

From *Kultur* to Cliché: German-Americans and Ethnicity

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The impetus behind this paper is pedagogical. As part of a new initiative at Ripon College I taught one section of a course called "New Homes, New Lives." My 15 first-year students and I explored "The German Experience in America," while colleagues in history and anthropology each offered their own courses on topics related to immigration. Our goal was to introduce students to the concept of a liberal education, specifically to stress the interdisciplinary nature of knowledge, and we were also supposed to acquaint them with such practical matters as taking notes, using the library, writing essays, and participating in group projects. Administrators occasionally interrupted our instruction to address the entire first-year class on matters as diverse as sexual harassment and second-semester registration, and the three sections in our cluster met together periodically so students could compare all three professors' interpretation of events, texts, and documents. The first-year seminars were an exciting, if also somewhat daunting enterprise, in which the field of German-American Studies occupied a distinct and interestingly problematical niche. My discussion concentrates on both the opportunities and constraints involved in such an undertaking. I am not claiming to have discovered anything new, but I am convinced that how we package what we already know says a great deal about the continuing relevance and academic legitimacy of German-American studies--or its lack on both counts.

One immediate advantage, particularly at a small, residential college in Wisconsin, is that such a course can and does attract so-called "heritage Germans," i.e., those students whose ancestry in German. According to reliable estimates, more than 50 % of Wisconsin's population is of German extraction, and the surrounding Midwestern states, which provide a significant proportion of our student body, are scarcely less Germanic.¹ Since German-American ethnicity is one way to connect not only to the students' history, but also and more importantly to their lives as "immigrants" to the new culture of college life, I tried to attract them with the following catalog copy: "Today, little remains of America's vibrant German past--a few Oktoberfests, bratwursts, beer, and some distant memories. This course explores what it used to mean to be German in the United States and what it still means today."² My own approach is literary, that is, I concentrate on texts written by and for Germans in America, and I examine those written artifacts in their cultural and historical context.

Since I am also rebuilding the college's German program, I admit that attracting "heritage Germans" to the department's other courses is a prime reason for me to be involved in the first-year studies program. All 15 students in the course are wholly or partially descendants of German immigrants, and 8 of those 15 students were taking German courses concurrently with "The German Experience in America." Not surprisingly, I recruited others who could start the language or renew their acquaintance with it. My tactic is to excite them with the prospect of access to an otherwise inaccessible world, in the hope that they will continue the journey from cliché back to *Kultur*. Even those whose high schools only offered Spanish are possible converts, however remote. And while student demand is no measure of German-American Studies' legitimacy within a German program, as we also all know far too well, German Studies are themselves at a critical juncture in the American academy. Any help a German-American course

can provide is more than welcome relief. The question is how such a course can function both as a serious intellectual challenge and as a recruiting tool for the wider riches of German Studies.

In my view, the one sure way to miss both goals is to present a nostalgic history of German-American achievement. Filiopietism is neither credible to our scholarly constituency nor interesting to our students. To me, the German experience in the United States makes far more sense if we regard German-Americans as instructive failures, and I offer my curious but almost completely uninformed students as proof that almost everything German in their ancestors' lives has been lost. However we might regret the loss, this absence of significant and lasting cultural impact is more useful in understanding both the construction and the disappearance of "authentically" German identities in America than any parade of heroes or achievements. And, just as important, German-Americans' unrealized ambitions can help students understand the cultural and political stakes in discussions as diverse as bilingual education in the United States or the place of *Gastarbeiter* in Germany. We can also ask what success might have looked like and how desirable its achievement would have been--both for German-Americans and for the wider culture in which they lived. Failure allows us to talk credibly about lessons from the past; it also permits students to connect with their nearly forgotten ancestors. The missing richness can help explain bratwursts and beer as the sole survivors of a larger German immigrant history. By contrast, as an interpretive model success is little more than vain tub-thumping, an echo of the monumental canon of German classics that are initially so irrelevant and unappealing to present-day students of German literature. Although they will not encounter any daunting masterpieces by German-American authors, students (and our colleagues) need a reason to read the wide variety of texts that German-Americans wrote and read. Appeals to *Kultur* are insufficient; we have to demonstrate that even the simpler language of popular literature and non-fiction accounts contains a surplus value of significant discourses. Luckily, texts that people actually read, as opposed to those that they were supposed to read, overflow with issues that concerned the German-American community in its struggle for survival, acceptance, and assimilation. We simply have to ask what questions these texts answered for their authors and readers; in practical terms, we often have to work with the relatively few primary texts available in English to see what they meant to their original producers and publics.

Before proceeding to the content of my course, let me first unpack what it is that I mean by the failure of German-American culture, a failure that led to its virtual disappearance in cliché. I take as my starting point a quotation from Der goldne Wegweiser: Ein Führer zu Glück und Wohlstand, published in Cleveland in 1881 and made available in English by Madison's Max Kade Institute in 1993:

Our native language, German, is one of the oldest, purest, and most cultivated of the living languages and surpasses most modern languages in richness and strength, in malleability and suppleness. It must therefore be especially important to our German compatriots in America that their descendants also learn not merely to understand their beautiful native language without difficulty, but to know it thoroughly and to speak it. . . in order to imbue the rising generation with love for a language in which people such as Lessing, Schiller, or Goethe wrote, one must open up to them the inexhaustible wellspring of beauty which this language contains and let them drink from it.

If the German generation born here only learns to speak and read German without becoming

familiar with the magical profound spirit of the German language, then they will naturally only use it when they are forced to do so, or when they see their advantage in so doing. It is different if the German language has become a dear friend to them, which helps to beautify their leisure hours with the immortal monuments that German thinkers and poets have given to humanity.³

To begin, the claim that German is more ancient, more beautiful, or purer than other languages is ridiculous, and we are lucky not to be saddled with such patently foolish reasons for teaching it. However, it is unfortunately also true that we can now make a far less convincing argument for German's usefulness than was the case a century or even 25 years ago. English is the world's language, especially in the natural sciences where German held sway a generation or two ago. Thus, if the rationale for learning second languages is purely instrumental, German should lose to Spanish in American schools. Moreover, except in a few diminishing enclaves, we must admit that German has not survived in the United States. Today's German-Americans have, at most, passing familiarity with a handful of lexical items, while the rest of the population recognizes little more than words such as "sauerkraut"--and not, despite the best efforts of anti-German hysteria, "liberty cabbage."

More important, if language is both the measure and means of culture, specifically the repository of high culture epitomized by canonical literature, German-Americans lost the cultural battle decisively. Already by 1900, German's practicality was rapidly diminishing, while the chance for its survival was never great when its sole justification was to enable German-Americans to commune with Goethe in private and at home. Simply put, that argument implies German ceased to communicate content that mattered in the lives of those who were supposed to speak it. Cultural cachet was simply insufficient, even off-putting to a majority of German-Americans. And when, for all practical purposes, the language went, so too did the newspapers, theater groups, businesses, and communities that were the hallmark of what had been, in the nineteenth century, a vibrant German community in the United States. To the extent that they continued to exist as a self-conscious ethnic group, twentieth-century German-Americans, including my students and their parents, had to construct identities almost entirely without reference to German and therefore without everything to which the language might have provided access. Where German survived W.W.I--and especially where it still survives today--the language contains nothing of the high-cultural content its nineteenth-century advocates hoped for. No wonder Der goldne Wegweiser rolled out the rhetorical heavy artillery; the above quotation smacks of nothing so much as fear--and well-justified fear at that.

That same fear and the nostalgic longing for an imaginary past --*eine rückwärtsgewandte Utopie*--governed much of the literature that German-Americans read and wrote. Stories such as "Der Schlösser von Philadelphia" (*Die Abendschule*, 1880), which I translated for an earlier class, revolve around the difference between German artisans and Yankee businessmen. These texts typically pit representatives of modern capitalist society--bankers, factory-owners, government officials--against the hard-working inhabitants of a pre-industrial community--farmers, craftsmen, and pastors. *Gesellschaft* does battle with *Gemeinschaft*, and, in the peculiar world of German-American letters, the good old days invariably triumph. The issues are serious and not very different from the problems that fill popular literature in other languages and at other times, but in a German-American context the solutions authors offered their readers predict the attraction of Oktoberfest. If fictional heroes are almost invariably craftsmen who yearn for

the simpler life of an intact organic community, then the "Bavarianization of German-American life" is easy to understand.⁴ Lederhosen and beer are simply the most visible signs of the culture's romantic anti-modernism. Since I want students to confront the ideological pressures that pushed German-Americans from *Kultur* into cliché, reading popular literature rather than "appreciating" supposed masterworks lets them see what why today's ethnically conscious German-Americans parody those aspects of Germany beloved by American tourists: Munich, Neuschwanstein, and Oberammergau satisfy the same longing for an untrammelled past.

Since most students are already acquainted with twentieth-century versions of German-American life, my other goal is to expose them to varieties of German culture in the United States that failed to survive. For example, one of my students and I translated "The Fourth of July," a short story that appeared in a German-American family journal, in 1871, at the height of German-American enthusiasm over unification in the fatherland. The story's primary readers were conservative Lutherans, and their counterparts within the text worry long and hard about the merits of attending a ball. On the one hand, the event celebrates American independence; it calls forth images of Germans melting or even disappearing into the larger society of their new homeland, although the careful reader notices that no Americans are present in the text, not even German veterans of the Civil War, who might have linked German-Americans to their new homeland's history. The plot revolves around a very different problem, namely, tensions within the German population of America. The narrator explicitly says "Catholics and Protestants, freethinkers and doubters, all seemed to be brothers" as they moved onto the dance floor, but the operative word here is "seemed." From the text's perspective, the brotherhood of all Germans, whether in the United States or in Germany, was a dangerous illusion. Those who drank and danced with people with whom they shared a language but not a religion ran the risk of eternal damnation. Although the editors placed "The Fourth of July" physically between a first-person account of the Franco-Prussian War and a sixteen-part history of the German people, its explicit message contradicts any thought of a single German-American identity. Readers of "The Fourth of July" were supposed to be Lutherans first and Germans or Americans only at their peril. They certainly would not have attended an Oktoberfest, nor would they approve of their descendants regarding such festivities as a mark of their ancestry. Students have to be acquainted with these tensions if they are to appreciate the variety of German-American life and the dimensions of its failure. They must realize, first, that there was never a typical German-American experience and, second, that Germans in the United States adapted to their new homeland in a number of different fashions, only some of which appear, in an American context, to be typically German.

For example, all too frequently discussions of Germans in the United States overlook socialism, anarchism, and the labor movement. To rectify that omission I include several autobiographies of the Haymarket martyrs, so students read first-hand accounts of working-class German life in the United States.⁵ They already had a first glance at early twentieth-century sweatshops in the film "Hester Street," which one of my colleagues introduced for all three sections. I stretch things a bit to claim Yiddish speakers as Germans, in part because there is a wonderful collection of letters to the editor of the *Jewish Daily Forward* available in English.⁶ These *Bintel Briefe* treat the everyday problems of life in New York City at the turn of the century, including mixed marriages, sexual harassment, and poverty, all written in a manner students can understand. They can also agree with the editor's advice or supply their own, which again bridges their college "immigrant" experiences to migrants throughout history. The *Daily Forward's* editor was keen

on workingmen's associations as the only option available to men and women exploited in sweatshops, and even conservative students need only take a short step to grasp the more radical ideas espoused by the Haymarket martyrs. Since six of the eight men arrested in connection with the bomb that exploded in Chicago's Haymarket Square in 1886 were Germans, it is easy to see why observers claimed there was an ethnic dimension in the event. "Americans" were quick to denounce the "foreign" terrorists, just as most German-Americans rapidly distanced themselves from their "bomb-throwing" compatriots. On the one hand, radicals recognized the need to reach beyond ethnic and linguistic boundaries if they were to succeed in organizing workers in their adopted homeland. German socialists became English-speaking labor organizers; they chose politics over ethnicity and hoped to make Marxism as American as apple pie. Haymarket also pushed middle-class German-Americans in the direction of the Anglo-Saxon mainstream by discrediting the bearded, i.e., foreign-looking German anarchists--despite their being innocent. In fact, mainstream German-Americans adopted Anglo-Saxon values as their own, claiming to be, through an earlier migration, the first Englishmen and, thereby, the best Americans. Both rejections help explain why bratwursts and beer rather than anarchism, high culture, or any "authentic" experience symbolize contemporary German-American identity. And the retrospective "normalcy" of that choice, its congruence with other developments in the United States, obscures much of what really happened in the German-American community. Today's students seldom know anything about that political diversity, nor can they regret the loss of their forbears' different visions.

Since this course includes a number of other non-traditional varieties of German-American life, let me deal briefly with two. I screened the film "Witness" to give students an easily accessible view of Amish culture. On the one hand, the Amish represent a kind of success story, but it will be important for us to discuss the cost, particularly in personal terms, of their distinct identity. We need to ask how they are able to maintain Pennsylvania Dutch and how that language functions both inside and outside the community as a means of maintaining borders. One obvious question is how well separation works today when the Amish employ "English" outsiders and also when the Amish take jobs outside their own community. Most important, just how German is Amish life, assuming there is a sensible way to define the question? On the other hand, we will want to look at the watering down of Amish culture, its increasing commercialization and commodification. Amish furniture and, indeed, the whole craft and country living market that coexist with Amish stores and visits to Amish country are part of an anti modern utopianism that enables Frankenmuth, Michigan and New Glarus, Wisconsin to prosper. Martha Stewart could well proclaim, "We are all Amish, now," and the gesture I attribute to her helps explain the sickening uniformity of German cuisine in the US. Ethnicity has become little more than a marketing tool, and the persistence of this particular strand of German-American culture--and not others--is mainly due to the fact that it coincides with a uniquely attractive form of nostalgia.

The German-American Jewish experience exists as the other end of the spectrum, as distant from the Amish and Oktoberfests as it is from the lives of Eastern-European Jews chronicled in "Hester Street" and the *Bintel Briefe*. Since Jews in Germany faced a similar mix of pressures sometimes favoring assimilation while at other times promoting a separate existence, their inclusion in a course on German-Americans is richly problematical. Along with Albert Einstein and some less prosperous, and less assimilated German Jews, I used part of Michael

Blumenthal's recent memoir, *The Invisible Wall*, because it deals with precisely those questions of identity I stressed throughout the semester.⁷ Blumenthal was born in Germany in 1926 and fled with his family through Switzerland to Shanghai in 1939. His father served in an elite guard regiment in the German army and was also a prisoner in Buchenwald. Blumenthal, who was Secretary of the Treasury in the Carter administration, appears to embody the typical immigrant success story--a life that is only possible in America. However, he has now returned to Berlin, at least part time, and he directs the Berlin Jewish Museum that will open there in the year 2000. It is intriguingly unclear to what degree it makes sense to think of Michael Blumenthal as a German-American, but I used him to speculate again with my students about what that question means. To the extent that Blumenthal is part of the German experience in the United States, he is missing from the cliché. So too are Ursula Hegi's postwar German immigrants, who struggle with their heritage and its relationship to the Holocaust.⁸ If they and Blumenthal are not typical German-Americans, can we agree on criteria to exclude one or the other?

My students reacted very well to the course, but I refrained from framing the issue for them in terms of failure. I sense that it would be far easier to present them with a list of German-American accomplishments, which I could discuss and then ask them to repeat for me on exams. My worry is not simply that such a course would be intellectually and academically dishonest, but that when they came to explore the remaining traces of their own family histories, as some of them did as part of a final project, the good students would discover their ancestors lived outside the cliché; they might find out I had fed them a lie. Having learned about the successes, there is little reason to believe that either Oktoberfest or, more important, the wider possibilities of German Studies would prove attractive to them. Such a course would also deprive them of the opportunity to rethink their attitudes towards present-day immigration; if they believe all Germans were "model immigrants," they could expect the same from Asian and Hispanic migrants. They might even lump all Asian or Hispanic immigrants into the same general category, modeled on the widespread misunderstanding of Germans in America, and they would be blind to the history of inner-ethnic diversity. So too would it be difficult for them to understand the problems and promise of Italian, Greek, and Turkish workers in Germany. They might buy into the myth of cultural homogeneity that Germans themselves are now confronting; even worse, they might accept the skinhead version of Germany. Of course, some of them may miss the point no matter what I do, but if this course is to help "students see that a liberal education will prepare them to deal with the complexity of issues that they will meet throughout their lives," then it has to center upon the ultimate failure of German-American culture and its descent into cliché.⁹

¹ See Kathleen Neils Conzen's chapter "Their Stake in the Land," in Marjorie L. McLellan, *Six Generations here: A Farm Family Remembers* (Madison, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1997) 23-4.

² *Ripon College Catalog 1998-2000*, 71.

³ *The Golden Signpost: A Guide to Happiness and Prosperity* (Madison: Max Kade Institute for German-American Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1993) 337-8.

⁴ I think I coined the term for the index of my *Popular Narratives and Ethnic Identity: Literature and Community in Die Abendschule* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991) 269.

⁵ Philip S. Foner, ed., *The Autobiographies of the Haymarket Martyrs* (New York: Humanities Press, 1969).

⁶ Isaac Metzker, ed., *A Bintel Brief: Sixty Years of Letters from the Lower East Side to the Jewish Daily Forward* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971).

⁷ W. Michael Blumenthal, *The Invisible Wall: Germans and Jews: A Personal Exploration* (Washington D. C.: Counterpoint, 1998). In addition, *Hitler's Exiles: Personal Stories of the Flight from Nazi Germany to America*, Mark M. Anderson, ed. (New York: The New Press, 1998) contains an array of useful texts.

⁸ Ursula Hegi, *Tearing the Silence: Being German in America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997).

⁹ *Ripon College Catalog.*, 70