

REINHARD KRECKEL  
Martin-Luther-Universität  
Halle-Wittenberg

## **Social Integration, National Identity and German Unification<sup>1</sup>**

### **I.**

Until recently, the concept of "social identity" led a quiet life in sociology. Of course, symbolic interactionists (e.g. Mead, Goffman) or Freudian developmental psychologists (e.g. Erikson) discussed it, and experimental social psychologists (e.g. Tajfel, Turner) tried to operationalize it. But macro-sociologists were not very interested. For their structural analyses of modern societies the concept of "social identity" was not of central importance.

All this has changed in recent years. Everywhere in the western world, not just in unified Germany, journalistic and political writers have discovered the issue of "collective", and especially of "national identity". The social scientists have followed suit. One recent writer even declared that the struggle for the "control of the means of an 'identitarian' existence" (Eder 1993: 183) is to be seen as a genuine class-struggle.

Faced with trendy and fashionable discussions which are neither conceptually precise nor politically disinterested, the sociologist may be tempted to keep his distance in order to avoid ideological contamination. However, I have decided otherwise. I think that sociology has an obligation to raise its voice against the ideological deterioration of discourse.

This is to say, I consciously choose a subject prone to ideological distortion. I choose it in order to demonstrate that sociologists need not shy away of emotionally difficult topics, for it is possible to treat them as "clearly and distinctly" as any other academic subject, in the best Cartesian tradition.

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Furthermore, though my subject is a difficult one, I do not think that complicated language is required to discuss it. Hence, I shall try to say what I have to say as simply as possible.

## II.

I begin with a few clarifications. First, I turn to the concept of “identity”, which is notorious for its manifold meanings. I distinguish the following six layers of meaning which, step by step, should lead to the clarification of the concept of “national identity”.

(1.) If we say that a coining machine produces “identical” coins, we wish to say that every single piece has exactly the **same quality and appearance**.

(2.) On the other hand, if a policeman wants to establish the “identity” of a specific coin, he has to prove its **continuity of existence over time and space**.

(3.) Thus “uniformity of appearance” and “sameness over time” are the two basic and straightforward meanings of the term “identity” in everyday language. The situation becomes somewhat more complicated if we wish to establish the identity of changing objects. Thus, if we cross a particular bridge over a water we may well identify this water as a stream with a specific name, notwithstanding the fact that we are perfectly aware that one can never step into the same river twice. Yet, it is precisely in this way that we establish the identity of a person, for example in the course of a police investigation. The basis of this personal identification is the **assumption of physical continuity which ignores the permanent biological transformation of the human body**. This assumption of continuity is inevitable whenever we wish to apply the concept of “identity” to human beings: Although the process of physical ageing and of mental transformation through experience, learning, forgetting etc. is always going on, every human being can be identified as the same person throughout his or her entire lifespan.

(4.) Thus, it becomes clear that even an act as simple as the establishment of the identity of a changing object or a living being is based upon complicated ontological assumptions of continuity. This is even more so, if we move on to the concept of **personal identity** as used in many different forms in psychology: If a developmental psychologist talks of the process of “identity formation” in childhood or if a clinical psychologist diagnoses a “disturbance of ego identity”, we are clearly faced with identity concepts of considerable theoretical elaboration. Their common denominator is the

"immediate perception of one's selfsameness and continuity in time, and the simultaneous perception of the fact that others recognize one's sameness and continuity" (Erikson 1980: 22).

(5.) However, in the present paper I am not concerned with the refinements of the concept of "personal identity". I simply use it as a stepping-stone towards the next conceptual layer, the concept of "**social identity**". It refers to the fact that human beings do not only perceive each other as distinct individuals with an unmistakable personal identity, but also as members of social groups or incumbents of social roles. Individuals are regularly identified with their family, their job, their religion, their gender, their party-membership, their national background etc. Often they themselves accept these identifications and "identify" with their social attributes: In this case, a person "is" his role. He "is" a man, a professor, a sociologist and a German. He acts as such, and he is treated as such. However, it is immaterial for the present discussion whether these social identities are perceived as purely external role attributes, or whether they become an internalized part of personal identity. For, whatever may be the case, we may assume that the behaviour of human actors is strongly oriented to the social identity of the Self and his or her Significant Others.

(6.) In order to be able to move from this general conception of "social identity" to the specific variant I am interested in, to "**national identity**", three preparatory remarks are required:

(a) The first one is rather negative. It serves to underline that it is logically inadmissible to invest social groups or even nations with a quasi-personal identity. Groups or nations are no persons. They do not have a mind, they do not have a memory, they cannot have a soul. Of course, they can act as "collective actors". They may even acquire the quality of legal persons and, through their representatives, they are able to interact with natural persons. But it would be a mistake to believe that groups can acquire a "collective personality" or a "group soul". *Homo sapiens sapiens* in his wisdom is able to ascribe identity to everything, to persons, to trees, to clouds, to gods - and also to nations and to corporations. But he himself is the only one who **has** an identity as long as he has his personal mind and memory. Thus, whenever a particular nation is attributed with an "identity" of its own which goes beyond the mere identification of the temporal and territorial continuity of its political existence, we move into the field of ideology. Of course, it may well be accurate to refer to the common "national identity" of the inhabitants of a certain region. If the majority of them perceive themselves as "Germans", and if they are perceived as such by others, their German identity clearly is a part of their social identity. But this does not warrant any loose talk about the "identity of the German nation".

(b) The second preparatory remark refers to a special case of social identity formation which has been described as “we-group-formation” (Elias 1987, Elwert 1989). As I just said, the attribution of social identity is a basic process of social life. Individuals classify themselves and others according to their membership and their position in relevant social groups. “We- groups” are a specific type of group: The members of a “we-group” are faced with specific obligations of loyalty and solidarity towards all other group-members and to the common goals of the group. It is quite possible that the group-members even “identify with the group”. That is, the particular values, goals or symbols attributed to the group are adopted by its members. It implies that the common “group interest” is expected to have priority over individual interests.

Family- and kinship-groups are the generic context of we-group formation. There, loyalty and emotional attachment to the group are obvious normative expectations. However, a group spirit may also develop in non-kinship groups based upon frequent and intensive face-to-face interaction, e.g. sports teams or work groups. In such cases, the sense of “togetherness” is grounded in common goals, close interaction and shared experience. Or, to put it differently, under specific conditions small groups are able to produce an intensive “interactive reality” of their own. However, the notion of we-group formation becomes increasingly problematic, whenever groups grow larger and the interaction between members gets more anonymous. In such cases the growth of strong personal bonds between the group members becomes unlikely and the chances of their acting in solidarity and mutual loyalty diminish.

The general direction of my argument should have become clear by now: Though I am not denying that “real we-groups” do exist, I am arguing that for large and anonymous social groups, such as classes or nations, the structural conditions for genuine we-group formation are very unfavourable indeed. It follows that, on sociological grounds, all claims of “national unity” or “class unity” have to be met with extreme caution. If faced with such claims, the sociologists should always be prepared for the possibility that the imagery of “national identity” or “class solidarity” is being used in a manipulative way and that no genuine we-group formation has been achieved.

(c) This leads up to my third preparatory remark. So far, I have argued that individual persons acquire a social identity by being members of specific social groups and by adopting particular social roles. However one facet of this general process of social identity formation requires special attention, **the process of social labelling**: Certain persons or categories of persons are attributed with unalterable characteristics. These characteristics are strongly valued, and they dominate perception to such an extent that individual behaviour not corresponding to the

stereotype becomes invisible. Through this labelling mechanism, complex human beings are reduced to stereotypical “jews”, “christians” or “muslims”, or to “criminals”, “law-abiding citizens” or “saints”. Not only the beneficiaries, but also the victims of labelling often identify with the stereotypical images imposed upon them. Thereby the capacity of refined social perception is reduced. Social actors are replaced by stereotypes.

After these three intermediary remarks, one sees the extension of the problem that must be solved if a “clear and distinct” concept of national identity is to be formed: To speak of “national identity” implies that the nation is conceived as a potential we-group. However, nations are not small primary groups, but huge and anonymous secondary groups. Thus, given the complex structure and social and cultural differentiation of modern state societies, it is very likely that a common social we-identity of all their inhabitants cannot be established, unless strong stereotypes are mobilized which minimize internal differences and concentrate on the uniqueness of common national qualities. Yet, the mere dramatization of common historical, cultural, linguistic or even ethnic characteristics tends to be abstract and emotionally sterile, if it is not accompanied by the reverse side of the labelling process - the **distinction between “us” and “them”**. That is, all members of the abstract we-group are highly valued, non-members are devalued and potentially excluded. Indeed, as Norbert Elias (1965/1990) has shown, this is the usual price to be paid for the formation of anonymous we-groups - the social division between “The Established and the Outsiders” which is produced and stabilized by means of positive and negative stereotypes. That is, in such cases we are not faced with genuine we-group formation, but with a **“pseudo-we-group”** which is not based upon the social ties and common culture of its members, but upon the discrimination and exclusion of outsiders.

### III.

Given this state of affairs, any attempt to provide the concept of “national identity” with a clear and distinct sociological meaning might seem futile. There is considerable danger to fall into propagandist traps and to give an academic legitimation to pseudo-we-groups.

On the other hand, the likelihood of intellectual confusion is equally dangerous. This is why I shall not give up on my attempt at conceptual clarification. Therefore, the following two questions will have to be faced: Firstly, it will have to be examined whether the diagnosis is correct that stereotypes and xenophobia are inevitable concomitants of national identity formation. Secondly, it will have to be asked whether the formation of a national identity is necessary for the integration of modern societies at all.

In order to be able to discuss these questions the second key concept mentioned in the title this paper will have to be considered - the **concept of “social integration”**.

Sociologists use the concept of integration in two different ways:

(1.) In its first meaning, the term “integration” simply refers to the incorporation of new members into a society. On the level of state society, the two most usual forms of integrating individuals are either by birth and socialization or by immigration and naturalization. This is the concept of **individual integration**.

(2.) Individual integration must be analytically distinguished from **structural integration**. The notion of structural (or “societal”) integration is closely connected with the paradigm of structural-functional theory and with its successor, social systems theory. There, the central concern is the structural differentiation of modern societies which requires the institutionalisation of generalized forms of social co-operation and conflict management. From this point of view a society is “integrated”, if its different parts are held together in a common social order. As Talcott Parsons has argued, the basic value consensus between the members of a society is the main pillar of social order. In this assumption he was a close follower of Émile Durkheim, who claimed that a common moral order is the precondition of solidarity and social stability.

Clearly, the functional theory of “order through consensus” is not without its dangers, as it tends to base its explanations upon a *petitio principii*. But this can be avoided by making use of a conceptual elaboration which has been introduced by critical functionalists - the distinction between “**social integration**” and “**system integration**”. This distinction was originally introduced by David Lockwood (1964) and subsequently refined by Claus Offe (1972) and Jürgen Habermas (1981). The crucial idea is that not one, but **two** modes of structural integration are active in modern societies:

(a) The first mode, social integration, is familiar from the writings of Durkheim and Parsons. It refers to structural integration based upon moral or value consensus. In order to minimize the risk of terminological ambiguity, I personally prefer the expression “**moral integration**”. But whatever term is being used, the essential point is that this mode of social integration is based upon consensus and explicit co-operation between the members of a society. As Durkheim would say, moral integration is social integration based upon solidarity.

(b) The second mode of social integration, “**system integration**”, operates without the bond of moral solidarity. System integration is achieved by means of standardized media of exchange,

especially money and power. The structures of modern western state societies are characterized by a capitalist market economy based upon money and a democratic and bureaucratic state administration which acts by means of formal-legal power. The argument now is that the circulation of money and the systematic application of bureaucratic power lead to “system integration” whereby the isolated activities of individual and collective actors are co-ordinated anonymously, without requiring a common value-orientation or moral solidarity. As Jürgen Habermas (1992: 643) put it: “Administrative power... and money have become anonymous media of social integration which operate without taking into account peoples’ minds”. According to Jürgen Habermas modern societies are obliged to rely on a combination of both modes of structural integration, moral integration **and** system integration. What interests him in his critical theory of society is the particular “mix” between the two modes.

All modern states are very strongly influenced by the **western model of the nation-state**. As is well known, this model is based upon the early modern conception of territorial and dynastic sovereignty which eventually led to the notion of the sovereign state. A second line of influence is the revolutionary idea of peoples’ sovereignty which has led to the various forms of modern parliamentary democracy. If we accept that democracy (“government by the people”) is a core element of the nation state model, the immediate question to be answered in any nation-state is: “Who is the people that exercises democratic sovereignty?”. One simple and pragmatic solution would be to consider all those who live in a particular territory as “the people”. But, this is not the preferred solution of the western model of the nation-state. Rather, the members of a nation are defined as a community of people held together by special bonds of blood, of history, of language, of culture, of religion etc. from which particular loyalties, rights and obligations are derived.

Coming back to the conceptual distinction between moral integration and system integration, it becomes now obvious that the nation-state model is not easily compatible with the pragmatic notion of mere system integration through anonymous market mechanisms and rational-legal domination. Instead, a common national identity, solidarity, sentiments of belonging and togetherness are called for.

At this point my argument seems to have to come to its conclusion, albeit with little enthusiasm: If one accepts that there is no viable alternative to the model of the democratic nation-state in the contemporary world, it appears that one will also have to accept that the structural integration of modern state-societies will always have to rely upon moral integration - a moral integration which, for the reasons stated above, is very likely to take an ethnocentric and xenophobic turn.

#### IV.

However, this conclusion is still premature. A short glance to the history of the Federal Republic of Germany between 1949 and 1989 proves that it was possible to build a stable and well integrated democratic society which was clearly **not** based on strong and unambiguous feelings of national identity of its citizens. Numerous surveys have established that the patriotic pride and the national identification of West Germans were comparatively weak (cf. Honolka 1987). That is to say, West Germany before the German unification was a society primarily integrated through system integration, not moral integration.

The Federal Republic of West Germany had come into being in 1949 as an accident of post-war history, not as an intentional act of nation-building. The “re-unification” of Germany always remained a central element of the official philosophy of the West German state. As a consequence, propagandist efforts to create a separate West German “national identity” were absent. On the other hand, the identification of the younger generations of West German citizens with the “German nation” diminished steadily. Nonetheless, the majority of West German citizens identified with their state. But their identification was not based on national grounds. The main reasons were the economic success, the efficient public administration and a far-reaching acceptance of the constitutional order, combined with a strong rejection of eastern state-socialism. In addition, both the system of mass communication and the educational system presented the Federal Republic as the taken-for-granted frame of reference for all West German citizens. The success of soccer or athletics teams representing West Germany in the international sports arena even led to the occasional expression of quasi-national emotions. In sum, however, the Federal Republic of West-Germany was not a national, but a mainly **post-national society**. Its structural integration was mainly system integration, based upon the successful functioning of the market and the state apparatus. However, over the years the majority of West German citizens also developed a sense of loyalty to the political order they lived in. Some authors even spoke of the growth of a spirit of “constitutional patriotism” (*Verfassungspatriotismus*, cf. Sternberger 1990, Habermas 1987) among the West German population.

By contrast, the structural integration of the East German Democratic Republic (G.D.R.), which comprised only a quarter of the western population, was much more precarious. A clear indicator for the weakness of its internal cohesion was the fact, that a heavily guarded wall had to be erected

around the entire republic in the year 1961 to prevent massive emigration. Intensive official efforts to create a strong emotional identification of the East German population with their own “socialist nation” met with limited success. Slowly, international diplomatic recognition was achieved, and especially the considerable number of olympic victories strengthened the self confidence of many East Germans. But the attractions of the more liberal and economically, politically and demographically more powerful West Germany were too strong. Once the wall had fallen down and the borders were open, the structural integration of the East German society broke down very rapidly. As a consequence, in the first free elections of 1990 a significant majority of East German citizens voted for political parties who supported a quick accession to the Federal Republic.

The unification process itself began as a process of system integration. In two quick strokes the West German currency and the free market system were transferred to East Germany in July 1990, the West German constitution and the legal system in October 1990. All surviving elements of East German system integration were replaced and incorporated into the western system. Foreign observers were surprised by the sober and unemotional way in which the German unification was carried out. Compared with the first German unification in the year 1871, the absence of nationalist rhetoric was quite spectacular: The second unification of Germany was rather a cool procedure. It was performed as a conscious act of system integration, with little concern for moral integration.

Between 1990 and 1995, this state of affairs has not significantly changed. Of course, large parts of the East German population were hit by the rapid transformation of the economic and political system. On the one hand, their freedom of thought and of movement was greatly enhanced and their living standard began to rise steadily. On the other hand, the rate of unemployment rose dramatically, and disillusionment grew among considerable parts of the East German population. East German citizens compared their situation with that of the West Germans and began to resent their relative deprivation. The West German majority, meanwhile, began to lose interest in the newly acquired parts of the country. Some Westerners may also have got a little tired of East German complaints. But enormous subsidies continue to flow into the East where the reconstruction of the material infrastructure and of the economy is in full progress. In other words, **the “national solidarity” expresses itself in monetary and administrative terms, as an anonymous act of system integration with very little moral and emotional connotations.**

If this diagnosis is correct, it means that the structural integration of newly united Germany still is mainly based upon the principle of system integration. This situation is not without its dangers. As the national identification and moral integration of East and West German citizens is not very strong, the mechanisms of system integration carry the main burden of societal integration. This means that

in case of a prolonged economic crisis the absence of a secure basis of moral integration could turn into a problem. The temptations might be there to substitute it by pseudo-we-group identification and an increasing discrimination of foreigners. There are some indications that this could happen: There is a small vociferous nationalist minority, there have been violent attacks and raids against foreigners in several East and West German towns, there was a fervent political discussion about the limitation of immigration which carried some xenophobic overtones. Yet, there are also strong public reactions against such a renaissance of ethnocentric chauvinism and nationalism. In any case opinion polls and political elections consistently show that the overwhelming majority of East and West Germans so far are not inclined to adopt any extremist positions.

Yet, one will have to accept that the specifically German brand of a post-national democracy is particularly susceptible to crises of system integration. Or, to put it the other way round, unified Germany simply is condemned to continue its considerable economic and political success, for its moral provisions for difficult times are not very secure.

## V.

However, this conclusion is too simple. It is based upon the tacit assumption that West German experiences may be transferred and directly applied to East Germany. But the process of German unification was not a routine operation. Therefore, routine treatments are inadequate. This includes the routine application of established procedures of sociological analysis.

This may be demonstrated by the conceptual distinction I have introduced above, the distinction between individual integration and structural integration. If confronted with the recent experience of the German unification, this distinction turns out to be insufficient. For “structural integration” in modern Germany is unthinkable without coming to terms with the phenomenon of “collective integration”. That is, a third mode of social integration, **collective integration**, will have to be considered, as the term of individual integration is inadequate. Indeed, the German unification is a historically unique case. The East Germans acquired their membership to the German state society neither by birth or immigration, nor was it imposed by violence and conquest. Instead, 16 million East Germans were turned into “new citizens” of the enlarged Federal Republic of Germany on the basis of their own democratically expressed will. In the beginning, this fact was treated as if it was indeed a routine case of population increase through massive individual integration. But, clearly, the East Germans were neither newly born nor newcomers from outside who might be expected to integrate and adjust individually into a pre-existent structure. That is, we are faced with the new

theoretical problem of collective integration, and the straightforward conceptual dualism between individual and structural integration cannot be maintained.

The process of collective integration comprises both aspects, it is an integration of individual persons **and** a change of structure. This is a new and hitherto unexplored theoretical issue of which we have little historical experience: All of a sudden the Federal Republic of Germany undergoes a territorial expansion and the population growth by one fifth. 16 million persons loose their taken-for-granted political and ideological frame of reference and most of them are faced with drastic biographical ruptures. To treat this simply as a question of individual integration or personal adjustment would be grossly misleading. A few empirical indicators may underline this: About one third of the East German population of working age are still without regular employment. Two thirds, if not three quarters of the East German labourforce have lost their employment position at least once since 1990, many experienced occupational dequalification and downward mobility, only relatively few found new career chances. On the other hand the unification process had no comparable consequences for everyday life in West-Germany. Rather, it helped to smooth out the beginning economic recession of the early nineties. Whereas business went on as usual in the West, the East experienced a great upheaval.

Thus, one will have to admit that these structural preconditions may encourage a polarization of the perception of social reality inside Germany. A sharp division between “Eastern” and “Western” perspectives may grow. As the “Western” view is clearly hegemonial, this polarization is not one between equal partners. In consequence, the signs are there that the polarization might take the form of a split between “the Established” in West Germany and “the Outsiders” in the East.

Of course this statement should not be mistaken for a sociological diagnosis. Every sociologist (and every thinking person) will know, that “the” West Germans are not all “Established”, and that not all East Germans are “Outsiders”. Rather, the above statement is a description of an ongoing labelling process in present day Germany. There is indeed a considerable risk that two “pseudo-we-groups” will establish themselves inside Germany - a sub-nation of East Germans and a sub-nation of West Germans who mutually devaluate one another in a stereotypical way.

The second risk, already mentioned before, is even more serious: The facile remedy against an undesirable East-West polarization inside Germany would be an agreement about a negative common denominator - that is, an agreement about a common enemy to be discriminated and excluded.

All this does not sound very optimistic. As a sociologist I observe that, on the one hand, the unification of Germany was carried out in the West German way, which means that it relied heavily on mechanisms of system integration. Given the initial conditions and the enormous time pressure, this was perhaps the only possible way. But on the other hand, it is equally undeniable that the whole process is lacking a reliable underpinning of moral integration, which might eventually lead to a chauvinistic backlash. In this situation, one might be tempted to call for genuine feelings of national identity and solidarity in order to provide the process of system integration with a stable moral “embedding” (Karl Polanyi).

However, if you have followed my reasoning so far, you will know that this is not what I could suggest. Solidarity is a “scarce resource” (Jürgen Habermas) in modern society. It cannot be wilfully manufactured through appeals and publicity campaigns. If this is attempted, the likely result is a pseudo-identification with superficial symbols of “the” German nation and a stereotypical rejection of everything outside. Therefore, as I see it, the only possible way can be a steady endeavour to strengthen the democratic political culture and to support the education of responsible citizens who are able to combine an awareness of their own historical traditions and loyalties with a cosmopolitan understanding. Clearly, this is something that has to grow steadily and cannot be achieved in a hurry.

You will have noticed that in this talk I spoke only about Germany. But although this is for the first time that I have come to Japan, I am sure that you will have understood from the similarities of our history, from the shared fate of our states and societies, why the case of Germany is such a special case. In particular I am sure you will have understood why the usual western path to national identity formation is not open to the unified German state. You will draw your own conclusions.

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