COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND CULTURAL CONSTRAINT: 
HOLOCAUST MYTH AND RATIONALITY IN GERMAN POLITICS

Jeffrey K. Olick
Columbia University

Daniel Levy
Columbia University

Using a case study of official representations of the Holocaust in the Federal Republic of Germany, we address the ways in which collective memory constrains political claim-making. In contrast to the commonly held views that the past is either durable or malleable, we characterize collective memory in political culture as an ongoing process of negotiation through time. We distinguish between mythic and rational political-cultural logics, and delineate mechanisms through which these logics operate as constraints: taboo and prohibition, duty and requirement. With these conceptual distinctions, we describe transformations in the memory of the Holocaust as a constraint in German political culture.

In the spring of 1981, West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt was returning from a trip to Saudi Arabia during which he had negotiated the sale of West German Leopard 2 tanks to the Saudi government. The issue was especially delicate, not only because of the usual problems of Western Mideast policy but also because of Germany’s “special” relationship with Israel (Deutschkron 1991; Feldman 1984; Wolffsohn 1988). Memory of the Holocaust had always complicated Germany’s stance on Israeli problems, and the idea of Israel’s sworn enemy acquiring West German tanks raised the hackles of Germany watchers the world over. Schmidt, however, was recalcitrant. For him, the opportunity to deal with another government without regard to the German past was especially important for the “normalization” of German politics that he sought both domestically and internationally.

Angered by Israeli and world reactions, Schmidt reportedly proclaimed that West German foreign policy should no longer be “held hostage” to Auschwitz (Wolffsohn 1988:42).

From the immediate postwar period to the present, powerful images of the Nazi past have shaped West Germany. Virtually every institutional arrangement and substantive policy is a response, in some sense, to Germany’s memory of those fateful years. The Holocaust, moreover, has long been the standard for evaluating German political activity; indeed, as some critics have complained, Germany has a past that, for whatever reason, will not pass away (Nolte 1987).

Both Schmidt’s purported statement and the general lament that the burdens of the past reach inappropriately into the present are vernacular claims about how the past affects us, or in more sociological terms, how collective memory works. West German commentators and politicians have often regarded the Nazi past as an ineluctable burden, onehetted by and working through the mystical force of taboo. This view is similar to scholarly approaches that emphasize the enduring power of traditions to shape the present (Shils 1981).

In contrast, many theorists of social memory have favored a presentist approach, seeing images of the past as the strategic handmaidens of contemporary needs (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). Much recent work on social memory, however, argues for a more...
complex view of the relation between past and present in shaping collective memory (Schönfield 1992; Schwartz 1991; Trouillot 1995; Zerubavel 1994): Collective memory, as in Ferguson's ([1986] 1991) philosophical critique, should be seen as an active process of sense-making through time.

In this paper we analyze the so-called taboos of the German past in order to understand more precisely how the remembered past shapes and constrains the present, and vice versa. What does it mean to say that the Holocaust creates taboos in German politics? How do enduring images of the past interact with present needs to shape political opportunities and limits? In what different ways can the remembered past constrain the present, and under what circumstances are such constraints transformable?

NEW POLITICAL CULTURE ANALYSIS AND THE INTERPRETIVE TURN

In the following discussion, we propose a distinction between different kinds of cultural constraints: those which operate "mythically" (often associated with the power of the past over the present) and those which operate "instrumentally" (often associated with the power of the present over the past). We make this distinction in order to understand more clearly the operation of collective memory—the conceptually and politically mediated past. To do this, we turn to recent work on political culture, which has problematized the issue of cultural constraint in a way that can illuminate some of the nuancer features of German struggles with memory and of collective memory in general.

In classic works on political development, political scientists described political culture

1 Both political culture and collective memory are overgeneralizing concepts. Political cultures and collective memories are always multiple, diverse, and fluid, with different institutional fields (Bourdieu 1993) operating according to different rules and interacting with each other in different and shifting ways. We refer mainly to elite public discourse, although we situate that discourse within others as much as possible. We make no assumption that elite versions are the political culture or collective memory per se, only that they are dominant versions of each.

as aggregate patterns of psychological orientations toward political outcomes (Almond and Verba 1963, 1980). Political culture analysis, therefore, is an attempt to measure the subjective and to argue for its importance in political life—namely for its role in maintaining democratic institutions. In an alternative view, attitudes were seen as epiphenomenal, as mere expressions of (or at the very least tools for) the more real—that is, objective—social structure.

In recent years, interpretive social scientists have reinvigorated the concept of political culture (Baker 1990; Berezin 1994, Brint 1994; Hunt 1984, Samuels 1993). In contrast to older reductionist or instrumental approaches, Baker’s political culture analysis centers on culture as a context of meaning. Culture is seen as subjective, as a backdrop of meaning and understanding through which people make sense of their world and their interactions with others. This cultural context is seen as shaping individual and collective actions, but not determining them entirely. Instead, people are seen as able to negotiate and redefine cultural meanings as they act and interact with others.

In the interpretive approach, political culture is seen as a more dynamic and fluid concept, one that is constantly being re-created and re-contextualized through ongoing interactions and conversations. This is in contrast to the more static and fixed view of political culture in the past, which often emphasized the role of tradition and inherited structures in shaping political life. In the interpretive approach, political culture is seen as a fluid and evolving concept, one that is always in the process of being constructed and re-constructed through ongoing interactions and conversations.

COLLECTIVE MEMORIES ARE STRUCTURED IN WAY INDIVIDUAL RECOGNITION, VALUES, AND BELIEFS OF POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS, AND THEREFORE, TO LOOK AT POLITICAL CULTURE AS A WAY TO UNDERSTAND POLITICAL ACTORS IN THEIR ACTION. POSSIBLE CLAIMS AND THEIR EFFECTS ON THEIR ENVIRONMENT.

Political culture, as a symbolic structuring that is always a context for political action, the cultural model is the attempt to describe the shared values and logics of political institutions. This is a more particularistic view of culture, thus can be made using more specific survey analysis; inductively, observed, and in terms of culture. As a cultural method, interpretation methodology is to recover the social structures, or changing rules that are culturally made by us as particularistic moments.

Central to our efforts in constructing the German past and present, and the recognition that political culture is a part of static systems—that is, cultural histories. Political culture is a historical process, not a deterministic one, but an on-and-off-always "new" process.

2 Although political opinion is often seen as a stable thing across all political systems, public opinion is subjective, intersubjective; they both influence and are influenced by political institutions and public opinion analysis. Political culture is not just a cultural artifact, but a dynamic and ongoing process, constantly being redefined and re-contextualized through ongoing interactions and conversations. This is in contrast to the more static and fixed view of political culture in the past, which often emphasized the role of tradition and inherited structures in shaping political life. Instead, political culture is seen as a fluid and evolving concept, one that is always in the process of being constructed and re-constructed through ongoing interactions and conversations.

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are structured in ways that transcend individual cognition, volition, and control. To understand political action as meaningful, therefore, is to look at the claims made by political actors in terms of the structure of possible claims and the structured possibility of their effects.

Political culture, as newly conceived, is the symbolic structuring of the claim-making that is always a constitutive part of any political moment; the analysis of political culture is the attempt to understand the patterns and logics of political claim-making both for particular settings and generally. Political culture thus can be measured only crudely by survey analysis; instead, it must be excavated, observed, and interpreted in its own terms as culture. As a result, we employ an interpretive methodology here, one that seeks to recover the sometimes hidden and always-changing rules that constrain (and are shaped by) claims made by political actors in particular moments.7

Central to our effort to understand how the German past and present shape each other is the recognition that political cultures are not static systems—that is, structures without histories. Political culture is always a historical process, not a determinate set of relations or a once and for all definition of the situation. Claim-making by actors in political contexts is conditioned by significant pasts as well as by meaningful presents; it is always path-dependent, though not necessarily in obvious ways. This point calls our attention to historical events of definitive importance, to how broad parameters are fixed or transformed at particular moments, and to how those moments manifest themselves or are invoked differently in subsequent contexts. Conceiving of collective memory as part of a political cultural process thus remedies the presuppositional tendency to view it either as an unchanging and definitive past or as pure strategy, always maliable in the present.

**MYTHIC AND RATIONAL LOGICS OF CULTURAL CONSTRAINT**

As mentioned above, political commentators in Germany frequently characterize the German past as imposing taboos. Often they do so to emphasize both that a particular image of the Nazi past is considered sacred (one in which Germany is a uniquely horrible and burdened historical perpetrator) and that this image works in inescapable (read “illegitimate”) ways. Below, we seek to redeem the insight provided by this taboo label while avoiding the more polemical slant; the role of collective memory is more highly differentiated than such a blanket characterization allows. To do this, we specify two ways in which collective memory operates as a constraint: by proscription (through taboos and prohibitions) and by prescription (through duties and requirements).

**Proscription: Taboos and Prohibitions**

The concept of taboo as articulated by anthropologists includes, first of all, reference to some sort of avoidance practice (Douglas 1966; Pelinka 1994; Steiner 1956). All societies specify objects, conditions, people, practices, topics and ideas that are avoided under certain circumstances. Moreover, such avoidance is not merely practical or morally-neutral; rather, the designated object is treated as dangerous, disgusting, dirty, morally repugnant, contagious, degenerate, or as embodying some combination of these qualities.
Another core sense of taboo concerns its contravention. Violating a taboo is not simply an error or an expense. It is a transgression or a pollution. Under some circumstances it is socially (or literally) deadly; under others it is survivable, but not without some redemptive or cleansing effort.

These usages show that certain cultural elements operate as mechanisms of demarcation and constraint, and that these operations play pivotal roles in maintaining the symbolic boundaries specified by a given society (Douglas 1966). Because taboos help set terms of discourse and boundaries of identity, they are central to the major concern of political culture analysis: the constraints on (that is, the structuring of) claim making in concrete settings.

Nonetheless, we argue older conceptualizations must be refined in two ways before they can contribute to the problem of collective memory as cultural constraint. First, in other conceptualizations, taboos are understood mainly in terms of social reproduction of already constituted and coherent systems. In contrast, we argue that we need to historicize meaning systems, to analyze them in terms of constitutive and transformative moments. We emphasize, therefore, the temporal dimension of taboos and their enactments. Taboos may be foundational, but to varying degrees they are developing structures. The Holocaust may create taboos in West German political culture, but these unfold along complex trajectories through time and space.

Second, much literature treats taboos as if it were part of so-called "deep structure" (Simmel 1950). According to this view, taboos manifest themselves as prohibitions in concrete settings (Friedrich 1946). We disagree with this mapping of deep structure manifests enactment onto the concept of taboo and prohibition. Taboos and prohibitions are not levels (deep structures versus manifestations) of the same phenomenon, but refer to distinct varieties of cultural constraint.

Taboos operate through a mythic logic; such logic is especially important in defining interests because it demarcates identities and mobilizes passion about them in persuasive, ritualistic forms. Taboos involve moral principles and definitional claims that are beyond debate, not because no alternatives exist, but because these issues are not decided by rational argument. Taboos are usually obdurate: They may change gradually or may be transformed dramatically, but they make their claims as absolutes. One does not debate with a taboo; one either obeys or transgresses its prohibitions.

Prohibitions, in contrast to taboos, operate through appeals to calculative rationality and exogenously constituted interests. Their method is rationality, and their goals are mundane. Here the rules of advantage and maneuver apply. A major difference between taboos and prohibitions is that in the case of prohibitions positions and plans are abandoned when they are no longer tactically useful or when they are refuted with valid arguments. Prohibition is a politics of exigency, not of passion.

**Prescription: Duties and Requirements**

Constraint, of course, involves more than prohibition. Without some ordering of the social flux, action is impossible. By constraining the range of options for actors in situations, culture also enables them to act in the first place—to make constitutive and instrumental claims. By extension, we can imagine positive correlates to taboo and prohibition—prescriptions in addition to proscriptions. A taboo prescribes (defines what is absolutely unacceptable) whereas a duty or an obligation prescribes what is absolutely necessary. A prohibition restricts; a requirement enforces. The relation of these concepts is displayed in Figure 1.3

In contrast to the common arguments that the Holocaust is taboo or creates taboos in German politics, we believe it is useful to specify and differentiate the Holocaust's concrete operation and development, and the concomitant over it as a constraint in German political culture. Thus we distinguish between taboos and prohibitions, duties and requirements, and more generally between the

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3 The gap between the upper and the lower parts of Figure 1 indicates that contravention is not strictly a type of cultural constraint; rather, it is a response to, or transformation of, cultural constraint. Thus contravention is of a different order from, but is related to, prescription and prohibition.

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COLLECTIVE MEMORY: A METHODOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

**Operation**

- Proscriptions: What may not be done
- Prescriptions: What must be done

**Contravention**

- How the constraint is overcome

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Figure 1. Types of Cultural Constraint

The operation of the past as cultural constraint. Below, contravention of cultural constraint in German political culture, setting the stage for an understanding that these two as well as the two above must be reconciled is crucial for untangling German political culture through time.3

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**HOLOCAUST MYTHS AND NATIONAL RATIONALITY IN MODERN GERMAN POLITICAL CULTURE**

Although the Holocaust is often discussed as a theological moment in the German consciousness, it certainly makes up important pressures on German national identity. As national ungraspability, the Holocaust exerts its power in German politics. The following outline will, in the sections that follow, introduce the mythology.

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Strategy and Morality in German Rehabilitation

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the founding Federal Republic was battered by many serious problems including the war, the Cold War, and the Nuremberg trials. In addition, it faced the challenge of the physical devastation, a

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The following account is a summary of a forthcoming article, and statements by government agencies concerning the Holocaust in West German history. It is based on our examples from that material and on their value in illustrating different kinds of cultural constraint.
operation of the past as rational and mythic constraint. Below, concrete examples illustrate the operations of the two types of constraint in German political culture. We argue that understanding the differences between the two—as well as their perceptual overlap—is crucial for untangling the complexities of German political culture as it is realized through time.4

HOLOCAUST MYTH AND RATIONALITY IN GERMAN POLITICAL CULTURE

Although the Holocaust is frequently viewed as a theological moment beyond all comprehension, it certainly makes demands and exerts pressures on German society; despite its moral ungraspability, its operation in German politics is not incalculable. The Holocaust exerts its power in German politics, as we will see, both mythically and rationally.

Strategy and Morality in German Rehabilitation

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the emerging Federal Republic of Germany encountered many serious problems deriving from the Nazi past. In addition to the pervasive physical devastation, Germans faced a moral crisis of perhaps unprecedented proportions. Allied occupation forces confronted the defeated and destroyed German populace with the crimes it had supported, in settings including early forced tours of concentration camps, "reeducation" propaganda, and the trials of leading political and military figures at Nuremberg. All Germans in the Western zones of occupation who had been of legal age during the Nazi period were required to fill out questionnaires that were used as the basis for "denazification" proceedings. A "bad" classification was supposed to mean exclusion from all kinds of public service, although this system was viewed as a travesty by practically all sides (Brochhagen 1994; Friedrich 1994).

Despite notorious cases in which former Nazis of various stripe managed to gain political power in the new government, Germany's new leaders had largely opposed the Nazis. A central feature of the new Federal Republic's political culture was its anti-Nazi stance, at least officially. The first major manifestation of this commitment was the Basic Law of the Federal Republic, which went into effect in September 1949. In the

4 The following account is based on a systematic survey and analysis of all major issues for, and statements by, government incumbents and agencies concerning the Nazi past over 40 years of West German history (Oliek 1998). We choose our examples from that more systematic study for their value in illustrating our conceptual argument about different kinds of cultural constraint.

Many Germans regarded the entire process as capricious. "Big fish" often escaped punishment because the requirements for prosecution were stricter and the political pressures greater, while "small fish" were more easily given a "bad" classification. On the other hand, the system was widely corrupt, and many managed to arrange dubious excisions. Furthermore, the Allied attitude toward German guilt changed dramatically as the cold war began; they saw a shift away from guilt as essential to winning Germans over to the West, and earlier politics of blame and punishment thereby became inexpedient.
words of constitutional historian Jürgen Seifert, 'The Basic Law... manifests a rejection of the past. It was created as a bulwark that was supposed to make impossible what happened in Germany at the end of the Weimar Republic and after 1933' (Seifert 1989:30).

The Basic Law may be read as a theory of German history. Through both its form and its content it identified "causes" of the so-called "catastrophe" of the German past. These included, most prominently, electoral provisions that had allowed for fragmentation at the political center, an inadequate federalism that had enabled a concentration of power, insufficient means to fight radicalism, and provisions on human rights expressed only toward the end of the older Weimar document. The Basic Law of the Federal Republic and subsequent legislation solved these problems de jure.

Indeed, the rhetoric of early leaders—especially that of the venerable Chancellor Konrad Adenauer—emphasized that these constitutional provisions rectified the problems that had allowed Germany to be "seduced" by "bands of criminals." This new constitution, Adenauer argued, combined with a more general commitment to "Western" values and institutions and with reparations to Israel (finalized in 1953), protected the new Germany from the problems of its past. These institutional and political-cultural reorientations established the Federal Republic of Germany as a "reliable neighbor," a central metaphor of the center-right government of the 1950s.

West Germany as a policy could not do certain things because of the Nazi past. At first, the Federal Republic could not have an army. When the Cold War began, the Allies moved quickly to rearm West Germany as a bulwark against the Soviets. Even with a new military, however, belligerence or anything but defensive operations within the territory of NATO (formed later) was strictly out of the question. As we will see, the complexities of a German military role became especially poignant in international conflicts in the early 1990s, specifically in debates over Germany's contribution to the Gulf War and to United Nations peacekeeping missions elsewhere.

In addition, knowledge of Nazi atrocities as well as the standards of the "community of nations" made anti-Semitism anathema to the new state. West Germany was constrained to support Israel unconditionally, although frequently it did so only under various forms of duress or with substantial complaints (Deutschkron 1991; Feldman 1984; Wolfsohn 1988). Throughout the 1950s, West Germany worked hard to establish diplomatic relations with Israel, though Israel continually refused. Only after the Eichmann trial of 1961—in many respects a catalytic moment for Israel in accepting the Holocaust as part of its history (Segev 1991)—did a sufficient number of Israeli leaders feel ready for such "normal" relations with West Germany. By that time, however, West Germany was caught between two conflicting imperatives: its "special" responsibility to Israel (which led the Federal Republic to supply Israel secretly with weapons after 1960) and the so-called Hallstein doctrine (the principle that West Germany would not entertain relations with countries that recognized the existence of East Germany).

When the weapons deal between Israel and West Germany was discovered, Egypt sought to manipulate West Germany by threatening to recognize East Germany. Leaders of the Federal Republic pleased with Arab diplomats to allow for Germany's "special" responsibility, but Egypt nonetheless invited East German leader Walter Ulbricht for a state visit. West Germany then announced its intention to establish formal diplomatic relations with Israel—Israel now wanted relations as a sign of support against Arab countries and viewed relations as Germany's moral obligation. Indeed, West German leaders justified the move overwhelmingly in moral terms rather than in the context of international brinksmanship that ultimately led to it, the move obviously involved elements of both.

Over the years, many academic and societal programs also were made difficult by the presence of the past. Anthropology, for instance, was taught (roughly, "racial" and biological) history in schools, and Nazi literature was still available at bookstores, in libraries, and through publishers in Germany through the 1980s.

These constraints were not the same, however, as the "local" logics. Some institutional rationalities (material or ideal ends) were constitutive and not subject to discussion altogether. For example, the Federal Republic pursued images of a "reconstructed" past. These democratic presentations of regaining and coherence were institutional "remembrance" to narrate historical performance as standing as rational authorities. An issue such as remembering, could be expressed through rationality.

On the one hand, it is sometimes said that such a gesture in itself would not have gone far before a Nazi past. The "voluntary" programs of a preceding regime were not something the program had to deal with. Adenauer and other leaders argued that such a gesture was necessary, not only for the nation's sake, but also for the nation's sake. Adenauer recognized the importance of a gesture, even if we were too late. It was crucial to see it as a whole. The program's subsequent steps could be explained entirely as an extension of the first step. Such a rationality then led to a change of course. Symbols taken and effectively put through unanticipated actions.

Although many historians (mostly detractors) argue that the Germans into this among others, provided that this was not the case, the gesture is still an important step in reestablishing its place as a nation. The majority of the public approved of the plan, as did Adenauer's cabinet.
stance, was tainted by Nazi Rassenlehre (roughly, "racial studies"); euthanasia could not even be discussed because of how the Nazis had used it: and medical ethics, especially concerning the rules of genetic experimentation, have been even more problematic in Germany than elsewhere over the last decades.

These constrained topics and activities are not the same, however, nor do they draw on the same logics. Sometimes they draw on instrumental rationality, aiming at either material or ideal ends; at other times they invoke constitutive and mythic foundations or evade discussion altogether. Early in the history of the Federal Republic, West German leaders pursued images of the Nazi past and the democratic present with the explicit purpose of regaining and expanding sovereignty. The institutional "remedies," as well as many rhetorical performances, may be easily understood as rational attempts to gain these ends. An issue such as reparations to Israel, for instance, can be explained in terms of calculative rationality.

On the one hand, the international weight of such a gesture is clear enough. Never before had a state undertaken such an extensive "voluntary" program to atone for the deeds of a preceding regime. On the other hand, the program had a clear moral dimension. Adenauer and other supporters of the measure argued that some such gesture was necessary, not only for cynical raisons d'état but also for the nation's moral stature in its own eyes. Adenauer rarely failed to convince when he claimed a pedagogical purpose. But even if we were to characterize reparations to Israel as a wholly strategic maneuver, the action's subsequent life as a symbol cannot be explained entirely in terms of the instrumental rationality that might have brought it about. Symbols take on lives of their own through unanticipated consequences, unavoidable polysemy, and their subsequent power, which is irreducible to provenance. No matter how intensely disputed the plan had been at the time, later West German leaders referred to these reparations as a shining moment of German national rectitude.

In the presence of material restitution and institutional realignments (constitutional protections coupled with a vociferous commitment to "Western" values and security policies), leaders of the new state acted as if the concrete burdens of the Nazi period had been remedied. Indeed, the rhetoric of the 1950s is often surprisingly impudent. When occasion arose to address the Nazi past, Adenauer and his associates always emphasized that this was no longer a concern for Germany. Any other position, they argued, would imply an acknowledgment of collective guilt. On occasion of anti-Semitic outbreaks, Adenauer belittled accusations that there were any serious anti-Semites in Germany.

It is a long-standing commonplace of political commentary and contemporary historiography that the 1950s was a period of

6 Indeed, such an acknowledgment had been a major discussion point in negotiations over the Wiedergutmachung (reparations). Israeli leader David Ben-Gurion insisted on it as essential. Adenauer steadfastly refused (Deutschkron 1991).

7 In response to attacks on the synagogue in Cologne and the general wave of anti-Semitic vandalism in the winter of 1958–1959, Adenauer spoke as follows in a special radio address delivered on January 16th, 1960: "To all of my German fellow citizens I say: If you catch a hoodlum anywhere, punish him on the spot and give him a sound thrashing. That is the punishment he has earned." Adenauer's point was that these attacks were the work of children and provided no insight into, or evidence of, genuine anti-Semitism. He went on to dismiss concerns abroad about the state of German society. "To our opponents abroad and doubters abroad I say, the unanimity of the entire German people in the condemnation of anti-Semitism and of National Socialism has shown itself in the most complete and strongest way imaginable. . . ." One assumes he is referring to solid rejection of extremist parties in elections. . . . The German people has shown that these thoughts and tendencies have no foundation in it." In light of the events that spurred this statement, Adenauer's claims appear to be at least somewhat overconfident.
avoidance and denial of the past (Greiffen- 
hagen and Greiffenhagen 1993; Mitscherlich 
and Mitscherlich 1967). Some of this 
behavior is clearly instrumental rationality: 
When the past makes one look bad (and thus 
restricts one's present possibilities), one em-
phasizes the present or the future. Much of 
this, however, extends to deeper issues in-
volved with identity formation and the prob-
lematics of self-understanding.

For most people, the extent of Nazi inhu-
morality was sufficient reason to reject official 
anti-Semitism, but privately most Germans 
were preoccupied with their own difficult 
situations and losses, and old attachments 
died hard. The degree of self-absorption 
and denial in the face of horrors "committed 
in the name of Germany" is, however, diffi-
cult to appreciate even given the circum-
stances. Indeed, at this early point, there 
was a radical disjuncture in many respects 
between the abilities of the government and 
of the general population to "come to terms" 
with the Nazi period. The government 
thought it had to be careful not to fall too far 
out of step with the people's attitudes. This 
is one reason Adenauer gave for rejecting 
theses of collective guilt: How could he gain 
the necessary domestic support for his new 
government if it loaded significant segments 
of the population with a burden of guilt, 
either legal or moral? One reason for denying 
collective guilt is that it was strategically a 
disadvantage; another is that it was an inac-
ceptable proposition for an expertly equiv-
ocating and evasive population.

At any rate, the conditions of the Federal 
Republic's early years—some of the result 
prepossess and persistent cultural 
frames, some unintentional, and some 
products of rational planning set the rules 
of the game for memory and culture for the 
next half-century. The unwillingness to ac-
cept collective guilt was not simply a ra-

tional attempt to avoid badgering, but reflected 
Germans' inability to understand their own 
implication in what had happened. This is 
not to say that collective guilt is a philoso-

ychally defensible position; we believe it is 
not. Most people, however, did not reject 
it out of philosophical conviction; rather, 
there is widespread evidence that many Ger-
man people—often obsessed with their own 

circumstances—could not even imagine why 
anyone should think that collective guilt was 
appropriate. 

10 In recent years, some scholars have 
disagreed with this judgment. From the 
center, Wehr and Steinbach (1984) argue that West Germany did 
an admirable job of prosecuting Nazi criminals 
within the rule of law and its structures. From 
the left, Lulke (1983) states that a certain de-
gree of collective amnesia was essential for the 
legitimacy of the new state in the 1950s. Even 
more polemically, Kell (1993) argues, contrary 
to the common view, that early West German 
leaders were overwhelmingly preoccupied with 
< contrast the past, although he equates men-

ing the past (even to deny it) with "master-
ing" it. Also see Mueller (1996).

11 A 1947 survey in West Germany included 
the statement that national socialism was a 
good idea but realized: 35 percent of the respondents 
agreed. In 1955, 48 percent of respondents agreed 
that without the war, Hitler would have been one of 
Germany's greatest statesmen (Kissmann 
1967). As recently as 1995, when respondents to 
a poll were asked "Were the actions of the 
Germans from the East just as great a crime against 
humanity as the Holocaust against the Jews?" 36 
percent of all Germans (40 percent of those over 
age 65) answered yes (Moeller 1996).

12 In 1930 the German Jewish expatriate phi-
losopher Hannah Arendt documented this phe-
nomenon in the American Jewish magazine 
Commentary. She described the self absorbed 
and defensive reactions she encountered when she 
visited a trip in Germany that she was a Ger-
man Jew:

This is usually followed by a little embarrassed 
pace, and then comes—not a personal question, such as: "Where did you go after you left Ger-
many?" no sign of sympathy, such as: "What hap-
pended to your family?"—but a deluge of stories 
about how Germans have suffered (true enough, 
but beside the point); and if the object of this little 
experiment happens to be educated and intelli-
gent, he will proceed to draw up a bal-
ance between German suffering and the su-
mother of others. (Arendt 1959:345)

13 The differences and the competition between 
official and vernacular memory form a central 
theme in social memory studies (see, for ex-
ample, Bodnar 1992; Borken 1991; Wagner-Paetzel 
people confronting that (is, not confronting) 
the past, see Mitscherlich and Mitscherlich's (1967) 
famous argument that Germans after the war suf-
fitted a pathological "inability to mourn." 

14 In a 1951 survey, only 32 percent of the 
population answered that they thought Germany 

The Myths and Logics of Perpetration and Denial

The framing of history has always been evi-
dent in a number of European countries 
developed in regard to their recent past. Ac-
knowledgements are prohibited in partic-
ular, but they are incorporated in the general 
analysis of mythic structures, some of which 
include the "zero hour" and structures produced 
by the "true and justifiable" practices.

In an extensive study of the Nazi period, 
Ober (1993) documents the extent of West German 
leadership's revulsion. That study reveals 
that the perpetuation of the alleged "catastrophe" 
was insufficient support for denouncing 
the actions of the Weimar Republic against the 
Jews. The perpetual and extensive denial 
of religious intolerance and, obviously, the 
"true and justifiable" actions was all too obvious. 
This is not to say that this denial was 
utterly "mastered," as referred to Bergen-Belsen. In 
fact, it is still hotly debated. In particular, 
the Semitic as racism has been and is being 
addressed as a taboo subject. Indeed, its absen-
cence from the public discourse is a 

This avoidance of the Nazi past as racism, although 
instrumental elements, is an important part 
of a taboo about the recent past. For years it has emerged in different contexts, but the 
absence is difficult to reconcile in the pre-

15 An analogous observation in literature on 
Nazi period. The study of anti-Semitism has been 
perlect, even before Daniel Goldhagen's book. Whatever the reason, it has been 
Goldhagen's controversial book is that it was the first to find this lack of refer-
ence to unsettling truths, as much as its absence in schol-

The Myths and Logics of Identity: Perpetration and Denial

The framing of historical obligations is quite evident in a number of proscriptions that developed in regard to the representation of the past. Acknowledgments of collective guilt are prohibited in part on rational grounds: but they are incomprehensible without an analysis of mythic structures in German culture, some of which bridged the divide of the so-called "zero hour" of 1945. These mythic structures produced instrumentally unaccountable practices.

In an extensive study of official representations of the Nazi past in West Germany, Olick (1992) documented the various ways West German leaders discussed the Nazi period. That study reveals a peculiar phenomenon: Of all the accounts of the causes of the German "catasrophe"—including extremism, insufficient support for the institutions of the Weimar Republic, economic pressures, criminal usurpation, unemployment, and religious intolerance among others—the most obvious cause, anti-Jewish racism, is rarely mentioned. This is true regardless of the context of the speech—from the Bundestag to Bergen-Belsen. In all of the analyses offered in public by West German leaders, anti-Semitism as racism (rather than as simple Christian Jewish "misunderstanding") is rarely addressed as a cause of German problems. Indeed, its absence is so extensive that the avoidance can be said to be ritualistic.

This avoidance of mentioning anti-Semitism as racism, although it contains some instrumental elements, is an excellent example of taboos about the German past. Over the years it has emerged in different ways in different contexts, but the avoidance is remarkably consistent. In the early years, anti-Semitism in the present was quite simply denied. The anti-Semitism of the past was portrayed as a minority view, an aberration, now eliminated, that did not warrant serious consideration in other than general terms. Anti-Semitism had been solved with human rights provisions, reparations, and an official racial policy. Indeed, early leaders of the Federal Republic were remarkably pro-Israel. This was not simply the result of a wish to "make good". Visitors to Israel (at first unofficial and clandestine, later official and touristic) often reported that they were deeply impressed by what the Israelis had accomplished. In comments made after such trips, Israelis were valorized in terms previously reserved for the German "master race" (Olick 1992).

The mythic logic involved here is made even clearer by the reversals that occurred in the late 1960s. Until the Six-Day War of 1967, the German left, as well as the center and the right, supported Israel unequivocally as the oppressed underdog. When Israel became an occupying force, however, many segments of the German left quickly and totally abandoned support for Israel, as if they had been suddenly freed from an unwanted burden. Indeed, this is a common characterization of the so-called "sixty-eights." In the late 1960s, the student left began to discuss and investigate the crimes of their parents' generation. Public discussion regarding the past was opened up. This process was not quite that simple, however: Such discussion was possible only because it fit with the younger generation's rejection of their parents' entire world.

Such vehement condemnation and general interest regarding the German past was possible only because the younger generation viewed itself as fundamentally different from the older generation and as unconnected to its crimes (Bude 1992; Klessmann 1987; Moeller 1996). Yet the burdens of that experience, whether acknowledged or repressed,

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15 An analogous observation that the scholarly literature on Nazism pays insufficient attention to anti-Semitism is that at the heart of the controversy over Daniel Goldhagen's (1996) recent book Whatever the merits of the positions in the "Goldhagen controversy" (Schoeps 1996), we find this lack of reference in political discourse even more clear and certainly more important than its absence in scholarly discourse.
had maintained the foundation for official philo-Semitism. The left of the late 1960s and early 1970s generalized the burdens of the past away from the specific debts understood by their parents, and apparently they seized upon the Six-Day War as an occasion to remove any special claims concerning Israel.

This delegitimation and the removal of special status for Israel and the debt to Jews was as strange as the shift from anti- to philo-Semitism in the early years of the Federal Republic. This second generation's confrontation with the Nazi past resulted in a generalized moral tone—one that challenged major aspects of the contemporary in both Germany and elsewhere. In the process, the Holocaust and the specific debt to Jews that resulted became merely one debt among others borne by this newly "moral nation."

This peculiar way of dealing with collectives is also related to the conceptual core of German identity, "Germanness" as a category of belonging is articulated in very different terms from French belonging—that is, as an ethnic rather than a civic category (Brubaker 1992). Immigrants can become French or American, but although they may obtain German citizenship, they will never be accepted as "really" German. In contrast, eastern Europeans who do not speak a word of German and have never been to Germany but who can demonstrate German lineage (sometimes, pervasively, by presenting Nazi-era documentation) are automatically granted German citizenship.

Despite the importance of such absolute ethnic principles of belonging in German Romanticism as well as in Nazi racial policy, these principles remained potent even after the delegitimation of Nazi disregard for ethnic "others." We argue that the early shift from anti- to philo-Semitism is connected, in part, to this "primordial" principle of belonging. Identities are absolute; it is easier to change the evaluative prefix from anti- to philo- than to examine the principle and to discard its logic. For this reason, current debates about the status of immigrants have been especially stubborn. Many on the left have tried to play the Nazi card as a way to establish a prohibition against excluding or disregarding immigrants. They argue that awareness of the Nazis' persecution of racial "others" should prevent contemporary Ger-

many from enacting laws to restrict immigrants' rights in due process under the law. Yet, there has been relatively little willingness to question the basic distinctions. The proposals are formulated mostly as desired prohibitions, but the debate is constrained by taboos against acknowledging the situational origins of collective identities.

There are clearly instrumental aspects to both the anti- to philo-Semitism shift and the unsuccessful attempt in the 1990s to prohibit constitutional changes concerning immigrants' rights. In the first case, a thoroughgoing examination of identity in the early years of the Republic—seemingly indicated by the unanswered and unmentionable extremes of Nazi racism—might have called into question the significantly threatened unity of a German nation. Despite the rhetoric of European identity and its seething refutation of nationalism, ethnocultural identification remained an unresolvable cultural principle, even when it produced bizarre results. In the case of immigration policy, the ability to exclude self-confidently depends on the absolute quality of the collective identity. Despite frequent arguments about the inability to manage economically in the face of huge numbers, the noninstrumental dimensions are clear in the resultant expressions of xenophobia and chauvinistic nationalism.

Another major proscription for German leaders regarding the Nazi past concerned attention to perpetrators. In the early years, leaders were careful not to be too specific about German perpetrators. This position fit with the argument that the blame lay with Hitler and his henchmen, with the understandable unwillingness of a government with implicated members to delve too deeply into personal responsibility, and with the desire not to alienate those who had played minor or major supporting roles, as mentioned above. Nonetheless, the issue of individual responsi-

11 The language frequently used by Chancellor Kohl illustrates this refusal to acknowledge the reality of international migration. Kohl intones repeatedly in the context of these debates that "Germany is no immigration country," though of course it has in fact always been such a country. In addition, Kohl often distinguishes between Bürger (citizen) and Mittlberger (approximately co-citizens).

12 For a more thorough analysis of exclusions see Schirmer (1988).
ability was caught up in more complex “mytho logics” (Apel 1985) of exculpation.

The very metaphors of political rhetoric reveal many Germans’ desires to avoid facing their own possible forms of culpability, either individually or collectively. These rhetorical stratagems include the perverse absence of actors—passive formulations (“the crimes committed in Germany’s name”); vague terms describing the period (“the conditions at that time,” “what happened during those years,” “the Hitler-time”); elliptical references to the details (“what happened,” “the crimes that were committed”); and pervasive qualification (“others suffered, but so did Germans”).

Taboo and Transgression Costs: The Jennninger Affair

The strength of these taboos is revealed poignantly in their transgressions—rare occurrences. A vivid example is the speech delivered by Bundestag President Philipp Jennninger on November 10, 1988, during a special session of the Bundestag a day before the fiftieth anniversary of Kristallnacht (the pogrom against Jewish businesses and property that marked the beginning of the escalation of the crimes against the Jews). In his speech, Jennninger addressed the viewpoint of average Germans in 1933, when Hitler came to power. Apparently the delivery of the speech made it difficult to determine whether Jennninger was simply portraying how the situation might have seemed reasonable to average Germans at the time, or whether in fact he was saying that it was reasonable. During the speech, large numbers of deputies stomped out of the chamber in protest, in the days following, Jennninger—an extremely prominent and highly respected figure—was forced to resign.

When one reads Jennninger’s speech in isolation it is difficult to detect the problem. He says nothing that had not been said before in other contexts, and certainly is not guilty of justifying Nazi policies, as he was accused. The problem was that in this speech, unlike in others delivered on similar occasions, Jennninger spoke of the issues confronting real Germans living in the early 1930s. In doing so, he acknowledged officially that many real people had supported Hitler for a wide variety of reasons. His focus on how Hitler had made sense to some people violated the absolute demonization of Hitler, and focusing on German problems violated the long-standing avoidance of attention to ordinary people as supporters of the Third Reich. Furthermore, the occasion of the speech conventionally required gestures of atonement rather than serious introspection, especially not about German problems. It was not that nobody knew these things; rather even 40 years after the founding of the Republic, German guilt is a difficult topic—indeed, a clear example of a taboo in political culture.

The Historians’ Dispute: From Taboo to Prohibition

In practice, one cannot easily distinguish between mythic and rational logics in political claim-making, partly because most moments include elements of both. Prohibitions and taboos, duties and requirements, are ideal types. Examples are drawn from the vastly complicated reality of changing political culture in which no claim is simple, no argument univalent, and no reference clearly bounded. Above, we attempted to convey how these two logics are involved and intertwined in concrete settings. Before drawing some general conclusions, we offer one further example: an elaborated debate over whether a particular set of proscriptions should be treated in practice as mythic or as rational. The “historians’ dispute” of 1985–1986, we believe, is a perspicuous case in which public intellectuals tried to seize control of a fraught cultural field and to transform the logic considered appropriate to it. This dispute, we argue, is best understood as an attempt to transform a field of taboo into a field of prohibition, and thus to alter the status of the issues contained therein and the conditions under which such constraints can be overcome.

The historians’ dispute was an exchange of articles in West Germany’s major newspapers by a number of prominent historians and sociologists; it concerned the status of the Nazi
past in German history and its implications for contemporary German identity. On one side, the archconservative Ernst Nolte (1987) argued that Auschwitz (the concentration camp that has become the metaphor for the Holocaust) involved no greater evil than had occurred in many other places, from Turkish Armenia to Stalin’s gulags. Also, implying that the Nazis had defensive motivations, Nolte referred to a 1939 declaration by Chaim Weizmann (leader of the European Zionists) that Jews would sympathize with the British and in Nazi statements that the Soviets would commit “Asiatic deeds” against Germany. Nolte’s arguments (published in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, one of Germany’s leading daily newspapers) challenged the dominant orthodoxy of Holocaust interpretation, whereby the Holocaust was an event fundamentally different from all others in history and implied special burdens for Germany. Nolte’s original formulations employed spurious evidence and were couched in an overly inflammatory manner: other conservative historians—such as Andreas Hillgruber, Joachim Fest (editor of the Frankfurter Allgemeine), and Michael Stürmer (a former adviser to West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl)—pursued more carefully the goal of alleviating the unique status of the Holocaust through comparison.

On the opposite side, philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas (among others) argued against this revisionism, which he saw both as an attempt to avoid collective responsibility through a misguided comparative historiography and as an expression of a widening neoconservative conspiracy (he used the term conspiracy to provoke) associated with the overall tenor of West German foreign and cultural policies since Kohl took office in 1982. Nolte’s attempt to establish equivalences among the horrors of the twentieth century, Habermas (1987) argued, not only was factually misleading but obliterated moral differences. In crediting claims of defensive motivations for the “final solution,” Nolte went even beyond making the Holocaust seem a “normal” part of political life:

19 For texts of the debate, see Baldwin (1980) and the volume called “Historikerstreit” (1987) published by Piper. See Maier (1988) and Evans (1989) for intellectual histories.

he appeared to be justifying the logic that brought it about. Even aside from this latter, extreme position, the urge toward “normalization,” the desire for a “normal nation,” had been potent at least since Schroedel’s comment in Saudi Arabia that German policy should no longer be “held hostage” to Auschwitz, and characterizes the entire period of West German cultural politics at least since 1982.

The historians’ dispute generated a great deal of attention, both academic and public. The debate symbolically ended when President Richard von Weizsäcker delivered a speech to German historians in 1988 in which he indirectly supported most of Habermas’s positions (Bulletin of the Press and Information Bureau of the Federal Government, 1131, pp. 1185–86). He stated that Germany must face its historical responsibilities (though he used much of the traditional grammar of exculpation in his speech).

How do we explain this event and the resonance of the issue both inside and outside Germany among intellectuals and politicians alike? The debate presented no new historical evidence, nor were any of the positions especially new. We argue that the debate was significant because it concerned the ontological status of the Holocaust as a cultural constraint in German politics and involved an attempt to alter that status for the widest public.

Nolte and his supporters held that the past should be treated the way previous German rulers had. Rather than trying to minimize the Holocaust as a cultural and political taboo, they tried to make it a part of German history.

German political culture is a powerful component of national identity and heretofore untouched by the mass effects of the Holocaust. This interaction of a particular rhetoric and a cultural and political space has developed into a ritualized political discourse—the Holocaust as a symbolic legitimacy claim for German elites—for themselves and for their people. As is well known, this discourse has produced particular forms of national identity. In an important paper, Habermas (1983), Rahnbach (1988, 1990), and others have analyzed the impact of the Holocaust as taboo on political discourse in Germany. The debates surrounding the Holocaust are largely taken for granted. This performance has a ritual character, and we have seen, the practice of remembrance is present in almost all aspects of public politics, domestic and international. Germany may have worked its way through these debates, but it has done so with a particular sensitivity to defensiveness about the Holocaust as taboo and with a need to find a reaction and a strategy that can adequately transgress.

In the historians’ debate, Weizsäcker’s position was the dominant one. If German politicians no longer felt an unavoidable mythological necessity to appropriate the Holocaust to rational collective memory, they might not succeed in eliminating it. In other words, a major reference function in German culture could only be eliminated if the Holocaust could be incorporated into rational discourses brought to the public in a manner that interests that lie beyond the Holocaust; this would ensure the possibility of retaining cultural unity and the dangers of a national future, transcending that which transcends it. The survival of the national past and the Holocaust is so interwoven that the two have won the debate.
Nolte and his supporters never argued that the past should be “forgotten,” however spurious their desire “contextualization” would have been. Rather, they challenged constitutive elements of German political orthodoxy by trying to minimize the power of the Holocaust as a cultural referent. In other words, they tried to transform the hold of the Holocaust from taboo to prohibition.

German political culture, as we have seen, is powerfully constrained by the dominant and hitherto unquestionable interpretation of the Holocaust as a special burden for Germany. This interpretation has required a particular rhetoric from German leaders and a ritualized politics of regret. The most basic legitimacy claims of West German leaders—for themselves, for their government, and for their people—always involve highly specific acknowledgments of the past (Olick 1993; Rabinbach 1988). These requirements are largely taken-for-granted, and their performance has a ritual quality. In addition, as we have seen, the image of the Holocaust is present in almost every moment of German politics, domestic and international. Leaders may have worked to minimize or avoid it, but these attempts usually have resulted in peculiar symptoms, ranging from discomfort to defensiveness. A violation of the Holocaust as taboo always evokes significant reaction and a struggle to cope with the transgression.

In the historians’ dispute, however, the neoconservatives’ achievement was to treat the dominant role of the Holocaust in German politics no longer as an unpleasant or unavoidable mythic feature, but as something open to rational challenge. Though they did not succeed in eliminating the Holocaust as a major referent for German political culture, they transformed it from a constraint that could only be obeyed or transgressed to one that could be investigated scientifically, debated rationally, and ultimately discussed much more easily. The neoconservative critique brought to the foreground the realm of interests that lies behind the absolute status of the Holocaust; thus they opened up the possibility of refutation, which is a less dangerous and ultimately less costly way to contravene it than transgression. Habermas may have won the debate, but the neoconservatives (as only a part of the wider political culture of relativization at the time) have won the war—to make the legacy of the Holocaust a proposition rather than a taken-for-granted foundation. Taboos cannot be dealt with calmly; prohibitions can.

The neoconservatives’ success is manifest in the comparative ease of subsequent commemorations, especially those held 10 years later on the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the war. Kohl’s government has stepped back somewhat from its more aggressive attempts to displace the Nazi period from German identity. Yet the highly ritualized acknowledgments they now offer are so routinized that the issue no longer has the same potential for conflict as before (Mueller 1996): The Federal Republic has achieved “normalcy” with regard to its past, not without it.

In this way, the debates about immigration and the military of the late 1980s and early 1990s depended on that prior “rationalization” in the historians’ dispute. In the context of the Gulf War, for instance, the hold of the German past was clearly delegitimated. If Germany made military or financial contributions to the international coalition against Iraq, it would be accused of belligerence—a dangerous image given its past. If Germany did not contribute, however, it would be accused of unhelpfulness and irresponsibility. Subsequent debates over German participation in United Nations peacekeeping missions demonstrated as well that the German past created often irresolvable cross-pressures. The same is true of the immigration issue. The hold of the German past over the absolute right of asylum was seen to be irreconcilable with the high costs of economic refugees entering Germany in the late 1980s and 1990s.

The power of mythic constraints (taboos) of the German past in the face of present exigencies has thus often produced complicated turns in German public discourse and policy. The historians’ dispute, however, paved the way for characterizing the hold of the past as illegitimately constraining—that is, as a veil that hides and delegitimizes strategic maneuvers. From this perspective, taboos are viewed as a way of concealing “real” power. Such a characterization, however, misses the nearly ubiquitous constitutive role of collective memory in political culture.
CONCLUSIONS

Our goal in this paper has been to demonstrate that political cultures operate as historical systems of meaning—that is, as ordered and changing systems of claim-making—in which collective memory obliges the present (as prescription) and restricts it (as prescription) both methodically and rationally. Through an analysis of the Holocaust as a source of taboos and prohibitions (and of their positive correlates) in German politics, we have specified different ways in which social pasts interact with social presents to shape political action.

The relationship between remembered pasts and constructed presents is one of perpetual but differentiated constraint and renegotiation over time, rather than pure strategic invention in the present or fidelity to (or inability to escape from) a monolithic legacy. As regards the role of political culture in political life generally, exigency and commitment, interest and ideal—that is, myth and rationality—are not entirely independent logics. They are two sides of a coin, mutually constitutive and, at the limit, each non-sensical without the other.

At what point should or does a past pass away? The answer depends in part on how different images of the past appear in and constrain political presents. The conceptual distinction between different kinds of constraint helps us understand how rules of political claim-making can be transformed over time. The illustrations from different moments in West German history show that the impact of the Holocaust unfolds in changing constellations. The possibility of removing the Holocaust as a focus for Germany's self-understanding (and for the way Germany is perceived by others) is thus located in a contested terrain on which mythical and rational images of the past sometimes work together and sometimes do battle, but these images always shape identity and its transformation. The possibility and the style of such transformation depend on the kinds of constraint that are operating.

The effects of German unification and Germany's central role in the European Community will create (and already have created) new challenges to the way the past is remembered and how it works as collective memory.

These challenges, however, have a long and varied history: the accumulation and transformations of this history lie at the center of Germany's ongoing work to define who it is, what it can do, and what it should do. The analysis of political culture, as newly conceived, helps us to appreciate and unravel the complexities of that work, which involves a continuous negotiation between past and present. Collective memory is this negotiation, rather than pure constraint by, or contemporary structuring of the past. In response to Helmut Schmidt, therefore, we may say that Germany is held hostage not by a taboo arising from Auschwitz but by the changing shapes of collective memory—the interplay of myth and rationality in shifting constellations—that give German political culture its peculiar character.

Jeffrey K. Olick is Assistant Professor of Sociology at Columbia University. He is currently completing a book on German memory of the Nazi period (The Sins of the Fathers: Collective Guilt and Symbolic Politics in the Federal Republic of Germany, 1949-1995).

Daniel Levy is a Ph.D. candidate in Sociology at Columbia University. His interests include collective memory and national identity in Germany, and their relationships to immigration debates.

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Political conflicts or linguistic divisions become a concern in the study of political behavior in democracies—including those subject to "new" issue-based cleavages based on class or group identity (Lipset and Rokkan 1967; Rokkan 1992). However, many political behaviorists and political scientists have argued that social cleavages are declining in importance as a result of a "new" issue-based cleavage. This new cleavage—largely based on ethnicity or language—has been described as a "new" cleavage that arises in the context of globalization and the rise of transnational movements (Leicht and Scott 1996). The study of these new cleavages is a major concern of political behaviorists and political scientists, as they seek to understand the implications of these changes for political stability and democratic processes.