3-1-2011

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The Search for National Identity in Abstractions From Historical Images: A German Example

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Germans today often feel ill at ease with the term “Nation,” due largely to its frequent association with the terms “Volk” and “Reich” during the time from 1871 until the end of World War II. However, the idea of a German “national identity” is a nuanced one with a complex history.

This paper examines how German-speaking authors of the 16th century reflected on national identity in their works by providing rhetorical ammunition for the development of specific national stereotypes. As an illustration of this search for national identity in abstractions from historical images, the focus will be on imagery of the German from Roman antiquity to the 20th century. This sort of ‘imagery/abstraction’ approach would be applicable to any search for national identity, East or West.

The study of national stereotypes is the subject of many recent publications that examine the notion of "national character" by applying the insights of image studies or "imagology," a comparist specialization that deals with theories of public image and "image making." ¹

German humanists were very much preoccupied with “image-making,” and this paper will explore the origin of some images that were crucial in fleshing out German national sentiments in the course of the 16th century. I will examine a broadsheet, literary, and other textual sources that were either used or written by early modern German authors in their quest for specific characteristics that would give credence to the idea of a German nation, differing and unique from their neighbors.

German writers and artists mobilized the rhetoric of national character to favorably compete with the high standards set by ancient Rome and the thriving city-states of Renaissance Italy, whose writers and artists validated their own works by emphasizing roots in ancient Rome. Although the humanists’ obsession with the

¹ For an excellent overview of the field of imagology and national stereotypes see a wide-ranging collection of essays: Manfred Beller and Joep Leerssen, eds. Imagology. The cultural construction and literary representation of national character. A critical survey (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2007).
question for German identity has been noted, it has never been thoroughly explored in one of the most important sources, the works of Johann Fischart (1546-1590). Late 16th century Strasbourg, where Fischart spent most of his writing career, was the perfect place to fuse literary, religious, and political debates on Germany’s place in history and amidst that of her neighbors. Echos of these debates can be found in many of Fischart’s works. This makes him an excellent case to study the imaginings or Vorstellungsbilder that gave birth to “national-typological fictions” championed by humanists such as Conrad Celtis (1459-1508), Jakob Wimpheling (1450-1528), and Sebastian Franck (1499-1543).

Of all noted writers in German, Johann Fischart is one of the least read and studied, although he is referred to as the most important figure in German literature in the 16th century. His major work is the Geschichtklitterung, sometimes considered a free translation of François Rabelais’ Gargantua and Pantagruel (1534). It was first published in 1575, followed by subsequent editions, each modified and enlarged, in 1582 and in 1590. Today the Geschichtklitterung is acknowledged as a literary-historical monument, and some critics, when reading Fischart’s innovative prose, are reminded of the most experimental writers of the 20th century, from James Joyce to the German Arno Schmidt.

Wilhelmenian Germany was a time of the most intense preoccupation with Fischart’s works. This preoccupation was quite lopsided, as most scholars viewed this Alsatian author primarily as an exponent of the German national character represented in the culture wars between France and Germany. It is no coincidence that Fischart’s works were rediscovered by the scholar Karl Hartwig Gregor von Meusebach (1781-1847), when the rise of Romantic idealism prompted authors to search the past for the literary heritage of the Volk.

2 Recent studies on national consciousness in early modern Germany have focused on humanism’s contribution to national consciousness, the translation of classical Roman histories into German, and the construction of a national identity based on the studies of Graeco-Roman antiquity. See, for example, Christine Johnson, “Creating a Usable Past: Vernacular Roman Histories in Renaissance Germany,” Sixteenth Century Journal 40, n°4 (2009): 1069-1090; Julie K. Tanaka, “Historical Writing and German Identity: Jacob Wimpheling and Sebastian Franck,” in Politics and Reformations: Histories and Reformations. Essays in Honor of Thomas A. Brady, Jr., ed. Christopher Ocker, Michael Printy, Peter Starenko, and Peter Wallace (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 155-175. A very interesting study in this context is Christopher S. Wood, Forgery, Replica, Fiction: Temporalities of German Renaissance Art (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2008). Wood intriguingly links his investigation of the relationship between art and archeology to discussions of German national identity and debates on the relative merits of German and Italian art in the context of a transfer of artistic leadership across the Alps.

3 In spite of Fischart’s prominence as a writer and ardent anti-papist crusader in the culture wars of the sixteenth century, his name is hardly ever mentioned in modern scholarship on German nationalism. When discussing nationalism in the early modern German context, scholars tend to give preference to the early humanists and, of course, Martin Luther.

4 Beller and Leerssen, Imagology, 4.
It is of note that Meusebach was a close friend of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, who supported Meusebach’s editorial efforts. In the Grimm’s brothers’ pursuit of “authentic” German folklore they realized the potential value Fischart’s works in the service of the ideal of a German nation-state.

In 1581, Fischart and the artist Tobias Stimmer (1539-1584) collaborated on a woodcut entitled Germania domitrix gentium. This broadsheet is of almost iconic stature, embodying many decades of debates on the nature of Germany among its neighbors. In a sense this broadsheet is positioned at a historical threshold, linking the past with the future. It both echoes Tacitus’s Germania and Roman antiquity and foreshadows 19th century debates on German nationalism, reverberating even in the name that Hitler’s envisaged: “Welthauptstadt Germania” (world capital Germania).

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Hovering above the globe is an image that represents *Germania*, with wings, the imperial crown, double eagle, scepter, and orb. This image inspired Fischart to compose a poem, “Ernstliche Ermanung an die lieben Teutschen, auß anlaß dises beigesetzten Bilds des Teutschlands angebracht” (Serious admonition to my dear Germans made on the occasion of this accompanying picture). In this poem, admonishing his fellow Germans to remind themselves of their heroic past, he exclaims:

What good does it serve, Oh Germany, that you are pleased by the image of a glorious and victorious figure representing the power of the Germans who have conquered the world? And does it help to know that your ancestors have earned their name with glory if you don’t care at all for their legacies?

He then continues to lament the fact that the Germans of his day praise their parents but do not live like them:

How can one boast of one’s parents but not follow in their footsteps? You praise old virtues, but you don’t practice them yourself. Why do you hold old customs in high esteem but do not live by them?

The author goes on to complain about the decline of German efficiency, and the weakness of the empire:

Well, how does it honor you when you highly praise the old Germans who fought for their freedom and did not tolerate any evil neighbors? Yet you do not defend your freedom, can hardly feel secure in your own land, and you even let your neighbor tie his horse to both sides of your fence.

Fischart expresses his deep discontent with *Germania*, and he questions whether one should honor such cowardice by letting her keep the crown and scepter. Indeed, he reminds his readers that these symbols of imperial power are already lost, by mockingly observing:

8 The German reads: “Was ists, daß man sich rühmet hoch Der Elttern vnd folgt jhn nicht noch / Bist Alter Tugent grosser Preiser / Aber der Tugend keyn Erweiser / Thust gut Alt Sitten hoch erheben / Vnd schickst doch mit darnach dein leben?”
9 The German reads: “Also was ist dir für eyn Ehr / Wann rühmst die Alten Teutschen sehr / Wie sie für jhre Freiheyt stritten Vnd keynen bösen Nachbarn litten / Vnd du achtst nicht der Freiheyt dein / Kanst kaum inn dein Land sicher sein / Last dir dein Nachbarn sein Pferd binden / An deinen Zaun fornen vnd hinden?”
She only deserves to keep a wooden horse for the king’s scepter
And she might from now on display a magpie instead of a brave eagle, and for the
orb give her a ball to hit when it bounces off the floor.\textsuperscript{10}

The heritage of ancient Germans is not taken seriously today, he stresses. The
freedom that our parents had to fight for is taken for granted, and on top of everything
else, foreign influences are taking hold of Germans, turning them into emasculated
men:

\begin{quote}
Instead people dally around with the notion of freedom and chase new ways of life
and novelties. And old German fortitude is displaced by effeminate frivolity.\textsuperscript{11}
\end{quote}

Germans, the author implores, have to be reminded of old virtues, and above all, unity. He concludes with these admonishments:

\begin{quote}
Upright, loyal, honest, united and steadfast, that’s what wins over people and holds
the land together.... May God help you understand this image of Germania correctly.
And thereby be both loyal to your friends and frightening to all your enemies.\textsuperscript{12}
\end{quote}

Towards the end of the 16\textsuperscript{th} century, Fischart recycles national images and stereotypes
that were primarily created in the roughly five decades after 1470, the year the re-
discovered \textit{Germania} of Tacitus was published in Venice.\textsuperscript{13} Benjamin H. Isaac has
pointed out that it was Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1526) who was “one of the first to
impress on his German contemporaries the value of Tacitus’s observations for their
own ethnogenesis.”\textsuperscript{14} In chapter 55 of his \textit{Discourses On the First Ten (Books) of Titus Livius}
(1517), Machiavelli explains the piety and integrity of his German
contemporaries above all by the fact that...

\begin{quote}
they do not have great commerce with their neighbors, for others have not come to
their homes nor have they gone to the homes of others, but have been content with
those goods, live on those foods, clothe themselves with the wool which the country
provides, which has taken away any reason for intercourse and (consequently) the
beginning of any corruption: hence they have not been able to take up the customs of
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{10} The German reads: “Ja jr gbiirt fur den Königsstab Eyn Hölztin Roß / welchs sie nur hab / Vnd führe
für den Adler Kün Eyn bundte Atzel nun forthin / Vnd für den Weltapffel eyn Ball / Den man schlägt,
wann er hupf’t im fall.”

\textsuperscript{11} The German reads: “Sonder man schertzt nur mit der Freiheit / Sucht fremde Sitten / Bräuch vnd
Neuheit / Vnd fur Alt Teutsch Standhaftigkeit beyt ein Weibisch Leichtfertigkeyt.”

\textsuperscript{12} The German reads: “Aufrecht / Treu / Redlich / Eynig vnd Standhaft Das gwinnt vnd erhält Leut
vnd Landschafft /,... So bald ich diß Teutsch Bild schaut an. Gott geb / daß ihr es recht verstahn / Vnd
bewydes Treu seit euern Freunden Vnd auch eyn Scheu alln eurn Feinden.”

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{De Origine et situ Germanorum (The Origin and Situation of the Germans)}, written by Gaius
Cornelius Tacitus around 98 A.D.

\textsuperscript{14} Benjamin H. Isaac, \textit{The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity} (Princeton University Press,
2004), 142.
the French, of the Spanish, or of the Italians, which nations all together are the corrupters of the world.\(^\text{15}\)

The humanist and (at his time controversial) freethinker, Sebastian Franck, echoes this idea, in his *Chronicle of Germany* (1539), when he observes: “The Germans never allowed foreigners to live among them so that the land would not be polluted by foreign customs.”\(^\text{16}\) Fischart, who was certainly familiar with Franck’s *Chronicon Germaniae*, picked up on this topic 42 years later in his *Germania* poem, when he complains about “fremde Sitten, Bräuch und Neuheit” (foreign customs, traditions and novelties) that might turn the masculine Germans from Tacitus’s *Germania* into women.

By the mid-16\(^{th}\) century, these images, national myths, and to a large degree, historical fabrications regarding the origin of the German people, had become staple and accepted conventional wisdom in the discourses on German national identity.

At that time, Tacitus’s text was the most detailed ethnographic work on the Germanic tribes outside the Roman Empire.\(^\text{17}\) The work is a commentary on the decadent Rome of his own time as much as on the Germans themselves. Some of the crucial passages for the discussion on national stereotypes can be found right at the beginning of Tacitus’s text.

In chapter II, he ponders about the origin of the name “Germany” and the inhabitants of this northern land: “The Germans themselves I would regard as indigenous, and not mixed at all with other peoples through immigration and intercourse.”

\(^{15}\) Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Historical, Political, and Diplomatic Writings*, vol. 2 (*The Prince, Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius, Thoughts of a Statesman*) [1513] in *The Historical, Political, and Diplomatic Writings of Niccolo Machiavelli*, tr. from the Italian, by Christian E. Detmold (J. R. Osgood, 1882).


In chapter IV he adds the following observations regarding the physical characteristics of the Germans:

For my own part, I agree with those who think that the tribes of Germany are free from all taint of intermarriages with foreign nations, and that they appear as a distinct, unmixed race, like none but themselves. Hence, too, the same physical peculiarities throughout so vast a population. All have fierce blue eyes, red hair, huge frames, fit only for a sudden exertion. They are less able to bear laborious work. Heat and thirst they cannot in the least endure; to cold and hunger their climate and their soil inure them.\(^{18}\)

Two ideas in these passages are of significance: the pure lineage of Germans (a topic misused and misinterpreted in the Third Reich), and an ethnographic approach based on environmental determinism, a belief that the physical environmental, above all climatic factors, determine cultural and societal developments.

Environmental determinism has been popular from Hippocrates (c. 440 BC.), via Jean Bodin (1529 - 1596), and Montesquieu (1689-1755 ) to modern times. Central to this theory in early modern times was the concept of three climate zones that determine personal characteristics: the southern African zone with intelligent but lethargic people, the northern European zone with energetic but unintelligent people, and the temperate zone (the Mediterranean), in which intelligent and energetic people live. This theory has the advantage that no matter where one lives, one can always position oneself in the temperate zone, as there will always be someone living to the South or North of oneself.

Joep Leerssen suggests an approach to the study of national character through “deep structures.” He maintains that “deep structures” in national stereotyping, involving the construction of binaries around oppositional pairs such as North/South, strong/weak, and central/peripheral, should be addressed diachronically and historically.\(^{19}\)

We see this sort of binary images in the works of early modern writers, such as in Agrippa von Nettesheim’s (1486–1535) *Of the Vanity and Uncertainty of Arts and Sciences.*\(^{20}\) In this work, there is a curious chapter in which national stereotypes represent the centerpiece of Agrippa’s argument. He wrote this text to ridicule humankind’s effort to gain knowledge, to attack the pretentiousness of learned men, and to advocate a return to a simple form of Christian faith. The chapter LIV in question is called: *De morali philosophia.* Its purpose is to show how little moral


philosophy affects the actions of human beings: "Therefore ... all Moral Philosophy is a vain and empty thing, neither sufficient to instruct men in the Rules of Justice, neither in their duty or Government of themselves." Before he arrives at the above conclusion, Agrippa describes different nationalities in order to underscore his thesis:

Besides, several nations have some particular marks of distinction, which are the more immediate marks of Heaven so that a man may easily discern of what Nation such or such a stranger may be, by his Voice, Speech, Tone, Designe, Conversation, Diet, Love, Hatred, Anger and Malice, and the like for who that sees a man marching in more state than a-Dung-hill-Cock, in gate like a fencer, a confident Look, a deep Tone, grave Speech, severe in his Carriage and tattered in Habit, that will not straight judge him to be a German?.... In Singing also the Italians Bleat, the Spaniards Whine, the Germans Howl, and the French Quaver.

It is only of minor concern for Agrippa that Germans are not presented in a particularly positive light, as this list is supposed to show that environmental and astrological factors determine much more than moral philosophy how humans live:

Some Nations are so planted by Heaven, as Firmicus writes, that they appear eminent for the unity and singularity of their Customs.... And indeed, every particular Nation, whether civil or barbarous, has some particular Manners and Customs particularly imprinted by Heavenly Influence, different from others, not to be acquired by any Art or Philosophy, but such as are meerly natural to the Inhabitants, without any assistance of Education.

In her recent dissertation on national self-portraits in early-modern German literature, Nienke Lammersen-van Deursen points out that Agrippa’s use of the word heaven may also be interpreted as weather or climate, and that by appropriating the writings of Firmicus Maternus, a Christian-Latin writer and astrologer who lived in the 4th century AD, Agrippa based his descriptions on the theory of environmental determinism.

The arch-humanist Celtis seems equally influenced by this theory, when in his address to the students at Ingolstadt he assumes that the more extreme weather in earlier centuries might have also been responsible for the more reprehensible traits of the Germanic tribes as described by Tacitus. Celtis was among the first to quote Tacitus as an authoritative source for his study of German history, but his great

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22 Agrippa, *The vanity of arts and sciences*, 147.
historical project, a comprehensive *Germania illustrata* was abortive. However, from his address to the students of the University of Ingolstadt in 1492, we not only learn about the intended scheme of his project, but we also see how Celtis repeats certain commonplaces about the exterior appearance and behavior of Germans:

Rid the world of the bad reputation the Germans had among Greek, Latin and Hebrew authors, who linked them with drunkenness, wild manners, cruelty, and such, more like the characteristics of animals or the insane. You should be very ashamed not to know the historical writings of the Greek and Romans, but you should be even more ashamed not to know our country’s geographical position, stars, rivers, mountains, ancient buildings and peoples and everything else that foreigners have written about us. It amazes me that Greeks and Romans have so thoroughly studied our country, such a big part of Europe, to use their expression, which was so rough and raw before the climate changed. It further amazes me that they were able to describe our customs, passions, and ideas with words as evocative as paintings and drawings.

The improved climate in the 15th century, he maintains, also has had a civilizing effect on his countrymen, although there are still Germans in some parts of the country who confirm the stereotype of the brutish German - or “inherited disease” - to be true: “It is quite puzzling to me that this inborn disease has been passed on in some parts of Germany for 1500 years ... although the climate has become much more pleasant after draining the swamps and cutting down large forests our country has been populated with famous cities.”

Celtis’s image of the German territories was that of a vast and flourishing country, with rivers, mountains, mines, and sophisticated cities, all of which needed to be examined, inventoried, and set down. In an article from 1958, Gerald Strauss stressed the importance of topographical-historical writings for the development of a national identity.
identity, such as Celtis’s works and cosmographies, as well as Sebastian Münster’s *Cosmographiae universalis* published in 1544. In the 16th century, maps complemented texts such as the *Germania* and finally made it possible to fix the mental image of one’s own country in the context of other countries on paper.

After the publication of *Germania*, many early German humanists flavored their writings with strong nationalistic leanings, pronouncements, theories, and propaganda. Apart from Celtis and Franck, there were Ulrich von Hutten (1488-1523) and Jacob Wimpheling, who displayed his fierce patriotism in his publication *Germania* (1501), in which he intended to prove that the Alsace region was German, and that German culture was on par with the French and Italian one.

Of significance here is whether the concept of a nation as it emerges in the 16th century is different from today, or different from discourses on nationalism in previous centuries. After all, some idea of “nation” already existed in the Middle Ages, but it usually referred to groups of people defined by a rough geographical area, or people who shared similar interests, as for example, student “nations” at the University of Paris. The Hussite Wars could be read as the emergence of a popular nationalism.

Walther von der Vogelweide (1170-1228) praised the virtues of German men and women in his poem *Ir sult sprechen willekomen*. Most historians agree that the term had different connotations from the Middle Ages to roughly the 18th century. Instead of relating to any notion of ethnic identity, the term *Deutsche Nation* was used as an institutional term in the sense of denoting the political community of interests of the German princes. It was also employed in political propaganda: *Deutsche Nation* was what the princes of the Reich defended against external attack during the 15th century.

Twenty-seven years after Benedict Anderson’s watershed publication: *Imagined Communities* (1983), a large body of work has been dedicated to the study of how to define the terms "nation" and "nationalism," and to the question about when nations first appeared. Are nations timeless phenomena, or are nations entirely modern, to a

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large extent constructed, and constantly changing during the on-going processes of state formation? If one sees nations as constructed, then it is important to be able to explain why and how nations developed.

Today, the predominant view in scholarship regards nationalism as a rather modern phenomenon. However, most of these historians also stress that modern nationalism was preceded by cultural and political developments that led to the formation of a modern national identity. The term most historians use for earlier manifestations of nationalism is “proto-nationalism.” This notion has the advantage that it distinguishes the time before the French Revolution from modern nationalism, but there is still a lineage, a connection.

Early modern authors evoke “nation-ness” by speaking in the name of the German nation; but speaking of nation in the 16th century German humanists did not always mean the same. Apart from the re-discovery of Tacitus’s *Germania*, many factors contributed to a heightened awareness of national identity. There were wars, violence, and the constant Turkish threat that is the subject of the many *Türkenlieder*.

Hans Sachs was one of many who engaged in the campaign against Turks with his poem *Wider den blutdürstigen Türken!* (1532) (Against the bloodthirsty Turks), and Andreas Osiander (1498-1552) published a booklet in 1542, entitled *Unterricht und vermanung / wie man wider den Türken peten und streyten soll* (Instruction and warning on how to pray and fight against the Turk), in which he tried to encourage Germans to be united in the fight against the Turks. A very important topos in German humanist historiography is the antiquity of German people, which inspired the Bavarian Johannes Turmair (1477-1534), also called Aventinus, to trace the ancestry of the German from an *Urvater Tuisco* to the present. Conrad Peutinger (1465-1547), another leading humanist voice, also maintained as early as 1506 that all Germans stemmed from Tuisco, a son of Noah.

A few decades after Peutinger, the “historical” figure of Tuisco had become such a commonplace in humanist historiography that Fischart and Stimmer felt compelled to publish a woodcut and poem in the same collection that includes the *Germania*

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32 Hobsbawm coined this term in his chapter on popular proto-nationalism. See Hobsbawm, Nations and Nationalism since 1780, 46.
34 As etext is accessible at http://mek.oszk.hu/04600/04661/#
35 See Frank Borchardt, German Antiquity in Renaissance Myth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), 114.
Domitrix Gentium. Other mythic figures and ancient heroes, such as the goddess Germania and Arminius (Hermann), the hero of the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest that took place in A.D. 9, were invoked as role models for the promotion of the German cause. Some humanists used their interest in language as an agent to promote nationalism; for example, Johannes Goropius (1519–1572) tried to prove that not Hebrew, but his native Antwerpian dialect was the original language of Paradise.

A closer study of Fischart’s texts unveils certain building blocks and leitmotifs that illustrate how he tried to flesh out the meaning of the label deutsche Nation to become part of an “imagined community” of Germans. Fischart seems to perceive the image of Germania in an emblematic way as a reminder for his readers to hold dear inherited German virtues. Fischart’s brother-in-law, Bernhard Jobin published Mathias Holzwart’s Emblemata Tyrocinia (1581), a work for which Fischart wrote the German preface and the German translations of the inscriptio and suscriptio of each individual emblem. The preface to Holzwart’s book offered him a stage for “prefacing the nation” with his thoughts on the origin of the German people.

In his long and labyrinthine forward, Johann Fischart explains the etymological source of the word “emblem” to a more general reading public he assumed was still unfamiliar with this type of book. He puts forward the theory that the origin of emblems lies in the tradition of coats of arms, and to support his theory, he refers to the so-called Pseudo-Berosos by Annius of Viterbo (c.1432-1502), a forgery published in 1498, which linked the bible to Tacitus’ Germania to create a direct lineage from Noah via the Germanic tribes to the Germans of the late 15th century.

In the Pseudo-Berosos, Fischart allegedly found proof that the descendents of Noah commemorated the great flood by depicting the bow of a ship on their weapons, flags, sails, and buildings, and eventually every nation chose and adapted a specific image as a reminder of the great flood. Fischart cites the following examples:

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37 See Joanes Goropius Becanus, Origines Antwerpianae, Sive, Cimmeriorum Becceslana, Novem Libros Complexa... (Antwerpia: Ex officina Christophori Plantintii, 1569).
39 Holtzwart, Emblemata Tyrocinia, 12.
Other peoples have also adopted different images as a reminder of their ancestors’ rise and fall: for example, the Phrygians used a pig, the Franks three toads. By adopting these two earthbound animals both nations remembered how after the Great Flood earth was their only shelter, and they remembered how they were told to cultivate it.... Indeed, every country has adopted her own special emblem.  

By declaring that these coats of arms represent nations, Fischart bases his idea of nation on images that draw their authority from the link to the Bible. These coats of arms are for him national emblems that serve to remind us of our national heritage. Here Fischart uses images and national stereotypes that were developed over a period of more than hundred years. A similar approach can be observed regarding the competition between Latin and the vernacular. Though most humanists assumed a natural hierarchy, in which Latin was superior to the vernacular, others became convinced that their own language was older and holier than even Hebrew. For example, Johannes Goropius, and also Fischart, who in the introduction to Holzwarth’s emblem book defensively remarks:

This is the reason is why we now have in our own language what the Greeks had ... special words and names: my suggestion is, after weighing the pros and cons, that one should no longer wonder about foreign words, but rather one should enjoy the clarity and richness of our own language.  

Fischart’s emphasis on the importance of speaking German foreshadows Johann Gottfried von Herder’s (1744 -1803) insistence that language is an integral part of one’s national identity. This aspect was particularly dear to the heart of a growing number of German intellectuals during the 18th and 19th centuries, who criticized the wide-spread use of French among the members of the political and cultural elites.

Despite that most modernist theorists see nationalism as an essentially modern phenomenon, a preliminary survey of early modern texts reveals a surprising number of issues that have stayed at the center of debates on German nationalism for several hundred years. For example, the question of Alsace: is it German, as Jakob

42 “Darumb haben auch wir nunzumal inn unserer Sprach / gleich so wol als die Griechen ... sondere Wörter und Namen verwendet: Gantzlich dafür haltend / wa man vorgesetztes alles gründlich erwiget / daß man sich nicht mehr der Fremde zuverwunderen / sondern der Deitlichkeyt und Reichlichkeyt unserer Sprach wird zubefrauen haben.”; Holtzwarth, Emblemata Tyrocinia, 10-11.
43 See the Zehnte Sammlung, paragraph 116 in Johann Gottfried Herder, Briefe zur Beförderung der Humanität. (Berlin und Weimar, 1971).
Wimpheling argues in his *Germania*, or French? Or is it both, as Thomas Murner (1475 - c.1537) asserts in his anti-Wimpheling work *Germania Nova* (1502), where he proudly calls himself “Thomas Murner Gallus et Germanus”?

Then there is the real or perceived Turkish threat to Christian European identity, a problem Germans are still debating today in a slightly altered form. It is safe to say that the first half of the 16th century is characterized by a spread of national consciousness, supported by the printing press and the Reformation. The second half of the century, however, witnessed a stagnation, above all due to the failure of the *Reichsreform* (Imperial Reform) of 1495, and the confessional split between Catholics and Protestants slowed down the process of modernization, which eventually was brought to a halt by the Thirty Years War.

Toward the end of the century Fischart was one of the last prominent voices that was still championing the idea of a German national consciousness, steeped in myth and based on elaborate historical justifications. Humanist scholars eagerly seized upon works like Tacitus’s *Germania* as an authoritative source for the study of German history with the goal of creating a rhetoric of national character that served a variety of political and cultural causes in the years before and after the Reformation movement.

Last but not least, theories of environmental determinism inspired fascist ideologues, and national stereotypes provided material for incendiary myths of German exceptionalism and superiority. This is evident, for example, in Joseph Goebbels’ speech on the role of women in society in 1933 upon the opening of a women’s exhibition in Berlin, where he quoted the afore-mentioned poem by Walther with his praise of German women.44

It appears that certain “deep structures” have never ceased to provide in part the leitmotifs for the creation of an “imagined community” of Germans, which makes it reasonable to say that the images Germans created about themselves are, essentially, not more than the figment of their imagination, that is, fiction.45

Bibliography


