Semitism. He went on to dismiss concerns abroad about the state of German society: "To our opponents abroad and doubters abroad I say, the unanimity of the entire German people in the condemnation of anti-Semitism and of National Socialism has shown itself in the most complete and strongest way imaginable. . . ." One assumes he is referring to solid rejection of extremist parties in elections. ". . . The German people has shown that these thoughts and tendencies have no foundation in it." In light of the events that spurred this statement, Adenauer's claims appear to be at least somewhat overconfident.

<sup>7</sup> Although many historians and commentators (mostly detractors) argue that the Allies forced the Germans into this move, Wolffsohn (1988), among others, provides convincing evidence that this was not the case. Nonetheless, the power of the gesture is still tangible for a state wishing to reestablish its place among "civilized" nations. The majority of the population, however, disapproved of the plan, as did a substantial portion of Adenauer's cabinet.



*The Mytho-Logics of Perpetration and Denial*

The framing of history is evident in a number of ways developed in regard to the past. Acknowledgments are prohibited in part, but they are incomplete; analysis of mythic structure, some of which by so-called "zero hour" structures produced countable practices.

In an extensive study of the Nazi period, Olick (1993) documents West German leaders' period. That study reveals: Of all the accounts of German "catastrophe" ism, insufficient support of the Weimar Republic, criminal usurpation, religious intolerance and obvious cause, anti-Semitism. This is the context of the speech to Bergen-Belsen. Inferred in public by We Semitism as racism, Christian-Jewish "rarely addressed as a lems. Indeed, its absence the avoidance can be

This avoidance of tism as racism, although instrumental elements, of a taboo about the years it has emerged ferent contexts, but tably consistent. In Semitism in the present

carried the guilt for the percent, in 1967 62 per

<sup>15</sup> An analogous observation in the literature on Nazism and anti-Semitism has been controversy over Daniel Goldhagen's book. Whatever the merits of the "Goldhagen controversy" find this lack of reference even more clear and than its absence in sch

avoidance and denial of the past (Greiffenhagen and Greiffenhagen 1993; Mitscherlich and Mitscherlich 1967).<sup>10</sup> Some of this behavior is clearly instrumental rationality: When the past makes one look bad (and thus restricts one's present possibilities), one emphasizes the present or the future. Much of this, however, extends to deeper issues involved with identity formation and the problematics of self-understanding.

For most people, the extent of Nazi inhumanity was sufficient reason to reject official anti-Semitism, but privately most Germans were preoccupied with their own difficult situations and losses, and old attachments died hard.<sup>11</sup> The degree of self-absorption and denial in the face of horrors "committed in the name of Germany" is, however, difficult to appreciate even given the circumstances.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, at this early point, there

<sup>10</sup> In recent years, some scholars have disagreed with this judgment. From the center, Weber and Steinbach (1984) argue that West Germany did an admirable job of prosecuting Nazi criminals within the rule of law and its strictures. From farther right, Lübke (1983) states that a certain degree of collective amnesia was essential for the legitimacy of the new state in the 1950s. Even more polemically, Kittel (1993) argues, contrary to the common view, that early West German leaders were overwhelmingly preoccupied with confronting the past, although he equates mentioning the past (even to deny it) with "mastering" it. Also see Moeller (1996).

<sup>11</sup> A 1947 survey in West Germany included the statement that national socialism was a good idea badly realized; 55 percent of the respondents agreed. In 1955, 48 percent of respondents agreed that without the war, Hitler would have been one of Germany's greatest statesmen (Klessmann 1987). As recently as 1995, when respondents to a poll were asked "Was the expulsion of the Germans from the East just as great a crime against humanity as the Holocaust against the Jews?" 36 percent of all Germans (40 percent of those over age 65) answered yes (Moeller 1996).

<sup>12</sup> In 1950 the German Jewish expatriate philosopher Hannah Arendt documented this phenomenon in the American Jewish magazine *Commentary*. She described the self-absorbed and defensive reactions she encountered when she revealed on a trip to Germany that she was a German Jew:

This is usually followed by a little embarrassed pause; and then comes—not a personal question, such as "Where did you go after you left Ger-

was a radical disjuncture in many respects between the abilities of the government and of the general population to "come to terms" with the Nazi period.<sup>13</sup> The government thought it had to be careful not to fall too far out of step with the people's attitudes. This is one reason Adenauer gave for rejecting theses of collective guilt: How could he gain the necessary domestic support for his new government if it loaded significant segments of the population with a burden of guilt, either legal or moral? One reason for denying collective guilt is that it was strategically a disadvantage; another is that it was an unacceptable proposition for an expertly equivocating and evasive population.

At any rate, the conditions of the Federal Republic's early years—some the result of predispositions and persistent cultural frames, some unintentional, and some the products of rational planning—set the rules of the game for memory and culture for the next half-century. The unwillingness to accept collective guilt was not simply a rational attempt to avoid burdens, but reflected Germans' inability to understand their own implication in what had happened. This is not to say that collective guilt is a philosophically defensible position; we believe it is not. Most people, however, did not reject it out of philosophical conviction; rather, there is widespread evidence that many German people—often obsessed with their own victimhood—could not even imagine why anyone should think that collective guilt was appropriate.<sup>14</sup>

many?"; no sign of sympathy, such as "What happened to your family?"—but a deluge of stories about how Germans have suffered (true enough, of course, but beside the point); and if the object of this little experiment happens to be educated and intelligent, he will proceed to draw up a balance between German suffering and the suffering of others. (Arendt 1950:345)

<sup>13</sup> The differences and the competition between official and vernacular memory form a central theme in social memory studies (see, for example, Bodnar 1992; Kammen 1991; Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991). On the problems of ordinary people confronting (that is, not confronting) the past, see Mitscherlich and Mitscherlich's (1967) famous argument that Germans after the war suffered a pathological "inability to mourn."

<sup>14</sup> In a 1951 survey, only 32 percent of the population answered that they thought Germany



*The Mytho-Logics of Identity:  
Perpetration and Denial*

The framing of historical obligations is quite evident in a number of proscriptions that developed in regard to the representation of the past. Acknowledgments of collective guilt are prohibited in part on rational grounds: but they are incomprehensible without an analysis of mythic structures in German culture, some of which bridged the divide of the so-called "zero hour" of 1945. These mythic structures produced instrumentally unaccountable practices.

In an extensive study of official representations of the Nazi past in West Germany, Olick (1993) documented the various ways West German leaders discussed the Nazi period. That study reveals a peculiar phenomenon: Of all the accounts of the causes of the German "catastrophe"—including extremism, insufficient support for the institutions of the Weimar Republic, economic pressures, criminal usurpation, unemployment, and religious intolerance among others—the most obvious cause, anti-Jewish racism, is rarely mentioned.<sup>15</sup> This is true regardless of the context of the speech—from the *Bundestag* to Bergen-Belsen. In all of the analyses offered in public by West German leaders, anti-Semitism as racism (rather than as simple Christian Jewish "misunderstanding") is rarely addressed as a cause of German problems. Indeed, its absence is so extensive that the avoidance can be said to be ritualistic.

This avoidance of mentioning anti-Semitism as racism, although it contains some instrumental elements, is an excellent example of a taboo about the German past. Over the years it has emerged in different ways in different contexts, but the avoidance is remarkably consistent. In the early years, anti-Semitism in the present was quite simply de-

carried the guilt for the war. In 1962, it was 53 percent, in 1967 62 percent (Klessmann 1987).

<sup>15</sup> An analogous observation that the scholarly literature on Nazism pays insufficient attention to anti-Semitism has been at the heart of the controversy over Daniel Goldhagen's (1996) recent book. Whatever the merits of the positions in the "Goldhagen controversy" (Schoeps 1996), we find this lack of reference in *political* discourse even more clear and certainly more important than its absence in scholarly discourse.

nied. The anti-Semitism of the past was portrayed as a minority view, an aberration, now eliminated, that did not warrant serious consideration in other than general terms. Anti-Semitism had been solved with human rights provisions, reparations, and an official philo-Semitism. Indeed, early leaders of the Federal Republic were remarkably pro-Israel. This was not simply the result of a wish to "make good": Visitors to Israel (at first unofficial and clandestine, later official and touristic) often reported that they were deeply impressed by what the Israelis had accomplished. In comments made after such trips, Israelis were valorized in terms previously reserved for the German "master race" (Olick 1993).

The mythic logic involved here is made even clearer by the reversals that occurred in the late 1960s. Until the Six Day War of 1967, the German left, as well as the center and the right, supported Israel unequivocally as the oppressed underdog. When Israel became an occupying force, however, many segments of the German left quickly and totally abandoned support for Israel, as if they had been suddenly freed from an unwanted burden.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, this is a common characterization of the so-called "sixty-eighters." In the late 1960s, the student left began to discuss and investigate the crimes of their parents' generation. Public discussion regarding the past was opened up. This process was not quite that simple, however: Such discussion was possible only because it fit with the younger generation's rejection of their parents' entire world.

Such vehement condemnation and general interest regarding the German past was possible only because the younger generation viewed itself as fundamentally different from the older generation and as unconnected to its crimes (Bude 1992; Klessmann 1987; Moeller 1996). Yet the burdens of that experience, whether acknowledged or repressed,

<sup>16</sup> Bude (1992) discusses the differences between Germany and other Western nations undergoing similar social transformations in this regard. In Germany, he argues antifascism (the accusation that present political and social organizations were continuous with earlier fascist forms) was decisive for the student movement; elsewhere it was only derivative or not even an issue.



had maintained the foundation for official philo-Semitism. The left of the late 1960s and early 1970s generalized the burdens of the past away from the specific debts understood by their parents, and apparently they seized upon the Six-Day War as an occasion to remove any special claims concerning Israel.

This delegitimation and the removal of special status for Israel and the debt to Jews are as strange as the shift from anti- to philo-Semitism in the early years of the Federal Republic. This second generation's confrontation with the Nazi past resulted in a generalized moral tone—one that challenged major aspects of the contemporary world in both Germany and elsewhere. In the process, the Holocaust and the specific debt to Jews that resulted became merely one debt among others borne by this newly "moral nation."

This peculiar way of dealing with collectivities is also related to the conceptual core of German identity. "Germanness" as a category of belonging is articulated in very different terms from French belonging—that is, as an ethnic rather than a civic category (Brubaker 1992). Immigrants can become French or American, but although they may obtain German citizenship, they will never be accepted as "really" German. In contrast, eastern Europeans who do not speak a word of German and have never been to Germany but who can demonstrate German lineage (sometimes, perversely, by presenting Nazi-era documentation) are automatically granted German citizenship.

Despite the importance of such absolute ethnic principles of belonging in German Romanticism as well as in Nazi racial policy, these principles remained potent even after the delegitimation of Nazi disregard for ethnic "others." We argue that the early shift from anti- to philo-Semitism is connected, in part, to this "primordial" principle of belonging. Identities are absolute; it is easier to change the evaluative prefix from *anti-* to *philo-* than to examine the principle and to discard its logic. For this reason, current debates about the status of immigrants have been especially stubborn. Many on the left have tried to play the Nazi card as a way to establish a prohibition against excluding or disregarding immigrants. They argue that awareness of the Nazis' persecution of racial "others" should prevent contemporary Ger-

many from enacting laws to restrict immigrants' rights to due process under the law. Yet, there has been relatively little willingness to question the basic distinctions. The proposals are formulated mostly as desired prohibitions, but the debate is constrained by taboos against acknowledging the situational origins of collective identities.<sup>17</sup>

There are clearly instrumental aspects to both the anti- to philo-Semitism shift and the unsuccessful attempt in the 1990s to prohibit constitutional changes concerning immigrants' rights. In the first case, a thoroughgoing examination of identity in the early years of the Republic—seemingly indicated by the unmentioned and unmentionable extremes of Nazi racism—might have called into question the significantly threatened unity of a German nation. Despite the rhetoric of European identity and its seeming refutation of nationalism, ethnocultural national identification remained an untouchable cultural principle, even when it produced bizarre results. In the case of immigration policy, the ability to exclude self-confidently depends on the absolute quality of the collective identity. Despite frequent arguments about the inability to manage economically in the face of huge numbers, the noninstrumental dimensions are clear in the resultant expressions of xenophobia and chauvinistic nationalism.

Another major proscription for German leaders regarding the Nazi past concerned attention to perpetrators. In the early years, leaders were careful not to be too specific about German perpetrators. This position fit with the argument that the blame lay with Hitler and his henchmen, with the understandable unwillingness of a government with implicated members to delve too deeply into personal responsibility, and with the desire not to alienate those who had played minor or major supporting roles, as mentioned above. Nonetheless, the issue of individual respon-

<sup>17</sup> The language frequently used by Chancellor Kohl illustrates this refusal to acknowledge the realities of international migration. Kohl intones repeatedly in the context of these debates that "Germany is no immigration country," though of course it has in fact always been such a country. In addition, Kohl often distinguishes between *Bürger* (citizens) and *Mitbürger* (approximately co-citizens).

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sibility was caught up in more complex "mytho-logics" (Apter 1985) of exculpation.

The very metaphors of political rhetoric reveal many Germans' desires to avoid facing their own possible forms of culpability, either individually or collectively. These rhetorical stratagems include the perverse absence of actors—passive formulations ("the crimes committed in Germany's name"); vague terms describing the period ("the conditions at that time," "what happened during those years," "the Hitler-time"); elliptical references to the details ("what happened," "the crimes that were committed"); and pervasive qualification ("others suffered, but so did Germans").<sup>18</sup>

#### *Taboos and Transgression Costs: The Jenninger Affair*

The strength of these taboos is revealed poignantly in their transgressions—rare occurrences. A vivid example is the speech delivered by *Bundestag* President Philipp Jenninger on November 10, 1988, during a special session of the *Bundestag* a day before the fiftieth anniversary of *Kristallnacht* (the pogrom against Jewish businesses and property that marked the beginning of the escalation of the crimes against the Jews). In his speech, Jenninger addressed the viewpoint of average Germans in 1933, when Hitler came to power. Apparently the delivery of the speech made it difficult to determine whether Jenninger was simply portraying how the situation might have seemed reasonable to average Germans at the time, or whether in fact he was saying that it *was* reasonable. During the speech, large numbers of deputies stormed out of the chamber in protest; in the days following, Jenninger—an extremely prominent and highly respected figure—was forced to resign.

When one reads Jenninger's speech in isolation it is difficult to detect the problem. He says nothing that had not been said before in other contexts, and certainly is not guilty of justifying Nazi policies, as he was accused. The problem was that in this speech, unlike in others delivered on similar occasions,

Jenninger spoke of the issues confronting *real* Germans living in the early 1930s. In doing so, he acknowledged officially that many real people had supported Hitler for a wide variety of reasons. His focus on how Hitler had made sense to some people violated the absolute demonization of Hitler, and focusing on German problems violated the long-standing avoidance of attention to ordinary people as supporters of the Third Reich. Furthermore, the occasion of the speech conventionally required gestures of atonement rather than serious introspection, especially not about German problems. It was not that nobody knew these things: rather even 40 years after the founding of the Republic, German guilt is a difficult topic—indeed, a clear example of a taboo in political culture.

#### *The Historians' Dispute: From Taboo to Prohibition*

In practice, one cannot easily distinguish between mythic and rational logics in political claim-making, partly because most moments include elements of both. Prohibitions and taboos, duties and requirements, are ideal types. Examples are drawn from the vastly complicated reality of changing political culture in which no claim is simple, no argument univalent, and no reference clearly bounded. Above, we attempted to convey how these two logics are involved and intertwined in concrete settings. Before drawing some general conclusions, we offer one further example: an elaborated debate over whether a particular set of proscriptions should be treated in practice as mythic or as rational. The "historians' dispute" of 1985–1986, we believe, is a perspicuous case in which public intellectuals tried to seize control of a freighted cultural field and to transform the logic considered appropriate to it. This dispute, we argue, is best understood as an attempt to transform a field of taboo into a field of prohibition, and thus to alter the status of the issues contained therein and the conditions under which such constraints can be overcome.

The historians' dispute was an exchange of articles in West Germany's major newspapers by a number of prominent historians and sociologists: it concerned the status of the Nazi

<sup>18</sup> For a more extensive analysis of this "grammar of exculpation," see Olick (1993) and Schirmer (1988).



past in German history and its implications for contemporary German identity.<sup>19</sup> On one side, the archconservative Ernst Nolte (1987) argued that Auschwitz (the concentration camp that has become the metonym for the Holocaust) involved no greater evil than had occurred in many other places, from Turkish Armenia to Stalin's gulags. Also, implying that the Nazis had defensive motivations, Nolte referred to a 1939 declaration by Chaim Weizmann (leader of the European Zionists) that Jews would sympathize with the British and to Nazi statements that the Soviets would commit "Asiatic deeds" against Germany. Nolte's arguments (published in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, one of Germany's leading daily newspapers) challenged the dominant orthodoxy of Holocaust interpretation, whereby the Holocaust was an event fundamentally different from all others in history and implied special burdens for Germany. Nolte's original formulations employed spurious evidence and were couched in an overtly inflammatory manner; other conservative historians—such as Andreas Hillgruber, Joachim Fest (editor of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*), and Michael Stürmer (a former advisor to West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl)—pursued more carefully the goal of alleviating the unique status of the Holocaust through comparison.

On the opposite side, philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas (among others) argued against this revisionism, which he saw both as an attempt to avoid collective responsibility through a misguided comparative historiography and as an expression of a wider-ranging neoconservative conspiracy (he used the term *conspiracy* to provoke) associated with the overall tenor of West German foreign and cultural policies since Kohl took office in 1982. Nolte's attempt to establish equivalences among the horrors of the twentieth century, Habermas (1987) argued, not only was factually misleading but obliterated moral differences. In crediting claims of defensive motivations for the "final solution," Nolte went even beyond making the Holocaust seem a "normal" part of political life;

he appeared to be justifying the logic that brought it about. Even aside from this latter, extreme position, the urge toward "normalization," the desire for a "normal nation," had been potent at least since Schmidt's comment in Saudi Arabia that German policy should no longer be "held hostage" to Auschwitz, and characterizes the entire period of West German cultural politics at least since 1982.

The historians' dispute generated a great deal of attention, both academic and public. The debate symbolically ended when President Richard von Weizsäcker delivered a speech to German historians in 1988 in which he indirectly supported most of Habermas's positions (*Bulletin of the Press and Information Bureau of the Federal Government*, #131, pp. 1185–88). He stated that Germany must face its historical responsibilities (though he used much of the traditional grammar of exculpation in his speech).<sup>20</sup>

How do we explain this event and the resonance of the issue both inside and outside Germany among intellectuals and politicians alike? The debate presented no new historical evidence, nor were any of the positions especially new. We argue that the debate was significant because it concerned the ontological status of the Holocaust as a cultural constraint in German politics and involved an attempt to alter that status for the widest public.

<sup>20</sup>This was not von Weizsäcker's first or most important utterance on the issue. Earlier he had delivered one of the most famous speeches of West German history to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of the end of the war on May 8, 1945. That commemorative moment had been caught up in the complications of the "Birgung affair" (Hartman 1986; Levkov 1987). Von Weizsäcker was praised by the overwhelming majority of listeners for calling on Germans to accept their "responsibility before history" without equivocation. That call was unusual in the context of recent discussions. Ten years earlier, however, President Walter Scheel had delivered a remarkably similar speech, which received almost no notice in a climate much less oriented toward relativization and final normalization. This last point makes clear the simultaneous path dependence and conjunctural specificity of collective memory: von Weizsäcker's speech depended on earlier commemorations for its language and themes, but its prominence depended on the moment.

<sup>19</sup>For texts of the debate, see Baldwin (1990) and the volume called *Historikerstreit* (1987) published by Piper. See Maier (1988) and Evans (1989) for intellectual histories.

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Nolte and his supporters never argued that the past should be "forgotten," however spurious their desired "contextualization" would have been. Rather, they challenged constitutive elements of German political orthodoxy by trying to minimize the power of the Holocaust as a cultural referent. In other words, they tried to transform the hold of the Holocaust from taboo to prohibition.

German political culture, as we have seen, is powerfully constrained by the dominant and heretofore unquestionable interpretation of the Holocaust as a special burden for Germany. This interpretation has required a particular rhetoric from German leaders and a ritualized politics of regret. The most basic legitimacy claims of West German leaders—for themselves, for their government, and for their people—always involve highly specific acknowledgments of the past (Olick 1993; Rabinbach 1988). These requirements are largely taken-for-granted, and their performance has a ritual quality. In addition, as we have seen, the image of the Holocaust is present in almost every moment of German politics, domestic and international. Leaders may have worked to minimize or avoid it, but these attempts usually have resulted in peculiar symptoms, ranging from discomfort to defensiveness. A violation of the Holocaust as taboo always evokes significant reaction and a struggle to cope with the transgression.

In the historians' dispute, however, the neoconservatives' achievement was to treat the dominant role of the Holocaust in German politics no longer as an unpleasant or unavoidable mythic feature, but as something open to rational challenge. Though they did not succeed in eliminating the Holocaust as a major referent for German political culture, they transformed it from a constraint that could only be obeyed or transgressed to one that could be investigated scientifically, debated rationally, and ultimately discussed much more easily. The neoconservative critics brought to the foreground the realm of interests that lies behind the absolute status of the Holocaust; thus they opened up the possibility of refutation, which is a less dangerous and ultimately less costly way to contravene it than transgression. Habermas may have won the debate, but the neoconservatives (as only a part of the wider political

culture of relativization at the time) have won the war—to make the legacy of the Holocaust a proposition rather than a taken-for-granted foundation. Taboos cannot be dealt with calmly; prohibitions can.

The neoconservatives' success is manifest in the comparative ease of subsequent commemorations, especially those held 10 years later on the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the war. Kohl's government has stepped back somewhat from its more aggressive attempts to displace the Nazi period from German identity. Yet the highly ritualized acknowledgments they now offer are so routinized that the issue no longer has the same potential for conflict as before (Moeller 1996): The Federal Republic has achieved "normalcy" with regard to its past, not without it.

In this way, the debates about immigration and the military of the late 1980s and early 1990s depended on that prior "rationalization" in the historians' dispute. In the context of the Gulf War, for instance, the hold of the German past was clearly delegitimized. If Germany made military or financial contributions to the international coalition against Iraq, it would be accused of belligerence—a dangerous image given its past. If Germany did not contribute, however, it would be accused of unreliability and irresponsibility. Subsequent debates over German participation in United Nations peacekeeping missions demonstrated as well that the German past created often unresolvable cross-pressures. The same is true of the immigration issue: The hold of the German past over the absolute right of asylum was seen to be irreconcilable with the high costs of economic refugees entering Germany in the late 1980s and 1990s.

The power of mythic constraints (taboos) of the German past in the face of present exigencies has thus often produced complicated turns in German public discourse and policy. The historians' dispute, however, paved the way for characterizing the hold of the past as illegitimately constraining—that is, as a veil that hides and delegitimizes strategic maneuvers. From this perspective, taboos are viewed as a way of concealing "real" power. Such a characterization, however, misses the nearly ubiquitous constitutive role of collective memory in political culture.



## CONCLUSIONS

Our goal in this paper has been to demonstrate that political cultures operate as historical systems of meaning—that is, as ordered but changing systems of claim-making—in which collective memory obliges the present (as prescription) and restricts it (as proscription) both mythically and rationally. Through an analysis of the Holocaust as a source of taboos and prohibitions (and of their positive correlates) in German politics, we have specified different ways in which social pasts interact with social presents to shape political action.

The relationship between remembered pasts and constructed presents is one of perpetual but differentiated constraint and renegotiation over time, rather than pure strategic invention in the present or fidelity to (or inability to escape from) a monolithic legacy. As regards the role of political culture in political life generally, exigency and commitment, interest and ideal—that is, myth and rationality—are not entirely independent logics. They are two sides of a coin, mutually constitutive and, at the limit, each nonsensical without the other.

At what point should or does a past pass away? The answer depends in part on how different images of the past appear in and constrain political presents. The conceptual distinction between different kinds of constraint helps us understand how rules of political claim-making can be transformed over time. The illustrations from different moments in West German history show that the impact of the Holocaust unfolds in changing constellations. The possibility of removing the Holocaust as a focus for Germany's self-understanding (and for the way Germany is perceived by others) is thus located in a contested terrain on which mythical and rational images of the past sometimes work together and sometimes do battle, but these images always shape identity and its transformation. The possibility and the style of such transformation depend on the kinds of constraint that are operating.

The effects of German unification and Germany's central role in the European Community will create (and already have created) new challenges to the way the past is remembered and how it works as collective memory.

These challenges, however, have a long and varied history: the accumulation and transformations of this history lie at the center of Germany's ongoing work to define who it is, what it can do, and what it should do. The analysis of political culture, as newly conceived, helps us to appreciate and untangle the complexities of that work, which involves a continuous negotiation between past and present. Collective memory is this negotiation, rather than pure constraint by, or contemporary strategic manipulation of, the past. In response to Helmut Schmidt, therefore, we may say that Germany is held hostage not by a taboo arising from Auschwitz but by the changing shapes of collective memory—the interplay of myth and rationality in shifting constellations—that give German political culture its particular character.

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