

GERMAN LEFTISTS COME TO GRIPS WITH THE PAST<sup>1</sup>.  
A CASE STUDY

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Abstract - The articles analyzed in this paper reflect a turning point in the evolution of German radicalism. For the first time, leftists doubt publicly the very foundations of their ideology - the concepts of fascism and racism - as a possible key for understanding Nazism. They discover their own 'negation of history', after having criticized that of their fathers, and react with a massive 'anti-Jewish impulse', revealing thus some of the mechanisms of left-wing antisemitism.

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For the Germans of the Federal Republic<sup>2</sup>, the problem of integrating the memory of the Nazi era within collective self-perception remains an open and recurrently acute issue. Since the early 1980s, a series of public debates has taken place, which seems to indicate a significant transformation of German historical consciousness regarding Nazism. Two contradictory tendencies have emerged in this process of transformation, neither of which seems to indicate what the dominant representation of the Nazi era will be in Germany, once this epoch shifts entirely from the domain of individual to that of collective memory.

On the one hand, a 'yearning for normality' is perceptible at all levels of West German society, especially within the younger generation; there is a wish to draw a *Schlußstrich*, a 'final line' over the constant recollection of Nazism. On the other hand, the past has returned more intensely than ever during the recent debates, and the very tendency implied by the 'yearning for normality' to deny its absolute specificity has created, within some limited but influential circles, a new awareness of its uniqueness. Thus, the Bitburg ceremony in 1985 was supposed to be the expression of some kind of general reconciliation with history. In fact, it was to unleash passionate statements from all sides of the Federal Republic about the significance of the Nazi past for present German identity; statements which had a 'trigger action' for all subsequent debates. Then came the Fassbinder affair, which turned into another major controversy about present and past. A controversy about the building of historical museums in Berlin and Bonn and of a war memorial for the dead of the Second World War, also in Bonn, took place at the same time.

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<sup>2</sup> The terms 'Federal Republic' and 'West Germany' are retained in this article, despite the recent unification with East Germany, in order to reflect the specific confrontations with the Nazi past which have engaged the left there, as opposed to the East.

Finally, the *Historikerstreit* crystallized most of the current trends of opinion, mainly on an academic level.

A recurrent theme in all these controversies is the need for a new national identity in West Germany. It is shared by all political tendencies, as the search started on the left, in the late seventies, and was then taken over by the conservative-liberal wing, after the *Wende* (turning point) of 1982. For such a new identity, the reworking of the significance for German history as a whole of what was accepted until now to be the major event of the Nazi era, i.e. the extermination of the Jews, is essential, because, since the end of the war, Auschwitz has become a reference not only for State criminality, but for evil as such in all western societies. Indeed, many Germans seem to be caught in an intractable predicament: the Nazi past is too massive to be forgotten, and too repellent to be integrated into the normal narrative of memory.

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Memory - be it that of the individual or that of the group - is the construction of a coherent and significant representation of past events. If, for one reason or another, such a construction is impossible, the conscience of the memorizing subject or group will try to find strategies permitting nevertheless the idea of a continuity, be it a twisted one; because, without such a continuity, i.e. without links between the present and the past, no history, and, consequently, no identity is possible.

The concept of strategy is a military term. It denotes a situation of antagonism and can be defined as the sum of tactics unifying the behavior of one or more people in the striving for victory. By employing the term 'memory strategies', we indicate that there is a conflict between the person who remembers and the thing (or the set of things) to be remembered, and that this conflict can be resolved in several ways, implying gains and losses. These gains and losses have a direct impact on

the character of memory itself and an indirect one on the entire identity of the remembering subject or group.

There are, of course, all kinds of memory strategies, ranging from amnesia to embellishment, or the falsification, of the past. In this article, we shall try to describe some of them by analyzing several autobiographical sketches written by German radical intellectuals.

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'Deutsche, Linke, Juden' (Germans, Leftists, Jews), was the special issue to which the Berlin left-wing journal *Ästhetik und Kommunikation* devoted its edition of June 1983.<sup>3</sup> This publication, and the controversy it generated, as one of the main contributions of German radicals to the general discussion of these years about the impact of the Nazi past on present day life. The Berlin quarterly was highly regarded in these years even by its political adversaries, and this in spite of its small circulation. It was directed by a team without a chief editor, thus realizing, even fifteen years after the 1968 student movement, the radicals' imperatives of cooperation and collectivization. None of the members of the editorial staff could be considered as the spokesman of the journal, but *Ästhetik und Kommunikation* as a whole was known to be a major organ of German radicalism. In 1983, one year after the political swing to the right, radicalism, as the whole German left-wing, was in crisis and looking for new models of identification.

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<sup>3</sup> *Deutsche, Linke, Juden, Ästhetik und Kommunikation, number 51 (June 1983); and the subsequent discussion in number 52 (September 1983), pp. 115-130, and number 53/54 (December 1983), pp. 242-256.*

The title of the special issue, 'Germans, Leftists, Jews', is somewhat misleading because Jews, as far as their own specific fate is concerned, play virtually no role in the different articles. The real subject is the relationship of German leftists to the Nazi past, German guilt and responsibility, the generational conflict and the above mentioned search of the left for national identification. The particular significance of the Berlin journal resides in the fact that, for the first time, German Leftists doubted publicly the very foundations of their ideology - the concepts of fascism and racism - as a possible key for understanding Nazism. The controversy which the special issue generated hints at the importance of the matter: never before in its history had *Ästhetik und Kommunikation* been acknowledged to such a degree by the mass media, the press and a wider public. Not only that, the numerous readers' responses gave material for two more issues of the journal. There was instant reaction in the whole German press and even a television debate between Eberhard Knödler-Bunte, one of the journal's editors, and Henryk Broder and Cilly Kugelmann representing the Frankfurt 'Jewish Group'. As the editors remarked: "Never in the past fourteen years has an issue of *Ästhetik und Kommunikation* been so bitterly criticized, not even during the factional disputes in the aftermath of the student revolt."

The June number of the Berlin quarterly consists of four autobiographical essays by German intellectuals, two articles on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, mostly in regard to Dietrich Wetzel's book *Die Verlängerung von Geschichte: Deutsche, Juden und der Palästina-Konflikt*,<sup>4</sup> and two interviews with prominent Jewish emigré women social scientists now living in Great Britain, Maria Jahoda and Eva Reichmann. Our analysis will be limited to the German contributions, which have a coherence in themselves and were at the center of the controversy. All of them are radically subjective

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<sup>4</sup> D. Wetzel ed., *Die Verlängerung von Geschichte: Deutsche, Juden und der Palästina-Konflikt* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Neue Kritik, 1983).

and break a sort of taboo. The feelings toward the Nazi past, and, especially, towards the heritage of the Holocaust and towards Jews and Judaism today, that are described in these sketches, prove to be far more complex and ambivalent than the main articles of their authors' ideology would allow one to imagine.

The difficulty of the subject, as well as that of the personal approach adopted by the authors, was realized by the editorial board as soon as the theme had been chosen. One staff member objected: "There are actually many more important things to talk about than just Jews!", and immediately they found themselves "quarreling bitterly until late into the night."<sup>5</sup> The editorial preface describes the evening as follows:

"We read everything about the subject that could be found on the bookshelves and we mobilized fragments of recollections that were buried in our biographies. During these moments of helplessness in our working group, despite impulses which had not been worked through, we had come much closer to each other than ever before. In the course of the discussions we understood that we were talking about the traumata our parents had bequeathed to us and which we had only covered with our new left concepts. Nothing had yet been clarified, neither our relationship to German History nor our own contradictions."<sup>6</sup>

Even during their elaboration, the articles published by *Ästhetik und Kommunikation* caused strong reactions among the friends and the families of the authors. One of them had to utilize a pseudonym in order not to endanger the recent dialogue he had managed to establish with his father.

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<sup>5</sup> 'Redaktionelle Vorbemerkung', *Ästhetik und Kommunikation*, *op. cit.*, p. 4. 4. *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

Friendships were broken up because of this or that sentence. The editors continue:

"These difficulties are part of the subject, but today they seem to become easier to discuss with our parents as well as amongst ourselves. (. . .) We have become aware of the fact that many things have not yet been dealt with and continue to exist as a blind stain or as a scar. If we don't want this History to continue *ad infinitum* by itself or to be treated in our place by German Jewish intellectuals, we have to learn to speak about it publicly."<sup>7</sup>

Thus the starting point and common denominator of all the articles is the *silence* which surrounded the Holocaust in Germany during the fifties and the sixties. This silence was, of course, initiated by the generation of its immediate contemporaries, but the question now asked by the authors of *Ästhetik und Kommunikation* is a serious one: had they not, although they were certainly the most politically self-conscious generation of Germans since 1945, extended it at least in this domain? Silence often alludes to something one has not come to terms with, and their own silence, the fact that, to their own surprise, they did not possess a discourse that dealt with the event *in its specificity*, made them understand that, in a way, they were deprived of its comprehension. For the very first time, German leftists had come to look upon the Holocaust as living history, and not as a closed chapter of the European fascist past. They suddenly perceived that the unsolved problems of the past obstructed the way to the present. However their reaction to this discovery was ambivalent. On the one hand they felt that they lacked something essential, and in this respect, their response was self-conscious; on the other hand, why did they argue that they did not want

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

to leave to 'German Jewish intellectuals' the privilege to talk about the past? This remark can be understood only through the background of the historical situation at the beginning of the eighties, when the radicals' positions towards Jews and Judaism once again changed.

From several points of view, the history of the relationship of German radicalism to Judaism is a tragic one. To a large extent it has been determined from the outside and has finally resulted in the failure of the New Left to seize its historical chance of becoming a moral authority in respect to the problem of German debt in History. The positions of the Leftists should often be seen as mere reactions to the political climate prevailing in West-Germany during the first decades after the war, which can be summarized as follows. Until the Six Day War, the official attitude in the German Federal Republic towards the fate of the Jews was characterized by public philosemitism and a cool relationship with Israel. It was dominated by a discourse attempting to "expiate" the faults of the past by financial reparations. During the 1960s, the student movement started to criticize the hypocrisy of an attitude which believed that one could pay for silence and a good conscience. The students started to reject the blackout of history that characterized the underside of the official *Wiedergutmachung*.<sup>8</sup> Yet, in a dialectical movement that never escapes its own logic, and the dynamics of which will become clearer with the analysis of the articles mentioned above, they themselves did not succeed in breaking the silence and facing the event, but only in eluding it through abstract theories regarding fascism and racism. With the 1967 Arab-Israeli war the situation became even more complex due to the fact that the German conservatives embraced Israeli military success and identified with it, thus causing the radicals to see Israel as the imperialist aggressor and the Palestinians as the heroic victims. An unconscious



stratagem aiming at alleviating an inherited feeling of guilt made them call the Palestinians the 'Jews', an expression which was to generate a long series of comparisons culminating eventually in the Nazi methods of the Israelis in the occupied territories' and the like. These verbal excesses, and the obvious lack of historical insight they implied, provoked the protest and the estrangement of some radical Jewish intellectuals, who belonged to the student movement veterans. The debate that arose from the broadcast of the television drama 'Holocaust' in January 1979 led eventually to the formation of a 'Jewish group' of intellectuals who publicly defended their points of view, converging neither with those of the right, which they did not belong to ideologically, nor with those of the left, as far as the Israeli-Arab conflict, antisemitism, the Holocaust etc. were concerned. When, in 1979, Broder and Lang's collection of essays *Fremd im eigenen Land*<sup>9</sup> and, one year later, Lea Fleischmann's *Dies ist nicht mein Land*<sup>10</sup> appeared, many German leftists discovered with stupefaction that they had apparently ignored some essential components of their friends' identities. Both Broder and Fleischmann emigrated to Israel while openly condemning their former political co-fighters for insensitivity to the fate of the Jews, a charge that Lea Fleischmann summed up in the old German dictum: 'Der Apfel fällt nicht weit vom Stamm.'<sup>11</sup> The tension this accusation created, and the dissensions it caused among German radicals, grew even stronger during the Lebanon war when one faction attacked the Israeli policy so violently as a new 'Holocaust', that some of the Left wing intellectuals felt embarrassed. In 1983, the collection of essays *Die*

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<sup>8</sup> Literally, 'making up for', 'repair', with the idea of reconciliation and atonement. This ambiguous expression is the official German term for the financial reparations to Holocaust victims

<sup>9</sup> . H. Broder and M. R. Lang, eds, *Fremd in eigenen Land* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1979).

<sup>10</sup> . L. Fleischmann, *Dies ist nicht mein Land* (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1980).

<sup>11</sup> Literally, 'the apple does not fall far from the tree', which is meant to insinuate that children have often the same faults as their parents.

*Verlängerung von Geschichte*<sup>12</sup> (the extension of history) demonstrated how useless the traditional Left wing concepts were in understanding the implications and whereabouts of the Israeli-Arab conflict. It also criticized vividly the often vulgar antisemitic propaganda of pro-Palestinian positions adopted by German radicals. This book became the main reference of the authors of *Ästhetik und Kommunikation* who needed, as they admitted, "help from outside"<sup>13</sup>. What did they need help for? To answer this question, we shall now examine the autobiographical sketches a little more closely.

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A quick glance at the titles of the articles is in itself illuminating: "Interim report. In Search of an Uninhibited Approach"; "Affected By What? By the Jewish Trauma? By Our Parents' Traumata?"; "Making a Rough Copy"; "Extension of the Silence".<sup>14</sup> All these titles reveal the awareness of an inhibition. Such silence surrounds the subject that it seems to imply a mysterious "impurity"- a concept to which we shall return. The authors feel much more "affected" by this impediment to a natural approach to history than by the facts that caused it, as we are soon going to see.

*Affected By What?* is really the very question that arises after a first reading of the articles. There is much emotion, some sincerity but, if one

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<sup>12</sup> D. Wetzel ed., *Die Verlängerung von Geschichte*, op. cit.

<sup>13</sup> *Ästhetik und Kommunikation*, no. 51, op. cit., p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> R. Ebel, 'Zwischenbericht. Auf der Suche nach Unbefangenheit', pp. 17-23; O. Münzberg, 'Wovon berührt? Vom Jüdischen Trauma? Von den Traumata der Eltern?', pp. 24-26; D. HoffmannAxthelm, 'Ins Unreine geschrieben', pp. 27-32. Play of words with the metaphor clean/unclean, pure/impure, which are the same word in German (rein), suggesting the idea that writing about the German-Jewish relations always implies some impurity; E. Knödler-Bunte, 'Verlängerung des Schweigens', pp. 33-47. All articles in *Ästhetik und Kommunikation*, no. 51 (June 1983).

takes into account the fact that all the authors are intellectuals, there is very little historical knowledge and not much desire to be better informed. This is particularly striking as soon as the authors talk about the Jews. Their perception of them remains confused and disfigured by resentment towards their status of victims. Jews are acceptable as long as they are faceless - the abstract result of an absolute crime, but not as a living community with their own culture and history and with their complexities and contradictions. As Eberhard Knödler-Bunte admits: "Jews did not appear in our history - not even as strangers or enemies."<sup>15</sup> And, more precisely:

"At this time I was already 18 years old and politically active. But our knowledge of Jews was incredibly poor. I had only heard that Jews are circumcised and have strange laws concerning the eating of meat and the respect of the Sabbath. Most of my information stemmed from the Bible lectures of our religious instruction. My parents had told me only that a terrible sin had been committed against the Jews, and the parson attributed this to the treachery to our Lord Jesus. That was all one could get in a small town in Württemberg during the fifties and there was no good reason to ask more questions about Jews. But one could feel an aura of secrecy and allusion surrounding the subject very much in the same way as it surrounded the subject of sexuality. Maybe it was because of this similarity of taboo that Jewish matters became, for me, an exotic and sexually loaded secret."<sup>16</sup>

When, by the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s, the authors of *Ästhetik und Kommunikation* acquired as adolescents a more detailed knowledge of the Holocaust, this did not motivate them to learn more about Jews. In a way, the discovery of Auschwitz did not leave room for any kind of life. It was an *absolutum* consisting of total destruction, including even the victims' memory, their very identity:

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<sup>15</sup> Knödler-Bunte, p. 41.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

"I cannot associate the hairs of Auschwitz and pictures of Jewish holidays. Since that time, two Jewish Communities exist in my imagination: an Orthodox or Liberal one, which was mainly a living, warm human community, and another, consisting of nameless victims, and both are held together only by the perfect murder of the Nazis."<sup>17</sup>

Thus the distancing from their own particular history has led many German radicals to distance themselves as well from the concrete history of the victims. As Dan Diner put it: "Because the German leftist no longer wanted to be a German in light of the pre-existing collective history, the Jew was also to be relieved of his particular history and identity."<sup>18</sup> But it was not only Jewish history that was to be eradicated: the abstraction and generalization of Left wing ideology was so radical that it did not even admit the concrete experience of suffering, and one of the main achievements of the Berlin publication consists of the fact that its authors eventually became aware of the pitfalls of abstraction. Knödler-Bunte confesses:

"For a long time I avoided concrete suffering. I did not go to visit concentration camps, I saw no expositions about the destruction of the Jews, no films about the deportations and the gassings. (...) I wanted the Holocaust to remain abstract - an absolute date for a morality which pardons nothing and which protects itself against all temptations."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ebel, 'Zwischenbericht . . .', op. cit. pp. 19-20.

<sup>18</sup> D. Diner, 'Fragments of an Uncompleted Journey: On Jewish Socialization and Political Identity in West Germany', *New German Critique*, vol. 20 (Spring/Summer 1980), p. 67.

<sup>19</sup> Knödler-Bunte, 'Verlängerung . . .', op. cit., p. 44.

As a matter of fact, the temptations were not missing. There was, in the whole postwar generation, a strong desire to escape the Nazi heritage and not to cope with the history of the Holocaust. Nevertheless the most sensitive felt that this was impossible, that they were trapped in their own national identity which implied an incomprehensible guilt. When they traveled abroad they were looked upon as Germans and, sometimes, even made responsible for what had happened. They had to explain what they could not explain to themselves and reacted with revulsion and repudiation of their parents' generation on the one hand, and with resentment towards the victims on the other. The image of the Jews was soiled by the atrocities committed against them:

"There was something uncanny, something terrifying about the feelings I associated with the Jews. It was not due to them themselves, but to what had been done to them and which one could no longer dissociate from them. They were the victims and, as such, part of our bad conscience."<sup>20</sup>

This bad conscience made them wish that the dead should remain dead. The discovery of the 'extension of history' is a recent one. It belongs to the eighties, not to the sixties. In the sixties, the student movement seemed, at first, to resolve all the problems. It provided the handy concepts of fascism and racism, which allowed the leftists to dismiss the problems of Nazism and antisemitism, and the keywords of capitalism, imperialism and colonialism supplied a global explanatory framework for world history. With the Six Day War, there was suddenly the possibility of considering the Jews no longer as the victims, but as the persecutors, and this was an excellent outlet for the paradoxical resentments the Berlin authors had felt, but not yet formulated:

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<sup>20</sup> Ebel, 'Zwischenbericht...', op. cit., p. 18.

"The Jews had been *revived* as Israelis, and now they made a vulgar imperialistic policy that gave no possibility for identification, but also no starting-point for guilt feelings. They made a policy that was their business, not mine."<sup>21</sup>

The psychological mechanism described here is well known: after identification, rejection, both of them on an emotional, not a rational level. What is new in these confessions is the admission of anger which this situation had produced within the 'second generation'. Knödler-Bunte calls it 'the anti-Jewish impulse', and gives a lengthy and self-indulgent description of his own aggressive incitements:

"Had the assimilated Jews in Germany not been part of the dominating class? (... ) Were not the majority of German upper-class Jews on the side of the conservatives, without whom Hitler would not have come to power? Had they not, as clerks, industrialists, entrepreneurs, and cultural bourgeois, bitterly fought against the opponents of Nazism? Why is there only sporadically an inner-Jewish criticism of the policy of the Jewish associations during Nazism, who consciously withheld information about the German concentration camps, and directed all their efforts and all the money to the Zionist symbol of Israel and its foundation, instead of caring for the emigration of Jews from the German territories as long as there was still time? And what about the right wing Jews who, with a great deal of money and still more might and influence, unconditionally support the Israeli policy, no matter how barbaric it is?"<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ebel, 'Zwischenbericht...', op. cit., p. 21. [Emphasis added.]

<sup>22</sup> Knödler-Bunte, 'Verlängerung...', op. cit., p. 36.

And the questions which, as Jessica Benjamin and Anson Rabinbach state, “betray the ignorance of the beer-hall rant, the uniformed rage of the radical polemicist at the Jews. . .”, continue unimpeded, “a drainboard of *shibboleths* on a variety of topics, clearly enunciating left wing anti-Semitism in its undiluted glory.”<sup>23</sup> They culminate in the cliché of Jewish self-hatred that is supposed to bring together perpetrators (or, more precisely, the sons of the perpetrators) and victims. Also in the description of Knödler-Bunte's first real encounter with Jews and Jewish culture in the United States the old antisemitic stereotypes abound:

“For the first time I had an idea of what Jewish culture could be: heaps of black clothed, bearded, Orthodox Jews who controlled the streetscape of the goldsmith quarter after hours; the many different faces in the numerous Jewish restaurants, which I examined half unconsciously for Jewish characteristics; the little shops near Hester Street ( . . . ). A bit later I became acquainted with the cultivated, bourgeois, liberal Jews. Most left-wing intellectuals I met were of Jewish origin, had a job in one of the universities and were present in scientific projects, magazines and publishing houses. They were extremely cultivated ( . . . ) and, in a way, not very American. My admiration for them was mixed with some jealousy. How easy it was for Jews from the American upper class to become intellectually competent and to express themselves as radicals and leftwing scholars, and how safely they were supported by their families and their social environment! If I were an American from the working class who wants to succeed, I thought, I would be quite angry to see how many posts were being occupied by Jews, from Wall Street to the universities. For the first time I understood, from my own

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<sup>23</sup> J. Benjamin and A. Rabinbach, ‘Germans, Leftists, Jews’, *New German Critique*, no. 31, Winter 1984, p. 187.

reactions, what I had never been able to grasp during my studies of fascism: that there is some real experience behind all antisemitism."<sup>24</sup>

What is most striking in these statements, besides their aggressiveness, is their historical ignorance. One cannot avoid the impression that more information would have facilitated the author in the task of overcoming his 'anti-Jewish impulse' and of facing his historical responsibilities from a rational rather than from an emotional point of view. Nevertheless one should not ignore that Knödler-Bunte shows some insight in his own condition and his profound motivations:

"As I tried to formulate these preliminary questions, which were to help me to explain the mass genocide of the Jews, I discovered in myself the desire to create bonds between the perpetrators and the victims, between my postwar generation and that of my parents, between German and Jewish history. What moved me is the impotent but decisive desire to break out of this entanglement of guilt without paying too much for it, and the knowledge that it won't work."<sup>25</sup>

Thus the inability to extricate oneself from an unwanted, yet necessary dilemma is in the very center of the radical discourse about German-Jewish relationships. The question 'what about ourselves?' is the only one that really seems to matter, and it is to the credit of the authors of *Ästhetik und Kommunikation* to have acknowledged this troubled starting point of the New Left. As we can see from all the autobiographical essays, the principal reaction to the discovery of a

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<sup>24</sup> Knödler-Bunte, 'Verlängerung des Schweigens', op. cit., p. 46.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 37.



specifically German historical burden was, during the fifties, the sixties, and the seventies, one of self-pity: the injustice is one done to them, the postwar moralists. They were convinced of now being themselves in turn the victims.

" 'As innocents we had to assume the guilt, the guilt of those who often did not even feel guilty ... to bear the consequences without being guilty, that was our fate.'<sup>26</sup> 'Already as a small child I understood that as a German, you are on the wrong side ... as a German you can forget about yourself.'<sup>27</sup> 'To be German was for me a stain, and long before I became politically active I felt a mixture of shame and humiliated pride . . . .'<sup>28</sup>

There is a strange lack of self-confidence in the radicals' discourse. It is not only the entanglement of guilt which seems unbearable to them, it is the idea that German history is so overwhelming, that it crushed its offspring's personality, the free will and the freedom of the individual.

"I cannot say I am fed up, I don't want to be a German any more. I am German wherever I go, often even the Nazi, guilty of what has happened. We are living in very, very hard times, identity is rare, you take what you can get . . . ."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> O. Münzberg, 'Wovon berührt?...', op. cit., p. 26.

<sup>27</sup> D. Hoffmann-Axthelm, 'Ins Unreine geschrieben', op. cit., p. 30.

<sup>28</sup> Knödler-Bunte, 'Verlängerung...', op. cit., p. 40.

<sup>29</sup> Hoffmann-Axthelm, 'Ins Unreine geschrieben', op. cit., p. 31.

This complaint is quite typical of German radicals. Already the student movement of the sixties was obsessed by the idea of manipulation, which was a recurrently acute issue in their discourse. Everybody was manipulated, by the press, by education, by all the reigning values of capitalist society - the Leftists included. The radicals pointed out that there were no means of escaping manipulation, and this was really a German phenomenon. In the French student movement manipulation was one subject among others, and certainly not the most important one. From a philosophical point of view, it poses the problem of free will, from a psychological point of view, it raises the question of identity. So why is it that identity is so rare?

There is some evidence that German radicals feel not only burdened, but literally mutilated by their collective history. Thus, Hoffmann-Axthelm cannot help wondering

"... that in spite of the Moloch called German history, the NS, the World War and Auschwitz, I look like a normal person, having eyes, hands and feet like everybody else; these eyes, hands and feet being totally normal, not mutilated, in spite of the camps constructed by the SS, which are full of the hairs and the gold teeth of those who didn't exist any more after the NS, the World War and Auschwitz had taken place . . ." <sup>30</sup>

Hoffmann-Axthelm is so very surprised by his apparent normality because he knows that, inwardly, he has been definitively maimed by German history, which has stolen from him his childhood and determined his personality, and he is aware of the fact that the morality of the New Left is of no help against this (pre)determination.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

"Because even we, the radicals, the representatives of the 'alternative' Germany, are no different [from the generation of the parents, C.C.]. We, too, stem from the speechlessness of surviving and continuing. Only at this point I feel that the whole affair concerns me personally: when I notice that I produce the same coldness as the others. Then I ask myself why, and examine the sources of my humanity. And behold, instead of a warm cradle and an overflowing, warming motherliness, there she is, German history, my father and my mother, my cradle and my childhood dream. I realize that there is a hole, a leak where all privacy escapes, and all true childhood..."<sup>31</sup>

The metaphors used by Hoffmann-Axthelm in an almost obsessive way and, in turn, employed also by Knödler-Bunte, are those of purity and impurity. The 'German speechlessness', which is the reverse of a (badly) hidden secret, implies for these authors some indelible impurity. Both build a kind of totalitarian myth upon the concept of German identity. There is nothing one can choose or leave behind, one can only accept it in its entirety, "as a strength and as a guilt. In this task you can only fail, there is no purity."<sup>32</sup> With its roots going far back into the Middle Ages, the German myth is one of destruction. Hoffmann-Axthelm holds that the age-old longing for an Empire, which was its first expression, necessarily implies absolute ruin. He does not give the reasons for this fatality but it becomes clear from his essay, that in an inexplicable inner dynamic, the desire for destruction continues to function even when there are no more outward enemies. It is then directed against the deep origins of the German myth,

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

interpreted by the author as the yearning for a better world which is, according to him, the very core of German national identity. That is the reason why even the best are affected by destruction, that no German can escape the entanglement of idealism and desire for complete annihilation. Hoffmann-Axthelm states that his own biography is characterized by pure normality, that he has nothing to hide, not even concerning his parents, with whom he did not have any clashes. In spite of that, he knows that there is something 'inexpressible' within himself, and sometimes he is surprised to hear the words "which leave the enclosure of [his] teeth". In the same way as the antisemite in Fassbinder's controversial play *Garbage, the City and Death*, he does not control his impulses, *it thinks within him*, and he is soiled by the impurity of his own thoughts. There is no choice possible in German heritage, because its very core is 'ineffable', avoids speech and therefore reason.

"There are no clean partitions between this Germany and that Germany - we have just this murderous one. I cannot live in the Germany of Bach or Hölderlin, but only in GDR or FRG. I cannot save Wagner and drop Hitler's Wagnerianism, and I cannot read Nietzsche only with Guattari, without taking into account the practices of the SS. But it would be perfectly ridiculous trying, because of this, to expunge Richard Wagner from the history of music or from one's life, to deny that he definitely causes something inexpressible to vibrate within me (yes, perfectly right!), and be it the wrong thing, the German thing, which caused the German speechlessness to become practical with inexpressible horror."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

The question whether it would not be more equitable to read Nietzsche only with Guattari, and not with the Nazis' misinterpretations, remains an open one. What is of interest here is the fact that Hoffmann-Axthelm thinks this impossible, and the reason for this impossibility is that he finds what he considers to be the 'specifically German impurity', within himself, as part of his identity. His reaction to that discovery, as well as that of Knödler-Bunte, is one of pride. They love the troubled image reflected by the mirror as much as they abhor it. Thus Knödler-Bunte catches himself at a feeling of 'national insult' as a response to the public criticism of the younger German generation by Broder and Fleischmann. He says to himself:

"You yourself are part of this Germany that is torn into pieces, not as an exception but as the standard of all the qualities which crystallized in history and not only since 1933. Underlying my social critical conscience I felt an approval of Germany as a culture, as a specific way of living and thinking, as the configuration of sensations, moods, landscapes and people, where I learned to say 'I'. I reacted with pride, not to the often evoked line of ancestors of German culture, Goethe included, but to a natural belonging to a living space, whose history is part of me, also as far as its fatal aspects are concerned. This cannot be denied."<sup>34</sup>

And as proof of what these fatal aspects within him look like, he continues:

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<sup>34</sup> Knödler-Bunte, 'Verlängerung...', op. cit., pp. 35-36.

"This spontaneous readiness to defend Germany went together with a massive anti-Jewish impulse. (...) I realize that the subject 'Germans and Jews' throws me back to general concepts which I had believed I had overcome a long time ago."<sup>35</sup>

These general concepts, these uncontrolled impulses can be found in all four essays of *Ästhetik und Kommunikation*. The most interesting question that arises from the analysis of the autobiographical sketches is why there is this lack of freedom and of intellectual maturity. All the authors were about forty years old when writing their contributions for the journal, and one of them (Olav Münzberg) almost fifty. Nevertheless, the thoughts and emotions described there evoke much more adolescence than an adult's reflection about his evolution regarding a crucial problem of identity. This does not mean that they are entirely vain. The achievements of the Berlin publications are not to be underestimated. There is a clear awareness among the authors that their previous 'history-less' attitude is of no avail. Ebel states

"... that the children of the victims and consequently the children of the perpetrators cannot free themselves from history. As the brutal negation of history [brutale *Geschichtslosigkeit*] which is customary in the radical alternative circles is certainly not the solution to the problem, the next step can only consist of admitting our own prejudices. That is the reason for this article."<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ebel, 'Zwischenbericht...', op. cit., p. 23.

The admission of prejudice is certainly one step forward comprehension. However one cannot avoid the impression that the authors of *Ästhetik und Kommunikation* stopped half-way in their efforts to come to grips with the past. This seems to be due to the fact that their wish for understanding is paralleled by a twofold desire which creates a new obstacle to objective perception. First of all the authors clearly want to reconcile themselves with the generation of their fathers. This was a general German trend in the eighties which can be observed just as much in public positions adopted by representatives of the Federal Republic as in historiography or literature. One does not try any more to establish a total distancing from Nazism but on the contrary to create bonds between the past and the present, to save what is acceptable, in order to develop a representation of German history where the Third Reich can be reinserted without destroying the whole image. Up to now, the radicals have not decisively contributed to this collective construction of memory. As they acknowledged themselves, their approach to public life has been completely ahistorical, concentrating mainly on social and ecological problems. The result of this attitude is a certain provincialism characteristic of German Leftists, and which cannot be found in the corresponding political circles of other European countries. However, with their entrance into the political scene at the end of the seventies and beginning of the eighties, the radicals acquired a new awareness of the ideological deadlock where they were stuck. They looked for a way out and found it, in correspondence to the general climate prevailing in this decade, not in internationalism, but in a new left-wing nationalism. This tendency can already be seen in the articles of *Ästhetik und Kommunikation*, which were published at a turning point of the radicals' approach to Germany past and future, to history and national identity. Thus, Hoffmann-Axthelm's closing words pave the way for an evolution which was to become a common denominator for the whole West German left wing during the years to come:

“What I wanted to write about is the problem German intellectuals have with their own history. I wanted to write about the fact that I cannot simply be an internationalistic intellectual, but always only a German intellectual, who carries this indissoluble historical burden and accepts it as the subject of his work. The aversion for this work is always there. If I did not love this country, it would not be a problem.... I approve ... anybody's decision to leave this country, this is really the best thing to do. But even if I approve it, it hurts me. I would so much like to live in a country one does not have to leave in order to feel well. I cannot leave and I do not want to leave, this is still my country.”<sup>37</sup>

Considering the special issue of *Ästhetik und Kommunikation* several years later, we can say in conclusion that it reflects a crucial moment in the evolution of German radicalism. More than half a decade after its publication, this document reveals the intractable predicament the leftists were facing during the eighties: the sudden and late discovery of history had bequeathed to them a past with which they could not cope. As we have explained, German radicalism had evolved on a rather abstract basis. During the sixties, the concepts of fascism and racism had provided a conceptual framework to the leftists which could satisfy them as long as the problem of Nazism was treated in reference to world revolution. With the passing of time, this perspective became more and more remote, till it vanished altogether. The ideological void left by the progressive breakdown of the revolutionary idea created among the radicals a new awareness of the past. They discovered their own ‘negation of history’, after having criticized that of their fathers. And they discovered the Jews as living human beings, as a cultural community with its own past and present linked to European history by all kinds of bonds, but also independent from it. For this discovery they were not prepared. One of the pitfalls of abstraction is that it keeps people

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<sup>37</sup> Hoffmann-Axthelm, ‘Ins Unreine geschrieben’, op. cit., p. 32.



caught in a network of stereotypes which tend to be replaced by others as soon as they are worn out. This is what happened to the radicals' perception of Nazism. The 'anti-Jewish impulse' of the authors of *Ästhetik und Kommunikation* followed directly their representation of the 'faceless victims.'

Nevertheless, a self-conscious reaction resulted eventually from the work of memory undertaken by the Berlin authors in their autobiographical sketches. The acknowledgement of prejudice was a first step towards the elaboration of a more differentiated perception of the past. What new historical image would emerge from that was not yet to be seen from the articles of the journal. But one thing seemed certain: radicalism as such was not apt to provide an answer to the pending questions. The new left wing nationalism to which a number of former radicals adhered during the eighties was a negation of important radical premises. It did not open the way to a more balanced vision of Nazism. The remaining alternative grouplets which demonstrated recently against the unification of Germany expressed at least the feeling that something is wrong with this general wish to draw a 'final line' over the whole complex of the post-war era. But they do not offer an alternative, and their feeble voices are drowned by a movement of much wider importance.