# "It Is Not All That Bad"—Hitler and Identity-building in *Er ist wieder da* (Look Who's Back)

Yuan Xue
*Shanghai Jiaotong University*

## Recommended Citation

## CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture

Contents of ***CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*** 23.2 (2021)
Special Issue: ***A Return of the Bad Old Times***. **Ed. Fabio Akcelrud Durão and Fernando Urueta**
<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol23/iss2/>

**Abstract**: In Germany, multiculturalism and "leading culture" (Leitkultur) are a pair of closely connected but opposite concepts. Multiculturalism has been accused of being the main reason why culture loses its core cohesion. Despite the persistence of calls for a leading culture in Germany in recent years, many scholars argue that the concept is also problematic. A monopolistic leading culture may be hard to realize in an already pluralistic Europe. I argue that the choice between the two reflects the dilemma of the establishment of German cultural identity. Focusing on the German bestseller *Er ist wieder da* (Look Who's Back, 2012), this paper analyses the social, political and economic developments that the image of Hitler mediates. In light of this, this paper will explore how literary representations of Hitler might contribute to the construction of German cultural and national identity.

**Yuan XUE**

**"It is Not All That Bad—Hitler and Identity-building in *Er ist wieder da* (Look Who's Back)**

**Introduction**
At the beginning of this century, many European leaders began publicly to address the perceived failure of their countries' immigration and integration policies. German Chancellor Angela Merkel claimed in 2010 that so-called "Multikulti" (short for multiculturalism)—where people of different cultural backgrounds would "live side-by-side" without any conflicts—had been a failure. British Prime Minister David Cameron and French President François Hollande made similar statements around the same time. It was a signal that political elites in Europe were shifting the consensus on multiculturalism, with implications for what is considered "politically correct." Topics that were once perceived as taboo, such as race, religion, immigration and integration, are now more widely discussed. In these debates, multiculturalism and *Leitkultur* ("core" or "leading culture") have often been positioned as opposing concepts. In Germany, more and more politicians, sociologists and public intellectuals participate in the debate on multiculturalism and leading culture. The term *Leitkultur* was coined by Syrian-born German political scientist Bassam Tibi in 1998 (*Europa* 154). In his concept of a European leading culture, the values of modernity are prominent: democracy, secularism, the Enlightenment, human rights and civil society. The questions of whether *Leitkultur* is feasible and whether multiculturalism is really obsolete are an additional focus of this article. Is this criticism of multiculturalism and political correctness a retrogression or the outcome of rational reflection on cultural development? The economic, political and social crisis can be seen as the root cause of the attacks on multiculturalism in the new millennium.

In 2012, with the debate on multiculturalism in full swing, the novel *Er ist wieder da* was published. The novel has been controversial since the day it was published, sharply dividing public opinion. It was a phenomenal cultural event in Germany. After its presentation at the Frankfurt Book Fair in October 2012, the novel rose to number 1 on the *Spiegel* bestsellers list and remained there for 20 weeks. Foreign rights were granted for more than 41 countries. A film adaptation released in 2015 grossed $25 million. I argue that the most interesting part of both the novel and the film is not Hitler's characterization as an authentic historical figure, but the interpretation of various aspects of today's German society through his eyes and his voice. The figure of Hitler, a representative of nationalism in its most extreme form, may reflect demands of German society when facing social problems, as he corrects a "political correctness" seen as having gone too far, reshapes social order, and promotes a particular vision of "social progress." This may be the real reason why this work has resonated so much and provoked so much thinking and discussion.

This article will discuss the portrayal of Hitler in German retrospective narratives, with a focus on the novel *Er ist wieder da*, to explore the political, economic and cultural reasons behind this phenomenon. The article will further explore how Hitler, as a historical and cultural figure, can contribute to the building of German cultural identity through consideration of the relationship between multiculturalism and *Leitkultur*.

**A Demon or a Human? Images of Adolf Hitler Since 1990**
In West Germany, multiculturalism was first discussed as a pedagogical issue and among left-wing parties. It was then "taken up by politicians concerned with social and labor market affairs" before gaining "decisive media exposure and becoming a political issue in the late 1980s" (Lanz 105, 109). The beginnings of "political correctness" in Germany go back to the 1990s (Wierlemann 104). The term has been largely shaped and used by the public media since then. The rise of multiculturalism has made political correctness an important coordination tool for respecting social and cultural differences and protecting the rights and interests of minority groups. There is a strong connection between multiculturalism and political correctness. Both, as practice and as norm, endeavor to create more racial, ethnic, sexual and religious diversity throughout social institutions in the name of justice and equality. Multiculturalism gives minority cultures specific rights to express and maintain themselves, whereas political correctness protects minority and vulnerable groups from discrimination. Political correctness is embodied in certain "taboo" topics that have been established in social and political life and as "red lines" that must not be crossed. For example, taboos concerning Nazi Germany and Hitler were motivated by atonement for Germany's launching of World War II and the mass killing of Jews.

Since the late 1990s, more and more scholars have begun to denounce multiculturalism as a political strategy that has failed to integrate different groups under common values (Eckardt; Asari et al.; Kosherbayev et al.). Critics argue that the relativism implied by multicultural ideology has loosened

Xue Yuan, "'It is Not All That Bad'—Hitler and Identity-building in
*Er ist wieder da* (Look Who's Back)"
page 3 of 12

social norms and moral constraints, and autonomous individuals may refuse to accept the rules and authority of the collective. Especially when it comes to the issue of immigrant integration, multiculturalism has been accused of preventing the receiving country from forging a unified culture and national identity and giving too much priority to ethnic and religious minority groups (Asari et al. 1). And when these groups are estranged from mainstream society, according to critics, the failure of multicultural policies have serious consequences: such groups communicate solely in their native language and with co-religionists, which complicates and minimizes contacts with the majority population, as well as causing a lack of social adaptation of immigrants. In the worst case, multicultural policies would be threatening to overall security (Kosherbayev et al. 151).

After 1945 many Germans pretended that all the crimes of National Socialism had been committed by Hitler and a very small group of Nazis and that the vast majority of Germans from 1933 to 1945 knew nothing about these crimes or were themselves victims of the Nazis. It would be wrong to say that cultural media of the 1950s did not speak of the Third Reich at all, but the narrative was clearly influenced by a victim's perspective (Assmann 78). Hitler was presented as an "overwhelming monster, [...] hardly as a person, but more than natural force - almighty, demonic, inescapable" (Schultz 45). The generations born after World War II were not as poisoned by Nazi ideology as their fathers. They were some distance away from Nazi crimes. This also gave them the opportunity to face this history and begin to identify with the victims of war, like Jews, Sinti and Roma etc. Hitler was regarded as "the other" who committed the crime, an absolutely evil and inhuman figure. So the political correctness around the figure of Hitler comes from a social consensus that he should not be portrayed as an ordinary flesh and blood person: instead, he is a demon, a supernatural force, or a personification of evil. In short, he is not one of "us." The characterization of Hitler as inhuman in literary and artistic works was especially noticeable, its clear purpose was to prevent evoking sympathy and even understanding in viewers, emphasizing Hitler's role as a uniquely criminal figure in history (Xue 132). The generations who were active in German literary and art circles in the 1990s are much farther away from history, and they are increasingly unable to agree on such a social consensus and are less willing to observe such restrictions on speech.

As the trend of multiculturalism gradually became contested in the late 1990s, the political correctness concerning how Hitler could be portrayed also began to change. The cultural phenomena marking this change are a series of comics, novels and movies that were published in Germany from 1998 to 2015 and featured Hitler as the main character (see Almenning). In the 1990s, many people from the Balkans migrated to Germany because of the Yugoslav wars. Germany was thus facing the need to think about immigration policy and reform of its citizenship laws. There were big debates about political correctness. In the comic book *Adolf. Äch bin wieder da!* (*Adolf-I am here*), which appeared in 1998, Walter Moers moved away from the image of Hitler as the embodiment of evil by portraying him as irritable, naive, and poorly living. Considerations of political correctness are trampled on cheerfully by Moers. On the path to de-mystifying Hitler's image, Achim Greser's comic *Der Führer privat* (Leader's Private Time, 2000) went even further. The Hitler portrayed by Greser uses vacuum cleaners, writes shopping lists and does other things ordinary people do. Portraying Hitler as having an ordinary private life enabled readers to confront the historical figure as a human being.

In the 2004 film *Downfall* (*Der Untergang* 2004, directed by Oliver Hirschbiegel) Hitler was portrayed by Bruno Ganz as a leader whose grip on power was faltering, who experienced despair in the last days of his life as well as emotional struggles with his subordinates and partner before suffering a pathetic death. Hitler was almost dramatized into a tragic hero. Later, Dani Levy's 2007 film *Die wirklich wahrste Wahrheit über Adolf Hitler* (*My Führer – The Really Truest Truth about Adolf Hitler*) tells the fictional story of Hitler's New Year speech being voiced over by a Jewish actor after the dictator lost his voice. The film speculates as to why Hitler carried out his cruel deeds. The answer the film presents is the psychological and physical violence inflicted on Hitler by his father (Almenning 40-41). Compared with comics, movies have a wider audience and greater social influence. These two films further reinforced the image of Hitler as a real person, breaking the taboo against humanizing him in literary and artistic works. However, these two films cannot yet be considered as portraying Hitler as a fully "real" character, as one highlighted only his final defeat and the other portrayed him as mentally unsound (see Xue 133).

*Er ist wieder da* is a satirical novel by journalist Timur Vermes, which was published in 2012. In the novel, Adolf Hitler wakes up and finds himself in Berlin in 2011, with no idea how he got there. Hitler gradually learns to understand his new surroundings and exploits the media to return to power and complete his historic "mission." He gets an appearance on a comedy show hosted by the Turkish-born comedian Ali Gagmez, and becomes a surprise hit with millions of views on *Youtube*. Hitler is then pursued by the famous German tabloid *Bild*, which reports negatively about him. He is even awarded

the Grimme Prize, after he succeeds in getting revenge on *Bild*. Meanwhile, Hitler becomes a star of his own show in a studio resembling the "Wolf's Lair." He is beaten up by neo-Nazis who think he is mocking the memory of Hitler. Hitler becomes even more popular as the public thinks he fought against the neo-Nazis and is perceived as a hero for defending free speech. At the hospital, he receives calls from various parties and politicians inviting him to join their respective party. A publisher asks him to write a book. In the end, Hitler uses his popularity to re-enter politics. The path of his rise is similar to that of 1933.

While the other texts discussed so far caricature, satirize, and to varying degrees present Hitler as an unrealistic figure, Vermes' book is a representation of a fairly realistic person whose observations satirize the realities in 2011's Germany. It is interesting to see how Adolf Hitler's self-representation in the novel is very close to the style of *Mein Kampf,* in which the historical Hitler expressed himself directly. The narrative perspective from the first person makes the viewer empathize with the fictional character, and hence humanizes the historical figure. As Gavriel Rosenfeld pointed out, portraying Hitler as "human" rather than "monster" forces readers to face Nazism as perpetrated by humans, but it could have the unintended consequence of not only humanizing but also "normalizing" Hitler's views, as readers can "laugh not merely *at* Hitler, but also *with* him." The significance of this representation of Hitler lies precisely in readers' conscious and unconscious identification with him, as they view today's problems through his eyes. In the following sections I will discuss how and to what extent the novel *Er ist wieder da* breaks the terms of political correctness, which were generally "observed" until the end of the 1990s.

## Nothing after the Red Line
Political correctness is blamed by its opponents for an alleged failure of multiculturalism. "Political correctness" is regarded by critics as a concept leading to contradictions: on the one hand, it supposedly suppresses legitimate criticism which is essential for democracy, but on the other hand it supposedly condones excessive free speech and actions for certain social groups. Conservatives believe that political correctness is often used to suppress and to question national and social mainstream culture, and that excessive consideration of political correctness in political life will inevitably obscure parts of the truth and thus threaten German democracy. When discussing the purposed construction of a Holocaust Memorial in Berlin in 1998, a debate was held between the German writer and intellectual Martin Walser and the President of the Central Committee of Jews in Germany, Ignatz Bubis. The main point of this dispute was whether Germany should be freed from the political correctness around the German historical consciousness and progress towards a normalization of its national identity. (Johnson and Suhr 52) In a speech given in 2004, a German politician of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) party, Wolfgang Schäuble, stated that it was time for Germany to get rid of historical baggage, reinstate "patriotism" and "elite education," promote healthy and fair citizenship, and fight against an over-emphasized political correctness.

German elites, with the help of literary and artistic works, tried to initiate a large-scale discussion. They intended to gain social consensus and change the political correctness. Vermes' novel directly addressed many of the topics that, in the 1990s, were at the center of debates about political correctness: asylum seekers, Jews, Hitler, the "Third Reich," immigrants, neo-Nazis, Germany's Turkish population (Wimmer 294). With no knowledge of anything that happened following his death in 1945, the fictional Hitler of the book looks at the world of 2011 from the perspective of his own time. He is still him, but the world has changed dramatically. Through television and the Internet, he is able to update his knowledge of the world. For him, the world seems to be controlled by a group named WWW. All TV programs are entertainment, either cooking shows, reality shows or detective stories. This reminds him of the wonderfully cheerful film "Feuerzangenbowle" of 1944, which served to distract the audience from the difficult time in which they lived. Hitler obviously has no regard for political correctness: he is contemptuous of immigrants from Turkey and Southeastern Europe and is still hostile to Jews. For him, the racial struggle is far from over. In fact it has only intensified in nature, and nothing he reads in the bourgeois-liberal press suggests otherwise (Vermes 99). Although Turks in Berlin are self-reliant, have decent jobs and live proudly in all spheres of society, they are still regarded by Hitler as representatives of a lower culture.

"How can the Führer of the National Socialist movement possibly take part in a telecast featuring one Ali Gagmez?" And I can well understand these doubts if they are motivated by artistic considerations, for great art must not be sullied by politics. One would never, after all, seek to embellish the Mona Lisa, not even with a swastika. But the ramblings of an emcee and Herr Gagmez is no more than that – could never be ranked among the expressions of high culture, quite the opposite, in fact. (Vermes 134)

In Hitler's opinion Germans should be allowed to joke about the Turks, or any other ethnic group (Vermes 263). No one, especially no German, wants to live in a land where non-German people cannot be joked about within the scope of politically correct discourse. Hitler identifies a common perception among critics of multicultural society, which is that only the rights of ethnic minorities are protected. This refers to a reality in German society that some mainstream media often omit the names of criminals with an immigrant background in order to avoid racial discrimination. This practice prevents the names of ethnic minorities from appearing in negative reports of crime and violence. Some critics advance the questionable claim that such an excessive practice of political correctness promotes criminal behavior among minority groups, which may threaten social order.

Hitler in the novel publicly mocks the Turks, but maliciously curses the Jews in his monologue. A scene from the film adaptation (*Er ist wieder da* 2015, directed by David Wnendt) helps illustrate attitudes to this topic in Germany. As TV producer Sensenbrink asks his comedy gag writers to "cross the red line" and make jokes about Hitler, the Jews, and gas chambers, they are so embarrassed that they have nothing to say. Beyond the red line there is almost nothing. Hitler was warned by TV producers that making fun of Jews on television is not supposed to be funny at all. He still cannot keep antisemitic thoughts away from his head and blames the global economic crisis on what he calls international "Jewish Finance" (Vermes 338).

In the novel, there is a scene in which Hitler meets holocaust survivors. Hitler's loyal secretary Ms. Krömeier no longer wants to work for him after finding out that her grandmother's family, who were Jewish, were murdered during the Nazi era. Hitler visits the old lady personally to tell her how essential her granddaughter was to his work. Instead of apologizing for what he had done to her family, Hitler explained that the war and genocide were not his crimes alone. He led a party of four million members in 1933, and came to power after winning an overwhelming victory through elections. As Hitler puts it: "Either there was a whole Volk full of bastards. Or what happened was not the act of bastards, but the will of the Volk. [...] Or you must condemn those who elected this Führer but failed to remove him" (Vermes 239). This scene clearly diverges from the "politically correct" representation of Hitler by offering a kind of relative "decriminalization," by showing that the crimes committed by Hitler were also the crimes of millions of Germans at that time. Cornelia Fiedler's comment on this point is accurate: "Why talk about the broad historical consent of the Germans to National Socialist politics, or about the deep roots of German anti-Semitism, when a crazy man offers to assume sole responsibility? Timur Vermes satirizes this 'Hitleritis.'" Acknowledging that Hitler's rise was the result of democratic elections makes the narrative about "the other" into a collective narrative about the German nation facing itself. This is a perspective that takes the debate to a new level, because then this shared historical legacy has to be confronted, instead of repressed.

One could say that Vermes with this political satire wants to hold up a mirror to Germans to ask if they are really as good and Nazi-free as they would like to be. Under the right circumstances, ordinary people can become Nazis or at least be complicit. It illustrates the persuasiveness of Hitler, who despite his lack of understanding of modern conditions can still convince his audience. Nazi ideology still has its supporters and they do not always look like the stereotypical neo-Nazis. The novel shows the popularity of Hitler in 2011. There is an episode in the novel that illustrates Hitler's popularity among Internet users: Ms. Krömeier helps Hitler to register an email address, but all the addresses with "Hitler" in them have already been registered, and even names like "Wolfschanze" (Wolf's Lair) and "Obersalzberg" are taken. Obviously, some of the young generation want to let go of the historical burden. Not only because this history has seldom anything to do with them, but also because they are tired of the protracted post-war democracy "re-education" and anti-Nazi education and they have no intention of carrying the moral burden of earlier generations forever. Hitler, as a cultural symbol of a specific historical period, is just one of many popular cultural figures, perhaps the least boring and the coolest one for them. The older generation of Germans, the contemporary witnesses, are in the twilight of their lives, and the young generation is already at the point where they will assume the power to define the narrative of collective memory anew.

Later in the novel, Hitler is called a "Jewish bastard" (Vermes 343) and beaten almost to death by extreme right-wing thugs, because he supposedly betrayed the German national cause with his national socialist and racist remarks in public. Willy Brandt's historic kneeling in Warsaw in 1970 symbolized Germany's long post-war recovery and reflection, marking Germany's moral rehabilitation after World War II. The times have changed so much that, in the novel, by 2011 even neo-Nazis see making provocative remarks as a crime against Germany, for it damages Germany's reputation as the most devout penitent of its past crimes.

Xue Yuan, "'It is Not All That Bad'—Hitler and Identity-building in                                      page 6 of 12
*Er ist wieder da* (Look Who's Back)"
*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 23.2 (2021): <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol23/iss2/6>
Special Issue: *A Return to the Bad Old Times*. Ed. Fabio Akcelrud Durão and Fernando Urueta

However, should the shifting of Hitler's characterization be interpreted as the return tide of far-right thoughts or does it reflect the rational judgment of intellectuals? On this point, the critical response to the novel is clearly polarized. Volker Surman criticized Timur Vermes' Hitler satire as simply an uncomfortable, tiring conglomerate of not entirely new ideas. Whenever it gets tough, Vermes lets his protagonists talk to each other in funny misunderstandings. For Oliver Jungen, although the novel wants to be somewhat subversive, the satirical "truths" in relation to the cynical, selfish and stupidly politically correct present are not so surprising or intelligent. Peter Kümmel believes that the Hitler portrayed in the film based on Vermes's novel has taken a step forward in breaking political correctness:

> A lopsided comparison might be drawn with Dostoevsky's The Brothers Karamazov, which relates the story of Jesus suddenly walking among people again. And what happens? Jesus is allowed to do a few miracles, then the Grand Inquisitor arrives, has him captured and commands him never to be seen again. In the German film adaptation of Look Who's Back, Hitler suddenly walks among people again, and what happens? All doors open to him. He is categorized as "cheeky," politically incorrect mass entertainment.

Peter Kümmel not only compared this reborn Hitler figure to Doestoevsky's returned Jesus, but also intended to criticize the film for not using this opportunity to go further along the road of breaking political correctness. Jungen and Kümmel imply that the red line should not only be crossed, but in fact should be abolished. If there is hardly anything left after the red line, why is it necessary to draw the line? Why not discuss, reflect, and think over those problems underneath? Why in today's Germany has such a fictional Hitler come into being, what does he represent? The novel shows how Hitler succeeded step by step in a society where media easily yield to profits and fail to prevent him from successfully entering the political world. His racist and nationalist remarks cause little resentment among the public. On the contrary, he quickly wins support nationwide by criticizing politics and society. Hitler sees his chance to revive his extreme ethno-national ideology, as in his view there is even greater disaffection among people than ever.

**Returning to nationalism?**
The novel shows what great influence a charismatic politician can have on people in a media-driven society. The desire to revert to old orders and certainties grows, which gives Hitler a chance to revive his ethno-national ideology. The Hitler of 1945 finds his way in 2011 and interprets the behavior of modern Germans in light of his Nazi background. Hitler thinks that today's Germany is in a deeper crisis than it was in 1930, though people may not even be aware of it: "There was an army of unemployed people, millions strong, and a silent anger in the population, a dissatisfaction with the prevailing circumstances which reminded me of 1930, except that back then we lacked the felicitous phrase 'political apathy'- it implied that there are limits to the deception one can perpetrate against a Volk such as the Germans" (Vermes 132). The term "political apathy" aptly describes the powerlessness felt by people in the face of the media and parliamentary democracy. The former is presented as overwhelming and dysfunctional, whereas the latter makes views of people hard to be fully represented. As Hitler observes, there is seldom much distinction between left and right parties in Germany nowadays: "Both sides work hand and hand in perpetuity" (Vermes 339).

In his eyes, there are huge divisions, contradictions and disputes among the federal states of Germany, between the Eastern and the Western parts of Germany and within the European Union. Due to this fragmentation at all levels, the opposing parties always care above all about their own gains and losses, ignoring the country's future. Hitler describes "an excessive dose of federalism" which ensures ongoing strife within the nation: "They created a number of states, called *Bundesländer*, which from the outset interfered in each other's affairs and picked to pieces all those resolutions passed by the totally inept federal parliament" (Vermes 125). This highlights the fact that democratically constituted states are dependent on achieving consensus through often lengthy negotiation processes. Hitler also criticizes the EU's expansion plan, which in his view makes the EU a "juvenile alliance" (Vermes 128), since practically everyone could be included. "The stronger members were considering whether to constitute their club, or to force out the weakest ones which naturally made a complete mockery of the original club" (Vermes 128). The European sovereign debt crisis has made the divisions among European countries even worse: as Hitler remarks, "[a] Portuguese, a Greek and a Spaniard go into a brothel," why should Germany pay for that?" (Vermes 168). All these factors have caused the social welfare system of many European countries to be so overburdened that they are about to go bankrupt, which will undoubtedly shake the foundations of European countries as high welfare societies. The most hopeless group of all in Hitler's eyes is the so-called "Hartzmenschen" (recipients of unemployment

Xue Yuan, "'It is Not All That Bad'—Hitler and Identity-building in                                    page 7 of 12
*Er ist wieder da* (Look Who's Back)"
*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 23.2 (2021): <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol23/iss2/6>
Special Issue: *A Return to the Bad Old Times*. Ed. Fabio Akcelrud Durão and Fernando Urueta

benefits) who have no intent to or are not able to resume their work and therefore become socially excluded.

As for immigration policy, Hitler deplores the undifferentiated treatment of immigrants and does not agree with not distinguishing Germans from Indians, Arabs, Turks, and Poles (Vermes 137). In reality, similar views were expressed by the controversial economist Thilo Sarrazin. His *Deutschland schafft sich ab: Wie wir unser Land aufs Spiel setzen* (Germany Abolishes Itself: How we're putting our country in jeopardy 2010), is a sharp attack on German immigration policies, at the very time Vermes' novel is set. Sarrazin's views were not that different from those expressed by Hitler in Vermes' book. He argued that the German birth rate is low, and the main population growth comes from low-middle class and Muslim immigrant families. The immigrants supposedly use loopholes in the welfare system to live a parasitic life without having to work. Low education level, low employment rate, low integration and high crime rate have become the labels of a generation of immigrants. Sarrazin demands that the receiving society must convey clear expectations to migrants, the tenor of which he characterized as follows: "We don't want national minorities. If you want to stay Turkish or Arab and want to do this for your children, you are better off in your country of origin. And anyone who is primarily interested in the blessings of the German welfare state is definitely not welcome with us" (Sarrazin 326). This book sparked a nationwide controversy about multicultural approaches in dealing with immigrants and refugee issues and the alleged failure of Germany's post-war immigration policy. Joachim Gauck made defended Thilo Sarrazin in 2010 for "speaking more openly than politicians about a problem that exists in society" (Sirleschtov and Haselberger).

In Hitler's view, TV shows, social media or newspapers fail to provide quality content. Hitler meant to use propaganda tools much more effectively to come back to power by giving enlightening shows for the people. The television industry is depicted as complacently helping him: Hitler signs a contract with a private production company named "Flashlight," which wants to include him in one of their programs to revive their falling viewership. The company's investment in Hitler allows him to set up a new headquarters.

"Media democracy" entails that media should be used to promote democracy. But in this case media people put profit before principle. In the book, the media largely follows a purely economic logic. In the media community, for good or bad, the highest possible audience means economic benefits, not only for the Turkish vendor of the book kiosk who wants to sell more newspapers about Hitler, but also for producers of television programs and operators of large social media. This economically oriented position makes it difficult for media practitioners to maintain independence, conscience and civic courage. After Hitler gives his speech in the comedy show, Ali Gagmez angrily forces Hitler backstage because he felt Hitler ruined his program by making racist comments. Gagmez now realized that Hitler was not a talented comedian but a true racist; he was filled with indignation and vowed to drive Hitler out of the show, but he gradually had to compromise and finally give up his position. As Hitler's website is clicked millions of times on the Internet, the production company celebrates its great success and plans how to make Hitler even more popular.

In Hitler's eyes, the contemporary German media landscape is ridiculously deformed. As he puts it: "The deaf man writes down what the blind man has told him, the village idiot edits it and their colleagues in the other press houses copy it" (Vermes 26). Newspapers like *Bild* try to reach as large an audience as possible by simplifying content, displaying posters or even polemicizing and presenting readers with lurid headlines. *Bild* in particular targets Hitler as someone worth being reported about. It quotes politicians who find his show tasteless and fabricates an affair with his secretary. After Hitler's team manipulated *Bild* into subsidizing him, by showing the bill for an interview in Hotel Adlon to the public, the newspaper's image plummeted, whereas Hitler's image was greatly improved. With this clever move, Hitler brought *Bild* to its knees. From then on it only reports positively about him. The dispute with the tabloid has also catapulted Hitler into the cultural pages of the quality press, where he is celebrated as a star. His success goes so far that he even wins the Grimme Prize, as he is considered as a democratic fighter for free speech: which, of course, he never meant to be.

In all sorts of chaos, Hitler sees his chance for success. Hitler's rhetoric cuts to the heart of today's problems. He sees it as his chance to win power by calling for a strong leader and a strong party. Though without governmental power yet, he believes that he was the one to be entrusted with the mission to clear out "the Augean stables of democracy" (Vermes 40) and revive prosperity of Germany.

First of all, he believes that without an established ideology one has no chance and furthermore no right to exist in the modern entertainment industry (Vermes 186). Hitler is portrayed as persistent, determined, inflexible—his worldview has never changed in principle. He advocates a return to traditional values by opposing abortion and pollution. Being a clever, analytical, calculating observer,

Xue Yuan, "'It is Not All That Bad'—Hitler and Identity-building in
*Er ist wieder da* (Look Who's Back)"
*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 23.2 (2021): <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol23/iss2/6>
Special Issue: *A Return to the Bad Old Times*. Ed. Fabio Akcelrud Durão and Fernando Urueta

page 8 of 12

he is able even to convert a pastor into an atheist. He is therefore endowed with "destiny," and he tirelessly carries out the mission of arousing German consciousness and national spirit, and takes over the task of leading the German nation out of its perceived predicament and re-establishing its vitality (See Xue 135).

Second, he believes that the basis of the preservation of the German people is the concept of race. "If this is not impressed on the Volk time and again, in fifty years we will no longer have an army, but a bunch of layabouts like the Habsburg Empire" (Vermes 247). This racist and militaristic appeal was played down by a group "foreigners" with decent behavior, outlooks and jobs in multicultural Berlin. In Hitler's worldview, there are many contrasts between so-called "Aryans," (Norwegian, Swedish, Swiss and German) and other ethnic groups. Hitler believes that the welfare system in Northern Europe and Germany supplies "millions of parasites" with heating for free in their log houses, which only leads to further softening and continued sluggishness (113). And the softened "Hartzmenschen" in Germany can only helplessly surf the internet and watch television gameshows. The head of the NPD (National Democratic Party of Germany, a far-right and ultranationalist political party described as a neo-Nazi organization in Germany), instead of being a powerful and intelligent leader, is weak and bizarre. As Hitler puts it: "[b]ombed out Berlin had not presented a sorrier picture. His voice sounded as if he were permanently chewing on a salami roll, and he looked like it too" (244). Another Party-member is a "soft, skinny, spotty" boy, who is "slow like a snail, as fragile as an old man's bones, and as soft as butter" (243). On the contrary, Mehmet, the son of the vendor of the kiosk is a tall, clean-looking young man. In general, Turks are simple and proud people. Mrs. Bellini, the Italian head of the agency, is a fantastic woman like a "skulking wolf" (152). Hitler demonstrates his understanding of nationalism, drawing a clear line between white Germans and other ethnic groups. He still insists on racial "improvement," since Germans, who are now lazy and week, fail to meet the requirements of an excellent race, which should be "as swift as greyhounds, tough as leather, hard as steel."( 243)

Thirdly, he is the one who is able to rebuild a strong and diplomatically tough new political party, maybe again a national socialist one, to reform the system that makes the Germans increasingly lazy and uncompetitive. As this logic has it, perhaps only a Hitler-like fanatical will and fighting spirit can give a shot to the weak Germans under their seemingly perfect welfare system. Hitler is extremely disappointed with the NPD, which is described as a neo-Nazi party but has no idea of what "Nazi" means. He has to change course: the far-right neo-Nazi party is obviously not up to the task; Hitler finds the Green party's governance program more convincing. In the novel, one of the highlights is an encounter with Renate Künast of the Greens. Hitler assured this left-wing party of his full sympathy - they were completely in agreement about the preservation of the "living space" and the withdrawal of the troops from Afghanistan (what good is a war with no prospect of victory?). Only on one issue were the views of the two quite different: Hitler is clearly not a fan of the European Union, which he believes will sooner or later disappear.

The characterization of Hitler in the novel always seems to get into contradictions. Hitler was a staunch anti-Semite, but he does everything he can to persuade his Jewish secretary to stay and continue working for him; he despises the Turks but wants Turkey and Germany to be allied. He is supposed to hate democracy and especially free speech, but actually supports democratic elections. He has to abandon the far-right neo-Nazi party and move closer to the left, and his anti-Semitic and racist speech is even misunderstood by the far-right extremists. Through the contrast between the fictional Hitler and Hitler as a historical figure, the novel creates a comic effect. This contrast was caused by the collision between Hitler holding a Nazi worldview and a democratic society with cultural diversity and pluralistic values. This is the reason why Hitler did not really arouse the public's resentment: he prudently took care of the emotions of all parties. He did not violate political correctness unscrupulously—many taboos have been internalized by society and become social conventions, and even Hitler cannot deny this fact.

Globalization, the Euro crisis, social cuts and immigrants have led Europeans to lose confidence in the EU and even in democracy. Suspicion of a liberal constitution and doubts about the advantages of democracy are increasing. That may explain why Hitler is portrayed as having more decision-making and implementation capacity. In the novel, Hitler does not express too many views on the topic of multi-ethnic coexistence in Germany, but rather refers to how people, who see themselves as ethnic Germans, preserve their own identity and culture. In an era when traditional values are violated, national identity deconstructed, living standards are changing and with personal safety threatened, how can one avoid being caught in the narrow, selfish, and closed framework of nationalism? It is an issue facing not only Germany, but also Europe, and even the world as a whole.

According to Frank Eckardt, the obstacles to acceptance of the concept and implications of multiculturalism derive from other contemporary developments in Germany. A key factor is how the conservative parts of the German population deal with the question of German nationality and the construction of others (243). At the beginning of 2016, the Munich Institute for Contemporary History (IfZ) presented its annotated edition of *Mein Kampf*, which had been edited for three years. Within the first year, more than 85,000 copies were sold and a seventh edition appeared in early December 2017. The idea of publishing the new, critical edition was the subject of debate, "with some seeing it as an important step toward illuminating an era in Germany, never to be repeated, while others argued that a scholarly edition would legitimize the rantings of a sociopath who led the country down the path of evil" (Eddy).

The particularity of the figure of Hitler leads to this dilemma of German cultural identity. As far as German identity-building is concerned, Hitler is an important part of German national identity: not a part to be proud of, but a part to atone for. This is different from other positive cultural figures that can aid national cohesion. On the other hand, this is a part of national identity that Germans must face. This history exists vividly in the vast number of documentaries, history books, biographies and literary works dealing with Hitler and his times. Facing history requires courage, and being able to bear a sense of guilt requires strength.

For the external perception of German national identity, this also means a dilemma. No matter how sincerely the Germans judge and reflect on themselves critically, they can be criticized and questioned by international and European public opinion. 76 years have passed since the war, and the memory of pain has been handed down by generations of Europeans, and it will last a long time. Germany, the largest economy in Europe, is in a power relationship with its neighbors, one in which it is sometimes considered to be hegemonic. As an important figure in German history, Hitler can be used to criticize or attack Germany.

This cultural dilemma has made Hitler a lingering scar in the heart of the German nation. As time goes by, the scar gradually heals, but whenever the social-political context and discourse change, it still inevitably hurts or begins to itch. Today, the far right is associated with an increasingly disaffected part of the population—but also has growing support from the intellectual class. Recently the NPD has failed to gain the approval of voters, while support for the anti-immigrant AfD (Alternative for Germany), another right-wing party, has been rising. The time is calling for the construction of a new identity. A nation that is disoriented and uncertain about its identity may fail to offer a strategy against populism, extremism and fundamentalist forces.

## 2. Hitler, *Leitkultur* and Identity-Building

The shifting of political correctness regarding the figure of Hitler meant the following three changes in German ideology. First, more than 70 years after the end of World War II, people have gradually viewed these once sensitive topics in a more objective manner. The line between what was "politically correct" and "politically incorrect" is blurred or even non-existent. The consensus of older generations is not accepted by the younger generation, which reacts against the perceived socio-political "censorship" of political correctness. They are feeling an urge to define their own identity to encompass more than atonement for World War II. Second, more and more people believe that German and European politics may have lost their impartiality and objectivity due to an excessive emphasis on political correctness and has gone to the other extreme. The taboos around the topic of "Hitler" should be lifted to free Germany from the discourses of World War II and the Holocaust, so that all issues can be discussed without historical burdens: "It must be allowed to address the issues of immigration that are taboo in reality by almost all parties and social organizations—from identity and integration, to abuse and asylum, to ethnicity, religious radicalization and the emergence of parallel societies." (Tibi "Leitkultur") Third, as the representative of German ethnic nationalism, Hitler's "return" in literature and popular culture meant the return of many values contrary to multicultural values. Hitler in the fictional world tries to rebuild German national identity through strong personal will, racism, protectionism and autocracy (See Xue 135); his audience, ordinary citizens, seem very receptive for these ideas. Fiction and reality are blending here. This may explain why populist and far-right parties from Denmark to Italy, Austria, France and the Netherlands won the favor of many voters in the general election. In their electoral program, economic and cultural protectionism are central issues, as well as the issue of identity. *Look, who is back* serve as a satiric warning concerning how a society is prone to extremist views when facing crisis.

The discussion of the term *Leitkultur*, from its birth to entering the field of political discourse, is mostly related to the issues of immigration and integration. I argue, however, that it is not only related to our relationship with others, but also to the question of constructing and presenting ourselves. If

Xue Yuan, "'It is Not All That Bad'—Hitler and Identity-building in                    page 10 of 12
*Er ist wieder da* (Look Who's Back)"
*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 23.2 (2021): <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol23/iss2/6>
Special Issue: *A Return to the Bad Old Times*. Ed. Fabio Akcelrud Durão and Fernando Urueta

multiculturalism fails to define the cultural identity, what kind of culture would help to shape it? Is the so-called *Leitkultur* the choice after the failure of multiculturalism? A monopolistic leading culture cannot be achieved in an already diverse Germany. Today, in Germany, race, gender, religion, and cultural diversity are indisputable facts. A German leading culture inevitably has a right-leaning tendency for its exclusiveness, dogmatism and emphasis on hierarchy (see Xue 136).

The most recent and important debate about leading culture in German politics was occasioned by the 2015 refugee crisis. In 2017, Federal Minister of the Interior Thomas de Maizière initiated a new discussion on German leading culture, by proposing ten principles as a "guideline of coexistence." This included social habits such as shaking hands, showing one's face and not wearing a "burqa." General education, the concept of achievement, the legacy of German history with its special relationship to Israel and cultural wealth and protection under Nato are to be approved. De Maizière also mentioned the binding consensus on religious freedom, ideological neutrality and "enlightened patriotism." Critics have argued that de Maizière's ideas would hinder social participation by excluding people who do not meet a nearly unachievable standard of assimilation. The ten principles were fiercely criticized by academics as well as his political opponents for imposing values opposed to liberal democracy and for displaying a sense of cultural superiority. De Maizière's attempt to build German national identity by *Leikultur* should however be well appreciated. For Germans, to define leading culture is also a process of self-discovery and self-identification. As de Maizière put it: "Those who are sure of their leading culture are strong. The strength and inner security of one's own culture leads to tolerance towards others. Leading culture is first and foremost what defines us. If it guides us in the best sense of the word, it will have its formative effect on others."

To conclude, what is the significance of the figure of Hitler to the construction of German cultural identity today?

First, the figure of Hitler helps us rethink multiculturalism. Hitler, who came to power through democratic elections, eventually became the perpetrator of autocracy and slaughter. This is undoubtedly a mockery of the humanism that Europe has professed since the Enlightenment. Although Germany's acceptance of multiculturalism was relatively late, its significance to the progress of building a democratic society is undeniable. Multiculturalism used to be a progressive value which formed after the postmodern critique of modernity. It is directed towards the advancement and inclusion of minorities in society. The ideal of the coexistence of different cultures has helped to change the social climate, to promote a spirit of tolerance towards the "other," to stimulate dialogues, as well as to make minorities heard. It is democracy. Equality, pluralism and tolerance gradually became an indelible mark in Europe's post-war identity, and Germany is no exception. The ghost of Hitler reminds us from time to time how people lose their sense of security in the face of external invasions and internal crises, as evidenced by the wave of populism sweeping Europe today. The progressive values that were once abided by are in danger of being lost. Multiculturalism should not be reduced to failed immigration policy or be blamed for social problems like unemployment, crime rate, low-birth rate, poverty and the Euro-crisis. By categorizing people according to their cultural and ethnic background and therefore blaming multiculturalism, populists divert attention from the real socio-economic and institutional causes of problems that should be confronted. If people always look for a scapegoat that to blame when facing social problems, how will society progress?

Second, the emergence of a "demonic" Hitler is always a warning that social problems must be addressed. It reminds people of how close they are to danger, conflict or even collapse. It is undeniable that whenever there are severe problems and crises in German society, Hitler returns in various ways, whether in literary and artistic works, public discussions or in people's hearts. Hitler represents the narrow ethnic identity, reflecting the struggle between ethnic Germans and outsiders. As long as this difference exists, the ghost of Hitler will never disappear. So I support Tibi's idea of de-ethnicization in his concept of leading culture. As he puts it, "I am of the opinion that an ethnic Arab of Islamic faith can only become a constitutional patriot of German elections if this person renounces ethno-religious determination and, at the same time, that Germans 'de-ethnicize' the term 'German'" (Tibi "Leitkultur"). He therefore spoke of a European rather than a German "Leitkultur." In my opinion, there is no need to struggle with German and European leading cultures. If a culture has its appeal, a person may follow it, no matter where in the world he is, how he was born, what language he speaks, what he believes. And a culture loses its appeal, as long as differences among nations, cultures and religions are stressed instead of promoting unbiased common goods. So what defines the culture in Germany can go far beyond national borders.

Third, the "human" Hitler will contribute to the construction of German cultural identity. How can Hitler be turned into a positive component of Germany cultural identity? To face Hitler's meaning instead

Xue Yuan, "'It is Not All That Bad'—Hitler and Identity-building in                    page 11 of 12
*Er ist wieder da* (Look Who's Back)"
*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 23.2 (2021): <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol23/iss2/6>
Special Issue: *A Return to the Bad Old Times*. Ed. Fabio Akcelrud Durão and Fernando Urueta

of treating his figure as a scapegoat brings Germany away from guilt and can provide  clear proof of national integrity. After many up and downs, Germany makes its commitment to the world: Germany will never repeat history. It is the spiritual wealth of the German nation, and the enrichment of German cultural identity. The figure of Hitler conveys therefore a clear and profound cultural connotation, which can be understood internationally without knowledge of German language and culture.

To what extent can a society encourage a culture of tolerance and freedom, which are essential parts of democracy? Is openness and tolerance respected by most impassioned fundamentalists and dangerous extremists, whose bigotry and isolation cannot be changed overnight? What can be done is to consolidate and strengthen social consensus, build a strong civil society, so that those extremist ideas no longer spread. Therefore, in construction of the German cultural identity, multiculturalism and leading culture should not exclude each other. Positive aspects of both can be absorbed. Leading cultures provide value consensus and rules; multiculturalism gives freedom and tolerance. Both are integral parts of a solid cultural identity. Immigrants and refugees are becoming a part of European history. Whether this great cultural and ethnic integration succeeds will determine the future destiny of Europe, maybe also that of the world. Germans and Europeans are conducting a social experiment. They are trying to make national borders and ethnic and religious barriers disappear, enable different people to share a peaceful life under the sun, and rekindle the light of European idealism. If this great experiment can succeed, then it will greatly promote the progress of human civilization.

**Works Cited**

Almenning, Nikola Hoff. *Hitler in der Badewanne. Erinnerungskultur, "Explosionen" und das Karnevaleske, Hitler in the bath* (Culture of remembrance, "explosions" and the carnivalesque), Universitetet i Oslo, 2015.

Asari, Eva-Maria, et. al. "British National Identity and the Dilemmas of Multiculturalism." *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, vol. 14, no. 1, Feb. 2008, pp. 1-28, DOI: 10.1080/13537110701872444.

Assmann, Jan. "Kulturelles Gedächtnis als normative Erinnerung. Das Prinzip 'Kanon' in der Erinnerungskultur Ägyptens und Israels" (Cultural memory as normative memory. The 'canon' principle in the memory culture of Egypt and Israel). *Memoria als Kultur* (Memoria as a culture), edited by Otto Gerhard Oexle, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995, pp. 95-114.

De Maizière, Thomas. "'Wir sind nicht Burka': Innenminister will deutsche Leitkultur" ("We are not burqa": Interior Minister wants German leading culture), *Zeit online*, 30 April 2017, https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2017-04/thomas-demaiziere-innenminister-leitkultur

Eckardt, Frank. "Multiculturalism in Germany: From Ideology to Pragmatism—and Back? In National Identities." *National Identities*. Vol. 9, no. 3, September 2007, pp. 235-245.

Eddy, Melissa. "'Mein Kampf', Hitler's Manifesto, Returns to German Shelves." *The New York Times,* 8 January 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/09/world/europe/mein-kampf-hitler-germany.html

Fiedler, Cornelia. "Ha, ha, Hitler." *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 9 January 2013, http://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/bestseller-roman-er-ist-wieder-da-ha-ha-hitler-1.1568685

Johnson, Sally and Stephanie Suhr. "From 'political correctness' to 'politische Korrektheit': discourses of 'PC' in the German newspaper, Die Welt." *Discourse & Society*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2003, pp. 49-68.

Jungen, Oliver. "Diktator sucht Volk. Böses Erwachen: Die Hitler-Satire von Timur Vermes" (A dictator is looking for a people. Evil awakening: The Hitler satire by Timur Vermes"). *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 6 November 2012.

Kümmel, Peter. "War er je weg?." *Die Zeit*. 1 October 2015 (40), https://www.zeit.de/2015/40/er-ist-wieder-da-kino-hitler-buchverfilmung

Kosherbayev, Zhanbolat et. al. "Postmodernism. Theory and Practice of Multiculturalism in Europe." *Calitatea Vietii*. vol. 27, no. 2, 2016, pp. 144–160.

Lanz, Stephan. "The German Sonderweg: multiculturalism as 'racism with a distance'." *European Multiculturalism Revisited*, edited by Alessandro Silj, Zed Books, 2010, pp.105-46.

Rosenfeld, Gavriel. "Rebooting The Führer: Adolf Hitler Brought Back to Life in German Hit Novel." *The Jewish Daily Forward*, 19 February 2013. https://forward.com/culture/171112/rebooting-the-fuehrer/?p=all

Schäuble, Wolfgang. Speech in honor for Dr. Klaus von Dohnanyi on the occasion of the presentation of the Kassel Citizen's Prize "Glas der Vernunft 2004" (Glass of Reason 2004).

Schultz, Sonja. *Der Nationalsozialismus im Film: von "Triumph des Willens" bis "Inglorious Basterds"* (National Socialism in film: from "Triumph of the Will" to "Inglorious Basterds"). Bertz + Fischer, 2012.

Sarrazin, Thilo. *Deutschland schafft sich ab: Wie wir unser Land aufs Spiel setzen* (Germany Abolishes Itself: How we're putting our country in jeopardy), Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2010.

Sirleschtov, Antje and Stephan Haselberger. "Gauck attestiert Sarrazin 'Mut'" (Gauck attests Sarrazin "courage"). *Der Tagesspiegel*, 30 December 2010, http://m.tagesspiegel.de/politik/integration-gauck-attestiert-sarrazin-mut/3685052.html?utm_referrer=

Xue Yuan, "'It is Not All That Bad'—Hitler and Identity-building in                                          page 12 of 12
*Er ist wieder da* (Look Who's Back)"
*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 23.2 (2021): <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol23/iss2/6>
Special Issue: *A Return to the Bad Old Times*. Ed. Fabio Akcelrud Durão and Fernando Urueta

Surman, Volker. "Lustig-blöder Hitlerkrampf" (Funny, stupid Hitler spasm). 7 March 2013, https://taz.de/Timur-Vermes-Satire-Er-ist-wieder-da/!5070624/

Tibi, Bassam. *Europa ohne Identität? Die Krise der multikulturellen Gesellschaft* (Europe without identity? The crisis of multicultural society). btb. 2000.

--- "Leitkultur als Integrationskonzept - revisited. Zwei missglückte deutsche Debatten 2000-2017" (Leading culture as an integration concept - revisited. Two failed German debates 2000-2017). *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung*, 8 September 2017. https://www.bpb.de/politik/extremismus/islamismus/255521/leitkultur-als-integrationskonzept-revisited#footnode16-16

Vermes, Timur. *Look Who's Back*. Translated by Jamie Bulloch, Maclehose Press, 2014.

Wierlemann, Sabine. *Political Correctness in den USA und in Deutschland*. Erich Schmidt Verlag, 2002.

Wimmer, Rainer. "'Political Correctness': ein Fall für die Sprachkritik" (Political Correctness: a case for language criticism). Evidenzen im Fluß. Demokratieverlust in Deutschland. Modell D - Geschlechter - Rassismus - PC (Evidence in the river. Loss of democracy in Germany. Model D - gender - racism - PC), edited by Andreas Disselnkötter et al., DISS, 1997, pp. 287-299.

Xue, Yuan. "The End of Postmodern Multiculturalism in Germany." *Exploration and Free Views*, vol. 9, 2016, 132-136.

**Author Profile**: Yuan Xue teaches German literature and Comparative literature at Shanghai Jiao Tong University. Email: <yuanxuelit@sjtu.edu.cn>