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Gegenwartsbewältigung [Overcoming the Present]

by Max Czollek

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Translated by Jon Cho-Polizzi

A short while back, I received the following email: “We would like to invite you to a debate. Our topic is: How does one deal with German guilt as an immigrant author?” Interesting question. Except that I’m not an immigrant author. And by that, I mean I have no migration background. Or to put it differently: My story doesn’t conform to the kind of stories to which the adjectives “migrant” or “immigrant”¹ are typically applied. “(Im)migrant” is not the role which I am used to fulfilling. Migrants are the other ones: the friends—those with whom we are bound together in this fight.

I’m used to being solicited as a Jewish author. Or as I prefer to call it: a Jew-author. And now I’m already in the thick of things. Because in this text, I’ll be investigating how normalized understandings of belonging and the return of rightwing thought are intertwined. I contend that these understandings are manifest in the demand for integration whose all-but-universal presence is the reason I describe this as an integration paradigm. And I’d like to explain why I believe that *Gegenwartsbewältigung* [overcoming the present]² is an appropriate counterstrategy. This text, then, is a kind of assembly kit for the construction of an alternative to the integration paradigm. But it’s up to you, dear reader, to make something out of it.

The first building block: Over 90% of Germany’s current Jewish population is comprised of people who migrated to Germany in the early 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet Union.³ The vast majority of Germany’s Jewish population *are* therefore immigrants. At the same time, Jewish people don’t typically appear in the defining contemporary binary of the well-integrated immigrant and migrant parallel societies. I’ve never seen a talk show about migration in which a Jewish guest was asked how well they’d integrated. The real empirical structure of the Jewish population, then, stands in tension with the role it’s been ascribed.

¹ The term *migrantisch* (or *Migrant_innen*) in German is used to fulfill a broader range of positionalities than either the English “migrant” or “immigrant.” Particularly in the context of discourse on the postmigrant [*postmigrantisch*] condition of contemporary German society, or the various demographic groups which comprise it, the term *migrantisch* may be thought of as including both English concepts without necessarily implied temporalities. As such, the terminology used in this English translation will vary by context.

² A play on the much-lauded German (World War 2-related) memory culture of “overcoming / coming to terms with the past” [*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*].

³ Dmitrij Belkin and Raphael Gross (eds.), *Ausgerechnet Deutschland! Jüdisch-russische Einwanderung in die Bundesrepublik* (Berlin: Nicolaische Verlagsbuchhandlung, 2010).

The second building block: It is possible to perceive oneself as Jewish and to still, at the same time, be made a Jew. My Jewishness might have to do with my family background, my religious practices, or my socialization. In this sense, it is a part of my identity. At the same time, I am also made a Jew when I am always presented with the same questions and allocated the same functions. It's critical to understand that these are not one and the same, which is why I use different terms to differentiate between the two: "Jewish people" for the empirical group and "Jews" for the ascription—the constructed group, with all its expectations and attributions. Both groups possess their own histories which can be reconstructed separately. If the conduct of an empirically Jewish person resembles the hegemonic expectations and ascriptions of Jews, this is the overlap of life and allocation, not authenticity. One should not confuse these things.

The third building block: Identity politics is an approach which reduces the diversity of the individual identity down to particular attributes. As an emancipative strategy, it is often accompanied by the hope of rendering established marginalizations more visible (for example, positioning oneself as Jewish, queer, (im)migrant, postmigrant, etc.). Emancipatory identity politics, then, signify the attempt at restructuring society in a way which would more effectively promote a higher degree of social and material justice. They confront a reality in which self-imposed adjectives and designations have become labels for the exploitability of marginalized perspectives and means of expression. Thus, Jewish, queer, (im)migrant, or postmigrant are not solely emancipative self-categorizations which insist on the non-identity of one's own individual positionality vis-à-vis the dominant culture. They are also designations under which the positionalities of those who are excluded or discriminated against become objects for consumption and control.

The fourth building block: Jewish people fulfill a different role in Germany than migrants. Sociologist Michal Bodemann describes the Jewish role in our society as a Theater of Memory.⁴ This could be a reason for the absence of Jews in the integration discourse I puzzled over in the first building block: In the Theater of Memory, Jews and Germans are positioned so closely to one another that not even a sheet of paper could slip between the two. And there's definitely no room for this essay either.

The reference to the German position here is important because it directs our attention to the place from which this desire for catharsis originates. *Who* would love to believe that they're no longer Nazis? For whom does this catharsis become an argument to fly their flags again during the World Cup? The German collective is construed through this shared desire for normality and positive national pride. I don't even need a theory to comprehend this, and so I'll only provide a short citation from the philosopher and sociologist Max Horkheimer—Jewish exile and former director of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research.⁵ In the early 1960s, Horkheimer wrote: "Perpetual reformulation: the Germans' recognition of guilt after the defeat of National Socialism was a splendid process for preserving a

⁴ Michal Bodemann, *Gedächtnistheater. Die jüdische Gemeinschaft und ihre deutsche Erfindung* (Hamburg: Rotbuch, 1996).

⁵ The so-called "Frankfurt School."

völkisch feeling of commonality in the postwar period. The main thing was to preserve the We.”⁶

The fifth building block: Already early on in the history of West Germany—and in its own way, East Germany, as well—Jewish people were ascribed the role as Jews to confirm this German catharsis. For this, their mere presence suffices: There can’t possibly still be National Socialism with Jewish people around. On the other hand, German-Jewish memorial rituals continue to affirm those assertions of normality time and again. By the mid-2000s, this longed-for normalization had advanced so far that people permitted themselves to fly the German flag and belt out of the national anthem during the World Cup.

But not merely Jews play along in the Theater of German Self-Production—(im)migrants, too, are allotted a particular role. Borrowing from Bodemann’s concept of the Theater of Memory, I employ the term *Theater of Integration* to describe this staging process. Its script demands the division of people into “good” and “bad” (im)migrants. Good immigrants shoot goals for the national soccer team and receive their integration award. Bad migrants repress their women and stand with blue balls at Cologne Central Station on New Year’s Eve waiting to grope German women.⁷ This role-playing makes possible a dual confirmation of the German self-image: firstly, that Germany is a welcoming society, and secondly, that this welcoming society is under existential threat from the self-same people who should live gratefully among the Germans: (im)migrants.

The sixth building block: Just like the Theater of Memory, the Theater of Integration follows a script. At times, these scripts differ significantly from one another, but both oscillate between catharsis and a claim to hegemony. This is exemplified by the fact that it is always the same side which determines who may demand integration and who remains under suspicion of refusing to integrate.

This was demonstrated recently in the #MeTwo debates surrounding the soccer player Mesut Özil’s resignation from the German national team in the summer of 2018. Sure, Özil and İlkay Gündoğan had taken a picture with the Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. But that wasn’t the point. These kinds of things happen all the time. Soccer players aren’t necessarily clever people. What was striking, was the matter-of-course nature with which the German Soccer Association [*Deutscher Fußball-Bund*] (*DFB*) orchestrated the suspicion that Germany’s shortcomings in the World Cup were largely the consequence of Özil and Gündoğan’s insufficient loyalty to Germany.

If ignorance and anti-democratic sentiments were really damnable offenses for the *DFB*, then they would also need to question the loyalties of other associates. For example, former soccer player and commentator Lothar Matthäus, who visited

⁶ Max Horkheimer, *Notizen 1950-1969 und Dämmerung. Notizen in Deutschland* (Frankfurt a.M.: S. Fischer), 200.

⁷ This is a reference to the 2015-2016 New Year’s celebrations in Germany, in which gangs of men—allegedly of predominantly “Arab or North African appearance”—sexually assaulted hundreds of women near Cologne Central Station (and in other major urban centers across Germany). The event was instrumentalized by the media and the German rightwing to perpetuate a discourse of refugees, asylum seekers, and other non-European immigrants representing an existential threat to German culture as violent sexual predators.

Russian president Vladimir Putin in the summer of 2018 with virtual impunity. Back then, no one asked whether Lothar Matthäus' loyalties now lay with Russia. From this, I conclude that the statements from the *DFB* convey a particular idea about who needs to prove their loyalty (and in what way). I could also write: Who needs to prove how well-integrated they are.

The seventh building block: Özil and Gündoğan were only the tip of the iceberg whose lower ends made visible the frozen abyss of the reality of integration discourse. This was demonstrated forcefully on social media in the following weeks through other marginalized people sharing their experiences of racism under the hashtag #MeTwo. People living in Germany with a German passport but the “wrong” name or “wrong” hair structure: addressed as foreigners and discriminated against on the job or housing market.

The integration paradigm is based on a particular conception of belonging which transcends demands for language acquisition or loyalty to the constitution. Its origins lie in a way of thinking which began developing in Germany in the 17th century: *völkisch* thought. Fundamental to this is a certain, internalized ideal of homogeneity. And, indeed, even in present-day Germany, one cannot imagine radical diversity as the status quo. Or why else would we always speak of “parallel societies” and never subcultures?

The integration paradigm means that a particular subset of the population determines who becomes German at what point in time. And who remains a foreigner. Those demands for integration require the imaginary of a dominant social center, otherwise they wouldn't make sense. And the same is true for the conception of a German hegemonic culture [*deutsche Leitkultur*].

I believe the currency of such *völkisch* thought in contemporary Germany—in which one particular portion of society determines who must assimilate, and who need not—is not an expression of the unresolved racism of a handful of people. It is, rather, a systemic failure in our open society. A system error called *integration paradigm*.

Because what is it other than a system error of an open society when people still live under suspicion of not having integrated themselves sufficiently or comprehensively enough in the second or even third generation? It is a system error when people are attacked in an East German city because their appearance doesn't mesh with the expectations of a rightwing mob. In the summer of 2018, even some of the most mainstream media described the assaults in Chemnitz as attacks “against foreigners.” As if citizenship in Germany were suddenly and once again something determined by the rightwing fringe: *If you're attacked by neo-Nazis, you must be a foreigner.*

Were Germany (in its own self-conception) truly an open society, the papers would have needed to report: Rightwing Mobs in Chemnitz Attack One Quarter of the German Population.

The eighth building block: I don't believe that we'll be in a position to put a stop to the revival of rightwing thought in Germany as long as our own political conception of belonging remains within the framework of the integration paradigm. This concerns both analysis as well as the development of counterstrategies—although such counterstrategies would, in the ideal situation, derive from analyses.

I can currently identify two common strategies for dealing with rightwing thinking: the alleged appropriation of rightwing terminology and the sort of devotion I've described in my book *Desintegriert Euch!* [*De-Integrate Yourselves!*] (Hanser 2018) as a rhetoric of affection.

This affection for the voters of rightwing parties has a long history in this country, and since the 2017 federal elections, a rather intense present. Federal representatives of parties from across the political spectrum advocated at the time for a common mantra: We need to take the concerns of AfD voters seriously. But what exactly is expressed by this sentiment? Firstly, the expression “concerns” underscores that we are dealing with legitimate claims. Because if someone is concerned, there must be a reason for their concern. The notion to “take seriously” furthermore implies a concession that one had previously neglected to worry about these voters' concerns. And so this promise to “take seriously” not only feeds into this rhetoric of affection, it also implies a promise of improvement.

But what does this improvement mean in the current situation? With this, I return to the second strategy I deemed the “appropriation of rightwing terminology.” Let me attempt to reconstruct a small chronology of this since the federal election. Directly following the election, politicians and organizations from all political parties released statements on “positive *Heimatliebe* [love for the homeland].” Every party did its best to outdo the others. Finally, on October 3, 2017, German president Frank-Walter Steinmeier, too, spoke out on *Heimat* love, declaring: “Those who yearn for *Heimat* are not living in the past.”⁸ Only a few weeks later, it became clear that the new federal government would rename the Ministry of the Interior the “Federal Ministry of the Interior, Building, and Community.” That sounds nice in English. Only the German *Bundesministerium des Innern, für Bau und Heimat* evokes a different connotation all together. And allows for the convenient abbreviation: *Heimatsministerium* [Ministry of *Heimat*]. These divergent examples were publicly conflated as a strategy of appropriating rightwing terminology: a strategy for taking the wind out of the sails of the AfD. So far, so good.

Alas, as his first official act, the freshly minted *Heimat*-Minister Horst Seehofer declared that “Islam does not belong to Germany.” With this statement things no longer looked like an appropriation of rightwing terminology, but rather, like the integration of their thought. If we also take into account the Bavarian state elections a few months later, it only becomes more apparent that the strategy of appropriating rightwing terminology has primarily meant a rightward shift in permissible public discourse. One is tempted to conclude from this observation that the strategy of appropriating rightwing terminology has failed for the time being.

⁸ Speech held on the Day of German Unity, October 3, 2017.

This translation is my own. The official English translation of his words “I am convinced those who want to feel at home are not stuck in the past” paints a misleading representation of the politicized language of the German original [*Ich bin überzeugt, wer sich nach Heimat sehnt, der ist nicht von gestern*]. Links to both the German original, as well as the official English translation are available online: <http://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Reden/DE/Frank-Walter-Steinmeier/Reden/2017/10/171003-TdDE-Rede-Mainz.html>

The ninth building block: The rhetoric of affection designed to appeal to voters of rightwing parties stands in polar opposition to a rhetoric of austerity directed primarily at refugees. It is no coincidence that this same group has, for years, suffered most tangibly from the threat of rightwing violence.

A few statistics on that: In 2017, according to the Amadeu Antonio Foundation and ProAsyl, there were an average of four attacks per day targeting refugees in Germany. The Federal Criminal Police Office [*Bundeskriminalamt*] records for the same year 251 attacks by rightwing extremists on asylum homes. But, of course, this is only the beginning. The withdrawal of protection by the state also includes the NSU murders, whose blatantly racialized motivations remained unrecognized for more than a decade. This never seemed to have stirred a particular sadness in the then-newly-appointed leader of the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution [*Verfassungsschutz*], Hans-Georg Maaßen (who, in the meantime, has been removed from office and is now spreading theories on a supposed leftwing conspiracy that had him fired).

The rhetoric of austerity reveals itself also in the absence of public statements of solidarity which sends a clear message to those impacted that the state will fail to provide any real assistance. In the last decades, Germany has repeatedly revealed itself as a state which has not and will not protect the victims of rightwing violence. Its elected officials, instead, express more sympathy for the voters of a party which preaches homogeneity and cultural dominance and which remains largely incapable of distancing itself from racist acts of violence. All this has led to a tremendous loss of trust among Germany's (im)migrant and postmigrant population. And this is not an insignificant minority, but a large section of the people who will determine the future of this country.

The tenth building block: We have arrived at a point at which this country can no longer afford to exclude one quarter of its population. This open society will have to change, or it will cease to exist. We are extremely underprepared for this transformation because the integration paradigm is being carried by a concept of belonging in which rightwing and racist ideologies effortlessly find their place. Therefore, the decisive question seems not to be to what extent the AfD or Pegida have updated neo-*völkisch* ideologies for our current political climate. Rather, we have to ask ourselves what ideas have been so inextricably established in our own way of thinking that we have been unable to prevent this return.

I think the story begins in the narration of successful German rehabilitation. There is nothing Germans want so badly as to finally be normal again—which is why they have invested immense emotional resources in the last decades to maintain this narrative. Naturally, such a narrative, like any narrative, produces specific gaps of ignorance. Not least, that a claim to normalcy precludes the critical insight one might extract from the increasing popularity of rightwing politics in Germany: That the German past has not nearly been as well “overcome” as people assumed and hoped for.

I would like to introduce an alternative to this claim to normality: the concept of *Gegenwartsbewältigung* [overcoming the present]. The notion of *Gegenwartsbewältigung* proceeds from an awareness that we are living in a post-National Socialist society. This inverts the familiar modes of interpretation for the

surge of rightwing thought because from the perspective of *Gegenwartsbewältigung*, it would be surprising if those outdated ideologies did *not* continue to manifest themselves in the present. As counterpoint to “overcoming the past” [*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*], *Gegenwartsbewältigung* means an attempt to shape our present in a way that the violence of the German past will be impossible to repeat. *Gegenwartsbewältigung* therefore does not aspire for normality or catharsis, but rather, for the awareness that both we, ourselves, and our society require ongoing attention and care.

The perspective of *Gegenwartsbewältigung* also has consequences for the Theaters of Memory and Integration. Since the need for a German catharsis disappears with them, we can start focusing on question such as: How do we form new alliances and majorities to start implementing our visions for an open society? With the end of those performances in the Theaters of Memory and Integration, the stage is finally free for the recognition of radical diversity to take its place. A radical diversity that is much closer to the reality of today’s society than the fantasy of cultural hegemony. The German present is already inextricably a queer, Jewish, Muslim, and atheist present.

The eleventh building block: I have described how the hope for normality in Germany has limited our strategies for combating rightwing parties and movements. In addition, I have argued that the integration paradigm is not in the position to prevent the rise of the AfD because it works as a vehicle for its *völkisch* thought. *Gegenwartsbewältigung*, for me, consequently means proposing an alternative model which points beyond this way of thinking, and allows for a different perspective on the German present.

Finally, I would like to consider strategies marginalized people have to protect themselves from allocation and functionalization within the German Theaters of Memory and Integration. In this respect, one can define the position of the marginalized not only as those who are allocated a function for the dominant group, but also those who always have to reply to the same questions: Where are you from? Are you a man or woman? Was your family in the Holocaust? Behind these questions lurks not only an imaginary of normality, but also, above all, the assumption that one owes an answer to one’s interrogator: Man or woman. German or not German. Shoah or no Shoah.

To interrupt these interrogations, I’ve suggested the concept of de-integration. In the context of this essay, de-integration might mean the refusal of an answer to what is perceived of as a compulsory question. The lie. The fiction. The silence.

The twelfth building block: On the day after the Frankfurt premier of my book, *Desintegriert Euch!*, I stood on stage alongside the dramaturg Necati Öziri, where we were meant to present 15 theses on the future of German literature. Shortly before the show, we decided to swap names. Necati said: “Dearest ladies and gentlemen, we’ve lied to all of you. Of course, I am Max Czollek, and that there is Necati Öziri. Obviously.” And then we read our 15 theses to a confused audience—Necati advocating for my *Gegenwartsbewältigung*, and I, for his *Kanak-Attack*.

Let's return to the question of the journalist with which I began this essay. De-integration could also mean declining the invitation without offering correction. This non-distancing from the (im)migrant position could be an act of solidarity with those who are perpetually addressed as (im)migrants. De-integration then means the recognition of the radical diversity of German society. It aims for a situation in which minorities perform eye-to-eye with German demands. And beyond the aforementioned examples, de-integration also means that the promise of justice be implemented in the sense of material and social participation for *all* members of a society.

It *belongs* to a mature and pluralist democracy that we learn to overcome old ideologies about belonging and society. And that we learn to live with the ambiguities this produces. The promise of de-integration is not harmony, but self-determination. And an actualization of democracy's promise as a place of justice in which people can be different without fear.