



Some Thoughts on German Identity

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- a 2105 graphic manipulation by the author

As more and more refugees and immigrants enter Germany, the nation is facing a number of existential questions. What does it mean to be German? Can Germany become a successful multi-cultural “salad bowl” in which a diverse populace lives together in harmony? Or should Germany seek to be more akin to a “melting pot” in which refugees and immigrants who wish to option citizenship are required to adopt a set of so-called “German cultural values”? And this option invites a deeper question: precisely what are “German cultural values”?

Recently I wrote a series of questions about this issue. Although this work does not proffer any answers, at least it raises some questions that are worth considering.

What's it mean to be German?

Must I speak the language of Goethe
or enjoy Wagner and Bach?

Should I sing "Einigkeit und Recht und Freiheit" with fervor
or feel ecstatic when the National Football Team wins?

Must I believe that spanferkel and sauerkraut are mouth-watering
or that beer is humanity's best invention to date?

Should I confront the word "holocaust" personally
or believe that "European integration" is a matter of fate?

Must I understand why November 9th is important
or be familiar with all sixteen federal states?

Should I feel that Caspar David Friedrich is on par with Raphael
& have loads of ideas about Dr. Caligari?

Could I be indifferent to all of these?
How much knowledge is required of me?

The questions raised in this work are certainly not unique to Germany. As "North-South" income disparities continue to widen, and conflicts engulf many parts of Northern Africa and the Middle East, more and more people are leaving their homelands to in the hope of finding better lives. Whereas some countries such as Sweden, Germany, and the United States have rather liberal immigration policies, others such as mainland China, Japan, and Korea have immigration policies that are more conservative. According to a 2014 Bloomberg report, Germany accepts more immigrants annually than any other country except the United States. In 2013 Germany legally accepted 606,800 non-German refugees and immigrants and currently perhaps only 80% of the German population is ethnically German. The number of persons entering the country illegally is difficult to ascertain: in 2014 some 57,000 illegal visitors were arrested within Germany. Not surprisingly, this has sparked many conflicts.

Historically, waves of immigration have occurred across Europe for centuries as a consequence of war, famine, and population pressures. Today many people are asking, "Can liberal secularism, which is a dominant force in Western Europe, peacefully co-exist with fundamentalist Islam or indeed with any fundamentalist faith?" The answer to that remains unclear, but the numbers of refugees and immigrants seem likely to increase for the foreseeable future.

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