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## **French disease or maladie anglaise. Figures of contempt or of self-assertion**

### **Abstract (English)**

This paper focuses firstly on the role stereotypes play in the emergence of nation-building in the sense of “imagined communities” (inclusion versus exclusion), using examples from the Bible, from Shakespeare, and from the German Wars of Independence (1813-1815). Secondly, stereotypes are shown as reactions against emerging new ideas or concepts that indicate a shift in traditional values (the self-determination of Shakespeare’s criminals Richard III and Iago, and Machiavelli’s “Principe” versus Erasmus’s “Institutio Principis Christiani”). Both basic kinds of stereotypes serve as safeguards against differentiation and are fact-resistant.

### **Abstract (Deutsch)**

Stereotype sind wirklichkeits- und wahrheitsresistent. Sie lassen sich nicht durch Argumente entkräften oder auflösen wie Vorurteile; sie sind prinzipiell nicht falsifizierbar. Dabei sind sie stabil, oft über Jahrhunderte. Die ‚Begründungen‘ können zwar wechseln – der Judentumshass reicht vom Antijudaismus des ‚Heilandmords‘ bis zum rassistischen Antisemitismus mit den Zwischenstufen der Hostienschändung, der Brunnenvergiftung, des Wuchers und dem Streben nach Weltherrschaft –, aber die Ausgrenzung bleibt stabil, auch wenn sie den historischen Umständen angepaßt wird. Das den Stereotypen zugrunde liegende Modell ist das von Exklusion und Inklusion als identitätsetzendem oder -stabilisierendem Existential: ‚Wir‘ und ‚die Anderen‘. Das Modell funktioniert besonders effizient in Krisenzeiten als Entlastung durch Schuldzuweisung (Seuchen im Mittelalter; ökonomische oder politische Klemmen seit dem 19. Jahrhundert). Auf einer weiter gefaßten Ebene spielen Stereotypen eine mentalitätsgeschichtlich entscheidende Rolle bei der Herausbildung von Nationalstaaten, den ‚imagined communities‘, wie sie genannt wurden, als Abgrenzung gegen andere Nationen. Das sogenannte ‚Eigene‘ funktioniert dabei verfassungsfreundlich erfolgreich gegen ‚das Andere‘ (das Undeutsche, der Erbfeind, der Ausländer; ‚positiv‘ stereotyp gewendet: die Leitkultur). Stereotypen sind stets in antiaufklärerischen Affekten fundiert, aber hilfreich als vermeintliche Sinnangebote. Das alles ist nicht neu, wie sich an historischen Beispielen zeigen läßt.

In Shakespeare’s “Merchant of Venice” a rich heiress is obliged to accept as a husband the suitor who picks the one casket out of three that contains her portrait. Portia, the heiress, lists the suitors who are waiting at her door. There is a Neapolitan prince who is only interested in horses; there is the Count Palatine, a sullen kind of philosopher; there is a Frenchman who is everything and nothing, bragging,

dancing, fencing with his own shadow; an English baron who has neither Latin, French nor Italian and buys his odd clothes in Italy, France and Germany; and a prince from Saxony who is very vile in the morning when he is sober, and most vile in the afternoon when he is drunk. These are humorous exaggerations that have their place in comedy, but underneath we find the common stereotypes of the age. Germans are either drunkards or frowning philosophers like Hamlet (who had studied at Wittenberg). The French are good-for-nothings, whiling away their time with trifles. Later in the play we see two suitors making their choice: there is Aragon, a haughty, ceremonious, conceited man, whose presence reminds us that the conflict between England and Spain did not end with the victory over the Armada. The other suitor is Morocco, a pompous, self-righteous prince with a tawny skin. A mild form of racism comes into the play here; Portia says: "Let all of his complexion choose me so".

The one character in the play with whom stereotypes are put to the test is Shylock. Of course all the age-old stereotypes are given or implied: he is rich, he is a usurer, (i.e. he thrives on the financial needs of the Christians whom he hates), he sticks relentlessly and literally to the laws of his creed. All the time he lives, though segregated, within the precincts of the Venetian republic; legally, but despised. He is a paradoxical example of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion. But the point of the drama is that he is in no way a paradigm of the stereotype Jew. He is a human being – "If you prick us do we not bleed? [...] If you poison us do we not die?" – wronged by the people he happens to live with. His daughter steals his riches – even things he is emotionally attached to – in order to elope with her Christian lover; and by legal casuistry he is tricked out of his right, codified in a contract, however atrocious. The play shows that the Jew is not inhuman "by nature", as history has it, but that society makes him act – or rather react – as he does. The malicious, revengeful Jew is a product of a society that stabilises itself by having its stereotypes confirmed (as is also the case with Othello, who is mentally tortured until his alleged "bestial nature" comes to the surface).

This is my first point: societies, political or religious communities, even individuals, construct and stabilise their identity by inventing stereotypes for difference or otherness that tend to persist tenaciously over centuries. Stereotypes of otherness work both ways – *we* are different from *them*, *they* are different from *us* – and may even develop physical markers or signs (the Jewish nose) to anchor the difference. We know this from many early or primitive societies that tattoo their faces or bodies. Let me call circumcision a stereotype in this sense: it distinguishes the Israelites from other tribes. If we accept such distinguishing markers as stereotypes – not prejudices or assumptions, but arbitrary signs that signify membership of a group, i.e. markers of *inclusion* – we may also refer to circumcision or to the wearing of the Burka as markers which serve in reverse as pretexts for *exclusion*. For example a woman wearing a Burka these days provokes

aggression in Western countries because it is seen as a symbol for the suppression of women or the refusal of integration. When Joshua, the successor of Moses, led his chosen people to the Promised Land he first circumcised them, because during their forty years in the desert the older people had died and none of the newborn ones had been marked in this way. After their installation of otherness Joshua led the people into a land that was inhabited by various tribes – Canaanites, Moabites, Arameans etc., all Semites – ransacked their cities and exterminated their people. They felt entitled to do so because they acted by the order of their God whose sign they bore on their bodies. Generations later there arose a most powerful enemy, the non-Semitic people of the Philistines who lived on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea and had founded 5 cities there, among them Gaza, Askalon and Japha . When the Israelites founded a kingdom of their own, Saul, their first king, promised his daughter to David as a wife but ordered him, by way of a dowry, to bring him 100 Philistine prepuces. David obliged and brought him 200. This is the same David who as a shepherd boy had killed the giant Goliath with a stone sling. But the Philistines were never vanquished and the Israelites never reached the sea. At some point or other they just disappeared from the stage of history. We hardly know anything about them, except that they must have been urbane tradespeople who trafficked throughout the Mediterranean. Oddly enough their name has survived and has become part of our languages; I don't know when this happened or why. Perhaps the Israelites themselves put it on the agenda – as they could not defeat them, they found an outlet by mocking them, because “Philistine” means a narrow-minded man, someone to be laughed at. So this is all that is left of a once powerful, much-feared people. Speaking of names, another one, from the New Testament, comes to my mind: the Pharisees in the time of Jesus. In our languages Pharisee has come to mean “hypocrite”. In the time of Jesus they were a very stern sect, rigidly observing the law, and Jesus himself – adhering to this attitude – said: “Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. For verily I say unto you, till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled” (Mat. 5, 17f.). That is to say, he defines himself as a Pharisee in the original meaning of the word. But in the course of the narrative of the Gospels they bear the brunt for most things that contradict the new interpretation of the written law, belief as opposed to rationality. And in the emergence of Christianity and in anti-Jewish propaganda, the Pharisees became a favourite example for self-righteousness and hypocrisy. It is noteworthy for the ubiquitous flexibility of stereotypes that the accusation of being Pharisees was later launched by Luther against the Roman church.

The construction of otherness by way of resorting to stereotypes plays an important role in the emergence of nation building, or what has been called by Benedict Anderson “imagined communities”. My second example in this section

about inclusion and exclusion comes from English history as unfolded in Shakespeare's plays. To begin with there is the famous speech of the dying John of Gaunt, culminating in a eulogy about

This fortress built by Nature for herself  
 This happy breed of men, this little world,  
 This precious stone set in the silver sea,  
 This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England,  
 This dear dear land,  
 Dear for her reputation through the world,  
 Is now leas'd out [...] (William Shakespeare: *Richard II*, II, ii. 43ff.)

These lines played a part in recent arguments for Brexit. But England also has hereditary claims to the crown of France, which France slights. In response to English offers of negotiations, the French dauphin sends a box of tennis balls to the young king Henry V. This is the first tangible sign of the reckless flippancy, scorn and lack of political responsibility on the part of France which in the course of the play will extend to an ever denser web of stereotypes characterising French mentality and behaviour. And if it comes to war, as it does, only France will be responsible for it: “[...] tell the Dauphin”, Henry says to the Ambassador,

His jest will savour of but shallow wit  
 When thousands weep more than did laugh at it. (William Shakespeare: *Henry V*, I, ii. 294f.)

(Incidentally, in the Laurence Olivier film of the play in 1944, dedicated to the Royal Air Force, the French were depicted as thinly disguised, preposterous Germans. The sneer of the Dauphin was Hitler's sneering at the Munich conference.) We first see Henry in action at the siege of Harfleur. He warns the Governour that, if he does not surrender, devastation and death will be the consequence –

Take pity of your town and of your people,  
 Whiles yet my soldiers are in my command. (William Shakespeare: *Henry V*, III, iii. 28f.)

This is the speech of a “truly Christian prince”. The city surrenders because the Dauphin fails to arrive with support, as his powers were not yet ready. In contrast to noble Henry, the French are vain braggarts offering a collection of stereotypes to denigrate the English: “a barbarous people”, “Norman bastards”, “Is not their climate foggy, raw and dull?”, and many others. But in their vanity they brag

When he shall see our army  
 He'll drop his heart into the sink of fear [...] (William Shakespeare: *Henry V*, III, vi. 58f.)

To be sure, the French have superior forces, whereas the English soldiers are few in number, badly equipped, starving, and in ragged uniforms. Their case seems

hopeless. But in characterising the French, Shakespeare again resorts to stereotypes: they are degenerate, more interested in the breeding of their horses than in their fitness for war, they are presumptuous and effeminate, overbearing, indulging in a “gloire” that is nothing but a soap bubble – stereotypes that time and again, not just in this play, are applied to the French from the English point of view and, for that matter, also from the German one in later centuries. In contrast, the English are down to earth, pragmatic, courageous, “fram’d of the firm truth of Valour”. Moreover, in time of need the English cling together – “We few, we happy few, we band of brothers”. This applies even to those populations that are prone to mutiny against English supremacy – the Welsh, the Irish, and the Scots, who are excluded on the grounds of their Celtic origins and their dialectal otherness, but included because of their territorial vicinity – so that the French challenge leads in the end to the Utopia of a United Kingdom. Perhaps this would also imply the hegemony of English (with its variants) over the French language. There is a funny scene where the French princess Katharine, the future wife of Henry, tries to learn English. In her first lesson she memorises: “[...] de hand, de fingle [...] de foot, de count” and comments:

ce sont mots de son mauvais, corruptible, gros, et impudique, et non pour les dames d’honneur d’user: je ne voudrais prononcer ces mots devant les seigneurs de France pour tout le monde. (William Shakespeare: *Henry V*, III, iv)

It is a final thrust at ridiculing the French by letting them parody the English tongue. This play, “*Henry V*”, is the paragon of English (or – already – British) national identity, flexible in that it can be exchanged for other exclusions: the Germans in the Second World War and in the decades following, and recently the rejection of the European Union.

Stereotypes are the simplest means to set in motion the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. My third example in this section comes from the German Wars of Independence in the years 1810 to 1815. The German-speaking countries had been occupied by Napoleon’s armies, the Prussian king was expelled. Heavy war contributions had to be paid, the countries had been devastated, their art collections looted, even the quadriga on top of the Brandenburg Gate was transferred to Paris. Yet Napoleon was not just a conqueror. What he had in mind was a reordering of Europe, to abolish its numerous petty kingdoms or dukedoms. A prime instrument for this was the creation of the Code Civile, a milestone in legal history, which for example conceded equal rights to Jews. Goethe, for one, appreciated Napoleon’s innovations and felt uneasy about his downfall. Anyway, the wars – fought not only by regular armies, but by many volunteer groups – led to a frenzy of enthusiasm for the German cause. This is where stereotypes come into play, stereotypes of the most chauvinist kind, in part formulated by philosophers such as Fichte or Arndt, by poets and painters. The stereotypes were not only directed against the Napoleonic occupation, but against the French in general.

It is as if the Germans wanted to take revenge on French thinking – which had dominated the 18th century even in Germany – in its totality. (In the Prussian Academy, founded by Frederick II, only French was spoken.) In the context of the impending wars the Germans discovered or rather invented their Germanness, in opposition to more or less everything French: German “Geist” against flimsy “esprit”, sincerity against flippancy, profoundness against superficiality, soul against “raison”, emotion against reasoning, Romanticism against Classicism, medievalism against modernity, feigned old-German garb against fashionable dress, etc. Of course this enumeration is a list of stereotypes. The patriotic spirit created a German fatherland, howsoever this could be invented or forged among tribes of different roots or territories. (“Oh holy heart of peoples, oh fatherland”, wrote Hölderlin.) A very telling example is the purification of the German language, which gets stripped mainly of French but also of Latin words in establishing our mother tongue – “Muttersprache, Mutterlaut”. “Fraternité” becomes “Brüderlichkeit”, “unité” becomes “Einheit” or rather “Einigkeit”, “Universität” becomes “Hochschule” etc. – honest German words against foreign infiltration or estrangement. (The word here should be “Überfremdung” for which no English equivalent seems to exist. It is this word which we hear most often these days in the context of the “flood of refugees” – another stereotype – that “haunt” (“heim-suchen” should be the word) our country.)

Most important in establishing German national identity is a distinction that sets it apart from other nations, not just from the French. Other nations are civilised, but the Germans are “cultured”, they are a “Kulturnation”. Since the Wars of Independence and for generations afterwards, “civilisation” in German understanding always had a slightly pejorative ring. Civilisation means sobriety, pragmatism, rationality, administration, economy, common sense, traffic between nations (even extending to cosmopolitanism), enlightenment. But something was felt to be lacking here, thus “culture” was intended to mean “that within which passes show”, in Hamlet’s phrase, with show in the sense of ostentation. Germany, and the German language in particular, had at last come of age, after England and France. It was the great age of philosophy, of literature, of philology. It was here that the phrase was coined: Germany is “das Volk der Dichter und Denker”. Even Shakespeare was appropriated and became – by way of Schlegel’s inspired translation – part of German culture; in fact he was promoted to the rank of the third classical German author after Goethe and Schiller. But the great cultural accomplishments were extended to claim superiority in other fields and led to the hubris of “culture” and the detraction of other nations which had only “civilisation”.

Shakespeare, and in particular Hamlet, is a nice example for our discussion of stereotypes. Goethe had interpreted Hamlet as a dreamer, an intellectual, ruminating, brooding, meditating, arguing with himself. He never comes to terms with himself, he procrastinates but never acts, even when the chance to kill the

king offers itself. Hamlet is much too noble a character, much too elevated to soil his hands by acting. This Goethean view of Hamlet was held to be a fitting description of the state of German mentality during the first five decades of the 19th century and beyond. In those years the phrase “Germany is Hamlet” was coined. After the Vienna congress the political situation had changed, but not for the better. There were revolutions against authoritarian governments – first in France, not yet in Germany – demanding reforms on various levels: against police states, against censorship, for freedom of speech etc. Against this background the Hamlet phrase was still appropriate. The poet Ferdinand Freiligrath, driven from one exile to the next, a friend of Karl Marx, wrote at the dawn of the so-called German Revolution of 1848 a poem which begins:

Deutschland ist Hamlet – Ernst und stumm  
In seinen Thoren jede Nacht  
Geht die begrabne Freiheit um  
Und winkt den Männern auf der Wacht.

Towards the end it says:

Mach den Moment zu Nutze dir!  
Noch ist es Zeit – drein mit dem Schwert,  
Eh’ mit französischem Rapier  
Dich schnöd vergiftet ein Laert!

The background is that Laertes, the brother of Ophelia, had been sent by his father to Paris to study, whereas Hamlet had studied in Wittenberg, the Lutheran city. So another set of stereotypes is evoked: the French are Catholics, the Germans Lutheran Protestants. In any event the conflict between France and Germany continued with ups and downs and was temporarily “solved” by the Franco-Prussian war, which led in 1871 to the foundation of the German Reich, with all the ensuing disasters in the next century. Six years later, in 1877, the Harvard scholar Horace Howard Furness dedicated his variorum edition of Hamlet “To the ‘German Shakespeare Society’ of Weimar / representative of a people / whose recent history / has proved / ONCE FOR ALL / that / ‘GERMANY IS *NOT* Hamlet’ / these volumes are dedicated / with great respect by / the editor”.

What I have sketched here is of course not a summary of German/French relationships. They are much more complicated. But I do believe that the German mood or mentality, in part at least, functioned along those lines of stereotypes. The French and the British people reciprocated in kind, of course.

Let me now – in the second, much shorter part of my paper – describe a totally different kind of stereotype. This kind may be split in two. The first refers to stigmatisation and exclusion derived from the political problems of those included; the second kind aims at emerging new ideas that threaten traditional values and cause fear.

The first type is the commonest and can be dealt with quite briefly. Let me remind you of the history of Jewry in Western societies. In medieval plague years the Jews were generally held responsible for it because they had poisoned the wells. In times of economic crises the international finance capital – which was “of course” Jewish – was the cause of it. In the 1880s a German theologian, preacher to the Imperial Court, coined the phrase “the Jews are our misfortune”, which was handed down to the next generations. Part of the Nazi economy was financed by the expropriation of Jewish capital, industry, real estate and other possessions which had been “stolen” by the Jews anyway. Everything German, or Germanic or Teutonic, was healthy; everything Jewish, in particular their blood, was sick or even poisonous. Once the Jews had been exterminated a sound German people and body politic could be re-established. I mention these well-known facts only in order to point out that propaganda always makes use of the mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion which rely – only and solely – on stereotypes. It is horrible to see that this primitive mechanism still functions as we watch the growth of right wing organisations throughout Europe. There is too much otherness in our countries, they argue. If we only get rid of immigrants, refugees, Muslims, the Schengen agreement, the established parties etc., we shall regain our national identity. All this works through stereotypes and is a relapse to the time of nation-building and nationalism which we had thought belonged to the past after the atrocities of the 20th century.

Secondly: emerging new ideas. Medieval and early modern societies were stratified communities existing in strict hierarchical orders. Every member had his or her predetermined place. In one’s place, one was responsible to a common or communal whole, the common weal, as the English phrase has it, held together in the last resort by Christian ethics. There was no place for individualism in the modern sense of the word. But gradually – or subliminally – a crack in the closed world picture was felt that undermined unanimous consent and was considered as a threat to traditional values. Not yet being able to recognise an upcoming change in human understanding and mentality, society responded by exclusion. New concepts such as self-assertion or self-determination – although the words did not exist in the 16th or 17th centuries – were denounced as unsettling society. It is significant that Shakespeare’s most heinous criminals – Richard III, Iago, the bastard Edmund in “King Lear” – are self-assertive individuals. “I am myself absolute”, says Richard, or “I am I” with a blasphemous ring to it. Edmund says “Nature, thou art my goddess”, appealing to a kind of survival of the fittest. Radical self-determination means a choice of evil, and aims at the destruction of everybody in its way. This individualism or self-determination becomes a stereotype of stigmatisation for new historical trends or developments not yet understood. It took about two centuries before self-determination, self-assertion and self-consciousness became primary values of enlightened human beings.

A telling example for political stereotypes in the early modern period is the theory of governance. In 1516 Erasmus of Rotterdam published his “*Institutio Principis Christiani*” (The Education of the Christian Prince). The prime requirements of a good prince are his firm adherence to the Christian faith and its undisputed ethics. He must be virtuous, wise and good. His judgments and actions must never be rash but well considered for the common good, firm but never cruel, mild and forgiving to his enemies. Erasmus constructs the picture of an ideal prince, and as ideals go, they are a collection of stereotypes, handed down since antiquity. They have nothing to do with political reality.

In the same year (1516) the Florentine diplomat and politician Niccolo Machiavelli wrote a small handbook on governance “*Il Principe*”, the contents of which spread by rumour throughout Europe, although the little book was not published until a century later. Machiavelli’s scandalous conclusion, based on close experience and observation, was that there is no such thing as a Christian prince. If it seems politically opportune in order to achieve a necessary goal, the prince may resort to Christian values without believing in them, i.e. religion may be of service if need be: the end justifies the means. Machiavelli uses the concept of virtue in the Roman sense – “*virtus*” – as mental and physical strength, the ability to analyse given situations and act accordingly. What Machiavelli has in mind is not personal power or the enrichment of the prince, but safeguarding the state against (mostly foreign) aggression for the benefit of his subjects. His word for this new concept is “*ragione dello stato*”, “*reason of state*”, “*raison d’état*” “*Staatsräson*”. In short: Machiavelli is the first truly political thinker in the modern sense of the word.

But this is not how he was understood in his own time. The stereotype of “*Machiavellianism*” is still with us today. It means cheating, deceiving, hypocrisy, treachery and a rigorous will to power. In confession-based 16th century thinking, “*Machiavellianism*” was seen as an onslaught on Christian values. But as Machiavelli’s ideas were spread by hearsay only, they were informed by anti-Machiavellian propaganda. The English punned on his name – Machevill, i.e. match evil – and in his first name, Niccolo, it was easy to detect an allusion to “old Nick”, i.e. the devil. In Christopher Marlowe’s play “*The Jew of Malta*” (ca. 1589), Machevill is brought on stage as the Prologue:

Albeit the world think Machevill is dead,  
Yet was his soul but flown beyond the Alps,  
And now the Guise is dead, is come from France  
To view this land, and frolic with his friends. [...] I weigh not men, and therefore not men’s words.  
Though some speak openly against my books,  
Yet will they read me, and thereby attain  
To Peter’s chair: and when they cast me off,  
Are poisoned by my climbing followers.  
I count religion but a childish toy,  
And hold there is no sin but ignorance.

As you see, even the Pope attains his chair only by resorting to Machiavellian means. Shakespeare presents an image of a Machiavellian villain when he has his future king Richard III say:

Why, I can smile, and murder whiles I smile,  
 And wet my cheeks with artificial tears,  
 And frame my face to all occasions.  
 I can add colours to the chameleon,  
 Change shapes with Proteus for advantages,  
 And set the murderous Machiavel to school. (William Shkeaspeare: 3 Henry VI,  
 IV, iii, 182ff.)

Here we get all the stereotypes that are associated with the name of Machiavelli to this day. Richard is a shining example of the abominable Machiavellian prince as the early modern era thought him to be. Needless to say, this contradicts Machiavelli's true intentions at every turn of thought or action. Later generations would find that Machiavelli's observations, far from being ruthless prescriptions, mirrored quite precisely courtly, diplomatic and political behaviour: one does not always mean what one says, one's counterpart need not see one's intentions, honesty or truthfulness are not opportune means for achieving political aims. This is how political reality functions.

Machiavelli's realistic observations were formulated at the same time as the Roman church was being challenged by Luther, but its core values were never questioned as the bedrock of Western societies. Against this background it was unthinkable that Christian ethics could be degraded to a mere tool among others, an expedient if need be to reach specific aims and ends. People were not prepared to see that Machiavelli's "ragione dello stato" reached far into the future, but reacted by exclusion and stigmatisation of the most grotesque kind – stereotype as caricature, which is the case more often than not.

And this seems to me a characteristic of stereotypes in general, that they stick in the mind over centuries with a pertinacity that disallows falsification. One may argue rationally against prejudices, and have a chance to dissolve them. But one cannot argue using facts or reasoning against stereotypes, which are the safest means precisely to ignore facts or existing problems and which satisfy base instincts of assumed superiority, especially if relished in like-minded groups. The only thing that history teaches is that we do not learn from it. Civilisation has always been but a thin varnish, or perhaps a precarious balance, as in Greek democracy. But if the scales tip over or tilt, anything may happen – the varnish cracks and the "Beast of the Depths" comes to the surface again. Stereotypes thought to have become obsolete once and for all, such as nationalism, have only been slumbering, and emerge again into the open to show their heinous faces.

**Bibliographical information**

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