1 Political Culture in Germany: A Paradigmatic Case

Dirk Berg-Schlosser and Ralf Rytlewski

Germany, more than most other countries, has had a dramatic and (for many Germans and non-Germans alike) traumatic history, in particular during the first half of this century. For a keen but well-meaning observer like Sebastian Haffner it exhibited a 'Jekyll and Hyde'-like quality (Haffner 1940; see also Haffner 1987): on the one hand, the two world wars and, in particular, the atrocities of the National Socialists have terrified the world and, on the other, such acts seemed incomprehensible in view of the rich traditions of German arts, philosophy and sciences. The eminent sociologist, Norbert Elias, has also been affected and intrigued by this 'reversal in the process of civilization' (Elias 1976, 1989).

Now, after a period of relative calm during which the two parts of divided Germany had become integral elements of the two major world power blocks, the sudden and – for most observers – completely unexpected unification again has given rise to some uneasiness and even fears abroad (see Chapter 19), but also to many concrete problems for Germans from both East and West when coming to grips with their newly found 'national' identity and their respective outlooks and mentalities after almost half a century of separation.

This is not the place to elaborate the particular historical events and the causal factors which have been responsible for these developments in any great detail (these have been discussed from different points of view by Calleo 1980, Blackbourn and Eley 1984, Hans-Ulrich Wehler and Heinrich August Winkler; for a critical summary see Grebing 1986). Instead, we will focus on the 'political cultural' aspects, that is, the 'subjective dimension' of these developments as they are reflected not only in the beliefs and attitudes, but also the interpretations of history and politics of the groups and persons involved.
For the concept of ‘political culture’, too, the German case has had a particular relevance (see the contribution of the mentor of this approach in contemporary political science, Gabriel Almond below; Verba 1965, Berg-Schlosser and Schissler 1987).

Apart from the intrinsic interest in the case, epistemological and methodological considerations have been important in this regard as well. Germany provides one of the few and relatively well-documented cases where four entirely different political systems (the Wilhelminian empire, the Weimar Republic, the ‘Third Reich’ and the Federal Republic) have succeeded each other within less than half a century. If one of the main hypotheses of the political culture approach (concerning a certain ‘fit’ or ‘congruence’ between a political system and its broader cultural bases) was to be confirmed, Germany provided a particularly relevant testing-ground documenting the continuities and changes in this regard (see also Almond and Verba 1980).

Similarly, from a comparative perspective, the German case seemed to contradict some of the expectations of ‘modernization’ theorists such as Lipset (1960) or Deutsch (1961). Here, a highly industrialized, urbanized, literate country had not become ‘democratized’ at the same time, or at least not in line with the unilinear concept of ‘development’ and the rather deterministic interactions of socio-economic and political factors assumed by many of these authors. For these comparative and, in part, contrasting reasons, Germany has also been included in some of the few truly cross-national studies of certain aspects of political culture (Almond and Verba 1963; Inglehart 1977; Barnes, Kaase et al. 1979).

Moreover, from an ‘intra-case’ perspective, Germany provides a rich testing-ground of political culture concepts as well. The multiple statehood before the foundation of the German Reich in 1871 has led to a particularly rich regional diversification of influences which, to a certain extent, still persist up to the present time (see, for example, H.-G. Wehling 1984). Within the ‘greater’ German context, specific paired comparisons following a ‘most similar countries design’ (Przeworski and Teune 1970) have also been possible. Thus, following the division of Germany after World War II, the FRG and the GDR still shared a common history and many similarities, but developed widely divergent economic and political systems. Furthermore, comparisons with Austria and the German-speaking parts of Switzerland also make J.S. Mill's ‘method of difference’ particularly applicable (Aarebrot and Bakka 1986). Not surprisingly, therefore, the analysis of the German case has instigated a large variety of studies,