4 Violence as Memory and Desire: Neo-Nazism in Contemporary Germany

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I INTRODUCTION

Whatever else it is or is not, the neo-Nazi movement is in part a new phenomenon and in part bound up inextricably with Germany’s past. It cannot escape, nor do its protagonists wish to escape, the dubious claim to representing Germany’s alter ego. Indeed they would not have it any other way. In this it differs from Italian neo-Fascism which, at least for electoral reasons, pretends to disavow its past history. In Germany neo-Nazi groups constitute not only themselves and their current situation, but as well a sometimes visible sometimes invisible absent presence, one related causally to so many other absences, historically and figuratively speaking, which continue to haunt Germany. For most Germans such absences are preferably repressed. They constitute guilty knowledge, the erasure that leaves a stain. But even if the knowledge disappears – and generational amnesia is perhaps a national pastime – the guilt remains, the ghost in today’s democracy.

It is perhaps for these and similar reasons that even a small but bold, and entirely unrepentant, neo-Nazi movement can produce such large reactions and fears. Despite the candlelight protests against xenophobic violence and the holding of memorial vigils in many German cities, the movement remains unabashedly defiant. Indeed, it celebrates and exploits what guilt there is as a previous expression of power even while denying the Holocaust itself. And because of its past, the movement can never be just a movement like any other. The more so since it claims to represent the continuity of, and nostalgia for, myths for a state which, once subservient to the will of the party, will be recreated by the latter’s inheritors. It is through a violence of re-enactment – the strutting, the uniforms, insignia, and the discourse (including references to the legally forbidden Mein Kampf), punctuated by atrocities, walls smeared with hate slogans, immigrant hostels burned, indi-

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individuals beaten – that the return of the Übermensch and the master race is signalled. In these ways violence retrieves principles while nostalgia evokes racial superiority, blood purity, military glory and conquest: the ingredients of an aesthetic of danger and death.

Not that most of those who number themselves among the ranks of neo-Nazi’s are themselves aesthetic objects. Despite uniforms and boots, batons and whips, buckles and insignia, the goose-step and the straight-arm salute, not to speak of a preference for blond boys and maidens, a significant proportion of the neo-Nazi clientele hardly fit the picture of their Aryan ideal. Not least of all this is because the shared solidarities of hatred expressed in a convivial way by the prolonged and excessive consumption of beer tends to leave its mark on faces and bellies. The beer halls are still the venues for the party faithful, at least certain beer halls off-limits to outsiders and where many continue to meet and dream of the restoration of the Reich. So much so that if Nazism was once a tragedy its Second Coming is a farce.

But it is a farce which also produces tragedies. If absences, guilty knowledge, memory, and their inversion through the return of the Übermensch and the master race, belong to a larger history of Germany as Volk (as community), today it is not only directed against Jews and gypsies (who nevertheless remain pollutants) but other immigrants, from Turkey, Iran, Vietnam, Russia, Poland, and elsewhere in Eastern Europe. Although the authorities protest that the violence committed against them is unorganized, spontaneous, and localized – not programmatic – and difficult to connect directly to the secret meetings, the semi-secret celebrations, the furtive display of forbidden Nazi salutes, the wearing of uniforms and paraphernalia, the connection between purity, “spontaneous” violence is most certainly in part choreographed in order to create a more general atmosphere of threat and danger. If the extermination of unwanted categories of immigrants appears unsystematic and unorganized – a product of chance encounters – looks may be deceiving.

Systematic or not, there is, as we shall see, plenty of violence. There is terror and the use of terror tactics. Nevertheless one would be hard put to call the movement “terrorist”. Indeed, Nazism has always been one of those movements able to play off legalism and the use of institutions of state and society for violent ends. Nor does any other movement combine designated actions aimed at disordering the bourgeois democratic state, and the form smashing that goes with it, with such a strong emphasis on order and discipline. Whatever their other differences, the old Nazism and the new have in common a preference for “disordering” as freedom and “ordering” as power and control.