

The German as pariah

Karl Jaspers and the question of German guilt

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A great deal has been written about Heidegger's involvement with National Socialism, and still more about his notorious silence about the crimes of the regime to which he lent his support and enthusiasm. Much has been and will continue to be said about the connections between his early philosophy and his political attitudes. But, apart from Habermas's scant references to his role after 1945, Karl Jaspers has received hardly any attention. This is especially odd, since in the 1950s Jaspers and Heidegger were the undisputed giants of postwar German existentialism, conjoined in numerous depictions linking Heideggerian *Dasein* to the irreducibility of man's existence brought into relief by the limit situation described by Jaspers' *Existenz-philosophie*. Jaspers' name was so often coupled with Heidegger's that he once considered writing a book about their differences under an epigram from Cicero's *De oratore*: 'People are always used to thinking about both of us together, and whenever people talk about us, they feel they must render judgement about us through comparisons. But how dissimilar is each from the other.'¹

Nevertheless, before 1933 such comparisons were not entirely arbitrary. In the early 1920s Heidegger and Jaspers regarded themselves as a *Kampfsgemeinschaft*, a kind of philosophical duo resolutely struggling together against the official Kantianism of the day. Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927), like Jaspers' early work on the *Psychology of Worldviews* (1919) and his *Reason and Existence* (1935), are – despite their disparities – explorations of how being is encompassed by what Jaspers called the 'immanence of the world'. Only their earlier intimacy and fidelity to each other explains why Heidegger's commitment to the Nazi revolution was experienced by Jaspers as so total a betrayal.

During the Nazi years Jaspers steadfastly chose to remain in Germany, despite his well-known antipathy to the regime and his removal from the University in 1937.

For Arendt, 'what Jaspers represented then, when he was entirely alone, was not Germany but what was left of *humanitas* in Germany. It was as if he alone in his inviolability could illustrate that space which reason creates and preserves between men.'² Unlike *Die geistige Situation der Zeit* (The Spiritual Situation of the Age), Jaspers' 1931 jeremiad against the 'despiritualization of the world', *Die Schuldfrage* (The Question of German Guilt) was the first contribution to what Habermas called the postwar consensus of the Federal Republic, establishing the connection between a collective German responsibility (*Verantwortlichkeit*) and a democratic political identity.³ Jaspers later recalled that *Die Schuldfrage* was written at the moment that the crimes of National Socialist Germany were first made 'apparent to the entire population'.⁴ But he was practically alone in publicly acknowledging that fact. Moses Moskowitz, who reported on conditions in Germany for *Commentary Magazine* in the summer of 1946, wrote that 'To date no one (except the philosopher Jaspers) has arisen in Germany to exhort his people to repentance and expiation for the mass graves of Jews dotting half the European continent.'⁵

After the war Jaspers, who was by then in his sixties, abandoned the traditional reticence of the German academic philosopher to enter the public realm. As 'the symbol of changed times and attitudes', during the 1950s and 1960s he intervened forcefully in the great controversies over Germany rearmament and reunification. Jaspers was no longer a philosophical outsider, but had become the 'Preceptor Germaniae' of a new postwar Germany, the public advocate of moral reversal and a repudiation of the 'national state thinking' that had characterized previous generations of German philosophers.⁶ In postwar Germany Heidegger's silence was a political statement; that Heidegger chose silence, while Jaspers spoke often, and to as broad a public as

possible, is of enormous political significance. When Jaspers noted that in postwar Germany 'no one can in honesty withdraw from political activity and cooperation', he seemed to be speaking of Heidegger's militant silence.⁷ Moreover, his advocacy of the 'European Spirit', of the unity of Western and non-Western metaphysics, was clearly directed against Heidegger's continued insistence on the 'German' roots of his thought. In his fateful report to the Freiburg University Senate Committee in December 1945, which led to the teaching ban imposed on Heidegger in January 1946, Jaspers noted that Heidegger 'certainly did not see through the real forces and purposes of the National Socialist leader'.⁸ Their philosophical divergence was emblematic of a wider disjuncture between speech and silence in postwar German society: between the larger private world of silence and the public world of official declarations – what Ernst Nolte derisively referred to as the gap between the *pays réel* of the *Stammtisch* (pub table) and the *pays légal* of officially sanctioned ritualistic commemorations of the crimes of Nazism.⁹

Jaspers' association with the postwar revival of humanism, and the linking of political freedom and democracy with the rhetoric of 'guilt', 'atonement' and 'penalty' (reparation) in Germany, was a way of re-establishing what Jaspers called the 'unconditionality' of good and evil in politics. In contrast to Adorno's undifferentiated reading of Jaspers as the ideologue of postwar existentialist vapidness, Habermas stresses the break in Jaspers's thought, above all his insistence on a communicative concept of reason, and, more importantly, his view that only under the conditions of free communication among political equals could a new German polity be created.¹⁰

If theoretical or practical reason proved powerless to prevent politically sanctioned murder, how then, Jaspers asked, can the nihilistic threat be removed without either opting for some illiberal *volonté général*, or entirely giving up on modernity and returning to some more traditional framework, for example, that of religion? His answer was an unambiguous embrace of the values of the 'West', that is, of Anglo-Saxon democratic liberalism. Jaspers' response thus helped produce what Habermas has called the 'basic consensus' of the Federal Republic, the implied connection between political 'responsibility' and political identity in the framework of a neo-Kantian ethics. This connection, which Habermas has called 'postconventional identity', has been – and will no doubt continue to be – called into question as Germany enters a new era of national reconstitution – of reunification. For this reason it is of interest to return to the conditions of the original

formulation of this consensus – not only for the purposes of defending its original intent, but also to inquire into some of its weaknesses.

I

A cursory comparison of the text of Jaspers' *Die Schuldfrage* (*The Question of German Guilt*), published by Piper Verlag in 1979, with the first edition that appeared with Lambert Schneider Verlag in Heidelberg in 1946 reveals that a preface has been deleted in the later version. This absence is understandable, since Jaspers' opening remarks, directed at his audience in the Alten Aula of Heidelberg University, would have been superfluous twenty years ago. But the fact that they *were* necessary in 1945/46 makes us aware of the *geistige Klima* (spiritual climate) that surrounded Jaspers' words: mistrust, scepticism, and the cynical attitude that after the collapse of the Nazi regime the occupation authorities were now imposing *their* ideological and political requirements on Germany. Such requirements, though they claimed to be the opposite of those commonly spoken and heard in the same room for the past twelve years, were in essence the same – a kind of spiritual diktat; this time, however, from the West. 'It is not the way of thinking, but only the direction of the aggression, or fraudulent glorification, which has altered.' To confront this mood directly Jaspers remarked:

All thought and research is, of course, dependent on political circumstances. But the important distinction is whether thought and research are coerced by political power and employed for its own ends, or whether they are left in peace because the authorities want to preserve the freedom of research.¹¹

What primarily interests me in these and other remarks directed at the military government is the fact that Jaspers did not hide the way his own thoughts conformed to the 'political circumstances'. This, however, can be interpreted as both conformity and, to a certain extent, refusal to accommodate to circumstances. Jaspers was certainly sympathetic to the American authorities to a degree. He was present at a meeting of 'reliable' dignitaries organized by the CIC (Counter Intelligence Corps) in 1945 that included Alfred Weber, Gustav Radbruch, Regenbogen and Alexander Mitscherlich, and he had the trust of Edward Hartshorne, the man responsible for German 're-education' at the university level. However, in the complicated intrigues and conflicts between the university (and its rector, Karl Heinrich Bauer) and the CIC, Jaspers sided with Bauer in his efforts to restrict the extent of denazification at the

University of Heidelberg, which was still closed.¹²

Jaspers called Germans to a new 'organization of responsibilities', one that was only possible in collaboration with the occupying powers. He rightly recognized that it was in fact a situation in which the majority of the population would not or could not accept the *distinction* between National Socialism and foreign occupation, and that his remarks were designed not only to explain the difference but to make that occupation useful: 'Then loyal integration into the wider context of the emergent world order would be a matter of conviction and real trust.'¹³ But this, I believe, only helps clarify the context of Jaspers' text. More importantly, from the standpoint of 1996, I would argue that the ways and means that Jaspers chose to argue his case are of lasting consequence. For this reason I propose to examine his rhetorical strategy from the perspective of the controversies that have rolled over German intellectual life since the 1987 'Historians' Dispute' (we might speak of a half-decade long Normalization Dispute from Bitburg to Unification).

My intention is neither to praise nor to bury Jaspers, as was so often the case in the late 1950s and mid 1960s when he stood at the centre of controversies over rearmament, *Verjähmung*, and, when he represented for many conservatives *Landesverrat* (treason), and figured at least for some on the Left, like Adorno, as the representative figure of the exculpatory 'jargon of authenticity'. Rather, I want to examine *Die Schuldfrage* from the perspective of the formation of a political and cultural narrative, a story which, at least for a specific generation of Germans, had authority, plausibility. In the very ruins of National Socialism this narrative was effective, precisely because it could rebuild the intellectual and cultural edifice that had been blown to bits by the end of the war. Thus, what interests me in this text is how it exemplifies one of the first strategies of confronting the National Socialist past. This was only possible, I should add, if its source was above all the one philosopher of repute who remained in Germany throughout the entire National Socialist era, who never collaborated with the regime, who was married to a Jewish woman, and, finally, who was identified with a 'cosmopolitan outlook'. Thus, Jaspers' *Die Schuldfrage* is the founding text of the new narrative of the 'European German', of a neutral, pacifist, and, above all, ethical Germany. Yet, at the same time, what interests me is the ambiguity of this narrative, particularly as it concerns the relationship between Germans and Jews.

In this regard I would like to pose three questions. First, how did Jaspers' self-conscious choice of a highly theological language of guilt and innocence (*Schuld und*

Unschuld) law and grace (*Recht und Gnade*), evasion and purification (*Ausweichen und Reinigung*), contribute to the emergence of a profoundly important idea and reality, the self-perception of Germans as a 'pariah nation'? Second, how did the 'question of guilt' lead to the self-image and ideal of a nationless and cosmopolitan Germany as the 'Weg der Reinigung'? Third, was there, perhaps unconsciously, a transposition or 'change of place' that occurs for the first time in this text, and subsequently in popular attitudes, between Germans and Jews? To put it more simply, how did it come to be that the German people, who had been a nation-state with catastrophic consequences, could, taking the historically nationless *Volk*, the Jews, as the model of a process of self-humanization, themselves reverse the process? And, vice versa, how could the Jews, whose very humanity came from their condition of statelessness, in the wake of their own catastrophe, now deserve a state to protect them? Changing places: Germans and Jews; from nation-state to cosmopolitan citizenry; from cosmopolitan statelessness to a *Volk* with their own right to a nation-state. This theme, which is ambivalent at best, is, I believe, the unacknowledged core of the story that Jaspers proposes.

II

No single intellectual in immediately postwar Germany contributed more to the reorientation of German philosophy toward a reconceptualized Western humanism than Karl Jaspers. His change, most evident in his articles of 1945/6, and in his *Die Schuldfrage*, exemplifies a unique personal reckoning and transformation in the face of the catastrophe. In what was at once a moral journey and a philosophical reorientation, Jaspers attempted to break decisively with the anti-liberal, anti-political and anti-Western elements of his earlier critique of reason, deeply rooted in German idealism – especially in Jaspers' own prewar thought. Jaspers' student, the writer Dolf Sternberger, who, along with Jaspers and the literary critic Werner Krauss, founded one of the first intellectual journals in postwar Germany, *Die Wandlung*, once recalled that 'only the experience of Hitler's dictatorship made Karl Jaspers into a political philosopher.'¹⁴ Indeed, Sternberger wrote, 'a different Jaspers emerged out of the obscurity of oppression.'¹⁵ The title of Jaspers' first postwar lecture series, 'Von der geistigen Situation in Deutschland' (On the Spiritual Situation in Germany) self-consciously recalled and commented on Jaspers' 1931 *Die geistige Situation der Zeit*. Though its illiberalism and hope for a future 'respiritualization' cannot be confused with sympathy for National Socialism, *Die geistige Situation der Zeit* exemplified the

melancholic pathos of antimodernity and the nostalgia for 'substance' and 'authority' typical of the conservative revolution of the 1930s.¹⁶ It is worthwhile recalling, if only to underscore the contrast, that in that work Jaspers condemned Marxism, psychoanalysis and racial doctrine equally for 'having destructive tendencies in common'.¹⁷ In his opening remarks to the 1945/6 lectures, Jaspers emphasized his larger purpose: to provide a moral guideline for German reconstruction, an 'ethos': 'the drafting of an *ethos*, that remains for us – even if this is the ethos of a people regarded by the world as a pariah people.'¹⁸

The possibility that the Germans are or might be regarded as a 'pariah people' is perhaps the most important yet overlooked theme in Jaspers' writing during this period. An admirer of Max Weber, Jaspers derived his understanding of the concept of the pariah from Weber's own admiration for the 'tarrying endurance of the Jews'. In his *Ancient Judaism*, Weber portrayed the *ethos* of the pariah people as one of social exclusion and worldliness, combined with an inner anticipation embodied in the ecstatic visions of the Prophets. The suffering of the Jews in exile was the path to inner purity and collective redemption. Yet, as Hannah Arendt pointed out, social isolation was not without its benefits: exclusion from power was a powerful impulse to private humanity. For Jaspers, the Germans too, in an

astonishing reversal, had now become a people deprived of their national existence and excluded from the community of nations because of the enormous suffering they had inflicted on others, above all the Jews. Their state destroyed, their country under foreign rule, their leaders in flight or in custody, Germans now occupied a position not unlike the one occupied by the Jews – in an ironic twist, they had begun their own political diaspora.

Die Schuldfrage is an attempt to provide a guide to the wanderings of the German spirit in this new incarnation as a stateless spectre. But it also delivers a warning: if Germans do not complete a moral self-education, this condition might become permanent. Though its larger goal was to herald emancipation from the nation-state and the beginnings of a new world citizen, a politics 'with a cosmopolitan intention', it provided the Germans with a programme for citizenship in this new collective. As Arendt recognized, the new global human solidarity envisioned by Jaspers is a restatement of Kant's ideal of 'perpetual peace', and a rethinking of his history from a 'cosmopolitan standpoint'.¹⁹

If the solidarity of mankind is to be based on something more solid than the justified fear of man's demonic capabilities, if the new universal neighborhood of all countries is to result in something more promising than a tremendous



Hitler contemplating the bust of Nietzsche

increase in mutual hatred and a somewhat universal irritability of everybody against everybody else, then a process of mutual understanding and progressing self clarification on a gigantic scale must take place.²⁰

This necessary self-clarification was both internal and external; it was predicated on a break with the major philosophical traditions in the West which conceived of thought as an isolated and solipsistic process:

Jaspers is as far as I know, the first and only philosopher who ever protested against solitude, to whom solitude appeared 'pernicious' and who dared to question 'all thoughts, all experiences all contents' under this one aspect: 'What do they signify for communication'.²¹

For Jaspers, expression and truth were never distinct. Thinking is a practice that occurs *between* individuals; communication is not secondary to truth, not mere representation, but central. Although as a mandarin intellectual of the old school Jaspers remained somewhat sceptical of parliamentary politics, he was also a pluralist in the sense that he believed diversity and variety across cultures to be the basis for a universal philosophy, not evidence of its impossibility. Habermas's view that modern ethics takes as its starting point the human communicative potential given in speech owes much to Jaspers' emphasis on the political significance of 'limitless communication' between, against and within traditions.

Jaspers' humanism was not predicated on the formal universalism of Kant, nor on the visible community of the nation, nor on the language of 'rights', but on the ideal of a moral existence achieved through communication with others, what he called *Existenz*. For this reason Jaspers always insisted on the public character of his utterances, and on the necessity of a public process of spiritual reconstruction. 'Everything base in public life can be corrected only in and through public life', he remarked.²² This is perhaps Jaspers' most important contribution to the intellectual reconstruction of postwar Germany: the insight that a public life is only possible in and through a constitutionally sanctioned liberal polity; that political freedom and public discussion were indispensable to producing the political 'transformation' of Germany. Political freedom, according to Jaspers, begins when the individual feels responsible for the political acts undertaken in his or her name. Though Jaspers was far less interested in the formal elements of a new parliamentary system – parties, interest groups, trade unions, and so on – he focused his attention on the moral element, what he believed was the

unique element, in the German experience.

Jaspers was well aware of the obvious contradiction between the historical circumstances of Germany in 1945/46 and the message of the *Schuldfrage*: German guilt was established by outsiders, imposed by force of arms and under political dictatorship: 'We live in the situation of "*vae victis*".'²³ Yet this situation was not one of barbarism. The opening to the West, the redirection of German politics, was governed by the fact that the political identity of the Germans was prescribed and imposed from above and outside. The victors, Jaspers added, were peoples who recognized 'human rights', indeed whose history was bound up with their very elaboration. Western values were thus imposed on Germany from outside in an authoritarian manner, but they were not discredited. A more serious inhibition to their acceptance was the condition of Germany itself. Political responsibility emerges only in authentic communication among autonomous individuals, a communication that was by Jaspers' own admission practically nonexistent in the atmosphere of ruin, hunger, grief, dissolution, hypocrisy and four-power occupation that existed at that time.

Nonetheless, Jaspers still perceived a possibility for renewal in German cultural history in 1945: 'We have lost almost everything: state, economy, the secure basis of our physical existence, and even worse than that: the valid norms that bind us all together, moral dignity, the unifying self-consciousness of a people.'²⁴ This loss was accompanied by an entirely new circumstance: the disappearance of the National Socialist powers at large; the end of independent German statehood; the 'dependence of all our collective acts on the will of the occupying powers, which liberated us from the National Socialist yoke'.²⁵ But even if political initiative was limited to the narrow scope of this situation, the possibility of speech was present for the first time: 'We may now speak publicly with each other, let us now see what we have to say to each other.'²⁶ A risky enterprise, allowing Germans to speak after the collapse of the Nazi regime. No doubt Jaspers was aware of this danger when he wrote those lines in the introduction to the first volume of *Die Wandlung* (The Transformation): 'We have changed inwardly and outwardly in twelve years. We are still in a process of further change, which cannot be foreseen.' The new journal was not conceived programmatically; it was to permit free 'meditation and discussion'. But it was also based on certain principles: on a recognition of the 'common origins of humanity' and on a rejection of the 'true evil of Nihilism', of 'contempt for humanity', and of 'heinous cynicism'.²⁷

In an autobiographical sketch written in 1957, Jaspers

recalled that he was one of the few who believed that 'since 1933 it was probable, and since 1939, certain, that the events in Germany meant the end of Germany. *Finis Germaniae*.' What would such a complete breakdown of the German polity represent? As Jaspers recognized, 'so many German persons, speaking German, partakers in the events originating in the lost German state, would survive. What shall they do, what gives their existence value, do they remain Germans and in what sense do they have any task?'²⁸ These questions led Jaspers to his most important conclusions. First, Germany is no longer a political entity. Neither the German empire nor the 'Third Reich' were more than a 'short-lived political episode'. Second, the tradition of German Idealism is still a source of cultural identity: that which is still German, which 'lives in the great spiritual realm, spiritually creating and battling, need not call itself German, has neither German intentions nor German pride, but lives spiritually from things, from the ideas of worldwide communication'.²⁹ In short, the end of German political existence can now bring into existence the true German – the universal citizen.

Germans could find solace in the foundation of history (*Grund der Geschichte*) and in solidarity with that which 'human beings throughout the world experienced in *extremis*, even if these values were despised in their own Fatherland'.³⁰ But how could the twin evils of nihilism and anti-humanism be avoided; how could the *anamnestic* solidarity of Germans with the other peoples of the world be established – how could Germans cease to be citizens of a narrowly circumscribed nation state and become world citizens?

If Jaspers might appear both excessively optimistic and naive about the potential offered by the political and moral collapse of Germany, his attitude towards the allied occupation was much more pessimistic. He considered the American occupation – which he experienced in Heidelberg – to be 'disastrous'. The blanket criterion of 'party membership' excluded all those from political office whose competence might be useful, while the imposition of democracy from above simply substituted 'for the authority of the Germans selected by you (the American army) the authority of party hacks, party bureaucrats and their directors'. The prospect for democracy was not good. 'But not until twenty years have expired can Germany be ruled by men who are freely elected.' Jaspers did not think that the German pariah should be permitted a political life until 'the power of reasonable men – who exist in Germany, and I believe in good measure – has matured'.³¹ What would that maturity entail, morally and politically? These are the questions first posed by the *Schuldfrage*.

III

Die Schuldfrage was delivered as part of a series of lectures at the University of Heidelberg during the Winter Semester of 1945/46.³² Its overriding theme, the renewal of a German polity through communication, is simply stated at the beginning: 'We must learn to speak with each other' (7). This process, Jaspers added, is far more than an inner-German affair. It alone could deliver 'the indispensable basis on which to speak with other peoples' (10). Before Germany could re-enter the community of nations, it had to undergo a process of political and moral self-clarification, accomplish a restoration of speech from the very ruin of language and politics. What all Germans had in common in 1945, apart from individual experiences of suffering in war and dictatorship, was only the negative experience of being 'a "vanquished nation" (*besiegten Staatsvolk*) delivered up to the mercy or mercilessness of the victor'.

Twelve years of official public propaganda created many different 'inner attitudes', but permitted no common mode of speech, no public language of communication. The possibility of bringing into public speech the private experiences of the Nazi era was made possible only by the victory of the allies. Despite the circumstances of occupation, the 'opening of the doors of the German penitentiary' from outside made the 'German soul dependent on this liberation'. Every German suffered losses, but no loss was as great as the loss of 'a common ethical-political foundation'. The result was profound atomization, the absence of any social solidarity, deep mistrust and suspicion between those who had supported and those who feared the regime. And yet, Jaspers remained convinced, 'Germany can only return to itself when we Germans find each other in communication' (14).

Throughout the text Jaspers adopts the soothing and comforting tone of a stern but sympathetic teacher: the overriding mood is pedagogical, the familiar technique of a teacher reasoning together with his or her students. Of course, there is always something slightly disingenuous about this tactic, the sole voice. But he also adopts the collective 'we', a voice which is conducive to communication. There is no finger pointing, no self-serving rhetoric:

Affect speaks against the truth of the speaker. We will not strike ourselves pathetically on the breast in order to insult others; we will not praise ourselves in self-satisfaction, which is only an effort to make others feel ill. But there should be no inhibitions created by self-protective reticence, no leniency via silence, no comfort through deception. (9)

By depriving the reader of a judging authority, Jaspers writes as part of his own audience: 'In such speech no one is the judge of the other, each is at once accused and judge' (9).

Jaspers has a clear agenda: first and foremost the separation of political responsibility from other forms of guilt. The four concepts of guilt which take up the bulk of the text are familiar. Jaspers distinguished *criminal guilt*, *political guilt*, *moral guilt*, and *metaphysical guilt*. Each is weighted differently, and it is clear almost from the outset that Jaspers is far less concerned with the first than with the last three. Moreover, it is really with the third and fourth categories – moral and metaphysical guilt – that Jaspers is most seriously preoccupied. Political guilt, though it remains critical to the idea of 'responsibility', also remains elusive, and, apart from a few very indirect references, does not distinguish the different ways that citizens might demonstrate responsibility for the acts of a criminal dictatorship.

Given the persistent controversy over the legal and moral basis of the Nuremberg trials, as well as the overwhelming inconsistency of those lesser courts which dealt with those accused of crimes during the Nazi era, Jaspers' few sentences devoted to criminal guilt, 'objectively demonstrable actions which transgressed against clearly defined laws', are barely adequate. Jaspers simply relegates this subject to the authority of the occupiers. The other sections of the text concerned with criminal guilt simply restate the classification worked out in the Statute of the International Military Court: the crime of waging aggressive war; war crimes; crimes against humanity.

Nonetheless, Jaspers argues for the legitimacy of the Nuremberg trials and against the commonplace opinion that they were a national 'embarrassment', or that any tribunal of victors against the vanquished is outside the framework of law. He rejects the *tu quoque* defence (that the victors committed the same crimes) and, most importantly, points out that the trials made manifest the most 'monstrous' consequence of the crimes committed by the Nazis. Hitler and his minions repudiated Kant's famous dictum that 'no act should be undertaken in war which makes a later reconciliation impossible', a crime which encompasses all the others and accounts for the irreparability of the German question.

Political guilt, on the other hand, refers to those whose political office implies responsibility for the acts of state taken by a particular regime. But – and this is perhaps the most important aspect of Jaspers' definition – it also includes every citizen of that state, since 'each human being is responsible, for how he is ruled' (17). Political responsibility is a direct consequence of

political decisions undertaken in the name of the members of a polity whether or not they consent tacitly or explicitly: it requires 'reparations' (not yet explicitly financial), or the 'loss or limitation of political power and political rights' (21).

In contrast to political responsibility, moral guilt is borne only by individuals. Each individual is responsible for his or her own acts. The moral authority of the individual conscience supersedes all other authorities. 'Any haziness concerning this basic fact is as much a form of guilt as the false absolutizing of power as the single determining factor in events' (19). Moral deficiency is the cause of all crime: 'The perpetration of countless tiny acts of indifference, comfortable adaptation, cheap justification of injustice, indifferent promotion of injustice, participation in the public atmosphere which disseminates unclarity and as such makes evil possible', all of that constitutes moral guilt and requires both 'penance and renewal' (*Buße und Erneuerung*).

Metaphysical guilt is by far the most ambiguous and difficult to grasp of the four categories. It refers to a basic *solidarity* between human beings which makes each responsible for all the justice and injustice in the world, 'in particular for the crimes that are committed in their presence and with their knowledge. If I do nothing to hinder them, what I can do, I am guilty.' This guilt, however, is borne neither by states nor individuals, but 'by God alone'. However, recognition of this guilt requires an even greater inner transformation than does moral guilt. It requires a destruction of pride. This inner transformation 'can lead to a new beginning of active life, but only when combined with irreducible awareness of guilt which, in humility, takes its stance before God, and conceives of all acts in an atmosphere that makes arrogance impossible' (21).

Jaspers conceives of these four categories as distinct spheres of responsibility, but also as distinct spheres of action and retribution. Law might affect criminal and political guilt, but not moral or metaphysical guilt. The former are determined 'externally' by the victors (as punishment, as juridical restrictions on Nazi office holders, as general proscription on political organization); but moral and metaphysical guilt remain outside the sphere of legal action; they are matters of individual conscience since 'no one can morally judge another' (23). Collective guilt is thus a contradiction in terms: 'It is against all sense to make a whole people responsible for a crime', and it 'is against all sense, morally to indict an entire people' (24). Since only political responsibility is in any sense collective, collective guilt only has meaning as political

responsibility, never as moral or criminal guilt. 'Collective guilt of a people or of a group within the people can never exist – except as political responsibility – neither as criminal, moral, nor as metaphysical guilt' (25). This distinction is at the core of *Die Schuldfrage*.

The political implications of Jaspers' distinctions are clearly stated in a brief section entitled 'The German Questions'. If Germans are collectively responsible for the political acts of the Nazi regime, they are not criminally liable for them, nor can they be made to bear the full weight of their moral or 'metaphysical' responsibility by others. If in fact 'the Nuremberg trials removed the burden of criminal guilt from the German people, their moral and political complicity was made even more clearly evident by the fact that the regime was acting in flagrant disregard of any known moral or legal principle – including those of the defendants themselves.'³³

Jaspers is also concerned with the various plans (for example, the famous Morgenthau plan) already put forward before the war's end to 'cut up Germany', to 'restrict the possibility of reconstruction', and to 'allow it no peace in a situation between life and death' (30). Although not directly addressed, his argument also seems to speak against 'denazification' as an externally imposed moral imperative. Finally, the question of German guilt is also a political question about the future of Germany: 'It is the question whether it is politically sensible, rational, safe and just, to make an entire people into a pariah people.' Although Jaspers does not fully elaborate on this question, it is clear that his answer is that Germans are politically, morally and metaphysically responsible for the crimes of the Nazi regime, but that the absolute majority is not guilty of any criminal act, and that therefore to declare Germany a 'pariah nation', to punish its people as 'inferior, without worth, and criminal, an ejection of humanity' is unjust and inhuman (31). This transposition is worth emphasizing. Did Jaspers believe that the Germans were being unjustly placed by the occupiers in the position of the Jews? Or did he welcome the new pariah status of the Germans as an opportunity? The first position is consistent with *Die Schuldfrage*; the second emerges more clearly in his letters.

What is clear is that for Jaspers, as for Hannah Arendt, with whom he begun an intense and lifelong correspondence in 1945, human solidarity only becomes meaningful in the context of political responsibility (*Haftung*), for example, with the destruction of the nation-state. His remark, 'Now that Germany is destroyed, I feel myself for the first time uninhibited as a German', affected Arendt deeply and can be understood

in this context. Regardless of any individual guilt that can be ascribed, and irrespective of moral self-scrutiny, political responsibility requires that each citizen is accountable for everything that a government or state undertakes in his name. However, under the shock of recognition that the nation-state is also capable of relieving mankind of its humanity – an annihilatory, totalitarian state deprives its citizens of solidarity – political responsibility extends beyond the borders of the nation-state. According to Arendt, this insight is Jaspers' most important contribution to the revision of Kant:

Just as according to Kant, nothing should ever happen in war which would make a future peace and reconciliation impossible, so nothing, according to the implications of Jaspers' philosophy, should happen today in politics which would be contrary to the actual existing solidarity of mankind.³⁴

Arendt, however, focused even more sharply on political responsibility: for her it was not simply moral guilt but the active engagement of citizens as moral actors that was missing in the tradition of the nation-state (and, by implication, in *Die Schuldfrage* as well).

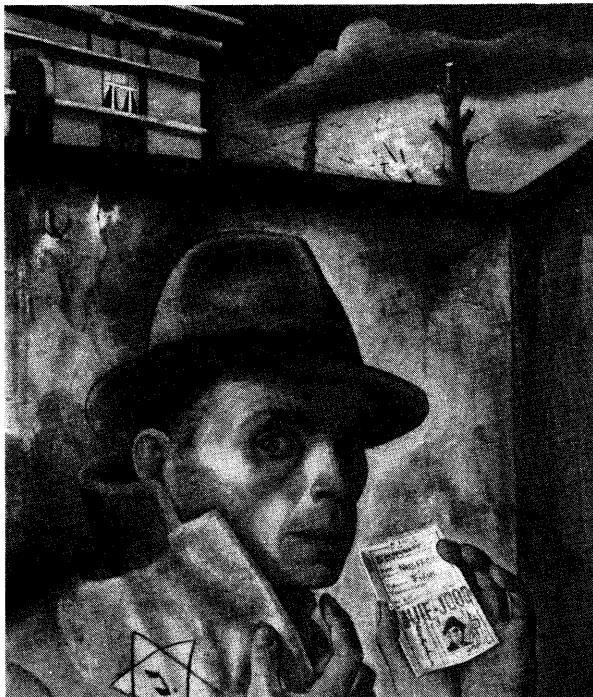
As an attempt to formulate the principles of post-Hitler political methods which transcend the nation-state – that is, as a document of pan-Europeanism – *Die Schuldfrage* should be read in the light of two other texts Jaspers produced in the same period: 'Vom europäischen Geist' (On the European Spirit), a lecture on European unity which he delivered in Geneva in September 1945, and historical epic, *Vom Wesen und Ziel der Geschichte* (On the Essence and Goal of History) (1949). In both of these works Jaspers developed some of the larger implications of his postwar philosophy of *Existenz*. In 1946/7 Jaspers put forward the view that 'Metaphysical ideals are not taken as straightforwardly true, but each stands for the truth of some realm of faith.' As Habermas commented, this philosophy of history brings humanity together 'coercively' in order to 'grasp its chance for a fragile solidarity'.³⁵ But, in a letter of 19 October 1946, Jaspers conceded to Arendt that this solidarity which he included in the concept of metaphysical guilt 'has nothing to do' with the kind of political solidarity – or citizenship – she envisioned. In fact, he notes,

the demand for political solidarity is only valid where the cooperation of a larger part of the population can be counted on. This was frequently there in Italy under Fascism. It is in Germany simply not present, and cannot be immediately demanded. It emerges only from the total context of living with one another.³⁶

In other words, 'solidarity' as Jaspers conceived of it was largely a metaphysical concept (before God) but not a political one, not something which could be achieved among Germans.

Germans therefore seem to be incapable of the political solidarity and active moral behaviour that would qualify them to become citizens either in Arendt's or even in Jaspers', more ecumenical, sense. They are in a state of tutelage, one which requires a moral confrontation with their own guilt, and if possible the metaphysical recognition that would allow them to surpass the narrower horizon of political and moral responsibility. But since they cannot achieve this they must remain, in some sense, a pariah people.

Felix Nussbaum. *Self-Portrait with Judenpaß*, 1943



IV

Jaspers' central role in the intellectual development of post-1945 Germany cannot be underestimated. He embodied the casting off of a certain type of German intellectual tradition, identified with pre-1933 German Romantic philosophy and still embodied in the stance of Heidegger – insular, anti-humanist and anti-Western. His embrace of the values of the Enlightenment – though mediated through a Protestant existentialist world-view – provided the orientation point for Germany's first major confrontation with the Nazi past. Moreover, Jaspers inaugurated the rejection of the liberal tradition of power politics closely identified with Max Weber: *Staatsraison* belonged irredeemably to the context of events that led to the German calamity. Germany could henceforth belong to the community of nations only by rejecting the tradition of the nation-state. Thus, the

'dismemberment' of Germany could not be counted among the other misfortunes suffered by Germans after the war: it might even be considered a blessing.

The break that Jaspers embodied was a major caesura in the political and intellectual constellation of the German philosophical tradition. His work was a clear repudiation of the dream of a German hegemony in Central Europe, and of the 'special path' which severed German thought and politics from the traditions of the Enlightenment. Jaspers also broke decisively with the ideal of national identity as the basis for German social cohesion in the post-Hitler era. Rather, he saw the very lack of national and moral cohesion as an opportunity for reconstituting any future polity along new lines. Finally, and most importantly, he gave intellectual support to the emergence of a minimum 'national consensus' in German political life: that any future German state would become responsible for the crimes of the former, that political responsibility – whatever form that might take: reparations, trials of criminals, education – would be an integral part of postwar Germany.

Jürgen Habermas, in his role as chief protagonist of the *Historikerstreit*, invoked Jaspers to re-emphasize the continuing necessity of this commitment and the need to criticize the neo-conservative attempt to destroy that long-established consensus, to reject the reassertion of the national-state tradition, and, above all, to substitute for a new and cleansed 'national identity' what Habermas has called the 'post-traditional' political identity of postwar Germans.³⁷

For it is only in the untroubled consciousness of a break with our disastrous traditions that the Federal Republic's unreserved openness to the political culture of the West will mean more than an opportunity that is economically attractive and inevitable in terms of power politics.³⁸

Jaspers' legacy requires that the memory of Auschwitz continue to be part of German political consciousness: 'to keep alive, without distortion, and not only in an intellectual form, the memory of the sufferings of those who were murdered by German hands.'³⁹

Habermas's explicit acknowledgement of Jaspers' significance for the moral reconstitution of postwar Germany should not, however, obscure some of the lingering weaknesses of *Die Schuldfrage*. The separation of German guilt into two spheres, moral/metaphysical and criminal/political, gave considerable support to the so-called 'silent' *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the past) of the immediate postwar years. It encouraged the view that politics and morality were distinct and separate spheres, and that Nazism could be regarded as an unfortunate political episode attributable

to Hitler and his fanatical acolytes. The concept of metaphysical solidarity, with its manifest religiosity and pomposity, justifies some of Adorno's bitterest comments in his diatribe against the apologetic rhetoric of postwar existentialism, *The Jargon of Authenticity*. Jaspers' emphasis on absolution, authenticity and decision was in no small part responsible for much of the public language of the postwar era, which, as Adorno contemptuously remarked, 'grasped at the banal, while elevating it and enshrining it in bronze at the very heights, much in the same manner that fascism cleverly mixed the plebeian and the elite'.⁴⁰

Jaspers' strict separation of political and moral responsibility also permitted the political culture of the early Federal Republic to substitute financial reparations and public declarations of responsibility for what might have been more effective and less ritualized attempts to reveal the truth of the Nazi past. It helped to discredit denazification, though admittedly these efforts were haphazard and poorly executed. Despite Jaspers' insistence on communication, *Die Schuldfrage* was still written in the language of German Idealism, with its oblique references and ethereal prose. Yet Jaspers' failure to name the crime against the Jews (although it is obliquely referred to), or to elaborate on the nature of National Socialism's 'singularity', did not fully discredit the exculpations that Jaspers refutes. The work's very sobriety, as Arendt recognized, was in no small part exculpation by understatement.

Even the most courageous aspects of *Die Schuldfrage* cannot be considered unproblematic. Not only did the repression of National Socialism in the 1950s have its social and psychological consequences (authoritarianism, anti-communism, *die deutsche Dumpfheit* [German stuffiness] – as the generation of '68 often called it), but the acceptance of responsibility (in Jaspers' sense) also contributed to the permanent 'oversensitivity' of many German liberals and leftists to all forms of oppression, the compulsive need to identify with 'victims', and the projection of the 'fascist imaginary' onto contemporary events. A permanent consequence of the superior 'coming to terms with the past' represented by Jaspers' *Schuldfrage* was an 'exaggerated superego', especially evident in the protagonists during the intense debate over the Gulf War in 1991. Ironically, in the aftermath of the national self-assertion of 1989/90, the Gulf War confronted Germans with a choice between peace and politics; between absolute innocence and the democratic commitment to a lesser evil. The aftershock of German guilt, especially in the peace movement, turned a legitimate anxiety of ecological disaster caused by war into the apocalyptic image of world-liquidating war:

authentic sympathy for the suffering of war victims, and of the Kurds and Shi'ites persecuted by the war, turned into moralizing self-justification. The result was not a simple pacifism but the inverted nationalism of the eternally penitential nation.

Yet, despite these more problematic aspects, *Die Schuldfrage* was an important beginning. It raised all of the issues that have subsequently been part of the West German confrontation with the past for more than four decades: abnormality versus continuity; national identity versus the burden of memory. Jaspers was the first to break decisively with the characteristic stance of pre-Nazi German philosophy, with its neo-romantic critique of Western decadence and lack of spirituality, so characteristic of both conservative and certain Marxist trends in German philosophy after 1870.

Jaspers was also the first German philosopher who remained in Germany to identify the centrality of Auschwitz for postwar German political consciousness. His contribution above all else was to insist, in Habermas's words, that

Auschwitz has become the signature of an entire epoch – and it concerns all of us. Something happened there that no one could previously have thought even possible. It touched a deep layer of solidarity among all who have a human face. Until then – in spite of the quasi-natural brutalities of world history – we had simply taken the integrity of this deep layer for granted. At that point a bond of naïveté was torn to shreds – a naïveté that as such had nourished historical continuities. Auschwitz altered the conditions for the continuation of a tissue of historical life and not only in Germany.⁴¹

Notes

1. Hans Saner, *Karl Jaspers*, Rowohlt, Hamburg, 1970, p. 147.
2. Hannah Arendt, 'Karl Jaspers: A Laudatio', in *Men in Dark Times*, Harcourt, Brace & World, New York, 1955, p. 74.
3. Jürgen Habermas, 'On the Public Use of History', *The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historians' Debate*, trans. and edited by Shierry Weber Nicholsen, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1989, p. 233.
4. Karl Jaspers, 'Nachwort 1962 Über meine "Schuldfrage"', *Die Schuldfrage*, Piper Verlag, Munich, 1965, p. 84.
5. Moses Moskowitz, 'The Germans and the Jews: Postwar Report', *Commentary* 1/2, 1946, p. 8; cited in Frank Stern, *Im Anfang war Auschwitz: Antisemitismus und Philosemitismus im deutschen Nachkrieg*, Bleicher Verlag, Tel Aviv, 1991, p. 11.
6. See Klaus von Beyme, 'Karl Jaspers – Vom Philosophischen Aussenseiter zum Preceptor Germaniae', in Hartmut Lehmann, ed., *The Spirit of Heidelberg 1945*, German Historical Institute, Washington DC, forthcoming

- 1996.
7. Karl Jaspers, 'A Reply to my Critics', in Paul Arthur Schlipp, ed. *The Philosophy of Karl Jaspers*, Open Court, La Salle, 1981, p. 753.
 8. Hugo Ott, 'Martin Heidegger und der Nationalsozialismus', in *Heidegger und die praktische Philosophie*, edited by Annemarie Gethmann-Siefert and Otto Pöggeler, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1988, p. 66.
 9. The historian Immanuel Geiss recently consecrated this state of affairs as a necessary 'balancing act' between public remembrance and private forgetting: 'Even Germans cannot literally think unendingly about the "Holocaust", which they did indeed bring about. As an abstract formula for the necessary balance between remembrance and forgetting – both necessary in themselves – we might perhaps consider the distinction between public and private, collective and individual action, the former parallel to collective shame and guilt. Collectively, and in the public sphere, the memory of the Holocaust must indeed be kept alive also in Germany, in general and historical writing, in the media and in public discussion, on days of commemoration, on memorials, and in concerts. In their individual and private lives, however, those who were not part of the circle of perpetrators in the narrower sense may be allowed to forget in between times.' (Translated from *Die Habermas-Kontroverse: Ein deutscher Streit*, Siedler, Bremen, 1988, p. 151.)
 10. See, for example, Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lawrence, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1987; Seyla Benhabib, 'Kritik des "postmodernen Wissens" – Eine Auseinandersetzung mit Jean-François Lyotard', in Andreas Huyssen, ed., *Postmoderne: Zeichen eines kulturellen Wandels*, Rohwolt, Hamburg, 1986.
 11. Karl Jaspers, *Die Schuldfrage*, 1st edn, Verlag Lambert Schneider, Heidelberg, 1946, p. 12.
 12. Renato de Rosa, ed., *Karl Jaspers Erneuerung der Universität. Rede und Schriften 1945/6*, Verlag Lambert Schneider, Heidelberg, 1986, pp. 400–422.
 13. *Ibid.*, p. 374.
 14. Dolf Sternberger, 'Jaspers und der Staat', in *Karl Jaspers Werk und Wirkung: Zum 80 Geburtstag Karl Jaspers*, R. Piper, Munich, 1963, p. 133.
 15. *Ibid.*, p. 134.
 16. See Ralf Dahrendorf, 'Kulturpessemismus vs. Fortschrittshoffnung. Eine Notwendige Abgrenzung', in Jürgen Habermas, ed., *Stichworte zur 'Geisigen Situation der Zeit'*, vol. 1, *Nation und Republik*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1979, p. 223.
 17. Karl Jaspers, *Die geistige Situation der Zeit*, W. de Gruyter, Berlin, 1931, pp. 142f.
 18. Sternberger, 'Jaspers und der Staat', p. 135.
 19. Hannah Arendt, 'Jaspers as Citizen of the World', in *The Philosophy of Karl Jaspers*, p. 541.
 20. *Ibid.*
 21. *Ibid.*, p. 543.
 22. Sternberger, 'Jaspers und der Staat', p. 137.
 23. See, for example, 'Die Erneuerung der Universität', (1945), in Karl Jaspers, *Hoffnung und Sorge: Schriften zum Deutschen Politik 1945–1946*, Piper Verlag, Munich, 1965, p. 31.
 24. 'Geleitwort für die Zeitschrift "Die Wandlung"' (1945), in Jaspers, *Hoffnung und Sorge*, p. 27.
 25. *Ibid.*
 26. *Ibid.*
 27. *Ibid.*, p. 28
 28. Karl Jaspers, 'Philosophical Autobiography', in *The Philosophy of Karl Jaspers*, p. 64.
 29. *Ibid.*
 30. Jaspers, 'Geleitwort', p. 29.
 31. Jaspers, 'Philosophical Autobiography', pp. 68, 69.
 32. Karl Jaspers, *Die Schuldfrage: Von der politischen Haftung Deutschlands*, Piper Verlag, Munich, 1987. References in parentheses in the text refer to this edition.
 33. See Martin Löw-Beer, 'Verschämter oder missionarischer Völkermord? Eine Analyse des Nürnberger Prozesses', in *Babylon: Beiträge zur jüdischen Gegenwart*, vol. 1, 1986, pp. 55–69.
 34. *Ibid.*, p. 549.
 35. Jürgen Habermas, *Philosophical-Political Profiles*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1983, p. 47.
 36. Karl Jaspers to Hannah Arendt, 16 October 1946, *Hannah Arendt Karl Jaspers Briefwechsel 1926–1969*, edited by Lotte Köhler and Hans Saner, Piper Verlag, Munich, 1985, p. 99.
 37. On the Historikerstreit, see Anson Rabinbach, 'German Historians Debate the Nazi Past', *Dissent*, Spring 1988, pp. 192–200; Charles Maier, *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust, and German National Identity*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1988; Richard J. Evans, *In Hitler's Shadow: West German Historians and the Attempt to Escape from the Nazi Past*, Pantheon, New York, 1989.
 38. Jürgen Habermas, 'Historical Consciousness and Post-Traditional Identity', *The New Conservatism*, p. 251.
 39. Jürgen Habermas, 'On the Public Use of History', in *ibid.*, p. 233.
 40. Theodor W. Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, Routledge, London, 1986, pp. 6–7 (trans. altered).
 41. Jürgen Habermas, 'Historical Consciousness and Post-Traditional Identity', in *The New Conservatism*, pp. 251–2.

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