

Christoph Schneider. *Der Warschauer Kniefall: Ritual, Ereignis und Erzählung.*
Konstanz: Universitätsverlag Konstanz - UVK, 2006. 331 S. EUR 34.00, paper, ISBN
978-3-89669-600-7.



Reviewed by Annika Frieberg

Published on H-German (February, 2008)

Christoph Schneider's *Der Warschauer Kniefall* examines the moment in 1970 when Willy Brandt, who was in Warsaw to sign the Polish-West German bilateral agreement, unexpectedly genuflected in front of the Warsaw Ghetto Monument. Brandt visited the site in order to place a wreath and honor the victims whom it represented. Schneider uses a sociological-anthropological approach and what he, drawing on Clifford Geertz, calls a "thick theoretical net" of interpretation to investigate why and how the gesture was transformed culturally into a German national symbol. Despite Schneider's interesting analytic approach, in comparison to some other studies, Schneider's perspective ends up being rather narrow.

The book's analysis focuses on performativity of the gesture as a political ritual, and its subsequent integration into a larger narrative by the West German media, one symbolizing national change. As source material, Schneider uses two collections of articles that appeared in the German press, one from 1970 and a second from 2000. His theoretical frameworks include theory

of symbols, rituals, narration, and collective memory. Schneider argues that Brandt's gesture can be understood through the theory on rituals in the sense of connecting the ordinary with the sacred, and that part of the gesture's and Brandt's national importance emerges from this elevation of this moment into something extraordinary. He also suggests that the genuflection functions as a passage according to theories about liminality, the transfer phase between two ritualistic ordering principles discussed by Victor Turner, in that the act broke with existing political ritual and the protocol of the state visit, and provided a passage to different rituals and protocol.

In framing the media coverage of the genuflection, Schneider relies on Hayden White's discussions of narrativity and the way in which events are organized through narrative structures. He also makes the larger point that narratives not only organize events but also construct national identity, and the way in which humans understand their place in the world. The West German media used narrative techniques to interpret and reinsert the break with protocol that the

genuflection constituted back into the social order. Schneider's discussion of the genuflection suggests that descriptions of mood that focus on the cold, dark Warsaw December and the turn toward hope and warmth following the unexpected gesture are allusions to the Cold War context. Also, in the narrative, according to Schneider, the media used religious frameworks to grant the moment its significance.

Correctly, Schneider emphasizes the absence, silence, and passivity of the Jewish victims in the interpretations of the genuflection between 1970 and 2000. The absence of a Jewish audience, and thus the suppression of that audience's agency, meant that the reception of the genuflection and action of forgiveness was omitted from the moment. That active forgiveness did not follow, however, was of less importance, since the ritualistic penitence seemed to imply that a larger general forgiveness followed. Schneider compares the articles that appeared in 1970 and 2000 to illustrate the change in German collective identity through media perceptions of the genuflection. An important conclusion of the book is the claim that the genuflection marked a shift in German national identity into a "trauma identity," with a corresponding awareness of Germans as the perpetrators in the Holocaust.

Schneider's book illustrates the potentially hermeneutic quality of German *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* and media interpretations of the genuflection. As Schneider rightly points out, the German media immediately set the parameters for discussion of the gesture within a *German* social, national, and cultural context. Jewish victims of the Holocaust were imagined as silent and passive actors in the drama of being asked for forgiveness.

Despite his awareness of this absent audience, however, Schneider's lack of attention to the international context of national identity constructions in postwar Germany, and to the communicative aspects of performative political ritu-

als to international audiences (particularly the Polish one), is questionable. The book does not discuss Polish Christians as recipients of Brandt's performative message. The Poles, who were the immediate audience of the gesture and target of Brandt's larger visit to Warsaw, are a silent and passive presence not only in Schneider's sources, but in his larger analysis as well. Consequently, important parts of national identity construction, such as German ambition toward reintegration into an international community, are entirely absent from his analysis.

In considering the gesture's importance for forward-looking constructions of postwar German national identity, it is important to remember that although Brandt's action may have been impulsive and, to the Polish audience's displeasure, primarily directed toward the Jewish people, the 1970 West German media coverage developed in the context of dialogue with Polish communist and non-communist actors. The performative aspects of West German state visits also had a longer history of attention to world opinion.[1] When, on the evening before signing the agreement in Warsaw, Willy Brandt stated on West German television that morality must become a force in politics, his words were directed to both German and international audiences.[2]

The inattention to the communicative aspects of the genuflection is partially a weakness of the subject-centered theoretical frameworks Schneider elects to apply. In constructing the genuflection as an event or a ritual, he omits any of the cultural and political intentionality of, and inspiration for, the gesture itself. The narrative construction suffers from the same weakness. While it is certainly useful to delve into the deeper layers of symbolic association, it does not explain whether the genuflection actively signaled a change in German national identity, or whether a change in German national identity inspired the genuflection.

One may compare Schneider's exclusive focus on the West German context of the genuflection with Michael Wolffsohn's and Thomas Brechenmacher's *Denkmalssturz? Brandts Kniefall* (2005), published in the same year as Schneider's book. A historical study, *Denkmalssturz?* concentrates on the international responses, or lack thereof, to the gesture. Wolffsohn and Brechenmacher confirm that the genuflection was largely a German national event and that Schneider is correct in considering the hermeneutical quality of its national media treatment. Still, the background that Wolffsohn and Brechenmacher provide underlines the narrowness of Schneider's analysis. Without attention to the communicative interpretation of the event within a larger international context, Schneider makes the curious nation-centeredness of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* appear natural. Nevertheless, the careful attention to the experiences and emotions connected with the genuflection nationally, and to the media's way of granting significance to the genuflection, enables *Der Warschauer Kniefall* to make its own contribution to research on reconciliation, modern German history, and nationalism.[3]

Notes

[1]. For communicative and performative aspects of state visits to West Germany, see Simone Derix, "Facing an 'Emotional Crunch': State Visits as Political Performances During the Cold War," *German Politics and Society* 82 (2007): 117-139.

[2]. Timothy Garton Ash, *In Europe's Name: Germany and the Divided Continent* (New York: Random House, 1993), 438.

[3]. Traditional reconciliation analyses have emphasized the genuflection as a key moment in Polish-German relations. Both Schneider's and Wolffsohn and Brechenmacher's research and analysis challenge this interpretation in that the genuflection is seen as neither primarily directed at the Polish nation nor emotionally interpreted within a Polish-German context. See, for example, William J. Long and Peter Brecke, *War and Recon-*

ciliation: Reason and Emotion in Conflict Resolution (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 96-100, for an interpretation of the genuflection as reconciliation within the Polish-German context.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Annika Frieberg. Review of Schneider, Christoph. *Der Warschauer Kniefall: Ritual, Ereignis und Erzählung*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. February, 2008.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14242>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.