

*Vera Kattermann*

Does the nation belong on the couch?

On the occasion of the anniversary of the Fall of the Berlin Wall, psychoanalyst Vera Kattermann gives a short psychoanalysis of the reunified nation.

On the 20th anniversary of the Fall of the Berlin Wall, an ambivalent hope is noticeable. When looking back, do we manage to differentiate among clichés? Which forgotten or repressed aspects could return in the course of public recollection?

The traces of the German division have by and large been forgotten. The position of the former frontier can in many places at best be guessed; cultural and economic differences have become less important. With some good will one could say that the reunification will be completed soon, and as an evidence one could point to the East-German Chancellor.

But has the nation grown together psychologically as well? Considering cultural behaviour, there isn't really any concept of a German post-unification identity accepted by the majority. The failure of the tendering process for a Monument of German Unity, the one-dimensional festivities for the 60th anniversary of the German Federal Republic, the fading out of an East German artistic position in the exhibition „60 years – 60 artworks“: taking stock of the symbolic integration is disillusioning.

We are also missing a good metaphor for reunified Germany, the way “the Wall” or “barbed wire” stood for divided Germany. Cliches like the “Jammer-Ossi” (complaining East German), or “Besser-Wessi” (know-it-all West German) may seem antiquated nowadays, but how else do we think of ourselves?

German-German dialogues. Some speak out loud, others fall silent

Germany suffers from identity diffusion. Collective identity has strangely nebulous contours. To inquire about national identity, however, quickly raises the suspicion of unreflected transfiguration of German national consciousness, or even of closeness to national socialist megalomania and phantasies of unity. „Naive national pleasure“, as observed during the World Cup of 2006, obscures the fact that banners painted on the skin are not an equivalent for an unbroken relation to the nation.

Does the nation thus belong on the couch? This is a lopsided metaphor: societies cannot be compared with individuals, instead they are heterogeneous, they involve power and dependency structures and they struggle with affiliation and exclusion. A more accurate comparison is that with a family seeking its self-image.

Using the terms of systemic psychology, we can assume that Germany as a patchwork family, 20 years after the Fall of the Wall, still suffers from a deficit of open communication and from subliminal conflicts. After the break-up of earlier loyalties and dependencies, both West and East Germans found new partners and they hurled themselves into the development of a common existence. Because of the almost simultaneous globalization, not enough time remained for discourse and for identity construction.

Germany in the therapy room is a family comprising very different experiences and perspectives accompanied by a striking helplessness in communication.

They do speak with each other, but there are considerable tensions and they avoid to address them. Some family members speak out loudly, others remain mute. What is impeding the communication?

It soon turns out that the apparently new patchwork family is not so new at all. Instead, it is a family reunited following a severe rift. This rift is accompanied by deep feelings of guilt and shame which constitute an emotional lump that constricts the exchange. National Socialism divided people into perpetrators, victims and followers. The moral dilemma resulting from this division is focussed on guilt and innocence, on loyalty and betrayal, on authority and submission – and it continues to affect later generations.

The building of the Berlin Wall was thus also an attempt to shift the splits and traces of violence committed to geopolitical projection zones where they were to be dissected and encased in concrete. Since everything was psychologically unbearable, impossible even to express in words, this way it all remained latent under the influence of the Great Powers. The fall of the protecting wall then got things moving. The Holocaust Memorial in Berlin is an impressive case of integration of feelings of guilt and shame which were previously divided. But turning to address the old conflicts is still accompanied by great anxiety – possibly it could disrupt family cohesion.

The heroes of 1989 are being celebrated, but politically they are irrelevant

This identity diffusion concerns not only the past. While for West Germans almost nothing changed due to the Fall of the Wall, East Germans had to accept a loss of familiar in almost every domain of life – a sort of migration experience without any change of location. Symbolically spoken: The new partner and his children entered the household in a dependent position, almost without any existential resources and as existential failures with stricken dignity.

The material superiority of capitalist West often led to a devaluation of the East. Already during the times of divided Germany, generous gestures on the part of West Germans often concealed subtle contempt. Sympathy and shame, greed and envy, feelings of superiority and inferiority characterized the relationship between East and West Germans.

These feelings have a separating potential as long as they cannot be openly expressed.

They do speak with each other, but there are considerable tensions and they avoid to address them. Some family members speak out loudly, others remain mute. What is impeding the communication?

It soon turns out that the apparently new patchwork family is not so new at all. Instead, it is a family reunited following a severe rift. This rift is accompanied by deep feelings of guilt and shame which constitute an emotional lump that constricts the exchange. National Socialism divided people into perpetrators, victims and followers. The moral dilemma resulting from this division is focussed on guilt and innocence, on loyalty and betrayal, on authority and submission – and it continues to affect later generations.

The building of the Berlin Wall was thus also an attempt to shift the splits and traces of violence committed to geopolitical projection zones where they were to be dissected and encased in concrete. Since everything was psychologically unbearable, impossible even to express in words, this way it all remained latent under the influence of the Great Powers. The fall of the protecting wall then got things moving. The Holocaust Memorial in Berlin is an impressive case of integration of feelings of guilt and shame which were previously divided. But turning to address the old conflicts is still accompanied by great anxiety – possibly it could disrupt family cohesion.

The heroes of 1989 are being celebrated, but politically they are irrelevant

This identity diffusion concerns not only the past. While for West Germans almost nothing changed due to the Fall of the Wall, East Germans had to accept a loss of confidence in almost every domain of life – a sort of migration experience without any change of location. Symbolically spoken: The new partner and his children entered the household in a dependent position, almost without any existential resources and as existential failures with stricken dignity.

The material superiority of capitalist West often led to a devaluation of the East. Already during the times of divided Germany, generous gestures on the part of West Germans often concealed subtle contempt. Sympathy and shame, greed and envy, feelings of superiority and inferiority characterized the relationship between East and West Germans. These feelings have a separating potential as long as they cannot be openly expressed.

There are also tensions among East Germans themselves. An open discussion between supporters of the system, followers, and critics has not taken place until this day. The deprecating perspective of West Germans does the rest. A community lacking a positive self-reference will be poorly motivated to work through past guilt conflicts, in addition to feelings of shame which are already present or have been imposed. The end of the GDR required a rather comprehensive repositioning, which included ruptures and breakdowns.

The now commonly used term „Wende“ (turn) triviali-zes the weight of the political revolt and the scope of the psychosocial consequences.

The ambivalence of the repressed is also present if we examine success stories. On the one hand, the heroes of 1989 are being celebrated, on the other, their political achievements seem to be irrelevant regarding today’s political landscape. Their sufferings from political repressions appear like romantic folklore. The vital, sys-tem disrupting forces of the time of the Wende appear to be unreal and remote in the current atmosphere of crisis.

In the therapy room of the family, the same paradox keeps reappearing: All this dynamics is well-known and everybody, if asked, will be able to explain it/discuss it. But it is dead knowledge, so to speak, be-cause though it is understood intellectually, emotional-ly it has no influence. Like in the case of a nuclear re-pository, at first the underground disposal appears as a good solution of the problem. But then the barrels de-cay and the mine becomes unstable, and it is the de-composition after radioactive half life, that, as we ho-pe, will reduce the danger. Only a temporal distance allows the integration of explosive feelings.

Twenty years after 1989 the issue is, first of all, to en-courage discussions in the family, to make possible expressions of feelings such as anger, resentment, or shame. Courage is needed for this, but above all a fresh atmosphere which encourages discussions. Those who until now have not been heard should also be involved: not least the immigrants, who have watched the pro-cess of unification apparently detached. Their perspec-tives could enrich the way we think about „the German issue,“ and shows the urgency of rethinking.

The victims of xenophobic attacks show the potential of violence and hate smouldering beyond the sophisti-cated discourses about the past. The point is not to prescribe the nation a binding identity. The characte-ristic self-conception of Germany will always include contradictions. Because we know about the abysses of totalitarian thinking, controversies and diversity are welcome.