Speaking the Unspeakable in Postwar Germany

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Published by Cornell University Press

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Speaking the Unspeakable in Postwar Germany: Toward a Public Discourse on the Holocaust.


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INTRODUCTION: AN ARCHIMEDEAN PODIUM

Give me a place to stand and I will move the Earth.

—Archimedes, quoted by Pappus of Alexandria, Synagoge, book 8

In the short autobiographical prose piece Ein sehr junges Mädchen trifft Nelly Sachs (A Very Young Girl Meets Nelly Sachs), Esther Discherheit reimagines her first encounter with a German-Jewish poet, Nelly Sachs, which took place in 1965.¹ Discherheit remembers that she had been deeply impressed by this “meeting,” which, albeit mediated through television, nevertheless had the effect of momentarily breaking her and her mother’s isolation and loneliness by way of triangulating them with a person with whom they had something in common: like her mother, Sachs had been brought up as an assimilated Jew in the cultivated milieu of Berlin’s affluent bourgeois society. Both Sachs’s and Dischereit’s mothers had responded to the anti-Semitic movement with initial disbelief, and both had survived the Holocaust at the cost of lifelong despair. As the offspring of a Jewish survivor, Dischereit had herself suffered considerably, most notably from the covert

anti-Semitism and open hostility she faced growing up in postwar German society. She thus described Sachs's appearance on German television as an eye-opening and truly dramatic experience:

I sat practically with open mouth in front of the TV, watching high-ranking German politicians giving standing ovations to a Jew. They honored her with a matter-of-factness, which was in complete contradiction to my life and experiences up to that point. That's what it was to me—I was thirteen years old. That was the first unbelievable thing I experienced in connection with this event. Next I heard Nelly Sachs speak. She, a Jew, was able to talk in Germany in a loud and clear voice, with her head raised, and the way she was speaking, Jewish in a completely obvious way, was something that had never existed, not for one day, in our house.

Young as she was, Dischereit had been unaware that in 1965, Sachs's receiving and accepting a major award in Germany was by no means an exceptional occurrence. In the preceding decade, a number of Jewish Holocaust survivors had already been honored by German institutions, and many of these honorees had seized this opportunity to publicly address a broader German audience. But this does not take anything away from Dischereit's astute perception and understanding of the significance of Sachs's intervention. To the contrary, Dischereit’s reflections bring to light what was—and still is—unfairly taken for granted. For the pervasive desire for normalcy and recovery had produced an atmosphere in postwar Germany that veiled how incredible it was that Sachs and others like her could speak, and speak publicly, in and about Germany. And yet Sachs's words, which are so direct and accurate that they “hit my [Dischereit’s] mother’s heart, so that she flushed all over and her eyes shone with sorrow,” would not have been possible in 1965 had there not been a precedent. Before Sachs, other major intellectual and literary figures—most notably Theodor W. Adorno, Hannah Arendt, Ingeborg Bachmann, Martin Buber, Paul Celan, Uwe Johnson, Peter Szondi, and Peter Weiss—had given (or staged, as in the case of Weiss) public speeches in Germany that in some way or another took account of the fact that millions of Jews were murdered in German concentration camps and that postwar Germany’s public did not seem to care. But in contrast to Sachs, these speakers did not speak in verse but instead experimented with the form of public speech, using it as an instrument for both critical analysis and self-reflection.

For these speakers, nothing was a given when it came to Germany: not the notion of “public” nor the genre of “speech” nor even “speaking” itself. Hence nothing in their speeches conforms easily to a given tradition. To the contrary,
their public speeches are exceptions, experimentations, sometimes even accidents. For what could one possibly say when addressing those responsible for the Second World War and the Holocaust? How could one encounter a people that until recently had embodied the savagery of Nazism? How could one properly speak in the language of persecution and genocide? And most importantly, how could one address any of these questions if they were persistently ignored, dismissed, and denied by the German public?

Elaborated through a series of test cases, *Speaking the Unspeakable in Postwar Germany: Toward a Public Discourse on the Holocaust* traces the aesthetic and communicative processes inscribed in the particular practice of public speaking, while inquiring into the conditions under which various authors, scholars, and philosophers helped shape the formation of a public discourse about the Holocaust in postwar Germany. Problematizing the very premise of public speaking in light of a breach in tradition that had yet to be fully understood, these public speakers unfailingly resisted conventional modes of aesthetic and rhetorical representation. Instead of trying to mend what they perceived as a radical break in historical continuity, or corroborating the myth of a “new beginning,” they searched for ways to make this historical rupture rhetorically and semantically discernible and—such is the alternative the medium of public speech presents to these writers and intellectuals—literally audible.

This book thus raises the question of how language failed these public speakers, or how they believed it failed them—a question of particular urgency to the exiled German-speaking Jews who figure prominently in this study, so much so, indeed, that it became their touchstone for the rhetorical and discursive organization of their public speeches. With the exception of Theodor W. Adorno (1903–69), who returned to Germany in 1949 and resumed his teaching duties at Frankfurt University soon after his arrival, as well as Uwe Johnson (1934–84), a German citizen who delivered his speech to the Jewish American Congress (JAC) while living in New York, and Peter Szondi (1929–71), a Hungarian Jew whose speech coincided with his relocation to Berlin, the speakers considered here—Hannah Arendt (1906–75), Martin Buber (1878–1965), Ingeborg Bachmann (1926–73), Paul Celan (1920–70), and Peter Weiss (1916–82)—visited Germany only sporadically. During

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4. The present study spans the historical period that saw the gradual division of the two Germanys and the development of two separate German states. However, it takes the Federal Republic of Germany as its focal point, since the German Democratic Republic’s problematical policies toward the Jews and its ideologically inflated anti-Nazi stance effectively left less room for the development of a discourse about Jewish persecution and a culture of memory. See Jeffrey M. Peck, “East Germany,” in *The World Reacts to the Holocaust*, ed. David S. Wyman and Charles H. Rosenzveig (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 447–72; and Małgorzata Pakier and Bo Stråth, eds., *A European Memory? Contested Histories and Politics of Remembrance* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010).

5. The end of the Second World War was popularly referred to as a *Stunde Null*, a “zero hour” (at 24:00 on May 8, 1945) at which the clock of German history purportedly started ticking afresh.
these visits, then, their native language—enunciated, resisted, and reappropriated in the presence of a live audience—implicates both the speakers and their addressees in often bizarre events of misguided and failed communication. That is, the breach in tradition caused by the war and the Nazi genocide of the Jewish people strongly and repeatedly manifests itself as a crisis of language, so that the questions of how to speak, how to speak in German, and how to speak to the German public are conveyed and enacted in the rhetorical structure, composition, and delivery of the speeches at hand.

What then is the political scope of these public speeches? While only some speakers (most notably Johnson and Weiss) in fact directly responded to current political controversies, all adopted tactics of resistance that would allow them to dismantle the “restorative” discourse that in their view dominated the Christian conservative politics of Adenauer’s Germany. Moreover, they reconfigured the relationship between the public sphere and the very idea of “politics” by drawing attention to the effects of the Nazi past on present-day public life. This was crucial, because, as Arendt explained, they were still under the influence of a major shock caused by the discovery of Auschwitz: “It was really as if an abyss had opened. . . . This ought not to have happened. And I don’t mean just the number of victims. I mean the method, the fabrication of corpses and so on—I don’t need to go into that. This should not have happened. Something happened there to which we cannot reconcile ourselves. None of us ever can.” Rather than being predicated on the ideological framework of West German postwar politics with its emphasis on economic growth, political integration, and cultural recovery, their speeches are characterized by their insistence on a historical absence and an ontological loss: the (virtual) absence of Jews and survivors and their living memory in Germany and the concomitant loss of truth and meaning, justice and ethics.

Thus in addition to offering a new entry into the question of postwar Germany’s public sphere, this book tackles the issue of the fractured cultural and national identities of a number of German Jews, a problem that had little political resonance in the postwar years. It was up to these individuals to untangle the iniquitous legacy of the anti-Semitic legislation of the Third Reich, which had gradually stripped away the possibility that one could be both a German and a Jew. This had profound implications for the public speeches they were to deliver in Germany: no longer

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6. The epithet restaurativ (restorative) is applied by many left-leaning intellectuals of the postwar period.


could they address other Germans as fellow citizens or compatriots, nor could they take for granted a shared culture and knowledge base. In ways both subtle and astonishing, the ideological assertion of a difference thus retained its power in their public speeches. By disrupting the discursive formations of postwar society and by introducing a language that is sometimes hesitant, sometimes taciturn, but always self-consciously (anti)rhetorical, these public speakers exemplify what Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt would come to define, in their 1972 sociological study, Öffentlichkeit und Erfahrung (Public Sphere and Experience), as a Gegenöffentlichkeit (counter-public sphere), which, in addition to arising alongside and against the bourgeois public sphere, emerges from historical breaks: “Historical fissures—crises, war, capitulation, revolution, counterrevolution—denote concrete constellations of social forces within which a proletarian public sphere develops. Since the latter has no existence as a ruling public sphere, it has to be reconstructed from such rifts, marginal cases, isolated initiates.” Although Kluge and Negt’s concept of Gegenöffentlichkeit is of course predicated on the proletarian public and the revolutionary working class, it nevertheless includes all those who exist in a state of tension with the dominant public sphere while positing their specificity and differentiation with regard to the bourgeois model. To the degree that the public speakers under discussion subverted the interests of West Germany’s majoritarian public sphere through their highly idiosyncratic and nonconformist approaches to public speaking—by essentially breaching the unspoken agreement to remain silent about and turn the page on the mass extermination of Jews—they constitute a counter-public sphere along the lines of that defined by Kluge and Negt. There are several reasons why Kluge and Negt’s notion of a Gegenöffentlichkeit is a critical concept for the present study. Firstly, it provides a fitting theoretical framework for a study of public speech or speaking, given that it likewise centers on the construction of an authentic language and new discursive forms that would be genuine to the subjective experience of individuals, enabling them to creatively resist and reappropriate their horizons of experience in an oppositional relation to the bourgeois public. By divulging subjective experiences that undermined the hegemonic discourse on German suffering, and by stating that they represented millions of Jews who had suffered endlessly more, the present set of public speeches became a significant threat to postwar Germany’s status quo. Secondly, Kluge and

10. Ibid., 43.
12. According to Gilad Margalit, the acknowledgment of German suffering was tantamount to denying German guilt during the postwar era. See Gilad Margalit, Guilt, Suffering, and Memory: Germany Remembers Its Dead of World War II (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).
Negt deemphasize the prevalence of the (Habermasian) bourgeois public sphere in order to draw attention to emerging counter-public spheres that defy alienation and fragmentation “from below.” The counterpublic thereby offers, as Miriam Hansen puts it, “forms of solidarity and reciprocity that are grounded in a collective experience of marginalization and expropriation.” This model of two competing discursive spaces—one a “reconciliation narrative” that exercises hegemony, the other an array of unorthodox, experimental approaches to public speaking—is a useful vehicle for understanding Germany’s conflicted public sphere during the postwar years. As various exiled, formerly exiled, or voluntarily exiled literary and intellectual figures began to collide with the limits and exclusions imposed on them by the official discourse of German suffering, the gaps and limitations of West Germany’s public sphere began to unravel. Thirdly, the fact that Kluge and Negt extend the notion of politics to all sites of social interaction legitimizes, indeed encourages, this book’s focus on ostensibly “alternative” cultural sites of political production, such as literary prize addresses, academic lectures, and theatrical performances. And yet, given the extensive reach of mass media in the postwar period, as well as the concomitant loss of an obvious community of belonging, these instances of public speech are invariably experienced as mediated and volatile. This is in accordance with Kluge and Negt’s concept of a counter-public sphere, whereby interventions into public culture are inevitably interpreted through a prism of otherness that is “no longer rooted in face-to-face relations and subject to discursive conflict and negotiation.”

This book nevertheless argues that taken together, these events of public speaking helped the formation of a counter-public sphere—to borrow the phrase of one critic, a “modern hybrid site of discursive contestation”—that beginning in the 1950s increasingly challenged the Germans’ insensitivity or indifference toward Jewish suffering while calling for a broader acknowledgment of responsibility for the crimes committed by the Nazi regime. It is significant that this counterpublic formed in Germany and in the German language—but through the voices of mostly Jews. This speaks to Gilad Margalit’s claim that the awakening of a public discourse on the Holocaust was the product of a Jewish Holocaust narrative’s penetration into German discourse. To cite Margalit, “The Jewish story entered German consciousness principally through literary and documentary works by Jews about their Holocaust experiences.” While it is certainly true that the work of some of the writers Margalit mentions (most notably Albrecht Goes and Paul Celan) did enter Germany’s mainstream literary market, it is important to realize


15. Hansen, foreword, xxxvi.
that a majority of Germans did not actually read (or know how to read) their books. The prose and poetry of the theologian Goes appealed mostly to the Protestant Bildungsbürgertum (the educated upper and middle class) and Celan’s breakthrough poetry collection, Mohn und Gedächtnis (Poppy and Memory), was praised for its magic, surrealist, and aesthetic qualities, and not for providing an unprecedented perspective into the inner life of a Holocaust survivor. Hence it is doubtful whether these narratives played a substantial role in creating public awareness of the scope of the Nazi crimes. Public speeches by contrast provided these literary figures with a broader and more comprehensive public platform from which they could effectively divulge their individual experience and their intellectual understanding of it to a national audience that they would otherwise never reach.

Even though the contemporary audiences often failed to register the subversive potential of these public speeches, so that most of them did not have a noticeable impact at first, the speeches nevertheless set the stage for what many consider a more “revolutionary” episode in German history, the protest movement of 1968. Probing the limits of Vergangenheitsbewältigung—a discursive formation that centered around the claim that postwar German society could “cope with” the past by focusing on future-oriented activity—they foreshadow the intense debate over the Vaterschuld (silence of our fathers) incited by the generation of 1968. Thus reconstructed, the public speeches to be considered here become the sign of an eruption of dissent that was already imminent in the 1950s and early 1960s but that crystallized only around 1966–67, when a younger, newly formed public of students began to participate in demonstrations, sit-ins, and protest actions arranged by the Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund (SDS; Socialist German Students Union) and other radical organizations. The present book thus traces the period of postwar Germany’s engagement with the Nazi past from the first public speaker to mention the Holocaust (Buber in 1953) to the first audiences (members of the SDS and the JAC, respectively, in 1967) to a refusal to listen. For the purposes of this book, the “new left’s” widening focus on, and concomitant reinterpretation of, the Nazi past will come to signal the end of the postwar era, and with it the stifling of the counterpublic that is the object of this study.

The public speakers that figure in this study lacked the relatively free and open discursive space of the politicized university. For them the breach in tradition also manifested itself as the loss of a politically progressive public sphere. For while the public sphere is inherently a challenging environment, the speakers under

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discussion faced exceptionally inauspicious circumstances because they had not previously entered the public sphere of general cultural discourse in postwar Germany. The only speaker to routinely reach a large audience with his radio lectures was Adorno: a ubiquitous presence in postwar Germany’s media landscape, he was skilled in expressing his philosophical thought in a style that would be relatively accessible for a mass audience. But not one of these figures conformed to the image of the moderately left-wing (and male) German intellectual whom Jürgen Habermas, in his seminal doctoral thesis published in 1962 as Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit (The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere), had identified as the representative of Germany’s emergent public sphere.20 As a result the speakers first had to produce the kind of public in which their speeches might take effect.

Their efforts to make a practical contribution to a public sphere from which they themselves felt alienated and excluded were accompanied by parallel attempts of left-leaning German scholars to historicize and theorize the public sphere (yet in a way that often reinscribed the division between home-grown public intellectuals and foreigners): as the number of theoretical speculations on the topic published in the postwar period indicates, the issue of the public sphere was clearly at stake. Habermas’s Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit exemplifies what one might describe as a widespread pessimism among younger German theorists regarding the perceived decline of the bourgeois public sphere. As Habermas writes, “Tendencies pointing to the collapse of the public sphere are unmistakable, for while its scope is expanding impressively, its function has become progressively insignificant.”21 Arendt, whose influence is strongly felt in Habermas’s book, had anticipated this renewed interest in the problem of the public sphere with the 1960 German version, Vita Activa, of her 1958 study, The Human Condition, and her book will provide some of the theoretical background for the discussion in chapter 1.22

Habermas’s case is interesting, however, because his early work so clearly marks him as a member of a younger generation who did not experience the Third Reich as adults. In contrast to Arendt and Habermas’s teachers Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, whose confidence in human rationality had been profoundly shaken by Auschwitz, Habermas retained his confidence in the public sphere as the mainstay facilitator of democracy. Habermas to be sure continued to hold up key principles of the Enlightenment: freedom of thought, limitations on governmental

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21. Habermas, The Structural Transformation, 4. And further: “Two tendencies dialectically related to each other indicated a breakdown of the public sphere. While it penetrated more spheres of society, it simultaneously lost its political function, namely: that of subjecting the affairs that it had made public to the control of a critical public” (140).

power, a free market economy, and a transparent system of government in which the rights of all citizens would be protected. The problem with Habermas’s fairly idealized account of Germany’s public sphere is that his notion of the public sphere subsumes difference by excluding groups that do not form a majority of the total population: ethnic minorities, women, and the working class. In this context, Kluge and Negt’s insistence on competing public spheres, founded on the “substantial life-interests” of contradictory identities, begins to take on significance.\(^{23}\) By investigating the conditions of possibility for instigating a public discourse about the Holocaust in Germany, this book sheds light on the speaker’s inscription within a ritualized network of problematical—anti- or philo-Semitic and thus ultimately repressive—relationships. Following Kluge and Negt, this book does not claim to resolve the tension between these individuals’ life interests on the one hand, and the public sphere’s claim to represent society as a whole on the other, nor will it attempt to fill this sociocultural gap. Its purpose is neither to define the essence of a German-Jewish experience, which is invariably fractured into an array of oftentimes incompatible cultural and national identities, nor to make the experience of survivorship available to a contemporary readership. Rather it makes a contribution to the study of West Germany’s public sphere by investigating its “use value” (Kluge and Negt) for a number of intellectuals who have since become canonical figures of Germany’s cultural—but not political—landscape.\(^{24}\) By examining whether and how these public speakers were able to articulate their experience and interpretation of past events so as to mobilize their audiences toward a major change of consciousness, \textit{Speaking the Unspeakable} offers a new approach to the problem of the public sphere, a concept as much at stake today as it was during the postwar era.

\textbf{The Public Sphere}

In the 1950s and 1960s a number of intellectual figures thus entered and subverted postwar Germany’s public sphere through their politically minded yet antideliberative, epideictic yet noncongratulatory speeches. As a rhetorical genre, epideictic speech is a hybrid form that does not impinge on the cultural or political context in which it occurs but instead acts upon the nature of rhetoric itself—and hence it achieves authority more from style than from meaning. Yet the charge of empty rhetorical sophistry must not be leveled against the \textit{Preisreden} (prize addresses) considered here. While they are certainly self-referential and often display a nondialectic and monologic structure—some indeed border on the language of literary prose and even poetry—they nevertheless attracted a substantial public audience, and hence were inherently political events. Producing what Arendt defined as a “space

\(^{23}\) Kluge and Negt, \textit{Public Sphere and Experience}, xlvi.

\(^{24}\) Ibid., 1.
of appearance,” these speech events occasioned gatherings of a plurality of actors and speakers, which is, according to Arendt, the condition sine qua non of politics (HC, 199). In addition to Preisreden, this book will also explore other forms of (and forums for) public speaking—a university lecture by Szondi, Adorno’s radio talks, Weiss’s avant-garde theater, and Johnson’s public speech at the Jewish American Congress, the latter embedded in narrative prose—that allowed these speakers to register and critically examine the discourses that informed their aesthetic and scholarly practice.

In each case, the question of dissent concerns both the political and the cultural structure of postwar society. Politically, some of these speakers were disappointed that the military, political, and social forces of the past were allowed to persist in the present. Adorno suggests that the conditions of repression, which had laid the psychological and ideological groundwork for the Holocaust, remained largely unchanged even two decades after the end of World War II. Both Buber and Arendt decry the rearmament of the Federal Republic and the stationing of atomic weapons in Germany, while Weiss brings the defective judicial system into the fray of public debate.25 Worst of all, millions of committed Nazis had been integrated into the new democracy, a practice that Johnson and Szondi criticize as scandalous leadership continuity between the Third Reich and the present day, which they took as another symptom of Germany’s failure to embrace an improved and truly democratic order. Looking beyond the scope of the nation’s political structure, some of these literary intellectuals are also concerned with the commodification of culture and literature. Ironically tagged Literaturbetrieb (literary establishment), a term that echoes Adorno’s Kulturindustrie (culture industry), the world of letters in particular seemed to be organized around a few prominent groups—most notably the Gruppe 47 (Group 47)—while avant-garde authors were either excluded or assimilated and “domesticated.”26 Symptomatic of these efforts was a trend to create and reinstate literary awards for both aspiring and recognized writers: in the period between 1950 and 1960, about sixty literary prizes were thus (re)established in the Federal Republic alone, among them the Georg-Büchner-Preis, the Literaturpreis der Freien Hansestadt Bremen, the Lessing-Preis der Freien und Hansestadt Hamburg, and the Goethepreis der Stadt Frankfurt.27


These literary awards and their respective prize ceremonies exemplify the multidimensionality of the German notion of Öffentlichkeit (public sphere), which, though commonly understood to refer to the concrete social institutions where meanings are articulated and negotiated, as well as to “the collective body constituted by and in this process,” as Miriam Hansen writes, also denotes a psychosocial, ideational realm that according to Arendt “comes into being wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action.” That is to say, these literary prizes encouraged the public to discuss and take interest in contemporary German culture and literature. By honoring writers and intellectuals, federal and local governments would further nurture both their political reputation and their cultural prestige. Providing for the large majority of the occasions on which postwar writers and intellectuals gave public speeches, literary awards were thus used to rehabilitate Germany’s status as a Kulturlation (nation of culture) and help determine who would best represent its standards and values when the time came to write the history of postwar Germany.

It is no coincidence that a considerable number of these literary prizes were awarded to Jewish intellectuals who were living in exile and would return only temporarily to Germany. Jews were thus being reclaimed as fellow Germans, while their previously asserted racial or ethnic “difference” was disavowed on the grounds that, after all, they had been born in Germany, spoke German as a mother tongue, or at any rate wrote for a German readership. Those exiles whom the Nazis had deprived of their German citizenship on political and racial grounds were now entitled to renaturalization according to Article 116, Paragraph 2 of the German constitution, the Grundgesetz. Yet with the exception of Adorno, who renewed his German citizenship in 1955, the public speakers considered here did not seek to repatriate: Arendt, a secular German Jew, never reapplied for German citizenship, even though she took her German readers seriously enough to personally produce German versions of books she had originally written in English. In a similar vein, Weiss, son of a Jewish-Hungarian father and a Swiss mother, acquired Swedish citizenship in 1946 and intermittently wrote in Swedish, but nevertheless continued to “dream” in the German language. Szondi, a Hungarian Jew who learned German as a foreign language, permanently settled in Berlin in 1961 but maintained his Swiss nationality. Celan, born into a German-speaking Jewish family in Bukovina, wrote German poems that were, however, infused with Hebrew expressions and terminology. A lecturer in German at the École Normale

28. Hansen, foreword, ix; and Arendt, The Human Condition, 199.
29. This new law supersedes the German principle according to which nationality is determined by blood rather than birthright, a principle that goes back to an 1842 law that served to prevent the naturalization of Jews.
Supéérieure, he became a French citizen in 1955. Buber, an Austrian and later Israeli Jew, had coproduced (with Franz Rosenzweig) a new German translation—in his own words *Verdeutschung* (Germanification)—of the Hebrew Bible. And Bachmann, whose earliest poems exhibit a certain affinity with *Heimatdichtung* (local, patriotic literature), soon harbored very negative feelings toward her native Austria and gradually identified with the victims of the Holocaust.\(^{31}\) Johnson, finally, born in Pomerania and much to his displeasure labeled “writer of the divided Germany,” actively sought out encounters with Jewish immigrants, particularly during the two and a half years he lived in New York.\(^{32}\) Addressing the Holocaust as an international, rather than narrowly German event, Johnson sheds critical light on the ramifications of Germany’s so-called *Sonderweg* (special path).

This book is about public speakers, some of whom are Germans or Jews and some of whom are, or used to be, both. Given, however, the range of different conceptions of what it means to be a “German Jew” at this historical juncture, the very notion seems void of significance—but it nevertheless *matters* whether a specific speaker is Jewish or not. Devoted as they all are to the memory of the Jewish victims of the Nazi regime, these figures cannot be grouped into a single defining sociocultural or political category, and they certainly transcend the artificial pseudoscientific racial boundaries drawn up by the Nazi regime. Instead they represent a miniature model of what Arendt defines as a “human plurality, [namely,] the paradoxical plurality of unique beings” (*HC*, 176): differing not only in terms of their ethnic or national identities but also in terms of their human essence, their absolute difference from one another is greater than their relative difference from the German nation or “race.”

Although the different parts of this book organize the speeches under discussion around the three theoretical concepts of self-revelation, dialogue, and testimony, to be completed by a final section on the role of the radio, other combinations, based on the biographical affinities of, or the intellectual, even emotional, connections among these writers, would be equally valid. For instance, both Arendt and Weiss wrote books conjuring up the theatrical aspects of Nazi trials; Szondi authored some of the most canonical essays on Celan’s poetry, a scholarly expertise he shared with his mentor, Adorno; Arendt asked Bachmann to translate her book on the Eichmann trial; Johnson produced a poignant story about his “pilgrimage” to Bachmann’s graveside in Klagenfurt; both Buber and Arendt were associated with

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31. Eva B. Revesz thus argues that Bachmann’s “lyrical voice evolves into an increasingly traumatized realization of the horrors through a projective identification with the victims. This transferential identification becomes so strong that the distinction between self and other breaks down entirely in what the intellectual historian Dominick LaCapra has termed ‘secondary traumatization and surrogate victimage.’” Eva B. Revesz, “Poetry after Auschwitz: Tracing Trauma in Ingeborg Bachmann’s Lyric Work,” *Monatsshefte* 99, no. 2 (Summer 2007): 198.

the Zionist movement. A constellation of public speeches given by eight congenial yet heterogeneous intellectuals, this book proposes just one of many possible patterns or configurations. Hence the imaginary lines drawn from one public speech to the next, from books to speeches, and from Germans to Jews, reveal an intricate network of influences and interrelations. A loosely affiliated faction rather than a cohesive group along the lines of, for instance, the Gruppe 47, the public speakers who are the focus of this book constitute a counterpublic that emerges from sometimes remote and abstract relationships: the breaking of communicative rules and the absence of personal and communal certainty take the place of ritualized meetings and formal invitations. But although they are defined negatively, in terms of acts of opposition, interruption, and skepticism, there is among these figures a level of cohesion through integrity and moral conviction. The latter does not necessarily result from their being Jewish (and hence persecuted, exiled, and deprived of a proper voice during and beyond the Nazi period). Instead it is the cohesion of a shared subject position, defined by the common concern for, and the determination to give a voice to, those who had been persecuted, exiled, and deprived of a proper voice.

In that way, this book explores whether the conceptual space of a German-Jewish diaspora, defined through the experience of suffering in concentration camps or from exile, be it self-imposed or not, fulfills the premise of an objective “Archimedean” vantage point from which these speakers could help redefine the once (presumed to be) clearly demarcated parameters of Germany’s public sphere. Public oration calls for a distant vantage point from which a speaker can perceive his or her object of study—in this case Germany’s unresolved relationship to the Nazi past—with the largest possible degree of objectivity and a view of totality. As Archimedes’s theory of the lever maintains, the greater the distance between the fulcrum of a lever and the object to be lifted, the stronger the motive force that will be applied to it. By the same token, the ability to assume a detached and independent standpoint is taken to increase a thinker’s—and by extension speaker’s—capability to survey his object of study and see it in relation to all other things. The question that arises from this analogy, then, concerns the possible forces set in motion by public speakers who occupy such an assumed location outside Germany’s political and cultural coordinates. By avowing and mobilizing their status as Jews who are no longer Germans, and as Germans and Austrians who feel that they do not belong, they effectively retain the kind of critical distance necessary to disentangle the dense texture of Germany’s public sphere, and as a result apply an unusual amount of leverage to some of its contradictions, conflicts, and problems.

Rhetoric, Event, Enunciation

Another important vector of this book is the discipline of rhetoric, a field German theorists have long not been interested in investigating. Their desire to eliminate
rhetoric stands in sharp contrast to modernist cultural tendencies in France, Great Britain, and the United States that “have created . . . the conditions for a renaissance of rhetoric, which today is asserting itself in all fields of intellectual endeavor and cultural production,” as John Bender and David E. Wellbery note.\footnote{33} Emphasizing the ways in which a number of public speakers distanced themselves from classical rhetoric as a coherent cultural practice or doctrine, the present study thus situates itself in a disciplinary field that Bender and Wellbery have defined as “an age not of rhetoric, but of rhetoricality, the age, that is, of a generalized rhetoric that penetrates to the deepest levels of human experience.”\footnote{34}

One reason why rhetoric underwent significant revision in the German context is that it was wholly overdetermined at the historical juncture of post-Fascism. It is a trope of postwar German rhetorical scholarship that in light of Josef Goebbels’s propaganda speeches, the very notion of “rhetoric” has become a pejorative term.\footnote{35} The demagogic power of Goebbels’s Sportpalastrede (Speech at the Berlin Sports Palace, 1943), for instance, is clearly an effect of its rhetorical force: campaigning for the idea of a “total war,” Goebbels used persuasion and a series of suggestive questions to raise his audience’s level of patriotism and militancy.\footnote{36} And Adolf Hitler, in addition to dedicating an entire chapter of Mein Kampf (My Struggle, 1925–26) to the topic of rhetorical speech, effectively instituted an academy of rhetoric to instruct aspiring party functionaries in propaganda, political speech, and mass agitation.\footnote{37}

Yet, in the history and theory of German-language literature and philosophy since 1945, relatively little attention has been paid to the place of public speeches delivered by major figures in those fields. While ancient Greek and Latin orations play a central role in the curricula of classics departments and the time-honored Lateinschule (grammar school), their German successors are taught in just a handful of rhetoric departments and are rarely studied in their own right as part of an intrinsically German tradition. Existing volumes on postwar German speech often emphasize the political and propagandistic aspects of rhetoric by focusing on deliberative speeches given by politicians and state officials while neglecting

\footnotesize{34. Ibid.}
other forms of public speech that are also much harder to classify. Focused on their argumentative content, these studies often judge public speeches against—rather than contrast them with—the classical discipline and conventions of rhetoric, and thus fail to pinpoint the political and cultural specificity of postwar speeches, and in particular their ostensible resistance to the discipline of rhetoric. Finally, such studies usually neglect the question of how these speeches relate to other forms of intellectual practice and do not examine it in a broader framework that embraces social, political, cultural, and aesthetic questions alike.  

Traditional assumptions about—and significant revisions of—Germany’s long-standing rhetorical tradition are everywhere at play in the public speeches under discussion. The speakers could not help but write their speeches in response to this tradition and in an effort to interrogate its conditions and premises. This is particularly true for Arendt and Buber, both exiled German-Jewish scholars who returned during the 1950s to deliver speeches in Frankfurt’s Paulskirche (St. Paul’s Church), which more than any other location in Germany embodied the idea of—and hopes invested in—deliberative speech as a pillar of parliamentary democracy. It is no coincidence that the German Friedenspreis des deutschen Buchhandels (Peace Award of the German Book Trade) has been awarded at this particular site, given that it housed the earliest sessions of Germany’s first freely elected parliament in 1848–49. Hence Arendt and Buber were surely aware of the famous speeches given by members of the National Assembly at that time—Ludwig Uhland, Heinrich Freiherr von Gagern, Ernst Moritz Arndt, and Ludwig Simon, among others—when they stepped onto the historic podium of the secularized church.  

In the German tradition, public speeches often functioned as catalysts for conservative, patriotic, and militant ideologies. The speeches delivered in post–World War II Germany are, however, in no way easy allegories for the rebuilding of a more progressive and democratic nation. On the contrary, what the speeches that are the focus of this study have in common is that they stand in opposition not only to reactionary efforts of evincing patriotism and national identity through public speech, but also to the ultimately facile construction of a—supposedly—pluralistic discourse about the past in postwar Germany. With an intimation of defiance that

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38. See, for instance, Detlef Grieswelle, Politische Rhetorik (Wiesbaden: DUV, 2000); Kurt Spang, Rede (Bamberg: C. C. Buchners, 1987). More recently, Jan C. L. König has made considerable headway in addressing the linguistic, communicative, and pragmatic idiosyncrasies of public speech while also taking into account their embeddedness in political, cultural, and physical contexts. See Jan C. L. König, Über die Wirkungsmacht der Rede: Strategien politischer Eloquenz in Literatur und Alltag (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2011).  
seems to emerge from a shared skepticism with regard to rhetoric as an intellectual and cultural practice per se, the majority of public speakers considered here emancipate their literary prose or scholarly erudition from rhetorical persuasiveness. If they set their speeches apart from the discipline of rhetoric, it is, however, not because they agree with classical Greek philosophers who contended that persuasion could undermine their quest for truth, depth, and interiority, but rather because they reject the very idea of persuasion on the basis of principle. Ambivalent about exerting influence on and control over their listeners, these speakers engage critically with the disciplinary conventions of rhetoric. Rather than guiding or manipulating their audience toward adopting their own ideas and convictions, they introduce them to fundamental philosophical and theoretical problems, as well as to unanswered and sometimes indeed unanswerable questions, doubtless because at this point in time, straightforward opinions and tangible solutions are simply not available to them. Some speakers dispose of rules and topoi to speak as antirhetorically as possible, while others speak in an utterly nonargumentative language that explicitly rejects persuasiveness. What is most striking, however, is that all of these speakers magnify the event character of their public speeches—namely, that they are anchored both temporally (in a specific occasion) and spatially (in the public realm). In other words, for them, “speech” is not a genre but an event. After all, public speech interweaves different ontological registers (of a specific time and place but also of less tangible—psychological and metaphysical—parameters), and is therefore, following Josef Vogl’s definition of the Deleuzian événement, neither an object or item nor a referent, but rather “an aesthetic, a poetic thing.”

Taking up Aristotle’s concern, first articulated in his seminal treatise On Rhetoric, with the material situations in which public speaking occurs, and putting pressure on the pragmatic aspects of their public speeches, these speakers pay increased attention to the semiotics of discourse at the expense of the semantics of words. What matters to them is not what certain statements mean but how they mean—that is, how meaning is produced in the act of speaking and through the logic of its oral delivery and public reception. Viewing their own speeches as pragmatic, communicative events, these speakers are keenly aware of the wider social relations in

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43. The idea of a semiotics of discourse can be attributed to Charles Sanders Peirce, who observed that signification is not an inherent property of the signs produced in communication, but rather a product of the relationship between the intentions of these signs and their perception and apprehension by a listener. See on this Jacques Fontanille, The Semiotics of Discourse, trans. Heidi Bostic (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2006), 10. On the notion of discourse, see Michel Foucault, who argues that meaning emerges from power structures and other social and historical determinants that regulate what can be said and thought at a given time and by whom. Michel Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (London: Tavistock Publications, 1972).
which their speeches take place. In this way, their activity as public speakers tallies with a contemporaneous theoretical paradigm: the increased focus on the situated-ness of speech in the disciplines of linguistics and rhetoric of the postwar period and the concomitant insight that language is largely unintelligible outside the social conditions and purposes in which it is embedded. Most commonly associated with the Anglo-Saxon movement of new rhetoric, but equally central to communication theory and post-Saussurean structuralist linguistics of the 1950s and 1960s, the insight into the situatedness of language led to an increased preoccupation with the social and psychological conditions of discourse and the claim that rather than ever being “neutral,” language is pragmatic, rhetorical, and persuasive. As Kenneth Burke writes, “Wherever there is persuasion, there is rhetoric. And wherever there is ‘meaning’ there is persuasion.”

The question of persuasion leads to another key term of this project: performativity. While it is true that the public speakers under discussion take a resistant stance toward—or seek to rise above—rhetorical persuasion, because it is naturally associated with Nazi demagogues who sought the support of the masses by appealing to popular passions and fears, this does not mean that their speeches are necessarily unpersuasive. As a matter of fact, they sometimes evince a persuasive force in a more immediate and indeed enduring manner than classical deliberative speech. Instead of trying to convince their audiences to think and feel in a certain way, which would induce them to take specific actions, the speakers, as it were, perform these actions themselves, and they do so by means of simple utterances, such as by saying, for instance, “I thank you” (Celan) or, to cite a second example, “I appeal to you” (Buber). To be sure, by shifting from locutionary to illocutionary statements, or, in the language of pragmatic linguist J. L. Austin, from constative to “performative” locutions, their speeches generate movements of force that perform concrete and immediate actions. For according to Austin’s definition, a performative, rather than conveying meaning through a representational system of signs, produces and transforms the pragmatic speech situation itself. A more direct form of linguistic activity than persuasive rhetoric, it neutralizes the antithesis of word and action by actually constituting the object to which it is meant to refer. Having no referent outside itself, the utterance then is the action.

One such performative speech is Szondi’s 1961 Antrittsrede (inaugural address) at Berlin’s Free University. A young professor about to take on his first academic position in Germany, Szondi is centrally concerned with the question of the extent to which intellectual figures like Walter Benjamin were excluded from the career...

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prospects offered to non-Jewish scholars by the German academy. Yet Szondi refrains from explicitly criticizing a discriminatory practice that extended from the Weimar Republic and much earlier into the postwar period. Instead he attempts to improve Benjamin’s status among academics by quoting extensively from—and thus forcing them to listen to—a broad range of Benjamin’s writings. It is then precisely by way of these performative quotations that Szondi obliges his audience to retrace and reflect on the material and cognitive processes that resulted in Benjamin’s works while also counteracting the continuing discrimination against a Jewish intellectual.

When viewed against the backdrop of both classical Aristotelian and contemporaneous rhetorical theory, it becomes evident that there is a tension in the public speeches under consideration, between their desire to register and critique the deceptiveness and potential abuse of classical rhetoric on the one hand, and their equally powerful desire to meet the communicative challenge of public speaking on the other. By reading these speeches in conjunction with the concurrent rediscovery of persuasion as perhaps the most critical and also most problematic element of rhetoric, and the corresponding concern with the pragmatic situatedness of discourse and language, the present study explores the ways in which public speakers instrumentalize—or fail to instrumentalize—language, while describing the social, political, and psychological factors that determine how (efficiently) information is transmitted from sender to receiver in each individual case. Because these speeches are contingent on a specific social context and historical situation, there is considerable tension between the speakers’ intentions and the ways in which these intentions are deflected by the enunciative event of their speech. The book thus productively extends the discussion of linguists’ insistence on the conditions of possibility that determine events of enunciation.

Involving speaking subjects as well as listeners, public speech does not behave as a fixed, passive medium. With this in mind, the present study seeks to account for the semantic structure of both its performance and its reception in West Germany’s public sphere. In other words, this study treats public speech as a “complicated dynamic system of interdependencies” that includes a communicator, a message, a recipient, and the medium. For contrary to written communication, where the act of writing and its reception remain strictly separate, public speech occurs in the form of a bidirectional exchange whereby the reception of a speech feeds back into its presentation. This can take the form of projected audience reactions, which a speaker takes into consideration while drafting a public speech, or that of actual pragmatic feedback, which he or she receives during its delivery. In the latter case, the speaker may then choose not to abide by the script by modifying, omitting, or adding particular statements. That speeches are communicative

47. Grieswelle, Politische Rhetorik, 52.
processes constantly reshaped by the subject’s experience or interpretation of the event is exemplified by Johnson’s speech at the Jewish American Congress in New York. According to Johnson’s account, the hostile reactions of the audience made him aware of the inadequacy of his script, which he then cut short to face a question-and-answer session. By thus illustrating the role played by the audience and by staging the invasion of reception into his speech, Johnson demonstrates that his addressees, though absent from the scene of writing, are active participants in the delivery of his public address. The same holds for the process of persuasion. Taking the form of a bidirectional exchange, Johnson’s speech compelled his audience to identify with his person and message, but also allowed his audience to impose their criticisms on him.

In addition to offering an operational definition of what is meant by the “speech event,” the chapter on Johnson demonstrates how the novelist complicated the formal status of his original script in relation to the event of its enunciation. By fictionalizing a speech he gave in reality and by providing the reader with a revised version of the original script, which was essentially a “reading” of his proper text, Johnson raised a number of important questions regarding the relationship between writing and public speech. Which version of his address is the “original”—the script, its enunciation in 1967, or its fictionalization in the novel Jahrestage (Anniversaries), the first volume of which appeared in 1970? Is a public speech that is being revised for print and adapted for broadcasting still an oration? And given that public speeches survive in the form of written texts, why insist on the oral specificity of the genre? Conceived and circulated within the parameters of both orality and writing, speeches do not precede writing logically or temporally, as in most cases the spoken words are intimately bound to the properties of a preconceived and premeditated script. For unless a public speech is entirely improvised, the process of writing precedes its oral delivery. Hence the written text is neither temporally secondary nor spatially exterior to (public) speech. As a reading of Weiss’s play Die Ermittlung (The Investigation) will demonstrate, some forms of public speaking—in this case, witness testimonies uttered in a Frankfurt courtroom and on a theater stage, respectively—are severed from their oral specificity. In Weiss’s play, the spoken testimony of human beings cannot compete against the factuality of written and printed artifacts, particularly since the former are ventriloquized by actors who do not act in any conventional theatrical sense. In curtailing their emotional power, the actors on stage disavow their human authenticity, which in turn makes them unable to controvert evidence against evidentiary facts.


Most of the speeches to be considered here were recited and read word for word from a manuscript on the occasion of their original public presentation. As the site of an unpredictable interplay between a prepared script and a unique situation, these public speeches evince a series of reversals. Firstly, they subvert the Platonic principle according to which the human voice functions as the most accurate conveyer of meaning. Contradicting the traditional assumption that the voice elucidates text and that spoken words interpret themselves, speakers like Bachmann and Celan fail to adapt such a “hermeneutically expressive” diction. Marked by the speakers’ quiet, monotonous, and seemingly disconnected tones of voice, Celan’s and Bachmann’s oral delivery contradicts, rather than expresses, their statements. Secondly, the majority of speeches resist the conventional conflation of voice and person(ality), being and utterance. Refuting the logocentric paradigm according to which speech functions as an unmediated vessel of meaning, they fail to reveal self-presence and being. A case in point is Arendt’s Lessing Prize address Von der Menschlichkeit in finsteren Zeiten (On Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts about Lessing), a speech in which the speaker’s voice did not “flow” directly from her “soul.” To the contrary, Arendt’s spoken words—and specifically those that refer to the speaker herself as the subject of enunciation—suspended her person in discourse and thereby thwarted Arendt’s attempt at revealing herself.

Overturning the traditional assumption that contrary to writing, oral deliberation is analogous to dialogic exchange, the speeches under discussion tend to be monologic, even self-absorbed. Instead of explaining, rephrasing, and strategically repeating in an effort to minimize or correct misunderstandings, some of the speakers refused to interact with their addressees. The oftentimes patently antidialogical character of public speech is particularly palpable in Celan’s Büchner Prize address Der Meridian (The Meridian), where his frequent and almost compulsive use of the rhetorical figure of apostrophe—he repeated the formula “Ladies and gentlemen”

50. See, for instance, Hans-Georg Gadamer on the difference between interpreting written and spoken language: “In contrast to the spoken word there is no other aid in the interpretation of the written word. Thus the important thing here is, in a special sense, the ‘art’ of writing. The spoken word interprets itself to an astonishing degree, by the way of speaking, the tone of voice, the tempo etc, but also by the circumstances in which it is spoken.” Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, ed. Garrett Barden and John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1975), 393.


as many as twelve times—only emphasizes the hermetic, indeed antidialogical, character of his public address. By contrast, Buber’s Peace Prize address represents a focused attempt to engage in a quasi-spiritual dialogue with his German audience. Responding to his audience’s experienced “truth” by issuing an ontological “call,” Buber clearly sought to act as a dialogical rhetor. But whereas he considered his encounter with a German audience as one that could potentially be considered “genuinely dialogical,” the ensuing dialogue was effectively severed from the referential context of Buber’s script. Hence his speech spawned a dialogue that communicates nothing.

One final question surfaces from the conceptual level of this study. It concerns the hypothetical difference between writing and speaking, which is in each case aligned with the operative distinction between the theory and practice of public speaking. Each part of this book thus examines a theoretical approach to the question of public speech, which it then juxtaposes with sometimes promising, sometimes failed “applications” of this theory to concrete events of public speaking: in part 1, Buber’s dialogical philosophy becomes the touchstone for a public speech of his own that performs and, as it were, instantiates a German-Jewish dialogue that privileges otherness and the particularity of discrete historical moments while rejecting essentialism and the ideologies associated with it. But Buber’s speech is also echoed by Celan’s and Bachmann’s explicitly antidialogical speeches, which foreground the flaws and agonies of engaging in such a “genuine dialogue.” Hence Celan’s and Bachmann’s interventions gesture toward the creation of a critical rather than faith-based counter-public sphere that would pose a significant challenge to hegemonic economies of knowledge construction. In part 2, Arendt’s and Johnson’s ultimately futile—and in Johnson’s case self-ironizing—efforts at revealing themselves in the realm of the public are read against the backdrop of Arendt’s concept of “self-revelation,” a concept that is as foundational for Arendt’s theorization of the public sphere as it is unrealistic as regards the practice of public speech at this historical juncture. And yet, by juxtaposing the concept of “public” with that of “pariah,” and by contrasting the notion of self-revelation with that of testimony, Johnson and Arendt successfully negotiate the conditions of possibility that would enable the creation of a counterpublic as defined by Kluge and Negt. In part 3, diverse instances of witness testimony, uttered in contexts that ostensibly undermine their judiciary provenance, emanate from Szondi’s and Weiss’s critical reflections on the hermeneutic status of textual and oral citation. This part of the book will unearth the ethical and epistemological challenges inherent to the claim of speaking “on behalf of” the “other” while arguing that this indeed points toward a viable way of creating a counter-public sphere along the lines of Kluge and Negt. Part 4, finally, revisits Adorno’s theoretical writings on the radio to ask how the mass media allowed this prominent thinker to position himself in the force field between the concrete interests of public reeducation efforts and the theoretical standards of the university. Seizing on the opportunity to reach a mass audience
through the radio while also training a generation of students in critical think-
ing, Adorno’s voice was ultimately crushed by the anti-imperialist agenda of the
increasingly militant students. It is this negotiation between theorizing and practic-
ing public speech, as well as the textually encoded frustration with, even rejection
of, these limits, that structures this book.