

GREGORY RODRIGUEZ
LOS ANGELES TIMES
May 28, 2006

What it means to be German;
Until 2000, citizenship was a matter of kinship. Now Germany needs to separate the ethnic from the civic.

BERLIN--IF LANGUAGE LEARNING and vacation destinations are any indication, then Germans are among the world's most cosmopolitan people. No one travels around the globe more than they do; few are more multilingual.

But even as Germans eagerly embrace the planet's ethnic and cultural diversity, they are struggling with it back home. There have been no recent incidents of home-grown Islamic terrorism in Germany (as there have been in Britain) and no rioting by minority youth (as in France), but no nation in Europe is more obsessed by the meaning -- and the potential threat -- of increased demographic diversity than Germany.

On the one hand, Germans worry that newcomers won't integrate into mainstream society. On the other, they worry that Germany won't let them.

Last month, a Berlin court convicted a 19-year-old man, the son of Turkish immigrants, of executing his sister as punishment for living an allegedly libertine Western lifestyle. A few weeks later, the teachers at a high school in a heavily immigrant district of Berlin threw up their hands, called the students incorrigible and begged the government to shut the school down.

In the meantime, on Monday, the government released a report showing that neo-Nazi activity is on the rise. In what appears to be a concerted campaign in advance of next month's World Cup, on Thursday skinheads attacked seven people whom the papers called "foreigners."

Still, Germany's real problem isn't "honor" killers or skinheads, who make up only a fraction of their respective ethnic groups. Instead, what keeps this increasingly diverse nation from gaining a strong sense of social cohesion is its self-made confusion over what it means to be German in the first place.

German identity, according to Barbara John, professor of European ethnography at Humboldt University in Berlin, isn't "republican" or civic: "We stick to the ethnic definition probably more than any other European nation."

Indeed, long before Germany's terrible experiment with ethnic supremacy during the Nazi years, Germans had a narrow view of themselves as a people. Unlike, say, the French, who acknowledge that their culture and language derive from the Romans and that they are akin to other Latin peoples, the Germans see themselves as unique. In the words of philosopher Johann Fichte, they are an *Urvolk* -- an archetypal people. That makes for an inflexible -- almost tribal -- sense of identity.

Even after World War II, when West Germans did everything in their power to rid their culture of chauvinism and racism, they left intact a citizenship law that was based on blood kinship rather than on place of birth. That meant that the children of Turkish guest workers, born in Germany, were not automatic citizens, yet an ethnic German from Romania whose family had never resided in contemporary Germany was.

It wasn't until 2000 that a more open citizenship law took effect. In arguing for a territory-based notion of citizenship, then-Interior Minister Otto Schily proclaimed that Germany needed to rise above "the destructive principle of ethnocracy."

Six years on, Germans are only beginning to differentiate between their ethnic and civic identities. Ethnic Germans still tend to look on non-ethnic Germans as *Auslander* or foreigners. Even the media, when they acknowledge minorities as German citizens, use tortured phrases, describing someone as a "Turk who carries a German passport," for example. Not surprisingly, such marginalization has negative consequences.

Ironically, the nation's ongoing attempt to distance itself from its Nazi past has left it reluctant to promote a sense of civic pride that could help unify the country and integrate immigrants. "How can you expect newcomers to identify with national symbols if we have a problem with them ourselves?" asks Tanja Wunderlich, who monitors integration and immigration issues for the German Marshall Fund in Berlin. In the

absence of such symbolism, Germans are resorting to a very self-conscious public debate.

In March, a prominent nonprofit organization spearheaded a multi-year public service campaign to encourage Germans to think about what kind of society they want to live in. "Immigration = future?" one billboard asks. People are urged to participate in a national dialogue on German identity.

But the shaping of Germany's future identity probably lies less in intellectual debate than it does in popular culture. This year, "Turkish for Beginners," a sitcom featuring a dysfunctional family brought together by a single German mother and a widowed Turkish-German father, received critical acclaim and high ratings. Head writer Bora Dagtekin, whose father was born in Turkey and whose mother is ethnic German, says he has fun playing with all of the ethnic clichés.

Likewise, Turkish-German novelist Feridun Zaimoglu tries to wrestle the integration debate out of the hands of polemicists. "The truth is you can't talk anymore of a foreign population and a native population, as if they were enemies," he says. Beneath the honor killings and the neo-Nazi outrages, a new identity is waiting to be born.

"As I understand myself, I am a German," Zaimoglu says. "I love my country, but I don't make a Wagner opera out of it."

Skeptical of the endless talk of identity, Zaimoglu humbly offers up a new model for his countrymen: "I don't try to define what it means to be German. I just live it."