

preface

One afternoon in the late summer of 2008, as this book was already going to the publisher, I was strolling along the docks of the Granville Public Market in Vancouver when I passed a young woman with a strong German accent emphatically explaining to her companion, “and that was the *first* time that one could say I am proud to be a German. That was the *first* time . . .” Just the day before, driving out of the same market, I saw a young man wearing a German flag on his backpack.

These two incidents suggest that much has changed since I began the research for this book nearly a decade ago and subsequently wrote a story about two generations of Germans struggling with their relationship with the nation. My time in Berlin came before the flag-waving and nationalism of the 2006 World Cup, when Chancellor Angela Merkel told a national newspaper that the flag-waving German fans were merely displaying a “relaxed pride in their country . . . without having to justify themselves” (Landler and Longman 2006). Just five years earlier, while I was living in Berlin, President Rau had publicly stated that German pride was an impossibility. In a short span of years, it seemed, Germans had set aside the automatic association of flag-waving with negative expressions of nationalism (Bernstein 2006a) and displayed what one newspaper reporter called “a sort of unembarrassed patriotism” (Bernstein 2006b).

For the youngest Germans—today’s children and teenagers—this book may already seem, then, like an odd artifact from another era. Indeed, cultural phenomena are ephemeral and trying to capture them on paper is inevitably a risky endeavor. The story I tell of German culture in the early part of this century, in other words, would likely look somewhat different today, less than a decade after I first began researching it.

But it is an important story nonetheless, and not just as a cultural artifact. Setting aside the exceptional circumstances of national sporting events, many Germans continue to struggle with their relationship with the nation. The kinds of generational clashes that I observed

were likely taking place in schools and other settings where generations interact throughout Germany during the time that I was there. The stories here, therefore, will ring true to many Germans born in the post-war era who continue to feel compelled to reject the nation, as they will to many members of a younger generation who resent the insistence of their elders that they can never be proud to be German.

The words of the Germans in this book will not resonate with all Germans, of course. National cultures are not homogeneous; rather, they are fluid and multivocal (Benhabib 2002), and there is tremendous variation among national populations in political opinions, attitudes, and relative emotional attachment to their collective national identities. I do expect, though, that these stories will ring true to other readers, too, even if they have never been to Germany and have little interest in it. The story I tell here of the clash of generations around a shared collective value—the nation—is an instance of generational difference that I contend happens in other places and at other times. Whenever a younger generation is striving to redefine a collective identity—whether national, ethnic, or religious—in ways that an older generation resists—I would expect a similar kind of pattern to emerge.

Overview of the Book

In chapter 1, I place the German case in the context of theories of national identity and nationalism, setting up the exploration of generational changes in Germany that will follow in subsequent chapters. I explain how academic and popular understandings of Germanness assume it is determined by “blood” and briefly review recent scholarship on nations and nationalism. Because these questions are impossible to investigate ahistorically, particularly in the German case, I turn in chapter 2 to a historical overview of citizenship, naturalization, and national belonging and identity in Germany. I focus on the periods leading up to and after World War II in order to provide a context within which current debates and contemporary understandings of Germanness can be investigated.

In chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6, I turn to the ethnographic research I conducted in three schools in Berlin. I begin in chapter 3 with debates about national pride in Germany, drawing on interviews with students and teachers to compare an older generation of teachers’ views on pride with students’ reactions to a prevailing public discourse about national

pride in unified Germany, which has presented national pride as an illegitimate emotion that is directly linked to right-wing activities. In chapter 4 I turn to the radical right-wing. Drawing on school and classroom observations, interviews with students and teachers, participant-observation in teacher-training workshops on right-wing extremism, research on curriculum and school-based interventions in Berlin, and life narratives from a selected group of self-identified radical right-wing and former radical right-wing young men, the chapter details the nature of the radical right and the challenges posed to teachers who are trying to address these youth in their classrooms. In chapter 5 I turn to the school-based ethnography, first addressing the context of civic education in German vocational schools before shifting to an account of the months I spent observing school and classroom practice in three schools, examining how conceptions of citizenship and national identity are addressed by state actors and in particular by public vocational school teachers in civics classrooms. In the final part of the chapter, I examine students' responses to what they perceive as a hegemonic classroom discourse about national identity. Finally, chapter 6 takes up the question of generational change in conceptions of citizenship and national belonging, revealing how a younger generation of working-class Germans constructs their understanding of citizenship and national belonging based on cultural rather than blood-based criteria, and showing how this redefines prevailing understandings that many outsiders (including academics) have of Germanness. In the concluding chapter, I return to the discussion about the constructed nature of nations, arguing that a younger generation of Germans is actively reimagining the German nation as their relationship to the nation and their understandings of who can be a German evolve. I point out the ways in which these findings illustrate both the success and the failure of the German state's project to create "democratic" and "tolerant" citizens. I also suggest that educators, parents, and other adults who are concerned about adolescents' participation in extremist movements would do well to consider whether generational shifts in the meaning of collective identity are playing a role in the appeal of such groups.