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978-0-521-63996-5 - Intellectuals and the German Nation: Collective Identity in an Axial Age

Bernhard Giesen

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This book proposes a theory of collective and national identity based on culture and language rather than power and politics. Applying this to what he calls Germany's "axial age," Bernhard Giesen shows how the codes of nineteenth-century German identity in turn became those of the divided Germany between 1945 and 1989. The identity he describes derives from the ideas of German intellectuals, from the uprooted Romantic poets to the influential German mandarins. Carried by the emerging bourgeoisie, it was constructed on the tensions between power and spirit, money and culture, and the sacred and profane. It also took four distinct forms: the nation as the invisible public of Enlightenment patriotism, the nation as the Romantics' aesthetic holy grail, the Left Hegelian nation at the barricades of democracy, and the nation as an extension of the Prussian state.

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Translated by Nicholas Levis and Amos Weisz



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Preface

Anyone who writes a study on intellectuals and the nation, and therein treats the intellectuals as the inventors of German identity, is necessarily referring to himself in several ways. For all the efforts at distance and abstraction, the presentation of the historical material herein is inescapably determined, much like the general theoretical considerations on the relationship of intellectuals to national identity, by contemporary perspectives of more recent history, and by the self-understanding of German intellectuals in the present day. It is possible to reflexively compensate for such perspectivity, but it cannot be avoided entirely.

The present work arose in the course of a research project on “National and Cultural Identity as a Problem of Early Modern and Modern Europe” at the University of Gießen. I am especially indebted to my assistants, Christian Kritschgau and Kay Junge, for the difficult work of evaluating historical sources, and for their criticism and wealth of bibliographical recommendations. The manuscript would never have been completed so quickly without them. Many friends and colleagues contributed to this book’s deliberations directly through criticisms and suggestions. This applies especially to Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, whose idea of an “Axial Age” exercised decisive influence upon this study, and who read, and critically evaluated, large sections of the manuscript – as did Helmut Berding, Jörg R. Bergmann, Günther Oesterle and Wolfgang L. Schneider. For extensive discussions on the theses of this study, and for a large number of critical suggestions, I would like furthermore to thank Jeffrey C. Alexander, Reinhard Bendix, Randall Collins, Klaus Eder, Harold Garfinkel, Reimer Gronemeyer, Karl Otto Hondrich, Klaus Kröger, Claus Leggewie, Iván Szélény, Johannes Weiß and Conrad Wiedemann.

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