

Locating the German Nation

INTERVIEW WITH DR. STEPHEN BROCKMANN

Dr. Stephen Brockmann, Associate Professor of German at Carnegie Mellon, presented the keynote address at the Focus on German Studies Fifth Annual Graduate Student Conference in October 2000. His keynote speech was derived from his 1999 book, *Literature and German Reunification* (Cambridge UP). David Prickett spoke with Dr. Brockmann about his book, the state of German Studies on American campuses, and the concept of "nation" in German Literature.

FOCUS: Could you please talk a bit about your career in academe?

Brockmann: I received my Ph.D. in Wisconsin working with Jost Hermand, then taught for a year at Columbia University, taught then at Michigan State University, went to Brown University for a year, and since 1993, I have been teaching at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh.

FOCUS: Could you offer your opinion on the state of German Studies on American campuses based on your experiences at the aforementioned universities?

Brockmann: At Carnegie Mellon, it is actually quite healthy. We have had a rise in the number of German majors. When I first arrived at Carnegie Mellon, we had two students taking upper-level classes. Now it is up to about fifteen. I understand that at other universities, German Studies is actually declining among the undergraduates. My own perspective is that teaching needs to be improved. We can not afford to sit back passively and wait for the students to come to us; we have to go out there and offer exciting courses and attract the students to us.

FOCUS: Speaking of "exciting courses," how do you approach culture in literature classes and vice-versa?

Brockmann: Most of the classes that I teach are actually literature classes, but I do offer a couple of courses on culture. For example, I offer a course on German film, and I will be offering a course next spring called "Nazi and Resistance Culture." For those courses, and including even some of my literature courses, I tend to bring in a lot of musical material. In my "Introduction to German Studies" class, we study two operas, Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* and Mozart's *Zauberflöte*. I generally also cover some art history. In the "Nazi and Resistance" culture course, we talk about the Nazis' assault on what they called *entartete Kunst*. In "Deutschland 2000," a course that I taught last spring at the request of some undergraduates, I allowed the students to pick aspects of German culture that they were most interested in, and let them organize entire class sessions based around those topics. One person did something on "hip-hop" music, other students chose political topics, there were economic topics; one on the Euro. Almost all of my classes involve a certain amount of political science. One of my themes is that politics and culture are woven closely together in Germany, so I do focus quite a bit on politics. Even in my contemporary classes, I concentrate a lot on politics, and even history. In the "Introduction to German Studies" class, students are introduced to several centuries of German cultural history from about 1700 on.

FOCUS: What drew you to the topic of "nation" in German culture and literature?

Brockmann: My perspective is based largely on my graduate work in the eighties, a time when there was a great explosion of theoretical work; of work on ostracized minorities: women, gays, blacks in German culture, Jews in German culture, etc. I welcome that and think that it is all wonderful work that is still going on. However, one of the things that I think that we neglected in the eighties was the question of the "nation"—of Germany itself. We were studying the margins of Germany, and we were not really studying the center. I think that there are historical reasons for that, because that center was deemed to have been responsible for the Holocaust and for World War II. People then tended to shy away from central issues of German culture and to focus on the margins, which were perceived as oppressed, neglected, and less guilty. However I began to ask myself over the course of the eighties why it was that one had to go to an English department to study Nietzsche or Freud, or go to a music depart-

ment to study Wagner. I decided that we needed to begin to focus a bit more on the question of what the center of the German nation is, and not leave it up to other disciplines and other fields. Those are the things that most interest people who are not directly involved with German Studies. Only at our peril do we leave those kinds of things to other fields.

With the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the reunification of Germany in 1990—events which no one in German Studies would have expected to happen—many of us were forced to revise our notion that there was no such thing as "Germany" or that "Germany" was nothing but an imaginary construct. One of the things that I think happened in the eighties is that when people started talking about the social construction of reality—there was a kind of implication that that which is socially constructed is therefore unreal; that it does not exist. To me that is a fallacy. I do not think that that was ever part of the social construction of reality. Something that is socially constructed is not therefore unreal; just because it is socially constructed does not mean that it does not exist. It just means that it is contingent on those constructing it, but nevertheless something that is constructed exists.

I think that the same is true for notions of German national identity. We can try to deconstruct notions of German identity all we want and show how they are constructed and contingent. Nevertheless, if you talk to Germans, of course they will tell you that they are "German;" they are fairly convinced that they are "German," just as we are fairly convinced that we are "American!" It is one thing to try to analyze this critically and try to show the ways in which it is put together, but it is another thing to claim that it is not there. I think that one of the fallacies of the eighties was the concept that if you just "ignore it," it is going to go away; it is not going to exist. My feeling was, particularly after the fall of the Berlin Wall, that we really needed to put the notion of German identity at the center of our work, and that's what I have been trying to do.

FOCUS: Could you discuss your role in *Dancing on the Volcano* (1994) and your work with Jost Hermand?

Brockmann: Jost was of course my dissertation advisor. In 1992 or 1993, when I was teaching at Brown University, I taught my first and only graduate seminar to date, which was on the culture of the Weimar Republic. That had also been related to my dissertation topic, which was "Mass Cul-

ture / Mass Death: The World War and Weimar Realism," and it is about the spate of novels dealing with World War I which appeared in the last years of the Weimar Republic, from about 1927 to 1933. I worked with Jost Hermand and also had the opportunity, later on, to work with his collaborator Frank Trommler, who worked together with Jost on one of the most important books on that subject, *Die Kultur der Weimarer Republik*. That was one of the reasons why I chose that topic when I was asked to teach a graduate seminar at Brown University. It was tremendously exciting. I invited Jost to come and give a talk on the topic of *Neue Sachlichkeit*, which is one of his main interests (and is also one of mine). I translated his talk and I got together with Thomas Kniesche, a professor at Brown University and put out this volume, which was an attempt to reassess the position of studies of Weimar culture after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the idea being that Weimar was the only previous example of a German democracy—a united German democracy—prior to 1990. I think that it was a productive volume.

FOCUS: Your 1999 book is entitled *Literature and German Reunification*, yet the central issue on which you focus can be summed up by the title of the Introduction: "Locating the Nation." Why didn't you choose this as the title of your book?

Brockmann: I actually initially planned on calling the book *Locating the Nation: Literature and German Reunification*. The publishing company told me that it was not sufficiently specific, and asked me to simply eliminate "Locating the Nation" since booksellers tend to look only at the first two main words of the title.

FOCUS: You discuss the German ideal of a "third path" for Germany, a diplomatic and cultural position which lies somewhere between Stephan Heym's "true socialism" and the anti-capitalist/anti-communist Germany of the Second Reich. To what extent was this "third path" a shared dream of the East and the West?

Brockmann: This is a very complex issue, the issue of the "third path." A lot of problems are hidden within this, and one could write an entire book about this. One of the chapters of my book is entitled "A Third Path?" Obviously this idea of a "third path" was something that was shared by a

lot of East German dissidents—the idea that you could have a democratic socialism with citizens rights, freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of assembly that you have in the West, with the socialist economic system that you had in the East. This idea was shared by a lot of writers in the East. I would say that the idea of a "third path" also was shared by some writers in the West. For instance, Günter Grass is a good example. Günter Grass has some ideal of a democratic socialism. But even if you go back to the period immediately after the end of the Second World War, you do find writers, especially from the *Gruppe 47*—Hans Werner Richter, Alfred Andersch—who already in their initial articles in the journal *Der Ruf* are talking about this idea of some sort of a "third path" which would steer a course between the communist East Bloc and the capitalist West Bloc. Again it is the idea of democratic socialism which comes up. Those kinds of ideas, I think, that were already formulated in the late 1940s after the end of the Nazi dictatorship, resurface strongly in the period of détente in the 1970s. What Alfred Andersch says in the late 1940s, he says again in the 1970s, talking about Germany as being a sort of keystone of Europe—that which is going to bring the East and the West together.

Now, this is very democratic and it is very viable in some ways, but I think one needs to be a little bit skeptical of it, because even the Third Reich was considered by its proponents as something of a "third path." This concept of Germany as somehow uniquely capable, as bringing together East and West—I think we (particularly those of us who are not Germans) need to look at it a bit critically. I am not sure that people like Alfred Andersch, who were talking about this kind of idea, were as aware of its historical antecedents in the 1920s or in the Third Reich as they should have been. On the one hand, I think, at least in the context of the East German revolution in the late 1980s, it is a very democratic, liberating notion. On the other hand, if you actually begin to study the history of the notion of the "third path," it can be quite problematic. I think one needs to be quite careful and analytic when studying it.

FOCUS: Are there still East German and West German writers? In your opinion, is there a contemporary author who is simply "German?"

Brockmann: Well, I think that they are *all* pretty much simply German, actually. At this point what we have is a "German literature," and in some

ways even the literature before 1989 was a "German literature." Is there a specifically East German literature—yes, I think in some ways there is, although there has been for quite a while, since long before reunification. However I think that what can be written now is far more truthful in terms of historical accuracy. One can write about the *Stasi* now in ways which one could not before 1989. Some people might say that now for the very first time, we genuinely do have a realist East German literature, which we really did not have before—realist in the sense of actually conveying what it means to live in a socialist society. One of the points that I make in my book is that all along—even in the 1980s prior to unification—there was something of a *gesamtdeutscher* literary market to which people like Christa Wolf and the other top Eastern writers belonged. At this point, today, the now deceased Heiner Müller is considered a pan-German writer. He was not just writing for the East or for the West; he was writing for the entire country. Christa Wolf, I think, would fit that as well. However, someone like Volker Braun is an interesting example of somebody who seems to still be read more in the East than in the West. Certainly there are still differences in the reading culture of the East and the West, and those continue to exist. In fact, in some ways they are even deeper now than they were before.

FOCUS: You discuss not only the East-West conflict, but also the generational conflict prevalent in Germany. Do these conflicts exist on separate planes? Where and how do they intersect?

Brockmann: Clearly there are generational breaks in the East and there are generational breaks in the West. In the East, what you have is a conflict between, say, the Christa Wolf generation and the generation of the Prenzlauer Berg. And in the West, in some ways, yes, you have a similar break between the older generation and the so-called *Generation Golf*. One of the things that people have said about these young writers is that they tend to be less politically motivated, whereas in both the East and the West, the older generation is still very much concerned with the issues of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. Their childhood was spent in the Third Reich and their early adult years in postwar reconstruction. The younger writers born in the late 1950s and 1960s and even the 1970s did not go through that, and they do not have that moral and political commitment. I am not entirely convinced of this; I think that it is still too early to judge that genera-

tion which is just now really beginning to emerge. I am not convinced that all of these writers are not concerned with questions of "nation" and politics. We just had a visit to Pittsburgh two weeks ago by a writer named Ralf Bönt. He was born around 1963-64, so he is part of this generation. He grew up in Bielefeld in West Germany and has published two novels so far, one called *Ides* (1999) and the second *Gold* (2000). He certainly does not fit this model of the *Generation Golf* / *Generation Berlin*, which is totally unconcerned with questions of politics and national representation; rather, he is quite political in his writing, is very much conscious of his status as a German, and is very critical. It is a mixed picture and I have not come to any definitive conclusions on this. There does seem to be some sort of generational shift going on; I can agree with that.

As I explained in the book, one of the things that I think happened in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Wall and the unification of Germany was that those opposed to the kind of political writing championed by those like Grass in the West were able to attack it by suggesting comparisons between that kind of writing by that generation in the West and writing by those from the similar generation, like Christa Wolf, in the East. I am not convinced that that attack was successful. Grass won the Nobel Prize in 1999; he is still very much politically active. Although coming from a very different political perspective, Walser, whom I will discuss in the keynote speech, still has a very similar view of the role of literature. I think that some of these writers in the younger generation probably do too. I think that the jury is still out on this younger generation.

FOCUS: In your book, you offer a psychological analysis on why the Germans refuse to embrace the "German nation" vis-à-vis Martin Walser's *Die Verteidigung der Kindheit*. The questions of guilt and nation come into play—would you suggest that the Germans' denial of nation acts as a Freudian fetish with regard to German guilt?

Brockmann: Yes. Absolutely. I think that one of the things that is happening even with what we were discussing earlier—with the refusal to address ideas of German nationhood, even within our own profession, is an attempt to avoid issues of German guilt. But I am absolutely convinced—both politically and for moral reasons—that there can be no dealing with German guilt unless you have a subject to accept guilt. That sub-

ject in my opinion is the German nation, and I do not know what else but the "nation" is capable of accepting the problem of guilt. I think that you can't have it both ways. You cannot at one and the same time say, "There is no such thing as the German nation; it is simply fiction and does not exist," and yet say "This German nation has to accept its guilt."

FOCUS: You maintain that the *Kulturnation* preceded the political nation, or, the *Staatsnation*. If the German *Kulturnation* united Germans before 1871, do you see the *Kulturnation* as a uniting force that helped bring an end to the Cold War? Are the Germans indeed embracing the German "nation?"

Brockmann: I think that they are. Certainly the *Staatsvertrag* that brought about German reunification talks about the role of culture in the united Germany. There is a sense right now in Germany that somehow Germany is beginning to become a "normal" nation, and this notion of "normal" comes up time and again in both positive and negative ways. In 1999 when Grass won the Nobel Prize, even his worst critics, such as Frank Schirrmacher of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and a lot of Grass's conservative critics, were overjoyed that this man had actually won the Nobel Prize. Marcel Reich-Ranicki, of course one of Grass's greatest critics, was thrilled. There was a sense that yes, this is a vote of confidence in the state of German literature and the state of German culture. That was quite interesting to me, and I do think that the *Kulturnation* continues to play a role. However, although Germany is not completely united in light of the problems that still exist between East and West, it is politically united, and culture is no longer the only thread connecting East and West Germany. Culture has lost that unique status that it had prior to 1989, but indeed, it continues to play a role.

FOCUS: Was there a "zero hour" at the end of the Cold War? If so, could you explain how culture (e.g., literature) shaped or determined reunification?

Brockmann: You know, that concept of the "zero hour" is a recurring topic with reference to 1989 and 1990. It is interesting, because already in the 1970s, some people like Frank Trommler went to great lengths to show that in fact there had been no *Stunde Null* in 1945. They did so pretty

convincingly, and showed many continuities between the Nazi period and the postwar Federal Republic; even continuities with Weimar traditions. After scholars had demonstrated that there was no *Stunde Null* in 1945, at least in literary terms, now, suddenly, after 1989 and 1990, people are saying that that was the *Stunde Null*, and the whole debate is occurring again. So I think that what is happening is that on the one hand, scholars do not like this term, because obviously there is no such thing as an absolute break in culture. It does not happen—even at the end of 1945, it did not happen. And certainly not in 1989 and 1990.

Nevertheless the concept of an absolute break—even though scholars do not approve of it—that concept seems to sit very deep in the popular imagination, and people are beginning to talk about a *Stunde Null*, as if it had actually happened. It is an interesting thing to analyze why that is: why, in spite of the fact that scholars do not like the term, the term pops up again and again. Right now I am working on a book about this "non-existent" *Stunde Null* between 1945 and 1951 or so. One of the things that I think happens is that the discourse about the zero hour also serves a critical function. That is, by demonstrating the expectation that there should be a *Stunde Null* and also demonstrating that it did not happen, there is a critical move. What one is doing is showing that there are these unpleasant continuities in German history. In some ways, this discourse of the failed zero hour helped contribute to democratic discourse in post-1968 West Germany. I think that in some ways, the discourse about the zero hour in the immediate aftermath of 1989 is not as progressive or as liberating as that. I fear that sometimes this discourse about a zero hour in post-1989 German culture may actually be trying to eliminate or erase the traces of what is perceived as the previous zero hour, and go back to some sort of "normal" Germany. Whether Germany is perceived as "normal" in the present or not, it is problematic to think of German history itself as "normal." What does this mean? I am mistrustful of discussions of the zero hour for the post-1989 period. From a purely factual level, there was no such thing as a zero hour, because as before, there were all sorts of continuities. I think also that this discussion of the zero-hour in the post-1989 period is generally raised by conservatives such as Schirrmacher who are trying, in a sense, to erase certain aspects of Federal Republican German culture that they do not like, such as the politicization of literature and the like.

FOCUS: What role will the *Kulturnation* play in the wake of the Americanization of Germany? In the development of the European Union?

Brockmann: You talk about the Americanization of Germany, and that is actually a topic of the dissertation of a graduate student in the English department at Carnegie Mellon University, Elizabeth Heffelfinger, whose dissertation committee I am sitting on. The Americanization of Germany is something that has been going on for a long time. We talked about *Dancing on the Volcano*, in that we had an article on the Americanization of Weimar Germany, which was a big topic back then. One could go back even further in history to the nineteenth century and consider what American culture—or perceptions of American culture—had already done to German culture. Obviously there is a quantitative shift after 1945, because suddenly there are hundreds of thousands of American troops on German soil; American political power is trying to reshape a democratic, western polity. So there was even more Americanization of German culture than there had been before. Nevertheless, it is important to be cautious and not simply state that America simply created postwar West Germany, but to allow the Germans a certain kind of agency—or allow for the possibility of a certain kind of agency—that the Germans exerted on themselves. I would urge that we not think in absolutes; that we think in subtle rather than absolute shifts.

As far as the *Kulturnation* and the role it may play in the Europeanization and the Americanization of Germany, I would say that this is an issue for the future to decide. I do not perceive that the *Kulturnation* will disappear. I was at the GSA meeting last week, and there was a talk there by a historian about “remembering Germany,” with the idea being that Germany has ceased to exist or something along those lines. It sounds rhetorically effective—impressive, dramatic. But I am not at all convinced that Germany has “ceased to exist,” either politically or culturally. There are still many people who are under the impression that there are still Germans out there! My sense is that the way that the European Union is coming together, it is trying to come together as a kind of democratic group of national cultures that still want to retain their cultural uniqueness. I think that that is good—we do not want a kind of homogenized Europe. One of the things that makes Europe so exciting is that you have such diversity in such a relatively small geographic space—even within each nation. Certainly Germany has all sorts of diversity within Germany

itself, and other nations do too.

Are these individual cultures going to disappear? I do not think so. Simply the fact that there is a coming together on the political level does not necessarily mean that all of these cultural distinctions will disappear. German will continue to be the language of 80 million people in Germany, 8 million people in Austria, and 5 million people in Switzerland. These people will continue to have a history that will guarantee a certain kind of cultural continuity (a theme that we have already discussed). What makes a nation? Part of it is its history. As long as German history is what it is (or is perceived as what it is) there will still be a community of people who consider themselves to be “German.” I do not see any direct shift to the disappearance of Germany or of the *Kulturnation*; if anything, I think that these cultural questions will be more and more discussed. I think that we see that in the United States as well. Why is that? Part of it is that postmodern politics, if you will, is very much about these issues of culture. How do we live together? What kind of a community do we want to be? What kinds of symbols do we work with? What is important to us? What are our values? I do see a continuation of the *Kulturnation*, but I cannot predict what shape it will take.

FOCUS: A related question: *Kulturnation* as “third path.” I am thinking of a rejection on the part of many Germans of what they perceive as a materialistic, consumer-driven American culture. Do you see that sort of Americanization—the import of American culture, of pop culture—being countered by the German *Kulturnation*?

Brockmann: As a kind of resistance? Yes. I think that we are already seeing that to some extent. There is a chapter in my book called the “Rebirth of Tragedy,” where I talk about Botho Strauß’s controversial essay “Anschwellender Bocksgesang” and a couple of other conservative cultural critiques that appeared in the 1990s; I think that you are already seeing that. Not that you did not see that happen before 1989, but I think that after 1989 you have that renewed space opened up for that kind of critique. The problem is that it is not just a question of Americanization, because there is a resistance to that in the United States as well. If you think of George Steiner, the English literary critic whom Botho Strauß very much admires (he actually wrote an introduction to the German translation of Steiner’s book *Real Presences*), he is addressing many of these

same issues. Allan Bloom in the 1980s talking about the "closing of the American mind" is a good example in this country. These things are being addressed in the United States as well, the issues of cultural decay and commercialization. In Germany, it is called "Americanization;" here, it is called "globalization." I think in some ways they are the same phenomenon. I think in Germany you do have a *Kulturnation* as a kind of antipode to this sort of Americanization, but I think that you see a similar phenomenon in other countries, including the United States.

FOCUS: If the 1970s and the 1980s saw a decline of "nation" by liberal thinkers and a defense of *Kultur* by conservatives, what did the 1990s bring, and what will the future hold for the German *Kulturnation*?

Brockmann: I think that the big story of the 1990s is that of "normalization." What you had last year in Germany was quite extraordinary: it was the war in Kosovo, with German military forces actually flying missions over Kosovo. This is the first time since the end of World War II that you have had troops of the Federal Republic of Germany fighting in a foreign war. This is very significant. Now, of course, they are doing this within the NATO alliance, but nevertheless, this is an extremely significant development. One of the concepts that is underwriting this development is this concept of normality; that it is finally time for Germany to be treated as a nation like the United States, like France, like Great Britain. Normalization such as this usually occurs in the peacekeeping—or the peace *making*—actions. If you think of the ways that the nineties began with the Gulf War and the massive German protests against the mere possibility of any German involvement in the Gulf War in 1991, and the end of the nineties in 1999 with surprisingly little protest against the actual involvement of Germany itself in Kosovo, I do think that you see a clear trajectory of the acceptance of national status or the status of the nation-state in a kind of normalization. The discussion that went on in Germany about the war in Kosovo was still very "abnormal," because it revolved entirely around questions of morality. One of the things that one noticed in those discussions was that unlike American and French policy makers, German policy makers did not talk about *national* interests; they talked about preventing another Auschwitz in Kosovo. That is still an entirely moral argument, and that is not the primary way that the war was justified in other Western nations; it was justified there primarily by national interests. Precisely within

this discussion of morality you still have some very telltale traces of very unusual and "abnormal" kinds of situations. Politically speaking, normalization is the major trajectory of the 1990s. As I say in my book, I do not think that notions of normality are necessarily either left wing or right wing. Such notions should be treated skeptically, but not just simply condemned. The desire to be a "normal" nation is not a reprehensible thing; I just ask what does it even mean in this day and age to be a "normal" nation? Just as we do not necessarily accept the idea of a "normal" person—what does that mean, to "norm" people? Why should there be "normal" nations?

FOCUS: In *Literature and German Reunification*, you discuss how East German writers have lamented their difficult adjustment to the consumer culture of the West. If East German writers are outsiders in the expanded Federal Republic, how will German literature be received outside of Germany, e.g., in the United States?

Brockmann: I think that high literature is always something of an elite discourse, here, in Germany, and elsewhere. When you talk about "reception," those who are receiving the literature in Germany are already in the elite, and then by the time it gets over here, particularly if it is in German, we are talking about even more of an elite: an elite group of people who are educated to study and understand German culture. German translation practices are wonderful, and there is still money in Germany for translating books from all sorts of languages into German, so it can be received in Germany. In the United States, it is much more difficult to get books translated into English. We have fewer books—period—published in the United States than in Germany. We are going to continue to be talking about an elite of people in this country who are able and willing to receive and discuss German literature. I do not think that we should be under any illusion about that. We are part of an elite, expert discourse, and our job is to mediate between this foreign culture and our American culture. That is how I perceive our cultural function here in the United States as Germanists: it is taking our expertise and trying to represent this foreign culture and its discourses within our own American terms.

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