



Jan Verwoert: BUT WHAT EXACTLY DO YOU REMEMBER?

In an early exchange, this bulletin's argu-rant was nicely summed up by its author as "an attempt to turn my permanent subtext into a text."

Cover image: three generations of Verwoerts

1. PLEASED TO MEET YOU

I am from Germany, I said. Oh, my husband is German too, she said. Our name is Speck. And to confirm, Mr. Speck at the next table in the Florentine Trattoria piped some words meant to be in my language. Beaming. Burly. High blood pressure. Very friendly, actually. From Atlanta, Georgia. In finance. Pleased to meet you. I'm from Geilenkirchen, near Aachen. Small town. You wouldn't have heard of it. Unless you were with the military. Big NATO base close by. For nuclear missiles, initially. Now for AWACS reconnaissance planes. People always said we had nothing to fear—that when atomic war came we'd see none of it. Because we'd be the first hit. Funny. Yes, today we visited the *Uffizi* too. Very beautiful. You must try the dessert: *Profiterol*. Pastry balls with a cream filling drowned in a chocolate sauce. Delicious. Enjoy your stay. And safe travels. Speaking of Germans in the States. And the military. Remember the story that passed quickly through the press in 2003, after Donald Rumsfeld made some nasty remarks about Germany and France clinging to hopelessly outdated old-world attitudes by refusing to participate in the war in Iraq? Some journalist recalled that a more youthful Rumsfeld, contrary to these pronouncements, had once been very keen on embracing his own family ties to old Europe. During his time at the Pentagon in the 1970s, he had paid repeated visits to the side of his family that had remained behind in their native Sudweyhe, near Bremen, after his great-great-grandfather left the village for Chicago in 1866. So the German press traced down the original Rumsfelds to hear what they had to say about their great-great-overseas-cousin's recent change of heart. And, to the great joy of a confessedly-pacifist nation concerned that its own Chancellor had failed to make the point convincingly, elderly Margarete Rumsfeld rose to the occasion. She told her interviewers that it was such a shame to see how mean her cousin was acting when he had seemed like such a decent person in the 1970s, how appalled she was at him starting a war. Having lived through the air-raids of World War II as a child, she said, SHE knew that this is a very bad thing to do, so why didn't HE know too? Old Margarete looked just like Donald himself dressed as his own grandmother. Her outfit and humble home were as perfectly conservative as you could imagine, which made her outrage very difficult to dismiss (as mere leftist whining). Granny don't like it: Rumi go home. Would the world finally listen and realize that Germans had learned their lesson?

That we're peaceful, respectable Europeans now? Well — no, actually. I remember conversations with perfectly respectable colleagues in Poland shaking their heads in disbelief. What's wrong with you Germans? You didn't hesitate to invade us! And now we have a chance to go take Iraq together you don't want to come? Why so precious all of a sudden? It felt like the new bad kid in the schoolyard telling the old bully to stop painting his fingernails, shave off that hair, and get back on the job everyone knows he does best. Why pretend? Yes, why pretend? Because we're different now, don't you see? Look at how the German football team played during the last World Cup and European Championships. I swear I read it in a Dutch newspaper: a commentator admitted that, yes, the world had turned upside down, the German team HAD FUN and were FUN TO WATCH while the Dutch team fought with the selfsame single-minded determination and brute force that had always made their nemesis so despicable. A sign of the times? A rhetorical question. Letter to the editor: Yes, thank you, we're nice now. But what about you? Any thoughts on that? On how the unapologetically violent playing style of your national team might mirror the recent collapse of (the facade of) Dutch liberalism? And the all-out triumph of a capitalist mindset so blatantly blunt it would leave you speechless had you not long accepted money to be your country's one true religion? What's wrong then with the leader of a government party proposing internment camps for socially unacceptable individuals outside Amsterdam? If it's good for business ... "Immigrants destroy this town," an Amsterdam taxi driver once told me. How would the poor possibly have the power to do that, I wanted to know. Was it not rather the moneyrule and real estate gambling that made the city uninhabitable? "Yes!," he responded, "the Jews!" And only last night I was chatting with a local from Rotterdam who was into football, so I asked him whether he thought it said something about the state of the nation that some fans recently beat a lineman to death after a local match because they disagreed with his decisions. The guy said no, people just need to understand that a lineman can make mistakes. Sure, they were wrong to kill him, and if they ever did it again they ought to be barred from attending games. Morality as double-entry bookkeeping — just make sure to stabilize the balance between mistakes and deaths. It worked in the colonies, so why reconsider now? There's an economy to brutality. I should know. When it comes to enforcing the norms of neoliberalism, Germany is rapidly becoming one of the most aggressive players in

Europe today. Pretending it was picking up the tab for everyone and only wanted to save the Eurozone and ... As if. Greek protesters are right when they accuse the German Chancellor of blackmailing governments of the south into enforcing the antisocial economic standards of the north. Real conservative societies like Spain or Greece are much more socially conscious. There, the public sector used to employ a man, his wife, cousins, and mistress, and permit them all to push the same pencil. Society is built on proximity, not on belief in the abstract state machine. After all, no sane citizen would pay taxes to a state whose public institutions you know to be less than trustworthy — because half your relatives work there. It's a family affair. This is what societies of the north don't understand. They tear close bonds apart by raising the pressure on every single individual to become an unattached, universally deployable 24/7 solo performer. The north wears its people out. It needs to relearn the social skill of organizing unproductivity by means of intensified family ties. And the crisis? One could encourage the super-rich of the south to put their money back into their own national economies instead of buying up parts of London. That might help. Austerity measures won't. They only make people ACTIVELY hate a state they didn't trust in the first place, and hence even less likely to pay taxes or give their money to its banks. Why bow to excessive economic demands imposed by a foreign nation? This question has a history. And some Greek protestors showed up in well-chosen period costume when Chancellor Merkel came to visit. They wore black boots, brown shirts, swastika armbands, and performed defiantly resolute Roman salutes. Just as the Germans did to articulate their rage in the face of the economic pressure France exercised on the country after World War I in the form of reparation demands (which took until September 2010 to be paid off). The Greek anti-Merkel demonstrators in SS gear hence succeeded in performing a most faithful historical reenactment of the Nazi's rise to power, true to the spirit of fury and infantile vengefulness that had propelled it the first time around. It's a force that moves people, much more easily than the will to take responsibility for the mess you got yourself and others into.

2. IT'S THE INDUSTRY, STUPID

That uniform: how does it feel to wear it? Buy some Hugo Boss. He was

one of their tailors. Still worn by business stormtroopers around the world! But seriously, Harry (your Highness), what was it like to step into an original cut of that little khaki SS number you wore to the costume party? Just sexy, or something more? What would have happened if, back in the day, your empire had stopped pretending it was only exporting civilization, building a commonwealth, and had instead chosen a somewhat more high-modernist, direct, impolitic manner of declaring its claim to supremacy? Did it ever occur to you, Harry, that the immutable class system your family graces with the air of hereditary legitimacy may have been one (if not the) main reason such a dress code didn't have much of a chance on the British Isles? Like most modernist forms of radicalism over there, it got defused by the custom to moderate and mitigate social forces according to the laws of class rule. Such a system had been weakened in Germany. After the abdication of the Kaiser, Hitler pushed into the vacuum with the German industries and masses behind him to destroy hereditary wealth and build highways to social mobility by turning the whole society into one big, fully modernized war-factory. The anti-modernist aristocracy around Claus von Stauffenberg was too late in realizing that this little big voice on the new media, the radio, would be the end of all they owned and commanded. Sure enough, by the end of the war that the modern death factory manufactured, there was literally nothing left of the country they had once ruled. Himmler once said it straight in a speech to SS top brass: by wiping out all the old towns in the country, Allied bombers were doing Germans a great favor, because it meant that after the war we wouldn't have to tear them down ourselves to build modern cities [*sic!*]. Total destruction — towards rebuilding a society in the likeness of the apparatus that brought about its erasure. The medieval woodworks of the old inner-cities made for good tinder. A few hours' firebombing on a hot summer night was apparently enough to burn Kassel to the ground, for instance. Since reconstruction, the city now officially has one of the most car-friendly layouts in the country — an infrastructure without which new industrial products (not least the car itself) couldn't circulate properly. Room had to be made. What cynicism! And yet on a trip to Oslo a couple of years back, looking down with some bewilderment from the Palace Park onto the modern business district by the Fjörd, I wondered aloud to my Norwegian colleague: "This place never got bombed, did it ... so how come there's all this postwar architecture in the inner-city?" Nonchalantly he replied, "Oh, this is where the poor

used to live in old wooden houses. Bad hygienic conditions. So after the war they moved everyone out, burned down the houses and built the office blocks.” Gasp. Shudder... Then driving through Ramallah in Palestine, my host’s friend asked me about Germany, so I delivered my by-now-well-rehearsed speech about how the country had changed, how the disempowerment of the military as a social player after World War II had been crucial for the rise of a liberal civil society. After all, I said, didn’t the current situation in the Middle East confirm this? Given that the military on both sides, Arab and Israeli, are the most influential social force in the country, with the majority of careers networked through its apparatus, is there any doubt about why the situation is only getting worse? Why would the region’s military industrial complex ever relinquish its socio-political hegemony, bury its source of influence together with the hatchet and let a civil society emerge that thrives on the shared commerce and culture (which practically already exists)? What was there to learn from the postwar German situation if not that the military industrial complex is and will always be the source of the problem, and to curb its influence is the only way to bring about ... yada yada. The driver’s friend listened to me with interest, then politely inquired, “But German companies sell very good weapons, no?” His perfectly unassuming manner only heightened my sense of total embarrassment. What bigots: Me. Us. Nice Germans. Professional pacifists. With very good products on offer.

3. THE JOKE

One of our best products is critical-historical consci(enti)ousness. We are very good at manufacturing self-criticality. Scholars of former imperialist nations can learn much from the uncompromising rigor with which we German intellectuals have dared to address the crimes and monstrosities of our past. All is laid bare. We expect to receive a medal for it soon. The guilt is ours. Ours, you hear? And since the guilt is ours, we alone shall rightfully pass the verdict on ourselves. So could everybody else please be so kind as to stop making dumb Nazi jokes? Don’t you see, we’re trying to keep things serious around here! Silence! We must concentrate! On proving to the world that we know everything better than everybody else, including the exact depth and degree of our guilt! Foreigners, don’t remind us. We’ve already perfected the art of reminding ourselves ourselves.

Thank you. In other words, the problem does not lie (as right-wingers in Germany keep claiming) in the self-assignment of guilt that has gradually become a vacuous ritual perpetuated by leftist moralists. No. Anti-fascist moralist rituals are okay, even if no one thinks a thing while performing them. The fact that they exist in Germany at all means that a populist like Dutch politician Geert Wilders would have automatically been banned from public office for proposing something like the Amsterdam work camps, or that (confessing) heirs to the original fascist parties wouldn't be allowed into the government, as they are in Spain and Italy. Moralism is not the problem. Authorship is. For here is where paradox and vanity reign supreme: *the very attempt to excel at writing the history of national guilt betrays the will to (re-)authorize that history*—as if one could take the case out of the hands of the foreign judges and juries and preside over one's own trial. Even if the verdict remains "guilty," it will be a judgment not just received but PASSED by oneself. Ironically, the ostentatious diligence we German intellectuals of two postwar generations have exhibited in authorizing our guilt feeds into a culture that seeks to own itself again. And in this sense, it is not so fundamentally different from the relentless insistence of the right-wing mainstream that, historically, it was now about time that things returned back to "normal." We got the East back, we moved the capital back from Bonn to Berlin, the economy is doing fine. *Und so weiter*. Irish stand-up comedian Dylan Moran made this point brilliantly in a 2006 skit. Running through a list of habitual national resentments, he eventually gets to Germans. Nice modern Germans talking with confident modesty about how things are going quite well these days. "We are very vibrant in theater and the arts." Moran nods in agreement. Yes, he says, you listen, but while you listen, you still think—he blurts—"Hitler Hitler Hitler ... Hitler Hitler Hitler Hitler Hitler ..." (imitating machine gun fire). This is how it is. And how it will continue to be. Because when you start two world wars and methodically murder millions of your people for being Jewish (Communist, Gay, Sinti, Roma), you forfeit the possibility of being your own judge and jury. To assume it was up to us Germans to decide when it's time to get back to "normal" is not just delusional; any Nazi joke freely made by someone else shows how utterly ridiculous it is. The world decides. With every joke. Normality? Forget it. Not up to you. Hitler Hitler Hitler Hitler. That such jokes also offer a way for others to indulge in unreconstructed feelings of supremacy and offload imperialist guilt may be true (Moran

himself performs the role of the bigot with conscious glee). But it makes no difference. These jokes are the judge and jury of history, and their simple truth remains: the perpetrator loses all rights to the authorization of his own story. Irreversibly. Irredeemably. Still, he must answer, not only in his name, but also that of others. My last name sounds Dutch. My great-great-grandfather probably was. “Verwoert” originally ended with a “d,” but my grandfather changed it to a “t” to make it more German—as was more or less imperative at the time. In 1952, my Aunt Karin went to the police to report the fraud and get the “d” back. The officer on duty apparently asked her whether she didn’t have more serious matters to attend to. As it happened, she did. She had had her first nervous breakdown already, and so the “t” remained. Half a century later, in the wake of her second or third breakdown, my aunt now upholds the theory that there are third-degree family relations to Hendrik Verwoerd, the architect of South African apartheid. There’s no way to prove it. Which again is not the point. The point is, in some parts of the world my name just has that ring about it—as was brought home to me when an artist from South Africa came up after a talk in Berlin and said he simply couldn’t believe that someone with my name could be a critic. The same year I spent a great evening with a group of South African artists in Bern who told me: “Jan, with your name, you’re just going to have to live with the fact that we’ll be making jokes about you all night.” Gently, they didn’t. But this is how it is. This is how history works. So the dilemma is that *while you lose the right to authorize what was done in your name, you still have to take full responsibility for it*—even if it will never be clear what “taking responsibility” can and does mean in any given situation. In some circumstances it will certainly involve acting, writing, and speaking, but in others it could simply mean accepting that the joke for the night is on you.

4. A MODERN MAN’S AMBITIONS

It happens when you’re called by your last name. In this moment, whatever was and is in the family is passed over onto you. Even though you had no choice in the matter. My grandfather Harry William had no choice either. He was fathered by a guy called Viereck. Germans might find that funny—it means square. Anyway, as it turned out, Herr Viereck had a

few things running on the side, so my great-grandmother gave him the boot and took up instead with Heinrich Verwoerd, a sailor. Heinrich moved the family from Cuxhaven to Duisburg, where he worked unloading ships in the harbor. By all accounts, he seems to have been a very likeable guy; a passionate labor unionist, fun to be with. A heavy drinker though. Apparently, the most important holiday for him was May 1st. Year after year he would be returned to the family in a wheelbarrow, passed out, drunk and happy. His son, my grandfather, hated him for it. For all of it, I'm sure. But most of all, I assume, for being working class and proud of it. Because my grandfather wanted something else. He wanted to get into business and rise above his background. He never touched a drop of alcohol and worked until he had his own bakery, which then burned down in one of the first air raids. To get by after the war he baked bread for someone else in the morning and played the violin in a dance band at night, for money, in bars, for Russian soldiers. And although his entrepreneurial ambitions endured, the closest he ever came to the real culture of enterprise was working as a valet at the Düsseldorf trade fair, showing businessmen to their cars. He was proud that these men knew him, running the lot from the saddle of his collapsible bike. He worked there until the age of 93, voted FDP, the German entrepreneur's party, and wore the party's signature piece of clothing to work: a yellow cashmere sweater, as beloved as the red scarf is to a Socialist. During the war he cooked food in a field hospital in Finland, and though he never formally joined the National Socialists, the party certainly spoke to ambitious modern men like him, no longer content with their class or to live the lives of their fathers. The National Socialists promised precisely what he was dreaming of—to modernize the country and open the gates to upward mobility. Upward mobility: that was the idea. It's somewhat strange that a man so otherwise rooted in the material world would be susceptible to ideas at all. But rise above—yes, at all costs. He sympathized with the Nazis for the same reason he wore cashmere in the parking lot. The story is much the same on my mother's side of the family in Hamburg. The great-grandfather: a carpenter and Social Democrat at peace with his place in society. His son: a car mechanic who loved speeding motorcycles. Anything fast and modern, in fact, for he too wanted to leave his father's life behind. So he joined the party, but didn't make it through the war. The family gravestones in Hamburg's cemetery tell the story of two generations. One is beautifully ornate with a hammer and a wood

plane chiseled from the stone on its top. The other is one of hundreds of identical small, flat rectangular soldiers' graves, numbered in rows. Class consciousness. And modernity. Death as a singularity. And death as a product. Mass produced. With a serial number. The mythic theatricality of Nazi rallies and parades tends to be interpreted as proof of a country carried away on a wave of dark romantic feeling for a form of the satanic sublime. As if any baker or car mechanic raised in a hard material culture had much of a sense for such feelings. It's not the Wagnerian pomp that produced the horror, but a different force. You sense it when you spell out the full name of the "Nazi" party: NSDAP, *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei*, the National Socialist German Workers Party, a modernist movement attempting to align the desires of a mass of social climbers with the interests of the German industries to force the country's modernization. At all costs. There are brute economic forces driving anti-semitism. A nation raids the capital and real estate of one key group within its own constituency, a pillar of its society, by declaring this part of itself to be no longer part of itself. Recall what the Dutch taxi driver said. If those who perceive themselves as the core of society sense an imbalance in the social distribution of wealth, they put the blame on the very poor and the very rich at the same time. The magic thought is: cut off the extremes and the middle will be fine. Traditionally, the urban Jewish communities were divided between the conspicuously impoverished and the reportedly very well-off. Their curse was therefore to represent both lots of money, and none at all. One force behind anti-semitism, therefore, is the ill belief that the very difference between rich and poor could be erased from society if the social group most prominently representing that difference (by virtue of its conspicuous divide) were expelled or crushed. And it is absurd to claim that a few decades of historic distance between the Holocaust and the present have made these forces and ideas obsolete. All the factors are still in play — on a global scale. Talk to people who vote Wilders or Berlusconi. You won't be surprised, but horrified.

5. BREAKS AND BONES

This is what it looks like from inside the families. And the fact that my own parents in turn broke with their parents' break, to become a dedicated history teacher and (Fluxus) artist, created the distance that allows me

now, as a writer, to put these things in words. To what end? To authorize a history of successive breaks between generations? Or to receive what's passed on regardless? How do you even identify this transgenerational heritage? The less I drink the more I look like my grandfather (who never touched a drop). I also share his taste for luxury, while the charms of cashmere would never occur to my sweet father. Is that enough to prove a connection? Once I played music with my grandfather. When intuitively working out the timing of a piece of music with someone else you can feel how the other feels. In this moment it was immediately, undeniably, disturbingly clear how much of him I have in my bones. Breaks and bones ... is this how the story of transgenerational transference is told—to be authorized by the last one to speak? In a group critique at the Ha'Midrasha art school in Tel Aviv, where I have been a visiting professor for the last two years, the term "third generation" came up. A student was in the middle of presenting a series of photos of friends and lovers, both Israeli and German. Her intention was to examine what it meant that they—we—were of this same generation, sharing the memories handed down to us. Suddenly my colleague Roe Rosen exploded: "But what exactly DO you remember!?" Silence. True. Why would we bank on the idea that memories were transferred, bodily, across generations? It brought home a painful irony of history. For German intellectuals of the left, it still feels like an irrevocable commitment: to defend such belief in the transfer of historical guilt and responsibility against the flat out denials of the right and popular sentiment that it is time for a return to "normality." In Israel, on the other hand, the inception of a prominent national memorial culture surrounding the Holocaust arguably began only at the end of the 1960s, at the same time the country started a permanent war against its neighbors, and expansion of its territory. Prior to this, as Amos Oz describes in his novel *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, Holocaust survivors would relate to their agony almost with a kind of shame, because those involved in the foundation of the state of Israel considered the fate of these "late arrivals" an unwelcome reminder of a history of trials and tribulations that would (or should) come to an end with the beginning of the new nation. Cultural memory finds itself caught between a rock and a hard place. When rigorously authorized by the left in one country and the right in another, the premise that transgenerational transference gives you motives to act upon suddenly seems questionable, to say the least. What exactly do you remember? This is the most crucial question to be

asked in order to counter the impulse *to authorize what perhaps cannot be owned but still must be addressed.* That which is always there, in speech and in silence. On another occasion, one student remarked laconically that it was the same story with her grandparents, who survived the camps, as it was for many other families: the grandmother talked about it all the time, while the grandfather never said a word, only read a lot, mostly German literature. That marriage of all talk and deathly silence screwed up her father, she said. And then he had a daughter. So the memory's there — somewhere between speech and speechlessness, in the loss of a language that may once have been shared. What we materially inherit together, then, is interruption: biographies are truncated and speech is maimed in the process. We cannot say how German would be spoken on the streets, nor what literature, philosophy, and music could still be written in this language, had this break not occurred. If there is an inherent task to writing now, it is to sensitize language to this pain of not knowing, in opposition to those who talk or write in German as if it were still an intact language to be used with confidence, by birthright. But this is only how it pans out in words. What other ways are there to testify to the interruptions in the family lines, produced by the violence of the forces of modernity in one generation, and the attempts to overcome those forces in the next? So many particular cuts and stories. Yet one big mess. Passed on. Yes, we're still in it. And there's no way other than to speak and take on what came to pass. In one's name. Only the discourse brought to you in your name cannot be undersigned by a single signature. Interrupted as it is, it belongs to many. No name arrives unbroken, untroubled by questions. For instance, as to its proper ending.

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