

VILÉM FLUSSER How the Germans see Israel.

The question has been asked how the West German press reports on the present Israeli-Arab conflict. It is a question which asks for the "ideology" that hides behind the comments, but also behind the news, as published in the various West German papers. It goes without saying that every newspaper serves a more or less explicitly stated ideology, but there is an overall German ideology which forms a background to all "Weltanschauungen", and it is most easily discovered where problems concerning Jews are involved one way or another. The present paper will try to point it out on the basis of comments on the present conflict in various news magazines, in the "Sueddeutsche" and the "Allgemeine Frankfurter Zeitung", and on the basis of radio and TV comments.

Two aspects strike the observer: that in the reporting the word "Jew" is almost never mentioned, and that the German origin of many of the actors involved in the event is not being called to attention. This might create the impression that the present war is being waged by an "Israeli" nation just as much linked to German history and destiny as are the various Arab populations, and that it is therefore possible for Germans to maintain a sort of uncommitted sympathy for this mythical "Israeli" nation. But of course this is a very thin disguise, and the very deep involvement of the German people in the Jewish question can be felt immediately under the surface. Were this the whole truth of the matter, it would be relatively easy to "unmask" the ideology behind the reporting. But the situation is, in fact, more complex.

Time and again, ~~at~~ with embarrassing frequency for a Jewish reader, there appear official and unofficial proclamations of German responsibility for the present state of the Jewish people. They have a somewhat ritual character and one cannot repress a feeling that, though they may be sincere, they aim at tranquilizing German self-doubts more than at effective action. They contrast with other official proclamations in which the German establishment tries to assume a "European" posture with regard to the event, as if the German position ~~with~~ vis-à-vis the Jewish problem were somehow like the Dutch or British position. One can sense how ill at ease officials and reporters are, and how they try to find an equilibrium between their historical past, (which links them closely to the Jews all over, including the Israeli Jews), and their recent position as partners in the Common market, (which is however also a rather precarious result of their history, in the sense that it involves assuming responsibilities for the Jewish people). One must admit that this is a task very difficult for all the Germans, and especially for those who hold some power of decision.

The acrobatic act ~~between~~ of maneuvering between ~~the~~ the mask of the benign impartial piece-monger and the mask of the repenting criminal is, however, itself a phenomenon of the surface. Underneath it much stronger force

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es are at play, forces that have to do not only with the present and the Nazi past, but with the age-old German identity problem, (which lies to some extent at the bottom of German antisemitism and philosemitism). Let me first point to some aspects of that problem, and then try to surprise it as it surfaces in the present reporting of the Israeli conflict.

The fact that the German society lost a political identity well before the Modern Ages, and that it never truly achieved it later on, led to exacerbated romantic nationalism. This articulated itself sometimes in the form of a bastard messianism of the type "am deutschen Wesen wird die Welt genesen". This messianism had a religious dimension, before it acquired a cultural, political and racial dimension, and, through its religious dimension, was linked, ever since its Lutheran origins, to Christianity and thus to Judaism. In fact, this sort of German ideology established itself as a counter-part to the Jewish ideology of the "chosen people". Therefore the very existence of Jews put, in a way, the German ideology as a quest for national identity into question. To put it in caricature: this German ideology says "we Germans are the true chosen people, and the Jews, the false chosen people, must disappear if we are to be truly Germans". Thus German antisemitism is unlike the Russian or French one in that it links German identity with the Jewish problem.

Two things must be said in this connection. The first is that this sort of ideology was not always dominant, and that there always existed tendencies in various opposite directions. Even tendencies that seemed to point at a German-Jewish identification. After the emancipation of the Jews German culture was in fact marked by Jewish elements much more than any other European culture. But it is easy to show that all those tendencies participated in the same dialectical play which has Germans and Jews for dialectical oppositions. The second thing to be said is that at present all those ideologies seem to be dead and that apparently there is no Jewish problem. But it is equally easy to show, (and the preceding remarks show so), that the Jewish problem is still active even in the physical absence of Jews, because it is a German problem. In a sense to be German is to be it in relation to Jews, as to be Jewish is to be it in relation to Gentiles.

This complex play of more or less unconscious forces shows itself in present reporting under curious forms. There is for instance a projection of a repressed German identity on the Israelis. "Look", it says, "how the Israeli army behaves as if it were the Wehrmacht". Jewish military victories are being experienced as if they were German victories before German "democratization", because in some sense the Jews are felt to be Germans. They do what Germans are no longer allowed to do, and in this sense they "represent" old Germany for Germans. But of course such a projection is immediately checked by consciousness, and the Israelis are being blamed for their "arrogance", which is, as every German knows, a typically German characteristics.

Then there is a sort of surprise which might be stated as fol

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"What a pity that I did not know long ago that the Jews are so much like us Germans". The Jewish conquering hero is apparently quite unlike the image of the Jews as projected and propagated by German antisemites. But in fact it is very easy to substitute one image by the other. Those Germans who now love the Jews because they are heroes are exactly the same that a generation ago hated them for being cowards. Philosemitism and antisemitism spring from the same root, and this is a bewildering discovery for a Jewish observer. But, of course, this worship of the Jewish hero is being checked, (although betrayed), by the press, because hero-worship, Jewish or otherwise, is out of fashion. Nonetheless it is easy to see that one-eyed Dayan is a sort of Jewish Wotan, an uncomfortable Wagnerian motive.

Lastly there is the myth of David and Goliath, which takes in Germany a curious Teutonic color. The small and underprivileged "pure man = tumber Tor" wins over the merely material giant. Like Germany, that pure and simple society of poets and thinkers, which was surrounded by malefic hereditary enemies, ("Erbfeinde"), so the Israelis are surrounded by brutal superior forces, but they win thanks to their "Geist", like the Germans. Thus what used to be Jewish cleverness and cunning becomes German ruse and spirit. But, here again such myths are no longer fashionable and enlightened democrats have long overcome them. (Until, one feels if one reads this sort of reporting, second notice). Therefore, immediately after expressing such atavistic admiration for the "little Israel", the reporters try to assume a more lofty and impartial position.

Such examples can be easily multiplied, and they all lead to the following diagnosis: On the surface papers, magazines and broadcasting systems in Western Germany assume a neutral attitude colored with sympathy for the Israelis. Just below the surface they recommend a moderating influence from the lofty "European" position, but simultaneously profess an involvement due to Nazi responsibilities, and do not succeed in synthesizing these two aspects. The hidden ideology behind all this is a rather unhealthy identification of the "repressed" German identity with the Israelis. Not much good can come out of such a muddle.