Germany

Unraveling an Enigma

GREG NEES
The Germans are an enigma not only to the rest of the world but also to themselves. Why does a society that prizes security and order and that seems to have a rule for everything not set a speed limit on its superhighways, despite the increasingly high number of automobiles that use these roads? How does such a heavily regulated society manage to attain such economic success in the competitive global market? How could a culture that produced such inspired musicians and artists as Bach, Beethoven, Goethe, and Schiller and such profound philosophers and scientists as Kant, Hegel, Heisenberg, and Einstein fall prey to the barbarities of the Nazis? How can a people be so sentimental, loyal, and trustworthy on the one hand and be so arrogant and easy to dislike on the other? These are only some of the questions that people pose when they try to understand the Germans. But foreigners are not the only ones who have that difficulty.

Libraries and bookstores in Germany are filled with works attempting to answer these and other questions. Germans spend great amounts of time among themselves discussing their puzzling heritage and culture. In fact, as will become evident in chapter 4, discussing almost anything is one of the Germans’ favorite pastimes. And trying to answer the ques-
tion “What does it mean to be German?” is one of the more common topics in these discussions.

A legendary German hero offers some initial clues to this challenging puzzle. In the Teutoburger Forest near Detmold stands a huge metal statue of Hermann the Cheruscan, whom Roman historians called Arminius. According to history and legend, in A.D. 9 Hermann led the Cheruscans and other Germanic tribes in their crucial victory over the three Roman legions that were trying to conquer the territory which we have come to know as Germany. After this defeat, the Romans never again tried to invade the Germanic territories.

We know of this battle first because it was recorded by the Romans and second because it passed into legend among the Germanic tribes, who were an oral people. It resurfaced in the works of German authors and thinkers after the Middle Ages. But not until the nineteenth century did the romantic and nationalist forces choose to resurrect the legend as a symbol of the greatness of the Germanic peoples and their culture. During this period the huge, heroic statue of Hermann was constructed and his legend promulgated in German schools. And it was during this same period that Germany was united as a modern nation-state. Here we find a major piece in the German puzzle: why did it take this two-thousand-year-old culture until 1871 to finally coalesce into a modern nation?

The spread of the Hermann legend and the building of the great statue were outward symbols of a struggle for the construction of a national German identity and a modern German state. As such, they served as an antidote to the sense of insecurity and inferiority which has marked much of German history. This sense of insecurity was derived in part from Germany’s geographic position, which often led to the Germanic kingdoms serving as battlefields where other European states fought their wars. It arose from watching other peoples—French, British, Spanish—form centralized states and create huge empires and great civilizations while the
Germanic states remained fragmented, with little political and economic clout. The Germans, divided into hundreds of small kingdoms, duchies, and principalities, felt themselves to be less than important in the grand scheme of Europe and the world. This lack of identity and sense of inferiority partly explains the preference of many of the German nobility for speaking and writing Latin during the Middle Ages and then French in later periods. It also prompted Emperor Charles V to say that the German language was only fit for speaking to horses.¹

Today this feeling of inferiority lingers among the Germans. The atrocities of the Third Reich have only served to make it more difficult than ever for Germans to identify themselves as such. It is telling that many young Germans have little or no knowledge of their Germanic ancestors. When asked, they often don't even know who Hermann the Cheruscan was. And when queried about their ancient Germanic ancestors, they will usually say that they were a primitive and barbaric people who were neither literate nor capable of creating the infrastructure which made Rome such a great civilization. Given this negative prejudice toward their own ancestors, it is striking that among the New Age movement in Germany there are numerous Germans who are fascinated with Native American cultures. While traveling through Germany, you can occasionally catch sight of an Indian teepee in someone's backyard. You will also hear of groups of people gathering in sweat lodges or participating in other Native American religious rituals. It is ironic that Germans can be so fascinated by Native American cultures but have no interest in their own, when both cultures had so much in common—politically, culturally, and spiritually.

Many of us think we know quite a lot about the Germans. After all, we argue, they are not so different from us and they played a large part in our own history. More Germans immigrated to the United States than any other ethnic group, and approximately fifty million American citizens currently claim
to be at least part German. But our views of Germans are often skewed, especially by the media. Of course we know of the beer-drinking Germans in their traditional costumes at the Oktoberfest, and we know Germans make great cars, but the Nazi image is omnipresent for many Americans, even if only in the background. What would Indiana Jones have done without the Nazis to fight against? And how many of the villains in Hollywood films have had a German accent or worn uniforms similar to those of the Nazis?

Many of these images have become classic stereotypes, and as such they influence our perceptions, thoughts, and behaviors when dealing with Germans. The insidious thing about such stereotypes is that they often have a core of truth, which is then applied indiscriminately so that every German becomes like the stereotype. In addition to the loss of individuality that such pigeonholing brings with it, there is usually an implicit emotional judgment about the stereotype, which makes successful communication difficult.

The reader is advised to remember that Germany is a densely populated country of over eighty million people who exhibit considerable diversity, which includes regional differences and dialects, educational and class differences, and political and ideological differences. Like so many European countries, the spectrum of political thought and party allegiance in Germany is far wider than that found in the United States. A typical German will notice little political diversity in the United States and view the Democrats and Republicans as representing two flanks of the same party. Americans have little to compare with major political positions taken by the Social Democratic Party (SPD) or the Green Party, and this is significant in understanding the German worldview.

In this book I have attempted to find the broader, underlying patterns of German life and culture. In doing so I often talk about “the Germans” and “the Americans,” realizing full well that such generalizations can slip easily into stereotypes.
Generalizations are useful, however, when trying to describe the overall form and structure of the forest without getting lost in the individual trees.

An illustration will make this clearer. While identifying Asian cultures as indirect has become a popular cliché, researchers have discovered there are differences in levels of directness among European cultures as well. Americans often pride themselves on how they “like to get to the point” and how they don’t waste time “beating around the bush.” From this perspective, the indirectness of Asians and their preoccupation with giving and saving face seems confusing and tedious, if not downright dishonest.

It thus comes as a surprise to many Americans to discover that the Germans are even more direct and less concerned about face issues than Americans are. As will be shown in the chapter on communication styles, this difference can cause significant problems when Americans and Germans try to communicate. Thus, while it makes sense to talk about the degree to which Germans and Americans are similar in their directness, in reality we find a great deal of difference in directness between these two cultures. There are some Americans who are blunter and more direct than most Germans, and there are some Germans who are very indirect. But this does not make the overall generalization any less valid if we assume that there is a normal distribution in both groups regarding this trait. Illustrated graphically, this distribution resembles three overlapping bell-shaped curves:
Note that while both peak on the right-hand side of the continuum between indirectness and directness, the American peak is a little closer to the indirectness pole than the German. The peak, of course, is where you find the predominant pattern of behavior in that culture. Finally, note how much further the Japanese are toward the indirectness extreme than either Germans or Americans.

A last point: to avoid confusion and offense, let me explicitly state that when referring to “the Americans,” I am speaking about the predominantly white, middle-class, mainstream culture within the United States. This is not to disavow the importance and richness of cultural variety within the U.S., but only to help draw a broad and easy-to-understand picture for the purposes of comparing and contrasting the two cultures.


Germany is a complicated country, a fact the Germans themselves are first to acknowledge. To talk simplistically about German culture is to engage in verbal sleight of hand. The very idea of “German culture” is ambiguous because it can be understood on several levels. Do we mean the culture of the relatively young German nation, whose borders have changed several times in the last hundred years, or do we mean the culture of all the German-speaking peoples? The latter would have to include the Austrians, the great majority of the Swiss, and isolated groups of Germans as far east as the Volga and as far south as the Seven Mountains region of Romania, not to mention the German-speaking people in Alsace-Lorraine and Luxembourg.

For the sake of clarity, when used in this book Germany and Germans will refer exclusively to the Federal Republic of Germany and its citizens. But even by limiting this examination to the current culture of the Federal Republic of Germany, a surprising amount of complexity still remains. Although Germany is small by American standards—its total area is less than that of Montana—the diversity and complexity of this country are not to be underestimated. Understanding this complexity is a key to working, living, and communicating successfully with the Germans.
Modern Germany can be likened to a patchwork quilt that has been carefully sewn together from scores of different little kingdoms and principalities. To understand how this came to be and what its current consequences are, we must take a brief look at its history.

The Essentials of Modern German History

Americans are a forward-looking people who tend to orient more to the future than the past, and for that reason I have tried to keep the section on German history short. But it is useful to note that Germans take a different approach to history than do Americans. They tend to always look to historical precedents in order to understand the present, a perspective followed to some extent in this book. I often use German history as the context for the present. For that reason, it is wise for Americans to spend some time learning more about Germany’s past.

Although many Americans show little interest in understanding or talking about history, this attitude is counterproductive when dealing with Germans. As will be described in greater detail in chapter 4, conversing and, in particular, engaging in detailed discussions are favorite national pastimes in Germany. Educated Germans have been raised to think and analyze historically; the American who learns the rudiments of this way of thinking and talking will earn respect and credibility from them.\(^1\) Not to do so is to run the risk of being written off as simply another uneducated American who is ignorant of the more important things in life.

The English word Germany derives from the name Germanus, given to the people of this territory by Tacitus, an ancient Roman historian. Tacitus was quite taken by these early, seminomadic “Germanic” tribes, seeing in them a healthy, more natural way of life that he hoped would be an antidote for the decadence of the Roman Empire. The interesting fact is that none of these tribes called themselves “Germans.”
After playing a major role in the downfall of the Roman Empire, these tribes were conquered by Charlemagne and converted to Christianity. Both the French and the Germans claim him as a national hero, but to the French he is Charlemagne and to the Germans, Karl der Große. Charlemagne was responsible for forcibly converting the last of the Germanic tribes to Christianity, and he also became emperor of the Holy Roman Empire in A.D. 800, uniting most of western and central Europe.

Within decades after his death, however, this empire began fragmenting politically, a process that continued for centuries. This was further encouraged by the religious wars following the Reformation. Fragmentation was to a large extent the result of Germanic laws of inheritance, which divided a man’s property equally among his sons, in contrast to other European countries, where, under primogeniture, property passed in toto to the eldest son. Consequently, what would become Germany remained a weak network of small warring states rather than a strong centralized country like France, England, or Spain. In fact, in 1648, with the signing of the Peace of Westphalia, which ended the Thirty Years War, what would later become united Germany was then a jigsaw puzzle of approximately three hundred small autonomous kingdoms, duchies, principalities, and free cities. It was Prussia’s destiny to change this.

**Imperial Germany (1871–1918)**

At the time of the Peace of Westphalia, Prussia was a small, unimportant kingdom located near present-day Berlin. But through a series of strategic wars, it expanded both its territory and power. Like Catholic Austria to the south, Protestant Prussia had designs on full control over the other German-speaking states. After a series of wars in which first Denmark, then Austria, and finally France were defeated, Prussia gained control over the German-speaking states, except for Switzerland and Austria. In 1871, under the leader-
ship of the Prussian chancellor Otto von Bismarck, the German Empire was created, finally bringing about a unified Germany. Bismarck supported and guided the Industrial Revolution in Germany, helping this newly centralized state rapidly become a modern world power. Prussia’s dominance left its mark on Germany in many ways, not the least of which is the fact that Berlin became the political center of modern Germany.

Like much of Europe, Prussia was organized according to a rigid hierarchy, which was basically a type of caste system. This class system was a direct outgrowth of European feudalism, an impediment against the democratic forces that were gaining strength throughout the continent and one of Bismarck’s greatest political challenges. To deflate the growth of democracy and socialism, Bismarck created Germany’s social insurance system, which is still in effect. This system serves as a major foundation for the social market economy that underpins German society. It is a major cultural component which reflects the Germans’ traditional acceptance of the role of the guardian state and the consequent deemphasis on individual freedom. While many of Bismarck’s policies had positive effects, which are still evident, his foreign policies, in particular his humiliating defeat of the French in 1871, set the stage for Germany’s traumatic experiences in this century.

Many Americans are under the impression that Germany is solely responsible for starting World War I. This view ignores the complexities of European politics at the turn of the twentieth century. European countries were involved in a series of “entangling alliances”—some of them the result of Bismarck’s policies—and thus were poised on the brink of war for several years before its actual outbreak in 1914. Experts agree that if the war had not started because of Germany’s support of Austria (which declared war on Serbia), another trigger would have been pulled by the European powers to start the war they were all preparing for. In the end,
Germany’s loss of this war gave France the opportunity to avenge itself for its defeat by the Prussians.

**Weimar Republic (1918–1933)**

After Germany’s defeat and with American consent, the French and British governments declared Germany to be solely responsible for the outbreak of the war and imposed huge war reparations. This strategy was designed to cripple the economy and ensure that Germany would remain a second-rate power. After the enormous hardships and great personal sacrifice during the war years, the loss of World War I was a great blow for the Germans and had repercussions throughout the country. In November of 1918, as the war drew to a close, the German emperor, Wilhelm II, abdicated and fled the country. The official class system collapsed, and political views became polarized. Radical forces of both the left (communists and socialists) and the right (nationalists and monarchists) were armed and intent upon installing a government of their own choosing. These forces clashed violently in the larger cities, and civil war seemed about to engulf the nation.

During this period, a more moderate, democratic government was installed in the German city of Weimar. Elections were held, but while much of the outright street violence abated, political assassinations continued. The huge war reparations payments, designed to economically bleed the country, proved effective. Hyperinflation ravaged Germany, and, at its peak, prices doubled daily, creating further hardship and turmoil among the German populace. Lifetime savings were wiped out overnight, and the economy collapsed, creating devastating unemployment. Finally, just when Germany seemed to be regaining some economic control, the stock market crashed in New York, setting off a worldwide economic depression.

This depression threw millions of Germans out of work and again set the stage for the emergence of small, radical
political parties that could not agree on a common economic or political solution to Germany’s problems. It was during this time that right-wing radicals reemerged and made their successful bid for power. By 1933 these radicals, in the form of the National Socialist German Workers Party (the Nazi Party), had gained control of government.

The Third Reich (1933–1945)

Just how much popular support the Nazis and their ideology actually received from the German populace is still a matter of controversy and emotional debate. What is beyond doubt is that the majority of Germans were thoroughly fed up with the violent class and political warfare combined with the economic hardship and instability that had been tearing Germany apart since 1918. They desperately wanted political and economic stability and security. For many, the Nazis seemed to offer just that. The Nazi policy of economic modernization, although based on creating a war machine, provided work for the unemployed as well as food and housing for those in need.

Their centralized ideology and message of social unity, while based on racial supremacist theories, provided a social glue that seemed to help the country pull itself back together after the divisive clashes and violence of the previous twenty years. Just as the United States went through an identity crisis and period of self-criticism after the Vietnam War, Germany was radically divided by debate about the causes and blame for the loss of World War I. The Nazis spread rumors of a “stab in the back,” blaming the loss on those Germans with more democratic and socialist leanings, in particular those who were then governing Weimar Germany. In fact, the first concentration camps were built by the Nazis to house those German socialists, union leaders, and communists who were branded as traitors for their attempts to create a more egalitarian society.

The Nazi carrot-and-stick tactic of creating jobs, solving
housing and food shortages, and fostering a new German identity that restored lost pride on the one hand while institutionalizing political repression and terror tactics to punish and intimidate dissidents on the other was successful in rapidly establishing complete political control over the country. How many of the Nazi leaders’ ultimate goals and strategies—for example, the “Final Solution”—were known by the populace at large is an open question. Without doubt, antisemitism had a long and ugly history in Germany, as it did in most European countries. But in the early years of their regime, the Nazis concentrated more on reviving Germany’s economic and military power, while working feverishly to gain complete political control. In its later stages, the dictatorship had gained so much power that few could challenge it. And once World War II actually began, the patriotism of most Germans inclined them to work for victory and to ignore all else. It will probably never be possible to fully determine what percentage of the populace was truly loyal to the party’s ideology, how many were simply opportunistic, and how many went along for fear of also ending up in the camps.

For those Americans who might believe that there is something unique about the Germans or their personalities that brought the Nazi experience upon them, it is wise to remember that as experimental research by social scientists in the United States has shown, even average Americans are susceptible to becoming sadistic and blindly obedient to authority when their social roles and external conditions demand it. I mean in no way to pardon or excuse the horrors and barbarities that occurred under the Nazi regime. Like other attempts at genocide, these must rank as unholy blemishes on human history. However, we must at the same time recognize the realities of the human condition and more clearly understand that cultural, political, and situational factors—not some inborn genetic programming—more fully explain these terrible events. Only by understanding that “German” is not
synonymous with “Nazi” can we move past our stereotypical thinking and learn to communicate openly and effectively with Germans.

**Der Zusammenbruch (1945–1949)**

Germans refer to 1945 as the *Stunde Null* (zero hour), and the period after the war is known as the *Zusammenbruch*, or collapse. While the majority of the world joyously celebrated the end of the war, for ordinary German citizens, this period was more difficult than the war itself. Fearing ethnic cleansing and the advancing Soviet armies, millions of expellees and refugees from the east flooded into western Germany. These additional people overburdened a country where food and shelter were already scarce. Hunger and malnutrition were constant problems. It is estimated that the average citizen subsisted on fewer than eight hundred calories per day. Like its cities, the country’s economic and political infrastructure also lay in ruins. From 1945 through June of 1948, German currency was basically worthless, and barter and the black market were the major sources of food and other consumer goods, which created an atmosphere of crime, lawlessness, guilt, and shame that intensified the trauma brought on by the loss of the war and the death of so many friends, relatives, and loved ones.

Because the end of the war marked the beginning of a transition to the Cold War, Germany was divided into four zones of occupation, with the Soviets in the eastern zones and the Americans, British, and French in the western zones. These divisions were never meant to be permanent, but as the Cold War progressed, the lines hardened into the boundaries that would later become East and West Germany.

**German Democratic Republic (1949–1990)**

The German Democratic Republic (GDR), or East Germany, was founded in the Soviet zone in response to the creation of the Federal Republic of Germany in the western zones of
Who Are the Germans?

occupation. The GDR became part of the Soviet bloc and was governed by a communist party along the lines of the Soviet model. Its centralized, state-run economy became the strongest in the communist economic bloc, providing the East Germans with the basics of life, if not with the great variety and quality of consumer goods those in the western zones enjoyed.

Germans in the GDR seemed less disturbed by the lack of material abundance and lower-quality consumer goods than they were about the lack of media freedom and their inability to travel. After the founding of the GDR, there was still no actual barrier between East and West Germany. It was only in 1961, with the building of the Berlin Wall to stop the steady migration of East Germans to the western zones, that the East Germans were suddenly denied access to their friends and relatives in West Germany.

But while the economy of the GDR seemed strong because of its position in the communist system, in fact it was much weaker than even the experts had guessed. Many industries had survived only because of heavy subsidies. Crucial investments in infrastructure, new plants, and more modern technologies had not been made because of the lack of hard currency. As glasnost and perestroika in Russia spread through the Eastern bloc, the GDR found itself in an untenable political position. By 1989 the regime was toppled by a peaceful revolution, the first in German history. In 1990, those orphans of the Cold War, East and West Germany, were finally reunited.

Federal Republic of Germany (1949–1968)

After World War II, the so-called “German Question” again occupied the minds of the world’s political leaders. What was to be done with a nation that had already risen phoenixlike from the ashes of one world war only to start a second? Should it be completely deindustrialized and made an agrarian country as some proposed, or was there a better solution?
As in the forming of East Germany, the events of the Cold War played a major role in the decision in 1949 to form the Bundesrepublik Deutschland (BRD), or as we call it in English, the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), in the zones occupied by the Americans, British, and French. Shortly prior to the actual founding of the FRG, a currency reform was initiated by the German government with the help of the three occupying powers. By now the Cold War was intensifying, and the countries of the West wanted assurance that West Germany would serve as a bulwark against the expansion of Soviet communism. They hoped that by allowing Germany to rebuild they could not only staunch the flow of communism but also create an economically healthy and politically democratic West Germany that would not be susceptible to the rise of radical parties as had occurred after World War I. To date, this strategy has functioned as hoped.

The economic recovery of Germany was nothing less than astounding. The aid granted by the Marshall Plan played a critical role, but it was the discipline, determination, and industrial flair of the Germans that helped create this recovery, which is referred to as the Wirtschaftswunder (economic miracle). By the end of the 1950s German industry was again a force to be reckoned with in the world. This creation of a vibrant industrial economy has had several major repercussions for the FRG.

First, with the rapid growth of industry, large numbers of workers were needed in the plants and factories. Because so many men had died during the war, the German government looked outside its borders for help. Large numbers of workers from Turkey, Italy, Greece, Yugoslavia, and Spain began arriving in Germany to fill the vacancies. Prior to 1945 there had been very little geographic or social mobility within the country. Because they lived in a class society, Germans were used to having little contact with persons from other classes or occupations. And because most people lived in the same town or region as their ancestors had, they possessed a strong,
centuries-old provincialism and sense of tradition. Strangers were viewed with suspicion, as were new ways of doing things. The influx of Gastarbeiter (guest workers) combined with the large numbers of ethnic German refugees who had already arrived from the east upset the previous cultural and ethnic stability of Germany.

While the ethnic German refugees were assimilated fairly easily, the guest workers, with their southern Mediterranean and Turkish cultures, were not, an issue that is examined later in chapter 7.

**Federal Republic of Germany (1968–1990)**

If the late 1940s and 1950s were years of struggling out from under the rubble in order to rebuild a modern society, the 1960s saw the material results of that struggle. Germany’s infrastructure had been rebuilt, and the economy was becoming one of the most powerful in the world, creating an affluent society that most Germans had never known before.

By the 1960s a generation was growing up that had watched their parents struggle to rebuild their country, but who had rarely had the time or wherewithal to talk about how that destruction had come to be. Most of the Nachkriegsgeneration (postwar generation) had worked with great industry and unswerving perseverance to rebuild Germany economically and politically, but in so doing they had basically swept the issue of the Nazis and the war under the carpet. Only artists, writers, intellectuals, and a few political leaders took issue with Germany’s Nazi past.

The younger generation chose a different approach. The late 1960s was a time of radical social change throughout most of the Western world. Protests against the war in Vietnam were not limited to the United States but occurred throughout Europe as well. Social justice and emancipation were common themes on the lips of many people. In Germany this social movement took aim at a special target: Germany’s most recent history.
Following the lead of an intellectual avant-garde, university students and some instructors began examining the Nazi era as part of what has come to be called *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the past). One of the most commonly asked questions was how a civilized country such as Germany could fall prey to the barbarities of the Nazis. For many of the younger Germans this question took on a more personal form: what did my parents do during the war and why did they not resist? These questions were first asked at universities, but their shock waves soon spread to the rest of society.

Spurred on by intellectual and political leaders, many students spent long hours confronting their country’s past, both in private and in the classroom. These talks fit in with the spirit of the times and led to massive political demonstrations, which forced the subject into living rooms across the country, where it was heatedly debated. As the younger Germans posed that fateful question to their parents—“What did you do during the war?”—Germany became embroiled in a national discussion that continues to the present day. The amazing debate in the *Bundestag* (German parliament) in the spring of 1997 about the role of the German army during World War II is only one facet of this continuing discussion.

By opening this subject for public discussion, the student movement created a huge generation gap, which still exists. Those young Germans who were politically active during this time and who identified with the student movement are often referred to as the “Generation of ’68.” The strong German peace movement, which had existed since the beginning of the FRG, was strengthened, and seeds were planted for the environmental movement, which led to the founding of the Green Party. Out of this rebellious period also grew the left-wing terrorist movement (Baader-Meinhof Group, Red Army Faction), who engaged in violent attacks on the establishment.

As a result of this period of political and social activism, German life has changed in many ways. Two of the most
important changes relate to education and child raising. While a clearly democratic political framework had been created for the FRG in 1949, many older Germans were still imbued with the traditional attitudes and behaviors left over from their authoritarian past. In order to understand the successful rise to power of the Nazis, sociologists critically examined the traditional German class structure, and psychologists applied their concept of the “authoritarian personality.” While no definitive answer emerged, what did become clear was that having a rigid class structure and raising children to obey all authority were major factors in the Nazi takeover. Many Germans became convinced that radical changes in educational structures and child-raising practices would be the best antidote to prevent a resurgence of fascism.

In the early 1970s agitation began for a new educational system that would be more democratic and available to members of all classes. As a result, educational reforms were enacted which opened the previously elitist school system to more children from the working classes. Because of these changes, 37.5 percent of German children completed the Abitur (academic school-leaving exam) in 1995, compared with about 10 percent in 1970. Because the Abitur is also the entry ticket to a German university, proportionately more young Germans now have a college education than ever before. This democratization of the educational system has been a subject of intense analysis and debate since these reforms were put in place.

In addition, many of the Generation of ’68 chose to raise their children in what they claimed was an antiauthoritarian manner. Children were to be given the opportunity to grow up “freer,” without being forcibly pressed into following what were considered outdated or unreasonable social conventions. Much of traditional German life was called into question by the Generation of ’68, and their children were raised without the excessive demands for respect and obedience that had characterized child raising in the past. Opinions
about the validity of the antiauthoritarian upbringing are many and still serve as a point of emotional debate for Germans. Regardless of ideological viewpoint, most Germans agree that younger generations today differ from older, more traditional Germans in a number of important ways. It is fair to say that they are generally less nationalistic, more democratic, and better informed than previous generations.

In the course of openly discussing their country's recent past, these same students also confronted the older generations with their questions and accusations. This set off wave after wave of self-examination and self-criticism in the FRG. No other example comes to mind that compares with Germany's willingness to look so closely at the mistakes of its past in such an open and objective way. Much of the credit for this remarkable feat goes to the younger generation of Germans. Equally important, they have attempted to change the way they communicate, cultivating a more open, less authoritarian style of speech. See the section on du and Sie in chapter 4 for an example of the kinds of changes that have occurred in communication.

How much these changes tore apart the German social fabric is illustrated by the following incident. In 1987 I was returning to Germany after a long vacation in the United States. A friend picked me up at the airport in Stuttgart. After collecting my luggage, we went to her car to find the following message written in the dust on the hood: Der Zustand des Autos läßt auf den Zustand Ihres Geistes schließen (The condition of your car says a lot about the condition of your mind). We were both brought up short. Admittedly, my friend was a member of the younger generation with leftist leanings, and she did sometimes go out of her way to behave in a manner that was designed to provoke the more traditional bourgeois Germans. That the car hadn't been washed or cleaned up in quite a while was pretty obvious, but that someone would be so offended by the car as to take the time to express his or her moral indignation in this manner struck
me as exaggerated. The tone was angrily indignant and not at all humorous like the simple “wash me” phrase sometimes written on dusty American cars and trucks. Clearly, an older, more conservative German saw this dirty car as an affront to public order and felt compelled to express his or her irritation. Equally incensed, my young friend was angry and disturbed that “these damned fascists are still active.” As the next chapter will show, order and cleanliness are dear to the traditional German heart, and because of this, those traits were direct targets for the students and activists of the 1960s.

While the late 1960s and early 1970s were a time of intense political activity and great change in Germany, that intensity had eased up somewhat by the late 1970s. To be sure, the peace movement, the founding of the Green Party, the antinuclear protests, and the periods of economic slump continued to provide the Germans with reasons for concern. Nevertheless, the next major wave in the series of dramatic changes occurred with the reunification of East and West Germany.

**Reunification (1990–Present)**

Poland’s Solidarity movement and Gorbachev’s promotion of glasnost and perestroika in the Soviet Union set the stage for the liberation movements that took place in most of the Eastern bloc countries. The period of peaceful revolution in the GDR was called *die Wende* (the change or turning point) and lasted from the autumn of 1989 until the first free elections in March of 1990. Die Wende was preceded in the summer of 1989 by an increasing—legal and illegal—exodus of GDR citizens, which put great pressure on both the East and West German governments. Pressure in East Germany increased in the autumn, when large street protests began occurring, first in Leipzig and then elsewhere.

Seeing that noncommunist governments had been set up in Poland and Hungary without Soviet reprisals, the East German protest movement became bolder. The government,
headed by Erich Honecker, seemed powerless to prevent the demonstrations, which were growing in size and frequency. Even within the GDR’s Communist Party, many were demanding change, and on October 18 Honecker was forced to resign. Realizing that change was imminent, his replacement, Egon Krenz, opened negotiations with church leaders and intellectuals who led up the protest movement. This accelerated the pace of change. Then, on November 9 a most unimaginable and spectacular event occurred: the GDR announced its citizens were now free to travel across any of the border checkpoints, in effect tearing a giant hole in the Berlin Wall. That night thousands of East Berliners poured into West Berlin for a joyous celebration of reunion with their cousins from the west. It was a moment of undreamed-of euphoria for these people who had chafed so long at the travel restrictions imposed on them.

The demonstrations for reform gained in size and success, but while the original dissident intellectuals and leaders had hoped for reforms and changes in the socialist system, the masses, who joined the movement in ever-increasing numbers, wanted not reform but complete dissolution of the GDR and reunification with the FRG. They wanted a Western lifestyle quickly and showed no interest in preserving the advantages of the GDR’s system. They voted in great numbers with their feet—many young East Germans left for West Germany, where they were constitutionally guaranteed West German citizenship. Their large numbers were a destabilizing factor for the West German society and economy, putting strong pressure on the West German government. When Helmut Kohl, chancellor of West Germany, visited the GDR in December of 1989, his proposal for reunification was widely cheered by the East Germans.

The government of the GDR finally conceded, and free elections took place on March 18, 1990. The clear victory of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) was an unambiguous mandate for reunification, and plans proceeded rapidly.
The two Germanys were formally reunited at midnight on October 2, 1990. It was another moment of euphoria, but as time would show, this euphoria was premature. The reunification was an untried experiment on a huge scale, and no one was sure how it would proceed. Chancellor Kohl had made promises of no increased taxes for the west and a painless integration of the two countries, promises that were soon shown to be untenable. Disappointment set in rapidly on both sides.

German reunification can in fact be said to have experienced three chronological phases to date. The first phase, like a honeymoon, was marked by euphoria and joyous celebration of the new relationship, as just mentioned. Unfortunately, though, like many honeymoons, it was brief in duration, leading into a second phase marked by bitter disappointment. If the first phase was characterized by an attitude of “Hurrah, the Wall is finally down,” the slogan of the second phase would have been, “Let’s put the Wall back up and make it higher.”

After the establishment of the German monetary union between East and West Germany in July of 1990, Western goods began appearing in East German shops. But then a plethora of problems emerged that had not been anticipated in the initial excitement. The first was that the East German economy was far weaker than had been thought. Many plants were hopelessly antiquated, the infrastructure was inadequate, pollution was horrendous, and questions regarding ownership of property were complicated. All of these problems made foreign investors wary, which resulted in plant closings, and many East Germans soon found themselves unemployed.

As unemployment increased, so too did rents and the price of food and other goods. The East Germans had never had access to a wide assortment of consumer goods or foods, but under the communist regime they had at least had the basic necessities of life and guaranteed employment. As unemployment skyrocketed and the government of the FRG imposed
itself on the east, the initial euphoria began to dissipate. Confusion and conflicting emotions became commonplace among East Germans, and many wondered if reunification hadn’t been a mistake.

They complained about the lack of solidarity, the competitive and arrogant attitudes of the Wessis (West Germans), and the harshness of the western system. Many Ossis (East Germans) thought back nostalgically to the job security, the lower rents and food prices, the slower pace of life, and the group solidarity and other advantages they had enjoyed before reunification. This was a time of great soul-searching. Anger, bewilderment, and self-pity were common, especially among older East Germans, who believed they would not be able to adapt to these newer ways and who felt their lives had largely been wasted. Younger East Germans were more able to take the changes in stride, but the period since the Wende has been one of great trauma for many former East German citizens.

It is difficult for an outsider to imagine the magnitude of the social upheaval in this vast experiment. When the citizens of the GDR voted to join West Germany, few knew what they were getting into. Remodeling the former GDR along the lines of West Germany meant that the east took on a brand-new constitution, complete with a new legal and administrative system. Not only were the East Germans unfamiliar with how this legal and administrative system worked, the only people with any administrative and legal experience were the former communists, and no one wanted them back in power. This meant that large numbers of experts from former West Germany had to come east to help out, adding more insult to the East Germans’ already injured pride. Similarly, the educational system needed new teachers and textbooks, and the press and media also had to be westernized. All of these changes were more complex and took far more time and money than anyone had expected. Combined with the problems of unemployment and soaring expenses, they
created a very difficult social and political atmosphere throughout Germany.

Now, nine years since the Wende, great progress has been made to integrate the two Germanys, but much still remains to be done. Germany can now be said to be in the third phase of reunification: adaptation and accommodation. Both the initial euphoria and following disappointment are being replaced by more open-minded and realistic attitudes. And the differences that exist between east and west have not disappeared. In fact they will probably remain for generations to come, as have other regional differences in the FRG.

**Germany: A Patchwork Country**

The differences between East and West Germans are only one example of important regional variations among the Germans. Recall that Germany in the Middle Ages had been a patchwork of small independent kingdoms, duchies, principalities, and free cities until united under Prussian dominance in 1871. Each of these small entities had been an independent state with its own monetary, legal, tax, educational, and political systems, and while much of this variety has been smoothed over by the creation of a centralized federal government and through the influence of the mass media, great variation still exists in customs, behaviors, and dialects as well as in attitudes and philosophy.

The patchwork nature of Germany is attributable to a complex interaction of many factors, such as the already-mentioned Germanic custom of dividing a man’s inheritance equally among his sons. Geography also played a role: the lack of rapid transportation and heavily forested terrain served to hinder cross-border commerce and traffic between the various regions. More importantly, what was to become Germany was surrounded by stronger, more centralized empires, in particular France and Austria, who played the smaller German states off against each other to keep them weak and unorganized.
One useful result of Germany’s fragmented past is that today Germany is a polycentric federation. Many of the current federal states are direct outgrowths of the former Germanic kingdoms and principalities. Unlike France, Spain, and Britain, with their historically centralized systems revolving around one major capital city, Germany exists as a series of smaller, interlinked centers, each of which had at one time been the capital of a smaller kingdom. There is no one megalopolis that completely dominates German politics, economy, and culture as do Paris and London; rather, each large city is a small, autonomous center in its own right. And although Berlin is once again the official capital, Munich, Frankfurt, Stuttgart, Hamburg, Leipzig, and other smaller cities remain important economic, political, and cultural centers. Additionally, regional governments throughout Germany remain major players in German politics—all of which is reinforced by the structure of the German parliament, the upper house of which is composed of directly appointed representatives from the state governments.

One of the most positive results of this lack of centralization is the German public transport system. Unlike a spider’s web which radiates out in all directions from a single central city, as in France, Germany’s system is a coordinated matrix, making travel faster and more convenient while contributing significantly to Germany’s economic strength.

While Frankfurt—particularly in its role as headquarters for the European Union’s central bank—will continue to be Germany’s financial center and the site of its principal stock market, the regional stock markets will continue to play a significant role. Many thought these smaller markets should be consolidated with Frankfurt, but now it seems some will become specialty markets, filling in niches not covered by the Frankfurt Center.

Another example of Germany’s regional diversity is seen in the many towns and cities, each with its own well-financed symphonies, theaters, operas, museums, and arts pro-
grams. Germany is a less popularistic culture than the United States, and such cultural institutions are viewed by the general public as important and worthy of support with public monies.

Nor is this diversity confined only to infrastructure and culture. Perhaps nowhere is it so clearly visible as in the number of independent breweries spread across this small country. Despite major national advertising campaigns and some consolidations of breweries, few beers do well throughout the entire German market. Instead, there are thousands of excellent local brews that have a loyal following among the inhabitants of the regions.

Germans are intensely loyal to their Heimat, the local area where they were born and raised. Unlike Americans, who are known for their willingness to pick up and move when an economic opportunity presents itself, Germans have traditionally been far less willing to leave their local region. While this has changed in the last few years, especially as more students have gone off to college in other areas, most still cling tightly to their regional roots. Because of the stigma attached to Germany’s past, many citizens tend to place more importance on their regional than their national identity. One person from the south of Germany (Bavarians are especially well known for their regional loyalty) declared, “I am Bavarian first, European second, and German third.”

Regional identification is also particularly noticeable in the numerous German dialects still spoken. There have been some moves to abolish dialects in the schools, and some linguists have predicted that all dialects will die out in time. Nevertheless, they are currently alive and well, especially in the south. In fact, in some regions they are even regaining prestige previously lost to standard German. This linguistic diversity is remarkable in such a small country. While there are a variety of regional accents in the United States, they cannot compare to the number of dialects in Germany. Some of the dialects are even mutually exclusive; many Germans
would not be able to understand one another if each were speaking only in his or her own dialect. For this reason, most speakers of a dialect have learned a toned-down dialect that resembles standard, or high, German (Hochdeutsch).

At the risk of offending some Germans, I offer the following generalization as a starting point for Americans trying to understand Germans: regional and dialect differences in Germany are most noticeable in the lower and lower-middle classes. As one climbs the social ladder, these variations generally play a lesser role, and educated Germans throughout the country are more similar in their attitudes, behaviors, and speech patterns than are those Germans who are less well educated. As is true in any nation, education tends to weaken provincialism as well as the traditions associated with particular regions. And, generally speaking, fewer people speak a dialect in the northern parts of Germany than in the south. The reasons for this are fascinating, complex, and well worth exploring if you are linguistically inclined.7

North-South Axis

North-south differences are noticeable in Germany, partly because they correlate positively with variations in religion as well as language use. Northern and eastern Germany are traditionally influenced by Protestant thought, while the south and west tend to be more Catholic. One telling illustration of the contrast in religious influences can be seen in the pre-Lent celebrations of Fasching and Karneval. These celebrations parallel Mardi Gras in New Orleans or Carnival in Rio and are marked by days of raucous parties and large, colorful parades. While the predominantly Protestant regions go about their normal daily routines during this time, the Catholic sections of the country celebrate on a grand scale. Their dissimilar approach to this time of year is reflective of the two religions and the differences in their attitude toward life. The Protestants tend to take a more serious view of life, whereas the Catholics view life more as a source of enjoy-
ment. But saying that northerners are more reserved, more likely to be Protestant, and less likely to speak a dialect is simplistic. The pattern of regional differences is far more complex than this. For example, specific smaller regions are the sources of many stereotypes regarding particular personality traits. Thus, Rheinlanders are thought to talk more and are considered more cheerful and extroverted than the dour, serious, Protestant Swabians, who are famed for their thrift and industry. Many Germans explain this by citing the Catholic influence in the Rheinland and the Pietistic influence in Swabia. In fact, leading European sociologist Max Weber, in his landmark work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, has shown how Protestant influences directly shaped economic development in different areas of Europe.

Perhaps no region’s stereotypes are more widely recognized or more often caricatured than those of Bavaria. The Bavarians are known for their *Gemütlichkeit* (sense of coziness, warmth, or intimacy) and open, friendly manner. It is generally agreed that Bavarians are quicker to use the familiar form of address and first names than are other Germans. In contrast, it is also widely agreed that people in the north talk faster, have fewer and shorter pauses in their speech, and are more emotionally reserved in personal relationships, warming up only slowly, and certainly not when they meet someone for the first time. For the northern German, the Bavarian’s switch to first names is far too impulsive, too intrusive, and quite impolite. Northerners are more cautious in their interactions, preferring to get to know one another well before moving to a first-name basis, if they do so at all.

Just as knowing whether a German is from the north or south will give you some insight into his or her behavior, so will determining whether he or she is from the west or the east.

**Differences between East and West**

Detailing the differences between East and West Germans is difficult because not only did the forty-plus years of commu-
nist rule leave its mark, but also regional differences had existed in the east prior to the takeover. This again was the result of Germany’s patchwork past. The Saxons, for instance, are thought of as more lively, humorous, temperamental, and easygoing than their direct neighbors, the severe and serious Prussians.

But in addition to these traditional differences, communism left an indelible mark on the East Germans. While certain personality traits and social behaviors were rewarded, others were marginalized. This is especially true for those older Germans who have lived most of their lives under communist influence. These Germans tend to be more group oriented, exhibiting a strong sense of solidarity and willingness to protect and help one another, which served as a survival function under the communists. These older Germans are less concerned about individual achievement than their West German cousins and are less competitive in the workplace. Instead, they tend to be more modest, more sociable, and more helpful toward their colleagues. Unlike West Germans, who strictly separate their business and personal lives, East Germans socialize more with their coworkers. Many of these traits are already changing significantly among the younger Germans in the east, resulting in a definite generation gap.

Another important distinction between east and west, especially for Americans, is that fewer East Germans speak English. Unlike West Germans, they were taught Russian rather than English at school. While the school curriculum has changed since reunification, it will be some years before English skill levels in the east match those in the west.

Another significant difference between the east and west is the approach taken toward Vergangenheitsbewältigung, or coming to terms with the past. Many younger West Germans know a great deal about their country’s Nazi past and can talk about the subject fairly objectively. While the issue can still generate controversy and emotional debate, at least it is out
of the closet and open for discussion. In the east the situation is different.

Because the Nazis viewed communists as their most dangerous political opponents, German communists and socialists were the first to suffer under Nazi persecution. When the GDR became a communist country, the leaders quickly distanced themselves from Germany’s Nazi past. They declared that the Nazis were a product of capitalism and that it was the socialists who had fought the Nazis. In the leaders’ opinion, it was absurd for them to take any responsibility for Nazi atrocities. Thus, while the GDR did more to get former Nazis out of jobs and positions of power than did the FRG, they also allowed their children to grow up with no sense of collective guilt for Germany’s past. Today, these differences in attitude between East and West Germans toward their country’s fascist history are gradually fading as democracy takes root throughout the country. Although the past will continue to be an issue that will occupy all Germans, east and west, for years to come, regional differences in this regard can be expected to decrease. West and East Germans are getting to know one another better, and many of their negative stereotypes are being revised or set aside entirely.

**Rural-Urban Variation**

In addition to regional differences, rural and urban distinctions contribute a further, major source of variation within Germany. As in all parts of the world, the more traditional patterns of a culture can almost always be found in rural areas, and the same is true for Germany. In the countless small country towns and villages one finds older customs and more traditional patterns of behavior than in the urban areas. The same goes for ethnic homogeneity and dialects, both of which are more pronounced in the country than in the city. And it is there that Germany’s agrarian past is still quite vibrantly alive in folk music, arts and crafts, and folk celebrations. Typically, the smaller towns and villages in the coun-
tryside are not subject to the more diverse social and cultural trends found in the cities.

In the cities there is a wealth of cultural diversity, especially in Frankfurt and Berlin. Because major German industry is principally located in the larger cities and urban areas, many immigrants and guest workers live and work in these centers. For example, Kreuzberg, an area of Berlin, was for a time inhabited predominantly by Turks. While this is changing, more Turks live in Berlin than in most Turkish cities. And in Frankfurt approximately 30 percent of the population is not ethnically German.

Given the significant differences between (1) the cities and rural areas and among the various regions; (2) ethnic, generational, and gender diversity; and (3) class distinctions and variations in educational background, valid generalizations about German culture are difficult to make. But one entry point into this highly complex pattern is the central values and norms that have helped give the Germans a sense of commonality and tradition.

1 For an examination of how this historical approach influenced social scientists in the United States, see the Hardt article listed in the References.

2 In June of 1922 one U.S. dollar was worth 350 marks; by November of 1923 the cost of a dollar was 4,200,000,000 marks.

3 While it is natural for Americans to want to distance themselves emotionally and intellectually from the policies of the Nazis, there are some striking parallels in our own history. The theories of genetics on which the Nazis based their racial ideology were not all that different from the theories of eugenics popular in the United States and other European countries at that time. In the U.S. this theory was used to support and justify racism and segregation as well as the involuntary sterilization of minority women.

4 After World War II, social scientists in the United States tried to understand what made so many Germans go along with the
sadistic and hateful policies of the Nazis. Stimulated by Adolph Eichmann’s trial in Jerusalem for war crimes committed under the Nazi dictatorship, Stanley Milgram set out to find an answer through experimentation. The question Milgram asked was “Can a normal human being commit such atrocities?” Milgram and other American social scientists were shocked to discover the degree to which ordinary Americans were willing to punish their fellow citizens with potentially fatal electric shocks when an authority figure ordered them to do so.

At a later date, social scientist Philip Zimbardo designed another experiment to answer the question “What effect does a prison have on the behavior of both the guards and the prisoners?” He set up a simulated prison using normal American college students as “guards” and “prisoners.” Like Milgram, Zimbardo was shaken to discover the quick changes that occurred in the behavior of both the guards, who became sadistic, and the prisoners, who became excessively submissive as well as showing signs of significant emotional disturbance. The radical and unexpected changes in behavior occurred so quickly that the experiment had to be prematurely terminated. The conclusion was clear: it was much more the social context and role that one played and less one’s personality that determine major dimensions of human behavior. For more information see Milgram or Haney and Zimbardo in the References.

5 I know of no example of a public political debate which was marked by such sincere, open, and authentic personal emotion by members of the various political factions. For more details see “Dieser Krieg läßt uns alle nicht los,” Die Zeit, 13, 28 March 1997, 16.


7 For more on this fascinating subject, refer to Clyne or Barbour and Stevenson in the References.

In order to communicate successfully with people from other cultures, it is important to understand how they interpret a given situation and what their intentions are. To do this we must have some sense of their values, norms, and beliefs, which interact in a complex way to influence all behavior and communication. For the purpose of brevity I will call these complex interactions “cultural themes,” because they run through a culture as a theme does through a book or a piece of music. Only when you understand the central cultural themes of any given culture can you accurately interpret and understand its inhabitants’ behavior, communication, and way of life. If you don’t understand their cultural themes, you will necessarily project your own values, norms, and beliefs onto them, and this projection is one of the principal causes of intercultural misunderstanding. If, however, you begin to learn the cultural themes, what before had seemed illogical or wrong behavior will take on a different meaning.

This chapter offers insights into seven central German cultural themes in an attempt to explain Germans’ behavior and their way of life. By understanding how Germans understand the world, you will increase your chances of communicating more successfully with them.
Ordnung Muß Sein

*Ordnung muß sein* (there must be order) is a well-known and commonly heard saying in Germany; indeed one of the first things that strike visitors to Germany is its cleanliness and orderliness. Ordnung is a theme that permeates German society. Go into a German house and it will be very clean, with everything in its proper place. Walk into a mechanic’s garage or carpenter’s workshop and the tools and equipment will be well maintained and stored neatly. In German offices you will notice large numbers of well-kept files and special notebooks that are referred to as *Ordner*. The old saying “a place for everything and everything in its place” might well have originated in Germany. It is certainly a premise on which Germans like to operate.

The desire for Ordnung is also related to Germans’ strict adherence to schedules and deadlines. Punctuality is a virtue, and lateness is seen as sloppiness or a sign of disrespect. Being late upsets the general Ordnung. Perhaps the country’s railways offer the best illustration of German punctuality. The trains of the German railway system are famous for their punctuality. It is a standard joke that you can set your watch by a train’s arrival and departure times. Germany has one of the world’s best public transportation systems, and a major part of its success stems from the German sense of Ordnung. This system, which links almost every village, town, and city in Germany, is a striking example of the German ability to effectively organize and coordinate complex processes. Like the transportation system, the rest of the country’s infrastructure is also well organized for the same reason.

One visible result of this well-regulated society is the condition of German autos. As the short anecdote in chapter 2 illustrated, Germans take their cars very seriously indeed. It is rare to see a car in Germany that is not well kept and in excellent mechanical condition. Germans take good care of all their property, but their cars are especially important because, more so than in the United States, they are a status
symbol as well as a means of transportation. The fact that they are in such good mechanical condition is in large part due to the Technischer Überwachungsverein, or TÜV. This agency inspects all vehicles licensed in the country and is well known for the rigor with which its inspectors go about their job. A horn that doesn’t work, broken turn signals, or rust in a crucial spot are all reasons for a car to fail this strict inspection. Inspections at a TÜV center are a microcosm of German orderliness. These inspection stations are spic-and-span, brightly lit, and operated by inspectors whose uniforms would be clean enough to be seen in a doctor’s office. While administrators take care of the paperwork in a brisk, matter-of-fact way, the cars move through a series of checkpoints, where they are thoroughly inspected. I can well remember the feeling of apprehension in my stomach as I watched an inspector walking underneath my elevated car with a bright light and very large screwdriver. He was intent on finding any spot where rust might have weakened the car, and he did this by thrusting the screwdriver with resounding force into each and every section of the chassis and underbody. Luckily for me, all rusted areas had been fixed by welding heavy sheets of metal over them, or my car would have been one of the many that the TÜV pulled out of circulation.

Germans claim such rigor is necessary because of the large number of autos, especially on the Autobahn, where there is often no speed limit and where they put their vehicles through their paces. This can be unnerving to Americans not used to aggressive drivers who often come racing up from behind at over 120 miles per hour while blinking their headlights to warn you out of their way. And as might be expected, German drivers know each and every traffic rule and regulation by heart—the result of strict licensing exams and extensive and mandatory driver education programs typically costing more than $1,000—and they expect you to do the same. Forewarned is forearmed: defensive driving is still a foreign concept in Germany.
**Ordnung: Rules and Regulations**

The sense of Ordnung is not limited only to the Germans’ material domain, it also strongly influences their social world. Germany is a society structured by a large number of explicit rules and regulations. One of the first encounters foreign residents have with the regulatory nature of German society is the *Einwohnermeldeamt* (resident’s registration office). All residents of Germany are required to register with their local *Einwohnermeldeamt* and to notify that office whenever they move or change their place of residence. German bureaucracy can be irritating or confusing, if not downright intimidating, especially when one is waiting in long lines, filling out innumerable forms, or dealing with unfriendly civil servants. The good news is that while it is time-consuming in the beginning, at least it generally works fairly well. Don’t forget that Germany is one of the more densely populated countries in the world, and its bureaucracy helps keep everything running smoothly.

Travel to German villages or small towns and you will be struck by how picturesque they appear. All of the houses are of a similar style and they present a pretty sight: roofs are covered with similar tiles and the colors harmonize. This is generally no coincidence but rather the result of a housing code that goes into great detail about how a house may be designed, painted, and equipped. While such detailed regulations often seem too confining to most Americans, the Germans see it as a way of ensuring a society that is concerned not only with individual rights but also with the common good. As we will see later, this notion of the common good and the social contract is an important part of the German mindset.

The rules that regulate Germany extend far beyond the many official laws and requirements. Unwritten codes of manners and customs also structure German social life. Some of these are detailed and quite explicit. Others are less so and are simply things that “one doesn’t do.” For example, there is even a protocol for hostess gifts. Because Germans are very
protective of their homes and private lives, being invited into someone’s home for dinner is an honor. But once invited, there are many rules about how to behave. For instance, it is customary to bring the hostess a bouquet of flowers. Germans love flowers and florist shops are abundant. But not just any flowers will do. Red roses symbolize romance, so be careful to whom you give them. And white chrysanthemums and carnations are generally reserved for funerals. Also, it is proper to give bouquets consisting of an odd number of flowers. No one seems to really know why this custom is important. Some Germans say it’s an old superstition; others justify the custom by claiming an odd number makes for a more aesthetic arrangement.

Be that as it may, Germans feel comfortable with these kinds of rules, which give them a feeling of security as well as a strong sense of what is right and wrong. This sense of right and wrong is often expressed openly and emotionally by Germans, especially when they think someone has done something wrong. This can seem overly judgmental or rude at times, but Germans prefer structure to an ambiguous situation where no one seems to know the correct way to proceed.

At times it appears Germans have a rule for everything—and they do, almost! This is an aspect of what Germans call Gründlichkeit, or thoroughness. Germans are great believers in doing things thoroughly, and this has led to their reputation as perfectionists. If they are going to do something, they spare little expense or time in doing it well. And if they can’t do it thoroughly, they are inclined not to do it at all. As a German carpenter once told me, “If I don’t have the time to do it right in the first place, when will I get the time to fix it later?” It is this logic which underlies the reputation Germany has for producing such high-quality automobiles and other products. Gründlichkeit is also an important component in the decision-making processes in traditional German organizations (see chapter 6) and is often a source of misunderstanding in German and American joint ventures.
For Americans with their strong sense of individualism and belief in personal freedom, the German devotion to order can seem obsessive and highly constricting, even invasive, but there is little getting around the varied laws and regulations, because they are generally strictly enforced. At times they irritate the Germans, too. I remember the indignation of a German friend who had gotten a ticket for not locking her car when she parked it. When she complained to the police, she was told the rule was in place to discourage auto theft. German rules can all be rationally justified, and German officials will quickly do just that.

**Ordnung: An Antidote for Anxiety**

This respect for rational justification is crucial to understanding the concept of Ordnung and the German psyche. Germans have an extremely high regard for rational, analytic thought. Like most Protestant countries of northern Europe, Germany was strongly influenced by the ideas of the Enlightenment, the Age of Reason, with its emphasis on intellect, reason, and learning. Germany, Prussia in particular, was quick to adopt the notion of the rationally organized society. With this mindset in place, Prussia reorganized its army and created a strong bureaucracy, which contributed greatly to its military prowess. Prussia’s success in defeating the French and finally uniting Germany convinced educated Germans of the effectiveness of organizing society based on rationalism.

The positive effects of rationality, however, explain only part of the Germans’ strong desire for Ordnung. The opposite of Ordnung, chaos, is something which the typical German abhors. Chaos causes anxiety and insecurity and is a continual threat to order. Chaos occurs at many levels and can take many forms: social unrest, rising crime rates, economic malaise, unruly students, or any unresolved issue. Even dirty streets or an unwashed auto can be construed as evidence that chaos is ever-present and waiting to spring. This deep-rooted suspicion that chaos, or at least disorder, is lurking
around every corner is a major cause of the angst and insecurity for which Germans are known.

The degree to which anxiety and insecurity influence German culture often puzzles foreign visitors. People everywhere in the world have to deal with unexpected setbacks, illnesses, and disasters that life presents, but Germans appear inordinately insecure and seem to worry much more than necessary about crises or emergencies that may never occur. Ordnung is one means by which Germans attempt to alleviate their insecurity. This worrying about the future often makes Germans seem gloomy and overly serious. It also makes them very risk-aversive, particularly when compared with Americans, many of whom thrive on risk taking. These fears and security needs are easier to understand in the context of Germany’s turbulent history.

For centuries Germany has been a major battlefield for both civil and European wars, and this has left a deep mark on the German psyche. These wars brought with them chaos and suffering and destroyed the social and economic advances that Germans had worked so hard to achieve. Unemployment and inflation have also been the basis for German anxieties. In this century alone Germans have twice lost all their personal savings because of inflation and economic collapse brought about by war. This loss may explain the current German pride in their currency, the beloved deutsche Mark (DM), and their resistance to adopting the euro. Although the motive for their pride in the mark is not always conscious, it symbolizes the rebuilding of Germany and the stability and order which the economic miracle of the late 1950s and 1960s created.

Another major factor contributing to their desire for Ordnung is their distrust of the wild and romantic side of the German personality: the music, myths, and literature as well as the Wanderlust (desire to roam or travel) of the German people. When the Angles and Saxons left the continent for England, they took with them the epic poem Beowulf. This
story tells of a great Germanic hero who, in his quest for fame and fortune, was required to dive into the dark depths of a large lake and seek out the lair of a hideous monster, the ferocious Grendel, who had ravaged the local people and whom no one could defeat. Perhaps no other tale so well symbolizes the romantic side of the German soul. It is a tale of adventure, heroism, and great camaraderie among Germanic warriors. It also symbolizes the depth of the German soul, which has given the world such wonderful art and music, but which is also at times a wild and seemingly uncontrollable beast, always ready to break out and wreak havoc and turmoil. Another example of this impulsive, irrational side of the Germans can be seen in the Sturm und Drang movement (Storm and Stress, 1767–1785), which was a passionately emotional reaction to the rationality of the Enlightenment as well as a forerunner to the Romantic movement, which shortly thereafter spread throughout Europe. Similarly, the music of Richard Wagner and Ludwig van Beethoven, the art of the German Expressionists, and the mythic approach to history taken by the Nazis are all manifestations of this wildly emotional side of the Germans. For centuries Germans, like other groups, have been trying to control this irrational side of their nature, and their idealization of Ordnung and rationality is, in part, an attempt to do so.

**Ordnung: The Class System and Education**

Traditionally the official German class system served as the prime creator of social Ordnung, structuring German social life until 1918, when it ended with the emperor's abdication. Before 1918 the three major classes—the aristocracy, the Bürgertum (professional and commercial middle class), and the lower class (workers and farmers)—lived in separate social worlds, their lives intersecting only tangentially. There were great discrepancies in wealth, lifestyle, and political power among these classes, and people tended to identify
strongly with their own class, while looking with disdain or envy upon members of the other classes. Because of this, interactions between members of different classes were marked by reserve and mistrust and were very formal in nature.

While the class society was officially disbanded in 1918, its influence can still be found in German culture today. Certainly the German acceptance of hierarchy, social roles, and the importance of social status is directly related to the structure and mentality of the old class society. While the aristocracy no longer officially exists, social standing still plays a large role in people’s behavior.

Perhaps the most obvious vestige of the old class society is the German school system, and here, too, Ordnung plays its part in the rigid tracking of students. During the first four years of schooling, all German children attend the Grundschule (basic school). After leaving the Grundschule, they go to one of three types of schools: Gymnasium, Realschule, or Hauptschule. The Gymnasium is the most academic of the three, requires the longest attendance, and is meant to prepare its pupils for entry into universities. The Realschule prepares its pupils for administrative and middle-management positions, while the Hauptschule provides a more vocational education for those who will later enter Germany’s extensive apprenticeship program.

Traditionally, only children from the upper and middle classes attended the Gymnasium. Children from the working class were expected to attend the Hauptschule and then apprentice to one of the trades. Until the early 1970s the percentage of German children attending the Gymnasium was relatively low. Since then the number has risen steadily, while those graduating from the Hauptschule has fallen. By 1995 the number of graduates from the two types of school had become approximately the same.²

The importance of education in Germany can hardly be overestimated. Occupational success and social standing go
hand in hand with educational qualifications. Most employers will not even consider someone for a job who does not have the proper education and credentials. In addition, for Germans, having a formal education means great respect as well as high status. In contrast with the United States, teachers are well paid and highly respected. And while businesspeople are often looked at skeptically, university professors enjoy higher prestige as well as generous salaries.

Having a university degree is often a prerequisite for group membership at higher social levels, and a preponderance of bonding and relationship building occurs while one is at the university. Because of the strong private-public distinction and the desire for tighter, more committed connections, middle- and upper-class Germans typically find it difficult to enter into close personal relationships later in life.

Finally, still other factors are involved in this idealization of Ordnung, including climate, religion, authoritarian upbringing, and a strong reliance on rational-analytic mental processes. Nor has this idealization of Ordnung remained constant. Germany has gone through radical economic and sociopolitical changes in this century and continues to do so. The process of change in values goes hand in hand with the more external socioeconomic changes—what the Germans call the Wertewandel (changing of values; see chapter 7). This has clearly had its influence on German ideas about Ordnung. While older Germans often seem obsessed with cleanliness, order, and rules, younger Germans are much more relaxed and flexible about them. These younger Germans know the horrors of their country’s past, but they have also had the opportunity to grow up in an affluent and democratic society in which social norms have changed considerably. Families and schools are significantly less authoritarian than they were before the Wertewandel, and these changes have given the younger generation a more optimistic, easygoing outlook on life.
Insiders and Outsiders

Vestiges of the class system also play a part in the way Germans distinguish between “insiders” and “outsiders.” Insiders are those persons who belong to the same group with which a German identifies. Depending on the situation, this could be the family, a group of friends, a social club, members of the same company, someone speaking the same regional dialect, and so on.

Germans distinguish clearly between insiders and outsiders on all levels. On the national level this distinction can be seen in Germany’s citizenship policy. While many people from other ethnic groups have lived and worked in Germany for decades, the German government has done little to help them become citizens or to integrate them into German society. This often holds true even for their children, who were born and raised in Germany and who speak fluent German.

On the other hand, persons from Eastern European countries claiming ethnic German status—even if only through a German great-grandfather—have been granted entry and have easily obtained German citizenship, although in many cases they could barely speak German.

This is a sore spot for Germans and the subject of much debate. Clearly, xenophobia and racism are to be found in Germany, as elsewhere throughout the world. But what is telling about the German version is the country’s official immigration and naturalization policy. While racism is evident in other countries such as France, Great Britain, and the United States, these countries make it much easier for aliens to gain citizenship. The clear distinction Germans draw between insiders and outsiders contributes to an official policy that makes nationalization difficult for non-Germans residing in Germany. However, as detailed in chapter 7, changes in this policy are slowly taking place.
On a less official level, the old German institution of the Stammtisch provides another example of the insider-outsider distinction. When you go into a German pub or restaurant, you will notice that no one leads you to a table. You are expected to choose your own table, and you can sit where you prefer. But you will generally find at least one table that is marked as the Stammtisch. If you try to sit at this table, even if no one else is sitting there, you will be politely informed that this is the Stammtisch, a special table reserved for regulars and that you must sit elsewhere. Such groups of regulars know each other well and meet frequently to play cards, gossip, or vigorously discuss everything under the sun.

When Germans are in a group with which they identify and there are no outsiders present, they talk about being unter uns (among ourselves). Being unter uns creates a sense of security and solidarity and directly influences the way Germans communicate. When outsiders are present, Germans are significantly more formal, more reserved, and less friendly. When only insiders are present, they open up and speak much more sincerely about topics they would never discuss with outsiders. As will be explored later, being an insider also brings with it commitment and obligation toward the other members of the group. This sense of internal solidarity and duty to the other members also makes it far more difficult for outsiders to enter the group. Americans, in contrast, try to facilitate the entry of new members to their group. For this reason, groups in the United States tend to be looser. They consist of less permanently connected networks of people and have more permeable boundaries.

For Americans accustomed to meeting strangers and being welcomed openly by them, the German formality and aloofness may seem cold and unfriendly. For Germans, on the other hand, it is being friendly toward strangers that is seen as unusual—and not necessarily positive. Whereas Americans often equate formality with unfriendliness and lack of ease, Germans have been raised to view reserve and formality
as the proper signs of respect for people they don’t know well. Because of this strong insider-outsider distinction, an insider’s introduction can do wonders in facilitating your entry to German groups, whether they be social or work-related.

**Clarity and Compartmentalization**

*Alles klar* is another ubiquitous phrase in Germany and usually means “everything is okay.” Translated literally, it means “all is clear,” and *Klarheit* (clarity) is something Germans desire in most areas of their lives, from their relationships to their way of talking to their very thought processes. Like Ordnung, it is a constant theme that is interwoven in varying degrees through all levels of German culture. In their spatial orientation, a perfect example of clarity can be seen in the fences, gates, and walls that surround all German houses and yards. These fences clearly and exactly mark the boundaries between the different properties and serve as a protective wall, limiting entry from outside. Lawns and yards without clear boundaries, which inexacty blend into one another, like those found in many American towns and suburbs, are too ambiguous for Germans. They believe instead that Robert Frost’s “Good fences make good neighbors” is actually more German than American. Given the limited space and high population density in Germany, this attitude makes sense.

Similarly, for guests invited into a German home, there are clear boundaries to be observed. Giving guests “a tour of the house,” as often occurs in American homes, is rare in Germany. Americans often do this to show off their house and to create a relaxed, informal atmosphere so that their guests feel at home. Dinner guests in Germany rarely get to see the inside of the kitchen, let alone a tour that includes the bedrooms. Germans maintain a formal atmosphere by having the house perfectly neat and orderly, by spending much time preparing for their guests, and by using their best tablecloth,
silverware, plates, and so on. The message they are sending is one of respect for such a special occasion as having a guest in their house.

The desire for clear borders also extends into Germans’ interpersonal relationships. As they say, *Klare Rechnung, gute Freundschaft*. Literally this translates to “clear bill, good friendship,” which means that when all crucial matters are made explicitly clear, then you can have a good friendship. Ideally, Germans view beating around the bush, vagueness of expression, and ambiguous definitions as major causes of misunderstandings and problems. This strong desire for clarity leads to a very direct and frank style of speaking, which is sometimes overly direct and blunt for non-German sensibilities. It also often leads Germans to overlook the feelings of the person they are talking with in order to be direct and honest. As the next chapter will show, this desire for clarity and the corresponding directness in speech are a crucial part of the German communication style.

The mutual influences of clarity and order reinforce one another and help create a strong tendency toward compartmentalization in all areas of their lives, for example, inside their dwellings. The open architecture typical of American houses and apartments in which the front door opens into the living room is not common. Walk into a traditional German home or apartment and you will usually find yourself in a small, closed corridor, or *Gang*. This corridor provides access to the other rooms of the house or apartment, and the doors to these other rooms will generally be closed. This configuration is considered orderly, and it also helps reduce heating costs. Because resources are limited, Germans tend to be quite frugal. Most traditional German houses have heating systems that allow them to heat each room separately, leaving unused rooms unheated.

Similarly, doors remain closed in most German public and office buildings, where a closed door does not mean a private meeting is taking place, but only that the door is closed as German notions of orderliness and clear boundaries dictate.
This is a noticeable contrast with the open-door policy of many American businesses. The proper behavior in Germany is to knock and then enter when the person inside responds. Germans say they keep their doors closed so they can get their work done. After all, they argue, you go to work to work; if you want to socialize, go to the movies.

Another example of compartmentalization in German society can be seen in the use of time. Clear and orderly divisions of time organize German life, and specific days and time slots carry an implicit meaning. Thus, to be asked over to someone’s house for midafternoon on Sunday automatically implies you are being invited for *Kaffee und Kuchen* (coffee and pastry). At such an event you can expect relaxed conversation accompanied by strong coffee and delicious pastries. *Kaffee und Kuchen* is just one of various German rituals that have clearly designated times.

Because of strong regional differences, not all these rituals occur uniformly throughout the entire country. Take, for example, the Swabian *Kehrwoche* (sweeping week). In most parts of Germany, Saturdays are generally the time for washing autos and doing the outside cleaning, but the Swabians have taken this general tendency and institutionalized it. Kehrwoche regulations require that all sidewalks and stairways of apartment buildings be regularly cleaned. In addition the Kehrwoche is a round-robin system in which the inhabitants of each apartment are assigned a particular week during which they are responsible for cleaning the steps and sidewalks of their building. This rotating system of responsibility assures that the cleaning is done and that everyone does the same amount of work. The Swabians seem to easily accept this regulation that promotes the good of the community, even though it places limits on individual freedom. As the section on social obligations later in this chapter will explain, Germans often view giving up certain individual rights as a fair trade in creating a better and more ordered society.
Another example of compartmentalization of time and its effect on the common good is illustrated by the long, drawn-out political discussions about the closing times of German stores. Traditionally stores were only allowed to operate until 6:30 P.M. on weekdays and until 2 P.M. on most Saturdays. Only gas stations and stores in railway stations, as a concession to travelers, could open on Sundays. After years of public debate about extending the stores’ hours of operation, they may now stay open until 8 P.M. on weekdays, although many choose not to. One important argument against extending the hours was that longer hours would inconvenience store owners and employees, infringing upon their private time, particularly if they had to work on Sundays. Sunday is considered a *Ruhetag* (day of rest), and Sundays are distinctly different from the hustle and bustle of weekdays. Any activity that makes noise or disturbs the peace, such as mowing the lawn, hammering, or playing loud music, is prohibited. Here, again, notice the German willingness to trade individual rights for social order.

**Private and Public Spheres**

Germans also compartmentalize the private and public spheres of their lives. As they like to say, *Dienst ist Dienst und Schnaps ist Schnaps* (duty is duty and liquor is liquor), which means that duty and pleasure are not meant to be mixed. While Americans are also known for dividing work from leisure to some extent, Germans carry the separation to a greater degree, not only in their behavior but also in the structure of their language.

Unlike English, German has more than one word for the pronoun *you*. When addressing one another, Germans must choose between using the formal *Sie* and the more familiar *du*. Both mean “you,” but each carries significant differences in meaning. To use the wrong form can be highly insulting. Generally speaking, Germans think of a person with whom
they work as a Kollege (colleague) and not as a friend. For this reason they typically address one another with the formal Sie, rather than du, which is reserved for friends and family. The deep significance of this distinction for Germans is illustrated by the following episode.

At a large German company where I was employed, there was a manager who refused to come to his department’s annual Christmas party. Germans have many holidays, and they typically try to enjoy them with a vengeance, so his behavior struck me as odd. When asked why he didn’t attend, he explained that he didn’t like socializing with his employees when they were drinking. It wasn’t that he had anything against alcohol per se, but he was disturbed by its effects on his employees’ behavior. The loosening up that many people experience when they drink, he said, often led the employees to become more friendly and familiar with one another, and sometimes they would lapse into the more familiar du. This was fine during the party, but afterward he said he had difficulty maintaining the appropriate distance toward his employees that he felt his job required. To get around this, he simply avoided going to the party. I have since discovered that such behavior is not at all uncommon.

This example shows the clear distinction Germans draw between their private and public lives. Germans value their privacy highly and go to great lengths to protect it. That Germans take their privacy seriously can be seen in their boycott one year of the official census because they were afraid of how the information would be used. It is also reflected in the Datenschutzgesetz, strict laws passed to protect against personal data being collected and stored on computers for commercial or government use.

Stephen Kalberg attributes this strong distinction between the private and public spheres in Germany to historical developments significantly different from those in the United States. For Germans the public sphere (work, politics, school, and other places where strangers are likely to meet) was
traditionally an area of life dominated by impersonal values related to efficiency, aggressive competition, and ambitious, goal-driven behavior.

On the other hand, the private realm and its attendant values were reserved for people one trusted and knew intimately, that is, for family and friends. In the United States these two realms, the public and the private, tended to merge, serving to mutually influence one another. Thus, a lack of reserve, informality, and friendliness became common to both the private and public spheres in the U.S. In Germany, because these two areas were more compartmentalized, distinct behaviors, values, and expectations developed for each. While formality and reserve are expected in the public sphere, the values of the private sphere are warmth, support, compassion, openness, and humor, all considered totally inappropriate for the public sphere. Many Americans who only know Germans at work are very surprised when they are invited into a German home and then discover this very different side of the German personality.

**Friends and Acquaintances**

Another facet of the clear compartmentalization of German social life is the strong distinction made between Freunde (friends) and Bekannte (acquaintances). Many of the people Americans label “friends” would not be considered real friends by Germans. A major distinction between friendship in Germany and in the United States is the degree of commitment and obligation one has toward friends. In Germany friends spend more time together and exhibit a higher degree of commitment and obligation toward one another than do Americans. Mentioning a worry or potential problem to a friend in the U.S. may get the rather vague and optimistic response, “Oh don’t worry, you’ll do fine.” Just hinting to a German friend that there might be a problem will elicit a series of concerned and detailed questions as well as sincere
offers of help and support. Such questions may seem intrusive from an American point of view, but for the German, this willingness to get involved in a friend’s problems helps define the level of commitment to the friendship.

Because of this sense of obligation that accompanies friendship, Germans limit the number of persons they consider Freunde. They believe that it takes much time and effort to maintain a good friendship and that it is impossible to have more than a few real friends. This is also another factor in their seeming aloofness. They probably already have enough friends and aren’t interested in extending their social network. For them the American desire to be popular and to keep as many friends as possible is confusing and seems superficial. As will be discussed in the chapter on business relationships, these different views of friendship can cause misunderstandings when Germans and Americans try to work together.

A major factor in the differences between friendships in Germany and the United States relates to differences in social and geographic mobility. Because Americans are far more mobile geographically and meet more new people when they move, they need to make friends quickly. Not doing so means being lonely. This greater geographic mobility in the U.S. partly explains why many Americans tend to seek their friends among those with whom they work or with whom they attend church. Because Germans separate their private and public lives so clearly, they rarely seek out friendships among their coworkers, nor do they often socialize with them.

Germans, being far less mobile than Americans, may live for generations in the same town, if not the same house. While this has changed somewhat since World War II, most Germans, as said before, are still very attached and loyal to the people of their Heimat. This is one important factor in explaining why many friendships in Germany have been maintained since childhood or college.

In addition to geographic mobility, social mobility also plays a role in creating differences in friendship patterns
between Germany and the United States. Americans tend to form friendships on the basis of common interests, and because Americans tend to define their identities more in terms of their occupation than do Germans, work-related interests often determine whom Americans socialize with. As a person’s job or position changes, so too do that person’s interests and, consequently, social circle. In the U.S., friendships tend to form in large, loose networks of people. Phrases such as “my friend from work,” “my bowling friends,” or “my buddies from the bar” attest to these wide, relaxed networks of friends, as do “networking” and “working a party.” Networks in Germany tend to be smaller, more closed, and more hierarchical than in the U.S. Thus, they limit social mobility and are less susceptible to entry from outsiders.

Although common interests clearly play a role in German friendships, more emphasis is placed on the other person’s complete character and personality and whether he or she is sympathisch (likable). Rather than looking at only a narrow spectrum of common interests, Germans want to get to know the whole person well before they enter into a friendship. They also want to be able to talk with their friends about a wide range of topics, in particular about their problems, irritations, and upsets. And they want to know if the other person is reliable, trustworthy, and discreet. These character traits are important because of the sense of obligation that is implicit in German friendships.

**Clarity and Rational Knowledge as Control**

It is no coincidence that the Germans call the Enlightenment the *Aufklärung*, literally, the “period of clearing up.” With the Germans’ strong sense of history, they view the Enlightenment, with its emphasis on *Wissenschaft* (science and scholarship) and *Vernunft* (rational understanding), as a watershed in human development.

It would be difficult to overestimate the German respect
for understanding based on rational analysis and scientific knowledge, both of which are seen as ways of creating Klarheit. This desire for clarity can be seen in their attempt to define their terms precisely when discussing issues as well as in their love of creating comprehensive categories and taxonomies. Because Germans love to converse at length, clear, well-thought-out, rational arguments based on broad knowledge elicit admiration and great respect. In fact, as we will see in the next chapter, in-depth discussions on just about any subject, politics in particular, are almost as popular as soccer, the national sport.

Displaying one’s knowledge while talking is also associated with being educated and thus brings with it not only respect but also status. This is one reason Germans like to appear knowledgeable; it is a way for them to gain credibility and social status. While Germany is now a semiclassless society like the United States, a person’s educational background is one of the most direct indicators of that person’s status in German society. It is no coincidence that so many company directors and leading politicians hold Ph.D.’s.

Germans also desire clear, unambiguous knowledge as a way to reduce the general insecurity and anxiety that plague them, since having knowledge is one of the best forms of control. From the German perspective, you can only control that which you understand, keeping ever-lurking chaos at bay.

This desire for control through clarity of thought and expression is one of the major factors behind the German tendency for detailed planning. It is not uncommon for Germans in their late teens or twenties to already have life insurance policies as well as plans for their career, financial security, and retirement. They can tell you where they hope to be at each stage of life and what steps they will take to assure their continued well-being and security. Similarly, decision making in German business is marked by clearly laying out all possible contingencies in the beginning stages
of a project and then planning all steps of the project accordingly. Improvising, “playing it by ear,” and “going with the flow” are too uncertain and ambiguous for the traditional German mindset.

**Pflichtbewußtsein**

As was seen in the section on friendship, *Pflichtbewußtsein*, or one’s sense of duty and obligation, is a major component of the German psyche. In fact the notion of duty and obligation informs the Germans’ insider/outsider distinction as well as their strong sense of *Gruppenzugehörigkeit* (group belonging) and *Gemeinschaft* (community). All cultures must deal with the tension between individual rights and personal identity on the one hand, and a person’s social role, group identity, and obligations to the larger social group on the other. The United States has radically extended the rights and liberties of the individual more than any other culture in the world. This ethos informs Patrick Henry’s famous cry of “Give me liberty or give me death!” While Germans are also strong individualists as well as great believers in the importance of individual rights, they tend to identify more strongly with the groups to which they belong than do Americans. This strong sense of belonging and loyalty to the group goes hand in hand with the sense of duty and obligation they feel toward the common good. It is this idea of being part of a social contract that explains much of the German way of life. Not to fulfill their duty weighs Germans down with a sense of guilt and shame.

The symphony orchestra provides a useful metaphor for Americans wanting to understand this aspect of German culture. While all members of an orchestra must be excellent musicians and highly skilled on a particular instrument, learning to coordinate their playing according to the director’s cues and the synchrony of the music is crucial in fulfilling their roles and reaching their common goal—playing a piece
Major German Cultural Themes

of difficult music in an aesthetically pleasing and harmonious way. Egotistical grandstanding or poor playing by an individual musician can ruin the entire performance. For the symphony orchestra to perform well, each individual must willingly submit to the whole in order that a greater good be reached.

Unlike jazz, a prototypically American music form characterized by open-ended beginnings and endings and by long, improvised solos by individuals or small groups of musicians "doing their thing," the symphony requires precise planning and complete coordination of many musicians to reach its goal. It is this sense of resolute submission of the individual to the greater good of the collective that typifies much of the German experience and worldview. Americans, of course, have their symphony orchestras, too, but the ideal of the coordinated whole is much rarer in American society. While Germans are clearly not as collectively oriented as many Asian cultures, they have a much stronger sense of social roles and group identity than do Americans.

This sense of submitting to the greater good serves as the main justification for many of the rules and regulations that structure German society. Thus, to break a rule is not only an infraction of the law, it is also a threat to the very notion of the greater good. For this reason many German pedestrians will not cross an intersection against a red light even when no cars are approaching. If asked, they will tell you that respecting the traffic light is a way of showing respect for society and social responsibility in daily life. Furthermore, they will say, to cross against the light would set a bad example for others, particularly children, who might follow their lead and be hit by a car at another crossing.

Perhaps the German sense of obligation finds its roots in the ancient Germanic tribes, whose very survival depended on members working well together. Group solidarity was highly valued, and individuals were severely punished for cowardice or deserting the tribe in times of war. From these
earliest times a code of honor and duty developed that shaped Germans’ behavior. To really understand this development, one must remember that ever-recurring periods of warfare marked European history, and Germany’s central geographic position made it especially vulnerable to the political and military maneuvering of the various European powers. The social evolution of European nations from the tribal stage through feudalism and finally to the class structures which form the basis of current European societies can be understood in part relative to the role of warfare in Europe.

In his outstanding series of historical studies about Germany, *Studien über die Deutschen*, Norbert Elias shows how warfare led to the domination of German society by an aristocracy, which was in effect a warrior class. This warrior class officially controlled Germany until 1918, and their ideals of loyalty, obligation, and courage were adopted by the other classes of German society. Today this sense of obligation and loyalty to the group can be seen in the behavior and sense of affiliation Germans have toward their family, friends, company, and region. It has played a major role in Germany’s economic success and is a basic component of the German social market economy, as chapter 5 will illustrate.

The notion of *Verbindlichkeit*, which implies the binding nature of one’s word, illustrates another crucial aspect of the German sense of duty and obligation. While still very young, Germans learn to be extremely careful about what they say because they are taught that when they speak, they are committing themselves to what they say. In its most extreme form, *Verbindlichkeit* is the belief that a person’s word reflects upon his or her honor. To not follow through with what one says is to not fulfill one’s obligation, something that rightfully causes disrespect in others and feelings of shame in oneself. In a business context, it can make one liable because oral contracts are still legally binding.

The importance of this belief in *Verbindlichkeit* explains part of the differences in German and American communica-
tion styles. Americans are more concerned with pleasing others and so talk accordingly. Germans are more concerned with being both respected and credible. These differences will become clearer in the next chapter, which focuses on German communication style.

---

1 For more information on German manners and customs, see Susan Stern, These Strange German Ways, listed in the References.

2 “Vorwärts in der Vergangenheit,” 73.


4 In the more religious Middle Ages, Germans, and many Europeans, compared their society to the body of Christ. In this metaphor, each section of society had its function to fulfill if the entire body was to function in good health. Later, in more secular times, this metaphor passed out of usage to be replaced by views of society as an organism or a giant clockwork. What underlies all these metaphors is the notion of a larger whole which can only function well when the individual parts fulfill their roles, thus contributing to the greater good of the whole.
German Communication Patterns

The way we communicate is directly related to the values and norms of the culture in which we are raised, and different cultures tend to prefer different communication styles. Because Germans and Americans use distinctive conversational styles, subtle but significant misunderstandings sometimes occur. Rather than realizing that misperceptions are being caused by communication styles with differing rules and norms, people tend to infer that the other person’s inherent character is the cause of the problem. This often results in Americans stereotyping Germans as opinionated and argumentative know-it-alls, while Germans tend to view Americans as naive, superficial, childish, and ignorant. One of the best preparations an American can make for dealing with Germans is to learn about their communication style.

Communication Style

The way people talk and present themselves is in large measure the basis on which we make judgments about their character. We generally assume, based on our perception of a person’s demeanor and manner of speaking, that he or she feels or thinks the way we would if we presented ourselves
thus. This is not necessarily true. Because we learned to talk and present ourselves as children, much of that behavior is now out of conscious awareness and seems “natural” to us. While we often prepare what we are going to say, we rarely think about how we will say something unless the situation is clearly critical, such as giving a presentation or going for a job interview. But, in fact, the how is just as important as the what and sends an important message, not only from person to person but also from culture to culture.

Communication style refers to the patterns that we use when we speak. It includes how we organize our presentation, what information we emphasize, how fast we talk, the intonation patterns we use, when we pause, when we interrupt, how and when we smile or gesture, when we use humor or when we apologize, what we assume are the goals of any given interaction, and much more.

For successful intercultural communication to occur, it is useful to understand how we use meaning and language to create our social worlds. It is no coincidence that the words communicate, community, and communion sound so much alike. They come from the same root and refer to processes of coming together and exchanging and sharing in order to create commonality. Diverse cultures and peoples have had dissimilar histories and resources from which to create their social worlds. In these social worlds, different communication styles are used to coordinate the activities and people of that culture. Understanding this basic fact and being on the lookout for the variations in communication style can improve interactions with Germans immensely.

In Germany there is a strong emphasis on explicit verbal communication, which emphasizes the content level of communication and deemphasizes the relationship level. This is especially so among educated Germans in business and public situations and is directly correlated with the private/public distinction we examined in the previous chapter. Americans also place significant emphasis on the content level of a
communication but do not deemphasize the relationship level as much as the Germans do. This different emphasis placed on the content and relationship levels is a major determinant in the distinctions between German and American communication styles.

Educated Germans today have, as we learned in chapter 3, idealized rational, analytical knowledge, and their communication style tends to be explicit, fact-oriented, and academic. There is a widespread belief among well-educated Germans that only by remaining rational and by consistently following clear principles will humans be able to achieve a better, more civilized society. Germans also believe that to really express something exactly, one needs complicated language. This leads to a business German that is more elevated and convoluted as compared with the more pragmatic, popularistic American style.

Corresponding to the strong emphasis on content, the relationship aspects of communication, as mentioned before, are more marginalized. Conflict is generally avoided, not by emphasizing harmony in personal relationships or by smoothing over differences of opinion, but rather by maintaining formality and social distance. Direct attacks on the content of a person's communication are common, but attacks on the person are avoided by keeping the discussion impersonal and objective.

While the ideal is to strive for rational objectivity, this does not mean that Germans avoid topics that raise the temperature and tensions in the group. Heated discussions are, in fact, quite common, and many become overly combative from an American’s viewpoint. From a German perspective, however, such discussions are still quite within the bounds of normal communication.

This point was driven home to me while sitting in a beer garden with three German friends. We were enjoying the late afternoon of a pleasant spring day and killing some time before leaving for a party. As so often happens in groups of Germans, the relaxed conversation became serious as talk
turned to politics. State elections were coming up and Elke, Rudi, and Thorsten were discussing the candidates and issues. When Thorsten made it clear he had no intention of voting, the level of the conversation changed. Rather than dropping the subject, as would most likely have occurred in the United States, Rudi and Elke went on the offensive, actively trying to persuade Thorsten that it was his duty to vote and brandishing a wide range of arguments to support their position. Thorsten for his part remained adamant that his vote would not change anything.

This example of a prototypical German discussion went on for about twenty minutes. The intensity and vigor with which both sides made their arguments and the directness with which they expressed themselves were uncomfortable to my American sensibilities. Their voices rose, their body movements became more energetic, and they continually interrupted one another. The atmosphere seemed suddenly quite charged. If they had been Americans, I would have been uneasy and worried that they would go away angry or perhaps even become violent. However, having witnessed such talks between German friends before, I was not especially concerned. And I was not at all surprised when Elke broke off the talk to remind us it was almost seven o’clock and that we should move on if we didn’t want to be late for the party. The subject was dropped, and we left for the party with no sign of animosity or vindictive reserve on the part of any of the three friends. In fact we spent the rest of the evening and early morning hours together, thoroughly enjoying ourselves. The fact that this discussion took place among close friends is of major import in the way the conversation was enacted. The intensity, directness, and informality used by the three correlates strongly with their close friendship and their age (early thirties) and with their use of the informal mode of address, that is, the *du* mode. Had they been older, in a more formal setting, or not known one another so well, they would have probably used the more formal mode of address, the *Sie* mode.
Du and Sie Revisited

The use of the formal Sie (use of last names and titles, verbs in the third person, and a more distanced, less emotional style of speaking) differs significantly from the informal du and strongly influences the way people converse in Germany. As was shown in the last chapter, this distinction is an accurate mirror of German culture as well as a major parameter of the German communication style.

Kurt Lewin was one of the first social scientists to conceive of the individual personality as being interwoven with, and partially structured by, the sociocultural system in which that person was raised. He considered certain personality types or structures as being correlated with particular sociocultural systems. Expanding on his idea of using concentric circles to visually represent prototypical personalities in the United States and Germany, we can better see how the du/Sie distinction is a major factor in German and American communication styles.

Figure 1: General Model of Self

In Figure 1, the inner circles represent the most personal, intimate, and vulnerable parts of a person. These private
parts are only divulged to one’s family and closest friends—or to doctors, therapists, and priests—if at all. The outward concentric circles represent the more public, less personal parts of a person. These outer circles, or layers, contain those subjects and behaviors a person is least shy about and most willing to divulge in public. In Germany and the United States significant differences exist between these layers of privacy and openness. These differences are not biological but are learned in childhood, as a child grows up and interacts with family, friends, and society.

**Figure 2: U.S. Selves Interacting**

![Diagram of U.S. selves interacting](image)

The typical U.S. personality structure (Figure 2) is marked by layers of increasing intimacy which have only vaguely delineated boundaries. This represents the extroversion of Americans and their willingness to quickly move to a first-name basis, as well as a tendency to talk quite openly about many things that people from Germany regard as highly personal. Despite this friendliness, however, the majority of U.S. interactions are limited by a large center of information that is considered private and out-of-bounds for normal interactions.
In the German model (as represented in Figure 3), there is a clear, strong boundary very near the surface, which is represented in this diagram by the thick dark line and which corresponds to the private/public distinction. In other words, this boundary very clearly distinguishes the parts of a German considered public and private, and it corresponds quite directly with the du/Sie distinction. Most German interactions between people will not penetrate past the outer layers of the personality (Sie).

In the U.S. model there is no such sharp distinguishing line, just as in English there is only one personal pronoun, you, and thus much more overlap or openness and friendliness in the majority of interactions. Whereas in Germany the strong outer boundary, the du/Sie line, keeps most interactions fairly reserved and formal (Sie), for those persons that one has a closer relationship with (du), the areas of the personality that interact are in fact larger than in the United States, as is shown in Figure 4. This is because the areas that Germans consider totally off-limits to friends and family is smaller. Because Germans make such clear distinctions between du and Sie relationships and because Americans do not, misunderstandings are bound to occur in many German and American relationships, both at work and socially.
In my research into German communication patterns, I conducted many interviews with Germans. Once, while trying to clearly understand the rules for using *du* and *Sie*, my own desire for simplicity and ease conflicted with the complexity of the German system. In frustration I asked my informant why the Germans couldn’t make it simple and just use one second-person pronoun as English speakers do. Ignoring the obvious ethnocentrism, my German friend answered with typical German irony, “Warum einfach, wenn es auch kompliziert geht?” (Why simple, when we can make it complicated?). People who say the Germans don’t have a sense of humor simply don’t understand them.

Understanding the social conventions that underlie the use of *du* and *Sie* is not simple, especially because they are not static, having changed significantly in the last fifty years. Until the 1960s, adult Germans who did not know one another well were expected to use the *Sie* form of personal address and a person’s last name. Not to do so constituted an insulting sign of disrespect. It is therefore typical for most relationships between adult Germans to at least begin with *Sie*. Among adults, the criterion for deciding whether to use *du* or *Sie* has traditionally been the degree of familiarity
between the persons speaking. Put simply, if they knew one another well and had achieved a certain degree of trust, they might switch to du and first names. To switch to the du form requires mutual consent and is accomplished explicitly by saying something like “Wollen wir uns nicht duzen?” (Shouldn’t we say du to one another?) or, for older, more traditional Germans, “Wollen wir Brüderschaft trinken?” (Shall we drink to brotherhood?). This mutuality is important. If one of the speakers is not in agreement, using the more familiar du form creates big problems. In many cases, especially in the workplace, adults never switch to the du form, preferring to maintain the respect, formality, and distance that go with Sie. Staying on a Sie level is also a way of telling neighbors to maintain the proper distance. And staying on a Sie level is also a way to avoid the ambiguity and risk that can occur in negotiating a closer relationship.

Traditional German adults expect children to say Sie to them, while they in turn address children with du. This asymmetric usage reflects perceptions of differences in status. When calling animals, as might be expected, Germans also use the du form.

In the lower grades at school, teachers are addressed with Sie, while they address their students with du. When German students turn sixteen, the law requires their teachers to address them with Sie. This is a rite of passage for the students and a big moment in their lives.

However, cultures and languages are in a continual state of flux, and the German culture—as with most cultures of the Western world—went through some turbulent transitions in the 1960s. As mentioned in chapter 2, the student movement and the Generation of ’68 set about to change Germany, and in some ways they succeeded.

Until the 1960s, it was typical for all university students who didn’t know one another well to address each other with Sie. Then members of the student movement began intentionally addressing one another with du as a sign of group
solidarity. By doing so they were imitating the unions and socialists who had already been using the *du* form to create a sense of solidarity among their members. Since that period, it has become common for younger Germans to address one another with *du* whenever they meet in a nonprofessional situation. This looser use of *du* by younger Germans is just one manifestation of the large generation gap that exists in Germany.

Today, Germans must take two major criteria into account when deciding whether to use *du* or *Sie*: how well they know someone and whether they perceive the other person as a member of their group or not. What had once been simple and straightforward has now become so complicated that even some Germans admit they sometimes don’t know which form to use.

**Private/Public Revisited**

As should now be clear, the *du/Sie* distinction correlates positively with the private/public distinction and greatly influences most aspects of German communication style. Thus it is more common to hear *Sie* in the office, unless the company is small and all the employees know one another, or if the office is staffed by young employees. But in leisure activities, such as the innumerable German sports clubs, *du* is heard more frequently. In fact, it is not uncommon for some Germans to say *Sie* to one another in the office and then use *du* when together in private. To be able to read between the lines of German communication, Americans must understand that the use of *du* or *Sie* is not simply a change of verbs and pronouns but rather a major change in modality. It is as noticeable as the distinction between the major and minor scales played on a piano. By making minimal grammatical changes, speakers introduce a whole different mood and modality.
Because English no longer has such a clear distinction, the widespread use of first names and the generally friendly manner of Americans, especially those in the service industries, initially cause confusion among Germans. This is an example of linguistic interference which causes them to confuse the general openness and friendly style of Americans with the openness and warmth they associate with du relationships at home. And when they discover that most Americans are just being friendly in the way typical of their communication style and do not want a deeper friendship, Germans tend to stereotype Americans as “superficial.”

On the other hand, if they are aware that use of first names and a friendly approach are simply part of a widespread American social style, they then tend to remain in their Sie mode. This comes across to Americans as cold, distant, and at times arrogant, leading them to perceive Germans in terms of negative stereotypes.

In my seminars designed to promote better understanding between Germans and Americans, I often do a stereotype exercise with the Americans. I ask them what comes to mind when they think of Germans. Without fail, three images of Germans emerge time after time: as boisterous beer drinkers, dressed in lederhosen and enthusiastically enjoying the Oktoberfest; as producers of excellent automobiles and other high-quality industrial products; or as Nazis. When asked where these stereotypes come from, most agree these images are common in the media as well as in stories and anecdotes they had heard growing up.

Because these images and stereotypes are floating around in the back of our minds, it is all too easy to misinterpret the German style of speech, thinking it is the character of the person talking and not merely the style of communication the culture expects. In truth, while most Americans prefer a friendly smile to a frown, many put on a smile even when they are not feeling especially friendly, in part because their communication style emphasizes the relationship side of com-
munication, encouraging them to be outgoing and personable. Another reason is the strong emphasis placed on customer service in the United States; that is, you get more sales with honey than with vinegar. And because Americans don’t distinguish as strictly between insiders and outsiders as do Germans, they tend to use this friendly style more frequently and with more people. Everyone knows, though, that smiling faces sometimes hide more than they reveal and that the friendliness of a telemarketer is purely bogus.

Developing trust is a key component of successful communication, and we intuitively tend to trust those who use the same style of communication as we do. This is partially because we understand the assumptions from which they are operating, and thus their communication seems more natural, more logical to us. With such people we don’t have to make as much effort to read between the lines but can deal more directly with the issues at hand.

Directness and Klarheit

Directness is a powerful communicative signal. It varies according to power and status and from culture to culture. Americans tend to think of themselves as very direct and to the point. Compared with many cultures, they are. Compared with Germans they are less so, although this depends on the situation and the particular speech act. In giving compliments or expressing pleasure or positive emotions, Americans are often more direct, especially in public. And as regards disclosing personal details to people they don’t know well, Americans can also be much more direct than Germans. But in terms of stating facts, offering criticism, and issuing direct commands, Germans are generally more direct, leading to perceptions of them as opinionated, blunt, and brusque know-it-alls.

As mentioned earlier, directness and honesty are highly valued by Germans and thus among the most telling characteristics of their style of speech. Part of this emphasis on
directness is related to their desire for Klarheit and dislike of ambiguity.

The commonly heard idiom, *Jetzt werde ich mit ihm Deutsch reden müssen* (Now I’ll have to speak German with him), shows just how central this idea is to German speakers. When this idiom is used, it doesn’t imply the partners were previously speaking to each other in a foreign language, but rather that an unacceptable situation has developed and it’s time to stop beating around the bush. Or as another common phrase has it, “It’s time to speak Klartext” (clearly or directly). Perhaps it is only coincidence, but the German adjective *deutlich* (clear, plain, distinct) as well as the German verb *deuten* (explain, expound, interpret) is morphologically very similar to the word Germans use to refer to themselves and their language: *Deutsch*.

The desire for clarity in German speech leads to directness that is sometimes off-putting to foreigners. A brief examination of some of their microlevel verbal habits will help clarify this aspect of German speaking style. Linguists use the term *downgraders* to denote words that make an expression weaker and less definite, while *upgraders* do just the reverse. Examples of some American downgraders are *sort of*, *kind of*, *pretty much*, *maybe*, *well*, and so on. While Germans typically use upgraders when complaining, many Americans soften criticism by using downgraders. Thus, in criticizing the campaign financing scandal of the Clinton administration, one of my American friends downgraded his statement, making it less direct by saying, “Well, it doesn’t show him in a real positive light.” A German friend, on the other hand, was more direct, concluding, “*Das war absolut unverschämt*” (That was absolutely shameless). Calling someone “shameless” is quite common and comes from the more absolutist moral values typical of traditional German culture. This more absolute approach is expressed by the use of upgraders, words and phrases such as *definitely*, *absolutely*, *totally*, *without a doubt*, and so on, which strengthen an expression.
A second common German verbal habit, the use of unqualified yes or no statements, often leads to misperceptions on the part of Americans, who are more accustomed to giving less direct answers. Ask a German a question to which he or she has a yes or no answer, and you will get a direct yes or no response. To them it seems simple enough. You asked a direct question and he or she is giving you a direct, clear answer, with no harm intended. Often the answer will also include a detailed explanation or argument to defend the answer. Germans are cautious, however, and are usually unwilling to answer a question without giving it appropriate thought.

Direct contradictions are a third verbal tool Germans don’t shy away from. If you make a statement and a German contradicts you without blinking, don’t be surprised. In fact, the primary function of doch, one of the most frequently used words in German, is to contradict the previous thought. While ja means “yes,” so does doch, but only as a form of contradiction. German children learn to use this word very early in their verbal development. For example, were a parent to tell his or her child that candy really isn’t healthful, it is quite likely the child would reply with a firm “Doch!” (Yes it is!). Germans practice stating their opinions clearly from an early age.

Fourth, Germans tend to use the modal verbs müssen (must) and sollen (should) somewhat differently and more frequently than Americans do, which can also make their style seem stronger and less diplomatic. Thus, a German would not think it odd to say “Das muß so sein” (It must be that way), where an American might express this opinion more diplomatically as “It would be good if we could do it that way.” Similarly, Germans tend to use direct imperatives more frequently than do Americans; for example, in a restaurant a customer might simply say “Bringen Sie uns zwei Rotwein, bitte” (Bring us two red wines, please), whereas an American might use a question format instead: “Could we have two glasses of red wine please?”
Taken together, these verbal habits can create the impression that Germans are overly confrontational speakers who are not very concerned with the image they are creating. This is a false perception. All communication has a component of self-representation or image management, and German is no exception. Germans are very concerned about the image they present during a conversation, but the positive images they aspire to are somewhat different from those Americans try to create. In general, because of the strong public/private distinction, Germans strive for credibility and respect when speaking in the public sphere. At home and with friends, credibility is still important, but then likableness and affection play a much greater role in influencing speech style.

**Critical Questions**

Intellectual criticism plays a central role in German speech patterns and has a long and honorable history. Starting with Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and continuing through Marx and Engels' examination of European society, criticism has served as one of the main forces in liberating Europeans from superstition and despotism. Asking critical and incisive questions based on a certain skepticism served as a call to action during the Enlightenment. From this perspective, being critical is also a way to be socially responsible. Of course during the Hitler period, a critical bent was not popular with the Nazis.

After World War II this critical force reemerged and served as a major component in revitalizing and democratizing German society. At that time, many intellectuals, political activists, and students felt it socially responsible to ask questions critical of their culture and government. The thoroughness and integrity with which they were willing to examine and question their past was unique in history. This critical review of their past was the subject of novels, plays, public debate, and television and radio programs. The student move-
ment and its focus on the Nazi past were discussed in countless news broadcasts and thus became the frequent subject of dining table discussions. Many older Germans were extremely disturbed by the intensity with which the younger generation pursued the issue. Families were divided by heated arguments, and a lasting generation gap ensued, as discussed earlier.

One of the conclusions arrived at by the intellectuals and students was that Hitler and the Nazis could only have come to power because of ignorance and a lack of social commitment on the part of ordinary Germans. The denial of this proposition by many older Germans only strengthened the younger generation’s belief in the need for a critical assessment of the Nazi era. While the fervor of this debate has died down, it has left its mark. Today many Germans, particularly those on the left and in the younger generation, still speak quite openly and critically about their nation’s past. They have deep issues with regard to their national identity, and they find the patriotism and nationalistic tendencies of many Americans naive and troublesome. For them criticism is part of political liberation and the creation of a better society. Since they find it normal to criticize their own culture, they don’t understand Americans’ defensive reactions to criticism about American policy and culture. Germans often complain that they can’t have a satisfying political discussion with Americans because they become defensive when Germans follow their critical bent. From the American perspective, Germans are not only overly critical of American politics, they are also perceived as being pessimistic and unwilling to become enthusiastic in the typical American style.

This centuries-long history of applying critical intelligence to public issues has become an integral part of German communication style and thus has a very different meaning for them than it does for Americans. This was demonstrated to me at a conference. An American speaker had just finished his presentation and was fielding questions. A series of pen-
etrating questions came from several of the Germans present. The questioning dealt with some ethical issues and increased in intensity as the American became less sure of himself. My sympathy went out to the speaker, who began to look more and more like bait for some very hungry sharks.

A German friend offered a different perspective when I mentioned the incident to him. He thought the presentation had generally been good but that there were some important gaps that had necessarily been exposed. When I referred to the loss of face for the presenter, he said people were socially obligated to get to the truth, but not necessarily to save face. And besides, if the Germans had felt the presentation was not generally worthwhile, they certainly wouldn’t have wasted their time asking such critical questions. From his perspective those questions signaled interest, not rejection.

**Diskussion**

Critical questions play a major part in one of the most common genres of German conversation, the *Diskussion* (discussion). Germans love to discuss just about anything under the sun. Diskussion is by its very nature goal-oriented and therefore to be taken seriously, and while Diskussion can be found in both the public and private spheres, it occurs much more frequently in the public sphere. The goals of Diskussion can be to test one’s knowledge, discover the truth, or solve some problem, and, one hopes, to come to some consensus with one’s conversation partner in the process. Mostly, Diskussion is analytical in nature and focuses on an issue that Germans consider a problem. From their perspective, the way to solve a problem is to completely understand it, which also means understanding its causes and other relevant background details. This mindset leads Germans to prefer a historical approach that looks at the interrelationships of all the different aspects of the issue. It is not uncommon in a Diskussion to track an issue back for centuries, which is another example of
German thoroughness and strong appreciation for the past. Americans, with their more pragmatic and future-oriented mindset, often take a “Don’t tell me the problem, tell me the solution” approach, which Germans find intellectually unsatisfactory. This discomfort with each other’s approach to problem solving plays an important role in business, as the section on decision making in chapter 6 illustrates.

Another aspect of Diskussion is the level of objectivity and seriousness expected. In a Diskussion one is expected to be as impersonal, serious, and objective as possible. This, of course, precludes any banter or attempts at humor, which are considered inappropriate. In the German education system similar behavior and attitudes are expected in class, resulting in a more intellectual atmosphere. A German friend, while training as a graduate teaching assistant at a major American university, told me how shocked he was upon being instructed to intentionally use jokes in order to loosen up the classroom atmosphere. Such behavior went against all he had learned as appropriate classroom protocol.

**Unterhaltung and Gemütlichkeit**

*Unterhaltung* has no satisfactory direct translation into English. One of the closest is simply “conversation,” but *Unterhaltung* is also synonymous with “entertainment,” and in the German mind they are often one and the same. Sitting around after a good meal or over a cup of coffee and talking for hours is pure pleasure for Germans. For them it is a way to test their knowledge and become more informed, while at the same time getting to know one another better and cementing bonds of friendship. They simply don’t understand how Americans can come to dinner and then not remain for hours afterward to talk unless they hadn’t enjoyed the group’s company. And perhaps worse, being invited to an American’s home and then sitting in the living room while a TV or a video provides the entertainment seems to a German the sign
of a poor education or outright ignorance as well as disrespect for the guest. For Germans the conversation itself is sufficient entertainment.

Unterhaltung is distinguished by its relative lightness and lack of intensity. It typically has no goal other than the enjoyment of the very act of conversation. Humor is welcomed in an Unterhaltung; in fact an Unterhaltung among friends in a private house is usually filled with laughter, warmth, and a jovial atmosphere, which gives rise to a highly enjoyable state that Germans describe as *gemütlich*, roughly translated as “cozy, congenial, jolly, hearty.”

Such situations often surprise foreigners. They discover a much warmer, laughing side to German colleagues who seemed so serious and grim at the office. Evenings spent with Germans in their homes are often filled with laughter, playful teasing, and a warm comradery and trust that are rare in the United States. But if an important topic comes up, the mood can also change and rapidly become serious. The mood will only become jovial again when the topic has been thoroughly dealt with. To switch back to the lightness too quickly might be interpreted as a lack of commitment.

**Vertiefen: Going into Detail**

To achieve their analytical ends Germans use a strategy called *vertiefen*, or “going into depth.” The procedure is to try to discover the core or central aspect of a question, issue, or problem, and to do this they employ theoretical arguments, statements of fact, and critical questions. In these discussions one sees the thoroughness and exactness for which they are well known. Needless to say, considerations of saving face are secondary to the goal at hand—discovering the truth.

This leads to an explicit style of speech in which precision of expression, exactness of definition, and literalness play important parts. These different expectations regarding details and precision lead to further reinforcement of already-
existing stereotypes. Americans perceive Germans as perfectionistic and compulsive; they see Americans as superficial and slipshod.

Contributing to these stereotypes is the higher degree of free association common in American conversations. Perhaps because Americans value creativity and imagination so highly, they tend to jump more from topic to topic when conversing. This is in direct contradiction to the German strategy of vertiefen, which requires that the speakers stay on topic until some resolution is achieved.

This strategy leads to long, detailed discussions that sometimes go on for hours. Germans want great amounts of detailed information, whether it’s for making a business decision, drawing up plans for the next vacation, or simply buying consumer goods. How prevalent this attitude is can be seen in German advertising, which is filled with details, facts, and technical specifications. This relates to their idea of thoroughness; that is, if you’re going to do something, do it well or don’t do it at all. They want to know small details that Americans often find superfluous and boring. In general, Germans also want lots of details because they distrust simplicity. They tend to suspect that if a thing is not complicated, then something important is missing.

Some Americans find such discussions enjoyable, but many find them tedious and drawn-out and at times threatening. Germans also enjoy such talks, in which they shy away less from delicate issues like religion, politics, and sex than do Americans. This is something Germans miss when trying to have a satisfactory conversation with Americans, who are less willing to express different points of view, or at least to express them so bluntly.

Germans do not necessarily like controversy more than Americans, but they shy away from it less. They share a widespread belief that it is important to be informed and to have an opinion, especially as regards politics. Not to do so is seen as a sign of poor character—and this is not only so
among the highly educated Germans. Even among working-class people, talking about politics and other controversial issues is a common pastime. From the German perspective, having a good—even if somewhat confrontational—discussion allows the conversationalists to get to know one another better as well as helping them understand the world a little more. People who rarely express a clear point of view are viewed negatively as glatt (slippery), or “lacking format.”

While many Americans tend to find argumentation among friends invasive and upsetting, Germans see it as part of the obligation one friend has to another. This involvement can extend into personal realms as well. For example, if a German is dating someone whom a friend feels is not a worthy person, that friend may tell him or her so. Such advice on personal affairs can lead to arguments, but most Germans accept that as part of the price they pay for having good, reliable friends. The bottom line seems to be that Americans strive harder for harmony in interpersonal relationships, while Germans tend to place more emphasis on directness and honesty. Germans also like harmony but are less averse to minor confrontations and seem more practiced in dealing with them.

**Verbindlichkeit**

Part of the reason Germans are so exact relates to their notion of what is verbindlich (binding, obligatory, or compulsory). We have noted before that as children, Germans are taught that they should think carefully before speaking because their word represents their honor. Or to put it another way, they are committed to do that which they say they will do. This underlying sense that they will be held accountable for what they say permeates German speech. It also relates strongly to their desire to be seen as credible and worthy of respect. To say something and then not carry through with it is a blemish on one’s reputation.
Perhaps, as some older Germans complain, younger Germans are less verbindlich than previous generations; nevertheless, Verbindlichkeit is still an important force in structuring German speech style. This is important for Americans to know because of their philosophy of “keeping one’s options open,” “maintaining a flexible position,” and “going with the flow,” which leads to a more tolerant approach when people change their minds or decisions. Balancing commitment and flexibility can be a dilemma for Americans. As a German friend of mine once said, “I think you Americans talk about commitment so much because you don’t have very much of it. In Germany we don’t talk about it much because it’s simply expected.”

When dealing with Germans, it is important for Americans to remember that their standards and expectations regarding commitment differ from those of their German colleagues. For one thing, oral contracts are still legally binding in Germany. Many business deals have gone sour because of misperceptions regarding unkept delivery dates and other matters that the German thought were agreed upon and that the American thought had been talked about only as a possibility. And in the private sphere, Germans are far less forgiving of people who change plans at the last minute or won’t commit to doing something. Credibility and reliability are key points that Germans are looking for in both personal and business relationships.

Similarly, open-ended phrases, which in the United States are intended to lubricate a social interaction but are not seriously meant, such as “I’ll give you a call” or “Let’s have lunch sometime,” are also confusing and disturbing for Germans, who tend to interpret such phrases literally.

Referring to commitment in a training seminar, one German manager said, “First I say no, then I consider whether I might be able to say yes. But I always hesitate before agreeing to do something or committing myself. Otherwise I could get myself in a jam.” Others agreed that they, too, used this
strategy. Verbindlichkeit brings with it an attitude of caution and thus helps keep discussions from becoming overly confrontational, as does the German notion of Sachlichkeit.

Sachlichkeit

Translated literally, Sachlichkeit means “objectivity,” but for Germans it means far more. It is really a mode or style of speaking and means sticking to the matter at hand, leaving out any personal references, and being as unemotional and matter-of-fact as possible. The idea of being sachlich pervades German speech, especially in the public sphere.

Sachlichkeit is reflected in the frequent use of man (one) and impersonal formulations beginning with es (it) as in, Es versteht sich, daß man so etwas nicht tut (It is obvious that one shouldn’t do that). These and similar formulations abound in standard German, and this propensity to use what might be called “it” language is encouraged in the schools and expected in educated speech. Such “it” language gives educated German talk a sense of being highly impersonal, abstract, and objective, all of which make confrontations more formal and less likely to become overly heated. Such formal, impersonal style is more common among middle and upper classes, who tend to speak standard German.

Along with such impersonal formulations, Germans are taught to think of their opinions as something distinct from their person. By dissociating opinion from person, Germans attempt to be more objective and also tend to be more intellectual and content-oriented. German schools reinforce Sachlichkeit as an integral part of their writing program; most German pupils have had practice in defending positions they don’t personally agree with. This tends to sharpen their argumentation skills as well as helping them maintain a certain psychological distance from their opinions. Thus they seem more comfortable with having their opinions attacked, without seeing it as an attack on their person. Again, this
kind of impersonal abstract talk is interpreted as coldness and aloofness by many Americans.

When communicating with Americans, Germans feel they constantly have to be on the alert not to offend, because Americans tend to react personally when their opinions are attacked. They feel dissatisfied with conversations in which one side is constantly evading direct confrontation in order to maintain a harmonious relationship. In fact, many Germans, especially men, will tell you they find conversations in which everyone agrees boring. They say that the points of disagreement are the most interesting and are where they can learn or teach something. Of course, this applies in an ideal situation. In fact, many times neither person seems to be trying to learn from the other; each is more intent on proving that his or her position is right. Taken together, these different approaches to discussion often leave both Germans and Americans confused and dissatisfied.

Another aspect of remaining sachlich is keeping one’s personal stories and experiences out of the conversation as much as possible. Here German notions of modesty and Sachlichkeit reinforce one another to make the talk more objective and as impersonal as possible. The American penchant for personalizing the discussion is looked upon by Germans with both distaste and envy. On the one hand, they find it quite amazing that Americans can talk about themselves so much, so openly, and so naturally and may find themselves wishing they could do the same. On the other hand, they often view this focus on the self as unfounded bragging. One German friend cited the example of an American who answered yes when asked if he spoke Spanish. When it turned out this fellow had only had one year of college Spanish and could barely utter two complete sentences in Spanish, my friend was amazed. From her perspective, a person would only say he or she could do something if, in fact, he or she were quite competent in that area.
Since emotions are generally considered a disturbance to the objectivity of a conversation, Germans attempt to limit the appearance of emotion in most discussions that take place in the public sphere. A major exception to this rule of thumb is the expression of irritation or annoyance.

**The Fine Art of Complaining**

In 1936 Kurt Lewin noted that Germans more commonly expressed their annoyance and irritation than did Americans, and his claim is still true today and can be a major cause of misunderstanding when Germans and Americans try to communicate. Remembering that when we are communicating, we are using words for a purpose, we might ask “What are Germans doing when they complain?” And it is just as helpful to ask “Why don’t Americans do the same?”

From one point of view, expressing criticism and complaint can be viewed as a continuum. They both involve making negative remarks about someone or something, but they are viewed somewhat differently by Germans. Perhaps freedom of speech and the attendant right to criticize the powers that be is something Germans do not take for granted. Or perhaps criticism is just an integral part of the German philosophical tradition. Witness the enormously influential trilogy by Kant: *Critique of Pure Reason, Critique of Practical Reason,* and *Critique of Judgment.* Part of this legacy is that criticism is seen as a right that must be well protected and reaffirmed through continual use. Criticism has a long intellectual pedigree in Germany and is often viewed as something both useful and necessary for the smooth functioning of a business or society. Complaining, on the other hand, is often viewed rather negatively by Germans, and yet, the fact is they spend large amounts of their time and energy doing just that. This fact can be illustrated by the number of words in German that exist to describe the act: klagen, sich beklagen, nörgeln, sich beschweren, mäkeln, schimpfen, wettern, jammern,
meckern, motzen. While each has its nuances, they all relate to the common act of complaining.

This is perhaps not so surprising when we realize that all cultures contain inherent contradictions that don’t seem to be interpreted as contradictions by the members of those cultures. Consider American culture. Certainly freedom and individual liberty are values that all Americans would agree are the foundations of society; they are written into the Constitution. And yet, the United States has incarcerated more of its citizens than any other industrialized country in the world. Many Americans do not see that as a contradiction at all, because they don’t think of these persons as “citizens” but rather as “criminals.” But to the outside world, this seems a pronounced contradiction.

So what are Germans doing socially when they are complaining? To understand their complaining it is useful to understand what anthropologist George Foster called the “image of limited good.”6 Put in the simplest of terms, the image of limited good is based on the notion of a zero sum game in which all resources come in a limited supply. Thus, not only is there a limited amount of gold, oil, land, water, and so on in our world, but also love, safety, happiness, and other nontangibles are in limited supply. Taking too much of any of these resources leaves too little for others. This notion and the corresponding idea that each person gets a fair share only when others don’t take more than their share is the fundamental assumption underlying much of the complaining one hears among Germans. Having an abundance of resources arouses other people’s envy and wrath, and Germans try carefully to avoid triggering such reactions. Given that many resources are in fact limited, it is easy to see why in such a densely populated country as Germany such an ethos would become widespread.

In the United States, an assumption of unlimited good is more common, and complaining is less socially acceptable. Quite probably the American penchant for optimism com-
bined with the open-frontier mentality served to keep complaining to a minimum. Complaining too much in the United States will get you branded very quickly as a loser and a whiner, and so most Americans try to avoid it.

Germans are encouraged to be modest and not flaunt their wealth and success. Understatement, not bragging, is valued. And one exaggerated form of understatement is complaining. Ask a German businessman how his company is doing and you will often hear about the problematic state of the economy, the increase in competition, the new regulations that are making production more complicated, the difficult problems the company is encountering, and so on. But if you look at his company’s profit and loss statement, you will often be surprised to see the company is well in the black, with good prospects for the future. Much of this type of complaining is simply the socially required “modesty” and “realism” that are expected in Germany—as well as an attempt to camouflage success so as not to arouse envy on the part of others. This is very different from the American corporate scene, where one is expected to present a positive image and where talking about problems is frowned upon. In fact many Americans state they have no problems, only “challenges” and “issues.”

But complaining in Germany is more than just camouflaging success. It is also a social ritual for building a relationship and creating community. In the United States when two strangers meet, they will often engage in small talk. Part of what they are doing is trying to find things they have in common, which can then serve as the basis for further conversation and a deepening of the relationship. This search for commonalities was important in a land of immigrants. There were obviously differences between them, so looking for common ground was crucial to building a relationship.

In Germany the situation was quite different. Rather than a loosely linked, diverse mass of people who were both socially and geographically mobile, German society was ethnically
homogeneous, old, and well established, with a clear social structure in which everyone was firmly embedded. There was little need to seek information about who the other person was, because most likely you knew the other person rather well, or at least could guess quite accurately what he or she was like, depending on behavior and attire. In this society, complaining became a social ritual and a way to establish a sense of commonality and social solidarity. Today this old ritual continues unabated. Sit down with some people who rent apartments—because of the high population, land is at a premium in Germany and far more people rent in Germany than in the United States—and one of the themes of conversation will be criticism directed at landlords for trying to raise the rent or for not keeping the place maintained properly. Sit down with the landlords, however, and you will hear a very different story. They will complain about how their costs have soared and how they are losing money because of rent control laws. Furthermore, they will tell you how they would like to get rid of at least some of their tenants but cannot because they are so well protected by the law. The litany seems to continue endlessly, while the American sits there wondering how people who never stop complaining have ever managed to achieve so much, which misses the crucial point that complaining is a social ritual and not a sign of despair.

Through complaining together and about the same topics, the speakers are implicitly communicating that they belong to the same group and thus share a common view and common interests. The art of complaining is still highly valued in Germany, because while it has abolished its official class system and is now only a semiclassless society, class boundaries and rankings still play an important role. Establishing one’s social position is an important part of communication, and what one complains about says a lot about one’s social position.

Complaining also serves as an emotional safety valve. German society is quite competitive, and this competition
combined with a high population density creates a sense of social pressure and claustrophobia, which many Germans don’t manage well. Getting together with one’s friends to complain is a way to vent this emotional pressure. And because they come to understand one another’s problems better, they often feel more favorably disposed toward one another, thus creating stronger bonds of friendship. Mention to a German friend that you have a problem and your friend will take time to ask lots of detailed questions to figure out what the problem is and how to help you.

One of the results of the German strategy of mutual commiseration is that friends tend to divulge far more of their private affairs to one another than Americans do. Americans tend to carefully weigh just what information they are giving away, perhaps because they know that once it has been spoken, there is no way to recall it. And because Americans are involved in more, larger, and looser social networks than Germans, that information could end up causing embarrassment. Because friendships are entered into more slowly and cautiously, Germans have been able to carefully test their friends’ discretion and know they can be trusted. If this trust has been abused in the past, then the relationship will probably have been dissolved.

That American friends don’t spend as much time complaining or commiserating over their problems strikes Germans as odd for several reasons. First, they interpret this fact as a sign that Americans aren’t being completely honest. Germans have trouble believing that Americans are really always so optimistic, so “up” or so “on” all the time, especially when their verbal and nonverbal behaviors don’t seem to match. This sends a mixed message, and sometimes distrust stems simply from the Americans’ lack of negativity, which the Germans see as unnatural. Secondly, they miss the feelings of trust and solidarity that are generated through commiserating with friends. One German I spoke to even suggested that one reason so many Americans go to therapists is
because they don’t have any true friends they can really talk with about their problems. A third perception is that by always attempting to put a positive spin on everything, Americans create the impression with Germans that they are dreamers who don’t have their feet planted firmly on the ground.

Naturally enough, whether German complaining takes place in the public sphere or among friends in the private sphere will determine what form the complaining takes. In the private sphere the complaining will be more emotional, more direct, and with less consideration for appearing reasonable. The more serious or formal a situation, the more matter-of-fact and impersonal one should be in expressing a complaint.

**Nonverbal Communication**

While verbal strategies and tactics comprise a major part of any communication style, the use of one’s body and voice is just as important, if not more so. In general, German communication style is marked by more constrained use of both bodily and vocal resources than the American style. Thus, the private/public distinction, which is such an important dimension of German culture in general, is also very noticeable in the nonverbal communication of Germans. This can be seen in a variety of dimensions, such as smiling, physical distance, touching, and vocal quality—all of which affect the style and emotionality of any given conversation.

**Vocal Quality**

Generally, German voice patterns tend to be somewhat deeper and exhibit fewer modulations than do American voice patterns and are viewed by Germans as a way of remaining in control and divorcing emotions from reason.

In line with their fondness for complaining, Germans are also more willing to use their tone of voice to express nega-
tive emotions of anger, frustration, and irritation than are Americans. This tends to upset Americans, who are more accustomed to vocal patterns that are typically less monotonic and more expressive of happier and positive feelings. This quality goes hand in hand with the American penchant for offering compliments and positive feedback to their conversational partner. Germans, on the other hand, complain it is precisely this vocal quality that leads them to perceive Americans as superficial and disingenuous, claiming that American voices are überschwenglich, or excessively exuberant.

Silences and pauses, which make Americans uncomfortable, are longer and more common in German speech, where they can even be interpreted as a sign of harmony. German speech, unless confrontational, tends to be somewhat slower and more reflective than the American tempo, in which harmony is signaled by a smooth, uninterrupted verbal flow and where pauses cause discomfort. The slower German tempo reinforces the image of being sachlich and thoughtfully serious. In Germany immediate replies and “thinking out loud” are less frequent than in the United States and are interpreted as overly impulsive and lacking the appropriate seriousness. In fact several German businessmen have said that they consciously use these silences as a tactic in negotiations. Because Americans are not as comfortable with a slower tempo or longer silences, they tend to get nervous and give away bargaining points when their German counterpart becomes silent.

The German tempo can speed up significantly and get louder with more frequent interruptions during a discussion where the participants have different opinions. While discussions in the Sie mode tend to be less heated and more reflective, these too can get more directly confrontational than is comfortable for Americans. In the du mode opinions are often expressed vociferously, but from a German perspective the directness and louder vocal intensity are not seen as
disruptive or abnormal. Of course, there is a fine line between a heated discussion and a fight, and while Germans are practiced in using an adversarial style, they too sometimes lose control in discussions, which then turn into arguments.

Germans can also be boisterous, especially in pubs and at public fairs where alcohol is served, but in general they do not talk as loudly as Americans do. Americans are more extroverted and outgoing, while Germans are more reserved and introverted. In part this German behavior is an attempt to be modest and not attract overmuch attention, especially when in public.

**Distance**

Because Germans dislike spectacles and prefer to remain formal and reserved in public, they will usually wait until they are in close proximity before greeting someone on the street. Hollering or waving to catch a distant person’s attention is something only younger or impolite Germans do. In fact, loud foreigners irritate the more traditional Germans, which causes considerable resentment and social tension.

In stores and in public places Germans accord one another less private space than do Americans. In other words, their personal space bubble is considerably smaller than that of Americans, and they do not consider it rude to pass very close to a stranger without acknowledging the other’s presence or excusing oneself. From their perspective, this is just normal public behavior and certainly not something for which one should apologize. People are simply accustomed to having less physical space and think it normal to be in close proximity with one another. The sharing of restaurant tables with strangers is indicative of this common German habit. Rather than keeping a large physical distance as do most strangers in the United States, Germans maintain this distance psychologically by not acknowledging the other’s presence and by remaining formal and aloof.
Facial Expression and Eye Contact

In Germany, someone who can’t look you in the eye is generally viewed as weak in character, is not to be trusted, or is hiding something. While direct eye contact is also an American characteristic, Germans have the disconcerting habit of fixing you directly with an unwavering gaze that seems to last for a fraction of a second too long and makes many Americans uneasy. Similarly, in face-to-face conversations, Germans will look you directly in the eye while talking, something which some Americans find vaguely annoying or disconcerting. From the German point of view this is a sign of honesty and true interest in the conversation. For Americans it can seem too intense and direct. On the other hand, Germans find that Americans don’t maintain eye contact long enough but rather tend to let their eyes flit back and forth in the vicinity of their conversation partner, always coming back to him or her but never staring too long.

Smiles are particularly telling. Whereas an American smile often means only that someone is being polite, friendly, or personable, a German smile more often indicates real affection and is used with far more discretion, generally only with those persons one knows and really likes. Many Germans say they really enjoy the smiles and friendliness they encounter in the United States, but if they acted that way at home, they would be sending the wrong message. After all, would you want to be continually broadcasting signals of affection to most people you meet? Affection and smiles are things Germans tend to reserve for friends and family.

Bearing and Posture

German children are still taught to sit and stand up straight, which is a sign of good character. Slouching is seen as a sign of a poor upbringing. This can be illustrated in the German word aufrecht (upright), which is used to describe both a person’s posture and bearing as well as his or her character
and integrity. The more “laid-back” and relaxed postures of Americans, especially those from the West Coast and among young people, have still not taken root in Germany. The concept of “hanging loose” may seem attractive to certain Germans, but it is definitely not widespread.

Traditionally, this upright bearing and posture were reinforced by wearing clothing that was formal. While this still holds true for the older, more traditional Germans, the younger generation has become much more informal and casual. Nonetheless, if you are not sure what to wear in a particular social situation, you are well advised to err on the side of formality.

Similarly, while traditional Germans, especially men, find touching to be embarrassing, the younger generation is much more relaxed. It has become quite fashionable to touch more as well as to kiss or hug in the French style as a greeting or way of leave-taking.

A handshake used to be a mandatory part of greeting and leave-taking in Germany. Younger Germans who have adopted the French-style greeting behavior have dropped the practice. Nonetheless, it is still considered proper in more formal situations and at work, where Germans shake hands far more frequently than do Americans. Typically, upon entering a room where a formal party or business meeting is taking place, good manners require that a person shake the hands of all present. This same ritual is repeated when leaving.

If shaking hands is common in Germany, other physical gestures and body movements are more contained. Such restraint is perceived as a sign of self-discipline and emotional control. From a German perspective, Americans often seem overly emotional, more given to expansive gestures and other body movement.

Most people cannot easily change their communication style, especially the nonverbal components, nor would they want
to; however, simply being aware of style differences and how they are culturally determined often helps one develop a more tolerant attitude toward those differences. This tolerance alone can often decrease misunderstanding and raise the level of satisfaction for those communicating across cultures.

1 This chapter describes a style of speech used by educated Germans throughout the FRG. While there are significant regional variations, it is important to at least be familiar with this style when communicating with Germans.


3 There are also rules as to who can “offer the du,” as Germans like to say. In practice what this means is that a person from a higher level must propose the idea of using the du form to the person lower in the hierarchy.

4 Not all the questioning of the past was voluntary. The occupying forces in the western zones had started a program of enforced denazification, which was supported by many German citizens. This denazification program resulted in a major difference of opinion between East and West Germans. While West Germans in the FRG were examining and trying to come to terms with their past (Vergangenheitsbewältigung), East Germans in the GDR were constrained by a government that abdicated all responsibility for Nazism. The GDR’s basic argument was that they—the socialists and communists—had been the enemies and victims of the Nazis and that it was now absurd for them to identify with them or to reexamine their past. By so doing the GDR authorities essentially swept the issue under the carpet.

5 This section does not apply to those Germans from the German Democratic Republic. Former East Germans, because of forty years under a communist dictatorship, are much less confrontational and are more reticent about expressing their opinions than are their West German cousins.
In fact, Foster concludes that such an ethos is common in many cultures of the world. For more on this, see George Foster, “Peasant Society and the Image of Limited Good,” American Anthropologist 67, no. 2 (April 1965).