



Jens Schneider. *Deutsch Sein: Das Eigene, das Fremde und die Vergangenheit im Selbstbild des vereinten Deutschland.* Frankfurt and New York: Campus Verlag, 2001. 371 pp. EUR 34.90 (paper), ISBN 978-3-593-36757-6.



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What is German, and who are the Germans? These questions have been posed since at least the end of the first century C.E., when Tacitus composed his study of *Germania*. If one detects a certain urgency in how these questions are asked today, it is primarily attributable to two sets of recent events and trends: the re-unification of Germany, and the “hollowing out” of the German nation-state by globalization and the European Union. Now as in the first century, answers to questions about German identity frequently have had more to do with the personal preoccupations of authors, than with empirical research. Modern scholarly studies of “Germanness” abound, however, and they have tended—as Jens Schneider notes—to search for answers in everything from history to statistics.

Schneider, in *Deutsch sein*, seeks to make sense of German identity following a tradition inspired by Tacitus, namely ethnology. Invoking the works of Benedict Anderson (“imagined communities”) and the ethno-psychoanalyst George Devereux, Schneider wishes to embark on an investigation into the ways in which Germans and foreigners name and perceive not only one another, but also the very analytical categories of “German” and “foreign,” self and other. In this, however, he is only partly successful, owing mostly to the fact that his laudable research ambitions outreach his empirical evidence.

Schneider’s book is divided into three basic sections. The first part is a discussion of the ways in which some historians and ethnographers inside and outside Germany have written about German self-perceptions and identities. In particular, he explores central works by Gordon Craig, Norbert Elias, Robert Lowie, Diana Forsythe, and John Borneman, in an effort to see how German and foreign academics have represented “being German” as a trope. This is by far the weakest part of Schneider’s study. While all of the authors he examines might be loosely referred to as ethnologists, it is never entirely clear why he singles out these particular authors for scrutiny. One could equally have considered for closer examination (and he does make mention of some of them) the likes of Timothy Garton Ash, Hermann Bausinger, Daphne Berdahl, Ralf Dahrendorf, Wolfgang Engler, Gabriele Goettle, or Uli Linke. Indeed, German and American ethnologists and ethnographers hardly offer a representative cross-section of or a methodological prototype for scholarly research about German self-images. It is equally disappointing that no consistent connections are made between Schneider’s finding in this section and his findings in the chapters that follow. This leaves unaddressed an important question that goes to the heart of Schneider’s book: are there ways in which “outsider” views of German identity have informed “indigenous” German views and vice versa? It would appear

so—and some of Schneider’s findings in Chapter Four seem to show as much—if one looks to German academic scholarship and mass consumerism following World War II, and notes just how porous, how open to international influences, the German social sciences, humanities, and popular culture have been.

The second, and by far the longest, section of Schneider’s book looks at how certain Germans and some foreigners living in Germany articulate their sense of German belonging. For this, Schneider interviewed thirty-five subjects who are part of the German “babyboom” generation (born between 1959 and 1967, though the birthdates of his interviewees range from 1957 to 1970), live in Berlin, and are employed in politics, the mass media, or the arts and culture. He justifies his choice of this rather peculiar group, whom he deems the “Wall Generation,” for investigation primarily on two grounds: their relative historical distance from the political events associated with Nazism, on the one hand, and 1968, on the other; and the prominent, even pivotal, role they play in the production of “public opinion” in contemporary Germany. Having identified this group, Schneider attempted to maintain a relatively even distribution of men and women, eastern and western Germans, and political affiliations among his interview subjects. In addition, he insisted that all his subjects have some kind of considerable “Fremdheitserfahrung,” which he operationalized as having lived abroad for more than two to three months, having themselves been “foreign” in Germany, or having close contact with “foreigners” in Germany. He then carried out the lion’s share of his interviews from April 1995 to November 1996, using a standard set of open-ended questions and then discursively analyzing the categories, oppositions, and narrative forms of the responses of his subjects.

While it is difficult to neatly summarize the findings of qualitative studies such as this, Schneider finds a number of prominent trends. He confirms that babyboomers, particularly younger ones and those from the former East Germany, feel emotionally distant from the attitudes of the 1968 generation. Perceiving themselves to be less political and more pragmatic than the youth of the sixties, the babyboom cohort, not surprisingly, tend to be far less attached to those issues that dominated public life in the 1960s. 1989, not 1968, tends to occupy the most prominent place in their collective memories of political life (this is especially true for eastern Germans).

In a way, Schneider’s Germans are strikingly familiar to anyone acquainted with modern German social his-

tory or Georg Simmel’s sociological studies of Berlin at the turn of the century. For the most part, his interviewees struck me as rather parochial, in the descriptive sense of the term. For example, most are intimately attached to “local” communities (family, neighborhood, city); concerned that familiar ways of life be maintained; cognizant of, yet also more than a little sensitive to, stereotypes about German discipline, punctuality, and *Ausländerfeindlichkeit*; and wavering between detachment and anxiety vis-a-vis things and people foreign. This is most evident in how those interviewed by Schneider tended to talk about the distinction between Germans and various kinds of foreigners. Despite the fact that most of them expressly dismissed equating national belonging with descent (*Abstammungsprinzip*), interviewees more or less consistently appealed to essentialist notions to explain difference. Even those voicing sympathy with the project of multiculturalism tended to express differences between Germans and others as a function of relatively fixed, stable, and reified “cultures” that could be placed on a scale of familiarity relative to the default setting of “German.” Thus, while none of Schneider’s subjects wished to associate themselves with opposing pluralism and inclusion, most all frowned upon the mixing of German and foreign (and by extension Germans and foreigners?). “Die Gemeinsamkeit von Linken und Konservativen in der Untersuchungsgruppe,” Schneider notes, “liegt in der Betonung des *Nebeneinander* und der kulturellen Differenz” (p. 227).

In Schneider’s view, these dispositions have found their intellectual articulation in the rise of a new wave of conservative attacks on the ethos of the 1960s. By way of example, he examines, in the final part of his book, the controversy surrounding Botho Strauss’s essay “Anschwellender Bockgesang,” published in *Der Spiegel* in February 1993. Strauss’s commentary was, among other things, a broad indictment of a de-mystifying cultural decadence he perceived in popular culture and the media in the Federal Republic. The essay’s most striking feature, however, was the way in which Strauss linked the youth movement of the sixties with Nazism and right-wing radicalism, seeing them driven by a common desire to destroy taboos and ultimately leading to “vatermoerderische Aufwallung.” Schneider sees in Strauss, and in those who either directly or indirectly defended him (among others, Schneider cites Hans Magnus Enzensberger and Martin Walser), the emergence of a new kind of “conservative diction”—embracing a naturalistic nationalism, rejecting the ideal of a multi-ethnic society, and critical of the “over-emphasis” of the Nazi past

in public discourse—that appears to be making inroads within the babyboomer generation.

The material in these two sections, which constitute the heart of Schneider's monograph, raises more questions than it answers. If one detects a persistence of *Kleinbuergerlichkeit* and essentializing attitudes about ethnicity among contemporary German babyboomers, how reflective of German sensibilities is this? As the novelist Walter Abish put it, how German is it?[1] Despite the best intentions and efforts of postmodern intellectuals, chauvinistic and essentialist explanations of difference remain alive and well, not only in Germany, but throughout the western world.[2] To be sure, there may be an historically specific form of parochialism that stamps contemporary German understandings of self and otherness, but without comparing the forms of classification of Schneider's informants and neo-conservative German public intellectuals with those of others outside Germany, it is impossible to label anything here as peculiarly German. Moreover, comparisons and contrasts need to be drawn between Germans as well. To what degree are the attitudes of Schneider's thirty-five babyboomers or Botho Strauss consistent with those of their fellow Germans and permanent residents? Curiously, Schneider never relates his findings to the vast social scientific survey research on changing values in Germany and the world.[3] This omission is all the more glaring, since many of his western German informants often invoke the very language and values of post-materialism (expectations of a high standard of living, security, freedom of personal development) when comparing themselves with "Ossis" and foreigners. Relating his data, derived from an interpretive social scientific approach, to that of quantitative social scientists concerned with similar issues might well have allowed Schneider to see behind the veneer of similar sounding rhetorics—and in the

process, discover the extent to which babyboomers might well feel as emotionally distant from the critics, as they do from the supporters, of the 1968 generation.

Notes:

[1]. Walter Abish, *How German is it (Wie deutsch ist es)?* (New York: Norton, 1980).

[2]. For instance, surveys have consistently found that, since 1945, most individuals consider the mentally ill to be essentially and qualitatively different from ostensibly normal people, despite the widespread view among clinicians that mental health and mental illness lie on a continuum. See Ulrike Hoffmann-Richter, *Psychiatrie in der Zeitung: Urteile und Vorurteile* (Bonn: Edition Das Narrenschiff, 2000).

[3]. See, for instance, Ronald Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization: Cultural, Economic, and Political Change in Forty-Three Societies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); and Heiner Meulemann, *Werte und Wertewandel: Zur Identitaet einer geteilten und wieder vereinten Nation* (Weinheim and Munich: Juventa, 1996). The literature on re-unification and its aftermath alone is vast. For a regularly updated bibliography online, see "The Bibliography of German Unity" at <www.wiedervereinigung.de>. As of March 2003, the bibliography, first made available online in 1999, had some 44,000 citations, and it continues to grow.

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