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Singularly German in the Pluriverse

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“At fifty, I knew the decrees of heaven.” As *New German Critique* turns fifty, nothing seems to be more wrong than this adage of the ancient sage Confucius. Long gone is the age when one could let the wick of one’s life be completely consumed by the gentle flame of wisdom.¹ This applies to scholarship even more than to individual life. Scholarship, as Max Weber soberly put it, “is not the gift of grace of seers and prophets dispensing sacred values and revelations, nor does it partake of the contemplation of sages and philosophers about the meaning of the universe.” Producing provisional knowledge rather than enduring wisdom, “it *asks* to be ‘surpassed’ and outdated.” What a scholar has accomplished is predestined to be “antiquated in ten, twenty, fifty years.”² The fiftieth anniversary of *New German Critique*, then, will come most likely not with any sage wisdom but with worries about the fate that scholars know to be inescapable but nonetheless constantly seek to evade—the fate of becoming antiquated. There are plenty of reasons for worry. There lurks a question mark behind every single word making up its shining name: What is *new*? What is *German*? What is *critique*? In the past half century, during which *New German Critique* established itself as an icon of German studies, *new*, the mantra of the modern in general, has metamorphosed into a program for what a sociologist calls the society of singularities; the reunification of the two postwar

1. Freely adapted from Walter Benjamin’s essay “The Storyteller”: “The storyteller: he is the man who could let the wick of his life be consumed completely by the gentle flame of his story” (108–9).

2. Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” 152, 138.

German states, the European integration, the global flow of people, ideas, and goods, as well as shifting geopolitical constellations, have transformed what *German* means; and *critique*, the guiding principle of the European Enlightenment, is forced to redefine itself in the dusk of Eurocentrism. With such momentous shifts, the field of German studies that *New German Critique* has envisioned and helped shape according to its vision is overdue for a radical reorientation.

“German”: *German Studies as Political Thought*

As a field of academic inquiry, German studies is predicated on a tacit assumption of what kind of cultural and political community the adjective *German* refers to. It is well known that *Germanistik* emerged in the nineteenth century as part of the nationalist project.³ It is perhaps no mere coincidence that a voluminous book bearing the title *Die Geschichte der germanischen Philologie* (*The History of Germanic Philology*), authored by Rudolf von Raumer, appeared on the eve of the proclamation of the German nation-state in 1871. The prevailing positivist philological method of the nineteenth century owed much to the juristic techniques, procedures, and standards in treatment of documents. Philologists applied the same meticulous care to literary texts as lawyers did to legal texts, as if literary texts were no different from constitutional documents lying at the foundation of the nation-state. After all, Jacob Grimm, one of the founding fathers of *Germanistik*, saw no real difference between poetry and law in the written records of the Germanic peoples.⁴ That scholars of the time sought to trace the study of the German language and literature back to a deep past, as Rudolf von Raumer did in his *Geschichte der germanischen Philologie*, was just another testimony to the nationalist penchant for inventing traditions.

In the early twentieth century, the waning of philological textual criticism and the rise of *Geistesgeschichte*—the spiritual-historical approach—registered a disappointment with the legal-rational authority of the German nation-state and the yearning for a spiritual community held together by some charismatic authority. The most prominent scholarship in *Germanistik* in the period was associated with the George circle—the most notable titles include Friedrich Gundolf’s monograph on Goethe (1916), Nobert von Hellingrath’s edition of Hölderlin (1922–43), and Max Kommerell’s *Dichter als Führer in der deutschen Klassik* (*The Poet as Leader in German Classicism*, 1928). This brand of scholarship offers acclamatory, hagiographic portrayal of authors as

3. See, e.g., Fohrmann and Vosskamp, *Wissenschaft und Nation*.

4. Grimm, “Von der Poesie im Recht.”

great creative geniuses with charismatic qualities. In so doing, it envisioned what the George circle called *das geheime Deutschland*, the secret Germany that, in contrast to the official German state with its legal-administrative apparatus, represents an aesthetic-spiritual state coalescing around a charismatic leader. Clearly, the George circle's secret Germany, also known as *das neue Reich* (the new realm), lent itself easily to appropriation by the National Socialist regime. Faced with the disastrous consequences of nationalism, scholars of German literature in the mid-twentieth century retreated temporarily into a purportedly apolitical sanctuary of "work-immanent interpretation"—one need only think of Wolfgang Kayser's *Das sprachliche Kunstwerk* (*The Linguistic Artwork*, 1948), which condemns all attempts to study literary works "in relations to extra-poetic phenomena."⁵ But escapism is inescapably political precisely by virtue of its ostentatious refusal to take political positions. Kayser himself was known to be a *Mitläufer* (party follower) in the Nazi period.

In the late twentieth century German studies flourished in a political environment characterized by European integration and the consolidation of the Western, or North Atlantic, community of values. Moving from social history (e.g., *Hansers Sozialgeschichte der deutschen Literatur* [*Social History of German Literature*], 1980–2009) to high theory (e.g., Friedrich Kittler, *Discourse Network 1800/1900*, 1985), it proffered exegeses of, as well as critical commentaries on, European modernity. With its thematic emphases on Germany's special role in European modernity, its aberrations from and circuitous returns to Western values, *New German Critique* was, by all measures, a major player in the field during this period. In the still young twenty-first century, however, German studies seems to be gripped by an acute sense of crisis. True as it is that a sense of crisis pervades humanistic inquiry in general, the malaise afflicting German studies stems, to a great extent, from a loss of faith in the political entities with which it has been hitherto associated: the nation, Europe, and the West. The "nation," in Germany at least, has long acquired the odor of an *Unwort*, a taboo word. In recent decades "Europe" and "the West," constructed to contain the nation, have also come under siege. Apart from their respective internal quandaries, intertwined external factors—globalization, the rise of Asia and of the global South, planetary ecological crises—eclipse the importance of Europe and challenge the hegemony of the West. Various recent trends in German studies, ranging from *interkulturelle Germanistik* (intercultural German studies) and migrant literature to ecocriticism, testify not only to a "postnational" but also to a post-European and post-Western constellation.⁶

5. Kayser, *Das sprachliche Kunstwerk*, 5. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.

6. Freely adapted from Habermas, *Die postnationale Konstellation*.

Given the political assumptions about what “German” is, German studies represents, in the final analysis, *études* in political thought with methodological and thematic variations. With the nation long discredited, Europe “provincialized,”⁷ and the West in a position of constantly having to defend itself, German studies is hard pressed today to find its political bearings and to assert its political relevance. This does not entail subscribing to, even less propagating, the one or the other political model. Rather, it means interrogating political assumptions underlying the notion of “German” and subjecting orthodox and heterodox visions alike to critical scrutiny. It is time to reconnoiter and remap German-language literature and thought as an imaginative space in which various political ideas have found expression and various models of community have been crafted—cosmopolitanism of the Enlightenment, organic community of Romanticism, promises and perils of nationalism, hopes of European unity and disappointments of Eurocentrism, shock waves, and opportunities of migration, to name just a few examples. If it takes on this task of reconnoitering and remapping, German studies will become a unique discursive site for reflecting on the political and for making sense of community and belonging—unique because of the rich historical experience and the shifting geographic location of that protean collective entity going by the name German.

“Critique”: From the Enlightenment to the Dusk of Eurocentrism

“Our age is the actual age of critique, to which everything must subject itself.”⁸ This famous dictum of Immanuel Kant’s effectively identifies critique as the *modus operandi* of the Enlightenment, the age of reason. When one and a half centuries later Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno observed that the Enlightenment had turned into its opposite, critique survived nonetheless. Not only the Enlightenment but also the dialectic of Enlightenment thrived on critique. Critique redoubled its power by subjecting the Enlightenment itself to its jurisdiction. *New German Critique* was founded at a historical moment when critique reigned supreme, gaining prominence as a purveyor of critical theories from Frankfurt and beyond. This historical moment coincided with decolonization. While European intellectuals, pained by the catastrophes of the twentieth century, aimed the arrow of critique at their own tradition, the overseas colonies were struggling to free themselves from their European masters politically as well as intellectually. Thinkers of decolonization pointed out that colonialism lay at the very heart of European civilization and that the catastrophes provoking critical reflections within Europe in fact represented colonial domination

7. Freely adapted from Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*.

8. Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, 13n.

turned inward. The Martinique-born Aimé Césaire spoke of the “boomerang effect of colonization”: Hitler “applied to Europe colonialist procedures which until then had been reserved exclusively for the Arabs of Algeria, the coolies of India, and the blacks of Africa.” One could not help drawing the conclusion that “Europe is morally, spiritually indefensible.”⁹ The dethroning of the political and moral authority of Europe in the age of decolonization led inevitably to a general reckoning with European thought. The most prominent example was surely the school of thought known as deconstruction, spearheaded, not surprisingly perhaps, by a Jewish philosopher from colonial Algeria. Alongside this kind of radical critique within European thinking itself, there emerged numerous attempts to discover, or rediscover, alternative modes of critique originating from outside Europe.

Already in 1960 the Japanese cultural critic Takeuchi Yoshimi put forward a mode of critique that he called “Asia as method.” Colonialism, Takeuchi pointed out, compromised the vaunted values of European modernity. “For instance, although equality might exist in Europe, one glance at Europe’s colonial exploitations in Asia and Africa revealed that equality has not been attained by all.”¹⁰ It is through the resistance of Asians—Takeuchi highlighted particularly the resistance of the Chinese—against colonial impositions that such values could be realized, for resistance affirms the claim to freedom and equality and thereby constitutes Asians as subjects of values. A half century later, baptized by postcolonial theory, “Asia as method” in Takeuchi’s sense of Asian subject formation through resistance to Western colonialism came to mean a mode of critique that operates through the cross-referencing of Asian societies: “Using the idea of Asia as an imaginary anchoring point, societies in Asia can become each other’s points of reference, so that the understanding of the self may be transformed, and subjectivity rebuilt. On this basis, the diverse historical experiences and rich social practices of Asia may be mobilized to provide alternative horizons and perspectives.”¹¹ In the meantime, a Japanese historian of Chinese thought advocated, in a 1989 essay, what he called “China as method,” that is, a way of understanding the world from the perspective of Chinese thinking. For too long, China, like all other regions of the world, has been measured against the purportedly universal standards of Europe. By contrast, “a world that takes China as method would be a world in which China is a constitutive element. In other words, it would be a pluralistic world in which Europe is also one of the

9. Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, 36, 32.

10. Takeuchi, *What Is Modernity?*, 165.

11. Chen, *Asia as Method*, 212.

constitutive elements.”¹² “China as method,” then, is not merely a call for respecting Chinese perspectives on the world but amounts to a critical program that replaces the epistemic hegemony of European thought with pluralistic, multipolar epistemic regimes for understanding the world we live in.

“Asia as method” and “China as method” are cited here as early examples of critical methods in the wake of decolonization. Postcolonial theory in the late twentieth century washed away any lingering pretension to universality that European thought might have. In the early twenty-first century, novel paradigms of critique such as decoloniality, global South studies, and radical ecocriticism undertake decisive moves toward affirming and producing pluriversal knowledge—multiform epistemic regimes that thrive alongside or in opposition to European modernity. In so doing, they strip European modernity of its long-held privileges and demote it to the status of one epistemic regime among many others. If there is any possibility of universalism left, it would not be a universalism of reason but, in Achille Mbembe’s words, a universalism of the delirium of European modernity: “Blackness and race, the one and the other, represent twin figures of the delirium produced by modernity.” As a condition of abjection imposed on people of African origin across early capitalism, “Black” has now, by virtue of neoliberalism and digital capitalism, been universalized into a condition of all subjects. The whole world has become Black.¹³

In the dusk of Eurocentrism, is *German* critique still possible? Does it still have a right to exist? What would such a critique look like?

The answer to such questions should be a resounding yes. The premise for it, however, is relinquishment of any pretension, indeed any aspiration, to universality. German thought must acknowledge that it belongs to the epistemic regime of Europe, which came to shape the modern world through colonialism, and which in the wake of decolonization has shrunk to a mere province in the pluriverse of epistemic regimes. On this premise, critique in a German vein has much to offer the world. In the wake of postcolonialism and globalization, German studies has in the past decades pursued a line of inquiry centering around the German connections to cultures and societies outside Europe, for instance connections via the exchange of ideas, the translation of symbolic forms, and historical or imaginary social interactions. To go a step farther, it is time to situate German thought and literature in the pluriverse of thinking and imagining around the world, so to make visible constellations that may yet prove illuminating. Already in Romanticism, Friedrich Schlegel, calling for a

12. Yuzo, “China as Method,” 516.

13. Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 2.

new mythology, exclaimed: “May the treasures of the Orient be as accessible to us as those of antiquity! What new fount of poetry could flow from India to us if some German artists . . . had the opportunity.”¹⁴ Aware of the pressing issues facing humanity and the planet, critique in a German vein needs to look to treasures of knowledge and founts of poetry in all corners of the world. For example, “Europe” has always served as a point of orientation for German self-positioning: from the Romantic vision of a spiritual unity of Europe—one thinks of Novalis or Schlegel—to the twentieth-century discussions of the German *Sonderweg* and “the long road to the West,” German thought has followed what can be called “Europe as method.”¹⁵ What would it be like if we juxtapose “Europe as method” with “Asia as method” or “China as method,” as mentioned above? For thinkers from nineteenth-century philosophy to twentieth-century sociology, Europe north of the Alps—“the Germanic world,” in the words of G. W. F. Hegel and others—and, later on, the North Atlantic world figured as the culmination of human history, the so-called modernity. Wouldn’t it be worthwhile revisiting this grand tradition of modernity theory vis-à-vis decolonial discourse and global South studies? From the Romantic vision of the oneness of nature to the climate activism of the present, the ecological imagination runs through German literature and thought. What could this German tradition of the ecological imagination contribute to “the global tapestry of alternatives” to the model of socioeconomic development that has led to the planetary environmental crisis in our time?¹⁶

“New”: *From the Avant-Garde to Singularity*

Newness is an imperative of the modern. As a temporal category that began to take hold from the late eighteenth century on, “the modern” implies a conception of time in terms of open-ended linear movement, articulated often by concepts such as “progress,” “development,” “revolution,” and “history.”¹⁷ Such a linear conception of time, with the idea of an open future at its core, entails the valorization of newness. In the age that calls itself modern, “the authority of the new,” as Adorno put it, “is that of the historically inevitable.” From the outset, art, including literary art, has been driven by the imperative of newness, as formal innovation not only fuels artistic production but also confers on it the very right to existence. Since the nineteenth century “no artwork had succeeded that

14. Schlegel, “Rede über die Mythologie,” 319.

15. Winkler, *Der lange Weg nach Westen*.

16. Kotari et al., *Pluriverse*, 339.

17. See Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft*.

rebuffed the ever-fluctuating concept of the modern.” The imperative of newness reached a shrill crescendo in the avant-garde movements of the twentieth century. For Adorno, of course, the obsession of modern art with newness is bound up with the commodity fetishism of capitalism. It is the aesthetic appropriation of “the trademark of consumer goods . . . by means of which artworks distinguish themselves from the ever-same inventory in obedience to the need for the exploitation of capital.”¹⁸

Whereas Adorno, writing at the height of industrial modernity in the mid-twentieth century, explained the compulsion of modern art for newness in terms of the aesthetic appropriation of the inexorable logic of capitalism, one can observe, in the wake of deindustrialization since the late twentieth century, a kind of reverse appropriation—the appropriation of the aesthetic values associated with art by society at large. There is, for instance, an “enrichment economy” in postindustrial capitalism, which seeks less to produce new things and more to enrich already existing things with aesthetic allure.¹⁹ More generally, the aesthetic values fostered by modern art in its pursuit of newness—innovation, creativity, autonomy, uniqueness, and the like—have metastasized to all domains of society. The literary scholar Sarah Brouillette draws our attention to such phenomena as “the presentation of artists as models of contentedly flexible and self-managed workers, the treatment of training in and exposure to art as a pathway to social inclusion, use of the presence of culture and cultural institutions to increase property values, and support for cultural diversity as a means of growing cultural markets and fostering an inclusive society of active cultural consumers.”²⁰ The appropriation of aesthetic values plays a vital role in the making of what the sociologist Andreas Reckwitz calls “the society of singularities.” Commodities are charged with an aesthetic aura of singularity, and consumers chase singular experiences. The conduct of life—“how one lives, what one eats, where and how one travels, and even one’s own body and circle of friends”—is measured by the standard of distinctiveness and uniqueness as if it were a work of art: “In the mode of singularization, life is not simply lived, it is *curated*. From one situation to the next, the late-modern subject *performs* his or her particular self to others, who become an audience, and this self will not be found attractive unless it seems authentic.”²¹ The logic of singularity conditions not only the individual conduct of life but also collective social life:

18. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 21, 19, 20.

19. See Boltanski and Esquerre, *Enrichment*.

20. Brouillette, *Literature and the Creative Economy*, 1–2.

21. Reckwitz, *Society of Singularities*, 3.

This is true of collaborations and projects in the professional and political world that . . . are each unique. And it is also true of the scenes, political subcultures, leisure clubs, and consumer groups in the real or virtual worlds that, as aesthetic or hermeneutic voluntary communities with highly specific interests and world views, distance themselves quite far from popular culture and mainstream politics.²²

To be sure, there were precedents for the one or the other manifestation of the society of singularities. For example, in the time around 1800, a period of German literature and thought sometimes referred to as the *Kunstepoche*, there was no shortage of projects of infusing aesthetic values into society, as epitomized by Schlegel's call "to make poetry lively and social and to make life and society poetic."²³ Goethe tried to design his life as if it were a work of art,²⁴ and the intellectual coterie of Jena known in literary history as early Romantics may be considered a perfect example of "aesthetic or hermeneutic voluntary communities." Yet it is in the present age, an age that Reckwitz dubs "late modernity," that the logic of singularity, indebted to the aesthetic values of modern art, permeates virtually all domains and dimensions of society from individual lifestyle and collective social life to economy, politics, and—what matters most in the present context—academic research.

Founded in a time still galvanized by the neo-avant-garde, *New German Critique* indicates how German studies attempts, belatedly perhaps, to live up to the imperative of newness that has propelled the modern all along. The modern has always been the privileged subject matter of this journal. The term *new* in its title flaunts its determination to mimic its own subject matter. In so doing, it exhibits incipient signs of the logic of singularity. Driven by shared intellectual pursuits, political convictions, and personal bonds, its founders and the editorial collective in the early years of its existence bear much resemblance to the "aesthetic or hermeneutic voluntary communities," which Reckwitz regards as a hallmark of the society of singularities.²⁵ Innovation, creativity, and uniqueness belong to the values dear to the heart of the journal's editors. Today, a half century later, humanistic inquiry in general is coming under the spell of singularity, characterized by unique topics, ingenious approaches, innovative projects vying for attention, and emerging fields still in search of a name.

22. Reckwitz, *Society of Singularities*, 3.

23. Beiser, *Early Political Writings of the German Romantics*, 117.

24. See Safranski, *Goethe—Kunstwerk des Lebens*.

25. See Huyssen and Rabinbach, "New German Critique: The First Decade."

The above discussion of the concept of “German” suggests an understanding of German studies as a discursive site for reflecting on the political and for making sense of community and belonging, while the discussion of “critique” suggests an approach that places German thought and literature in the pluriverse of thinking and imagination around the world. Conceived thus in terms of subject matter and methodology, German studies promises to figure prominently in humanistic inquiry as a field that curates the ideas, visions, images, and models of community associated, in one way or another, with the designation “German.” First, there are literary figurations and historiographical reconstructions of, as well as philosophical musings on, that ever-shifting political entity called Germany. Germany has been cursed with a particularly torturous constitutional history, beginning with the old *Reich* that the great jurist Samuel Pufendorf famously dubbed “an Irregular Body,” even “some misshapen Monster,”²⁶ going through the nationalist fervors, democratic experiments, and totalitarian disasters of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and arriving at today’s liberal constitutional design accommodating federalism, national sovereignty, and European integration at once. Literature and thought accompanied this traumatic constitutional trajectory with hopeful anticipations and wistful reflections, dire warnings and therapeutic reenactments. Second, there are those ideas and visions coming from the pen of German-speaking thinkers and poets, be they Friedrich Hölderlin’s poetic celebration of peace or Kant’s philosophical program of peace, be they Oswald Spengler’s historico-philosophical ramblings about the downfall of the Occident or Martin Heidegger’s fundamental-ontological rescue of the Occident purportedly squeezed between America and Russia. Last but not least, there are outsider perspectives or, as anthropologists would have it, etic observations on the German, be they trained on the state, the people, the social formations, or the cultures. Such observations include both those written in the German language—for instance by migrants—and those written in other languages.

This list of the ideas, visions, images, and models of community associated with the designation “German” is far from complete. Curated by scholars in German studies, those listed as well as those not listed here fit together into a distinctive, singular spectacle of the German. The verb *curate* is used here on purpose. First, it is meant to highlight the appropriation of the aesthetic values of modern art by the academic discourse, be such appropriation inadvertent or unabashed. Maybe it would be a productive thought experiment to compare our academic field to a museum featuring installations? Second, it acknowl-

26. De Monzambano, *Present State of Germany*, 176.

edges the creative act of selecting the objects of this field from the vast world of thought and imagination and thereby differentiating them from countless others. Finally, it suggests the performative character of academic inquiry and the existence of spectators. In collecting and investigating all that is associated with the German, scholars have other languages, other epistemic regimes, other cultural and political traditions in view. The panoply of ideas, visions, images, and models that they collect, analyze, and exhibit are there for others to watch and to judge. Scholars in German studies recognize the existence of alternative ideas, visions, images, and models of community both in the West and in the East, both in the global South and the global North. In a word, they present the German as a singular constellation of ideas and visions in the pluriverse of thinking and imagining.

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