

## Uprising of the Garden Gnomes

### A 1990s Polemic

#### NEWS PHOTO

In May 1993 I was a graduate student in Cultural Anthropology, visiting Europe to do archival work on the contact and confluence between European and West African peoples, in particular on forms of exchange involving performance as seen in masquerade, sacrifice and ancestral spirits. It was that Summer I also began spending time in the Small Garden Colonies of Berlin, talking with people, taking photos and thinking, trying to better understand the ways in which ancestors, animism and fetishism (key European notions in describing Africa) might be imagined in the context of how longtime city dwellers constructed and decorated their garden houses and garden plots. In particular, I became interested in the presence of and imagination involved around the garden gnome. It was the silly, absurd and often uncanny nature of this figure within the German (and larger Northern European) imagination which first pointed me to what must certainly be considered as their sacred nature.

It was on May 26 of that year, while having my breakfast that I spied a report in the local left newspaper, the *Tageszeitung*, which caught my interest. In a photo of a nicely white framed window, inside looking out, below a thin curtain and between potted plants stood Snow White and two gnomes. Below it the caption read: "German Garden Gnomes Seek Protection Behind Glass."

Below this stood a greater caption and sub-caption to the story which this pleasant photo illustrated. It read: “Uprising of the Garden Gnomes: Learn from Rostock: In Weißwasser a refugee camp has been placed amongst small gardeners/ Now the small gardeners are making threats with Molotov Cocktails.”

## **MAP**

The article painted a picture of small town residents on the verge of violence against foreign immigrants and possibly on the verge of siding with the radical right. Near the outside of town, where the local garden colonies are located, the government had built two dormitories for those recent immigrants seeking asylum in Germany. Not too long after these buildings had been built and refugees moved in things started to come up missing in the garden colony and constant disturbances of the peace began taking place. The small garden owners began to feel threatened.

In typical fashion, this article went on to depict these rural dwellers as closed minded, xenophobic and resistant to change, but beyond this it exploited many of the negative sentiments toward the East Germans held by many West Germans and especially those negative sentiments towards peoples from outlying eastern regions like Weißwasser.

Typically as well, the problem of German racism and its ever-important shame was here depicted as a problem of the East, the underdeveloped problem child of the West whose

underdeveloped sense of shame reflects badly on the nation as a whole. The invited response of its Western left readers was meant to be a “tsk tsk,” eye rolling, and the common disappointed expression that these people “simply have no shame.” Beyond this, however, was the ever-present powder keg waiting to go off, affirming a certain apocalyptic, or reliving of history, scenario, which loosely maintains the continuity between those left Westies who are the daily readers and moralizers of these stories.

Such stories, the form of which is not at all unusual in the West German left media, displays several current themes in the former West Germany’s imagination of the newly unified Germany and several much older themes in the German imagination of themselves as a “people.”

A popular theme we find in this report may be seen as a reversal of the pan-Northern European and American notion of “the Wild West.” In contemporary Germany the theme of “the Wild East,” not at all unlike “the Wild West,” connotes a region where civil law is yet forming and where entrepreneurial violence and an unstable sense of the state set a scene where excess is bound to overflow into wilder ways from which Europe and German modernity in particular has come to distinguish itself. No one in the left media seems to be sure, exactly, what this Wild East will turn out to be, but many seem to feel that these forms of wildness which define it are in some unknown way related to obsession with the ancestral and that the residents of the East are somehow less equipped to regulate and/or harness this presence of the past into forms of productivity and petit-

bourgeois civility as the West Germans seem to have done since the end of German totalitarianism in the mid-twentieth century.

### **GARDENS PHOTOS + Griebel Gnomes**

Small garden dwellers have over a century of history in German cities and towns; a history which often involves what is seen as a queer response to urban life and the acceptance of modernity. Their gardens are located in what are called “colonies” made up of anywhere between 10 and 40 small houses and garden plots. Among the names given to these colonies one finds a variety of telling words from “peace,” “contentment,” “festival ground,” “home” to the more exotic, “little Africa,” “Togo,” and “Tahiti.” These small garden colonists are popularly referred to as “Laubenpiper” after a form of small bird which lives in shrubs. Like the bird, the garden gnomes which populate and share their colonies, the small idyllic scenes which decorate their plots, and their little houses, the term “small” in the name “small garden colonists” or “small gardeners” connotes the popular theme of “the little man” in modern Germany. The little man, usually an urban or suburban dweller, lives within a certain confusion and defensiveness of the world around him, not knowing much but feeling very strongly about what little he does know. This little man, however, is in a certain sense a rural man displaced, unable to understand the reality of urban modernity as it is and unwilling to join in its middle-to-high culture. Like all little men he is viewed by those bigger than him as a strange cross between the naive (for which one is always in a certain sense guilty) and the idiot (for which one cannot be blamed but must in civilized society be tolerated). The little man is

known for his lack of taste and his sense for the tacky in all things and, like all things distasteful, these things are most often passionate, obscene and otherwise deviant.

## **ZWERG WITH SUNGLASSES**

But like so many things in the bourgeois German imagination one's status as a little man lies in one's own self-recognition of this status, a form of recognition which is never simple to locate. All such recognition, so the dominant cultural paradigm tells us, lies not simply in oneself but oneself in the eyes of the Other through whose eyes one must come to see oneself as if from outside. To do this, we are told, involves *a form of sacrifice*; involves the willingness to give up one's own perspective and, in making that of the other one's own, to accept that of the Other as one's own. In the end, however, this whole process of sacrifice in which one comes into self-consciousness requires that one come to see oneself through the eyes of not just *any* Other, but through one or more among those Others which dominate one, which belittle one and make one foolish or, at best, naive.

In contemporary Germany these Others who offer this possibility are framed in complex ways, usually involving a mix of those who lived before (usually in the twentieth century) and those contemporary persons who remain outside of the definition of the modern German his or herself. Among the latter group, lying outside of the modern Germans, are included: (a) both immigrants or minority groups, and (b) those Germans who have in some way lost their German modernity and have gone wild in

some unusual way not included in German modernity's usual primitivist appropriation of the wild found in the fine arts, music and urban middle-to-high culture.

Note, however, that the sacrifice involved in the form of self-recognition described above can neither rely *solely* on those of the past, be they Nazis, Marxists, resistance fighters, and so on, than it can rely *solely* on contemporary Others in German society. As said above, this form of sacrifice leading to self-recognition must and does rely on *a mix of* those past Others and those Others of the present. This is a situation in which, I might venture to add, the German Jews *used to* be placed more as contemporary others in a mix with a pagan past and are today placed more as past, twentieth century others, who, in the story of Nazism and its horrors, figure as the historical correctness of the left and of left bourgeois civility, and the moral lesson taught thereby.

Certainly today in the Germany of the Western left media the main basis of self-recognition is that of the history of the Nazi era, and the German Jews, as somewhat fictitious past Others, past Germans to be proud of and to honor as opposed to even the regular military and non-Jewish civilian war dead. The key theme in this move to self-recognition is a certain mix made with these past Other-Marxists and Jews, the contemporary immigrants of Germany, and the left media itself. It is through their multiple eyes in one that the Germans must come to see themselves, learning from this experience.

\*

But to these writers and moralists other forms of recognition and sacrifice either do not exist or at least cannot, for the sake of utility or devotion to history, be thought of and tried. The view of those from the “Wild East” is seen as nothing more and nothing less than an undeveloped form of unhappy consciousness, dangerously reflecting the violence of the past which has supposedly been overcome in the civilized West. The equation made within the western left media is that between Nazis and Stalinists who failed to build anything but nationalism and subliminal violence through state terror, and that of the former East Germany which did little more than the same. While East Germany did partially recognize the Jews as past others in the way the West German left has done, in its opposition of the bourgeois status and values of many of its strongest twentieth century thinkers, it failed to make the first part of the equation complete. Furthermore, the second part of the mix in which contemporary Others (immigrants) were equated with the (historical and potential) victims of the German un-self-consciousness, were not included due to the supposed fact that any repetition of the persecution and holocaust of the war years was regarded as simply impossible within the socialist East German state. It is thus that the stage for this particular “Uprising of the Garden Gnomes” article is set and then plays to a standing ovation amongst the West German left.

But is this the end of the story? Why should we assume that the West German left has some sort of superior understanding of the process of self-recognition in which Germans will not repeat their madness, cruelty and errors regarding others in their society?

Would it not be at least worth suggesting that compared to the Nazis or the East German state that they are in fact inept and for the most part a failure in the manipulation of the sacrifice involved in self-recognition and creating the sacred within Germany? Is there something simply empirically wrong, sociologically and cultural anthropologically, in the way they view nationalism and state power in terms of self-recognition? Could it be that unlike their political opponents they fail to acknowledge and deal with the existence of forms of sacrifice and self-recognition which have and continue to be not only key factors in political success but also factors which they, through a certain sense of taste and bourgeois civility deny and belittle as not worth considering? Indeed, a key strategy of the contemporary West German, American and other lefts (their bourgeois leaders often being more educated and worldly than their opponents) has been that of belittlement. Either from urban to rural, from center to margin, or from international to national the theme of belittlement is prevalent. In this belittlement a certain *ressentiment*, a certain disdain mixed with envy of those forms of self-recognition and sacrifice which they refuse to recognize, seems to rule.

Fortunately for us, the very subject of this talk addresses the belittled and seeks to cull from it what might have heretofore remained hidden, as belittled things often are, within the most obvious and mundane.

**GNOME TRANSPARENCY - “KLEIN ABER MEIN”**

The Garden Gnome, the most belittled of belittled men (or is he or she just naturally little?), is much more than a symbol and much more than we have heretofore thought to attribute to a sign. He is a rural dweller, as the ancestors of urbanites were or still are. He wears something like what one imagines as medieval peasant garb, most often with beard, most often pudgy, always with a pointed red “penis cap” (as they are called in Germany), and often with some sort of garden implement in hand. Like all little men he is passionate, rude, a bit perverted, and could care less. He is no fool but, like a trickster, plays a certain naiveté while he’s up to his tricks. Leading a happy-go-lucky and for the most part cozy existence he does not shy away from the great amount of work which needs to be done in the garden, but approaches it with the greatest alacrity. When encountering him, as one does now and then in the garden, he is often grinning. Should one wonder what he is always so happy about? Is he happy about the tricks he’s playing? Is he happy because the sun is shining and the garden is doing well? Who knows or cares, who simply wouldn’t be happy leading such a life? Who simply wouldn’t like to be let be?

But this is the problem, it is said, one simply can’t be let be in this world, in this century, and the last century, from which it seems we, and certainly the Germans, may never escape. The Garden Gnomes, like the landed ignobility on whose estate they live, must be understood symbolically as a reveling in a conservatism and escapism which dangerously ignores the repeating past, as standing for a sort of anti-modern hedonism and a whole class of little men who revel in their supposed symbol. Either this, or, as it

has played out in recent years, possibly understood as a sign of an ethos which threatens German modernity itself.

The newspapers of Germany have for years been and continue to be littered with stories of violence against garden gnomes, often perpetrated by angry young men who, in the tried and true cultural processes of generations, have taken it upon themselves to, supposedly, profane that which, in the end, they end up making all the more sacred.

**Show garden gnome destruction.**

In suburban neighborhoods throughout Germany tensions are forever ebbing and subsiding over (or between) little (and/or belittled) men. The common story is of a person who complains about his or her neighbor's garden gnomes, calling them tacky and distasteful, which in turn escalates into a battle of further insults. On this subject was even published a popular book entitled: "Poison-Gnomes - When your neighbor becomes your enemy" displaying the popular truth that, as the Germans say, "the neighbor is the greatest enemy of mankind."

**Show fighting clips.**

\*

I'll never forget the time, as an experiment, I donned a red gnome cap (given to me by a craftsman and manufacturer of garden gnomes in the South) and entered a

crowded workman's pub in Berlin on a Saturday night. As I entered the place went into an uproar, and a flurry of loud conversation about what was happening. People were unsure of how to react. Was I mocking them? Was this a provocation? Was I crazy, or just having a good time? Time after time, including that night, I was approached again and again by mostly bourgeois adults who with an almost childlike fascination, ask to wear the cap for a moment. This cap, I found, like the image of the gnome itself, especially brought into and donned in such profane contexts, amounted to an image which held an incredibly sacred yet equally as undefined sacred power. Upon seeing it on my head eyes would role, people would burst out in sputters or even become angry or, at least, unsure of their feelings for that moment.

This cap was like a mask, a mask behind which only I, the wearer, could know or say who I was or what my intentions were (or if there were any they could understand at all). It was like a pane of glass between myself and strangers, a pane in which I could see them and see myself alternately and which they could see me or themselves alternately. This cap and the garden gnome itself is, like a pane of glass, a site of recognition, yet a site which tempts one to break through it, to smash it, should one's fear or alienation get the best of one. In this pane of glass I, the anthropologist, was not only attempting to see myself in the eyes of the Germans but also, in doing so, to see the German Other. Likewise, the German Other was seeing his or herself in my eyes (eyes which could very well have been German for all too many of them knew) and depending on what he or she saw, to violently, or via assumption, remove my mask and expose my true intentions. Behind this mask, it seemed, I must have actually been either an idiot, a clown or

someone insulting them. If an insult, it would have been in the form of belittlement, calling them garden gnomes, which is a common form of expression of belittling a group.

At any rate, what was exposed was a form of the sacred unrecognized as such by the West German left. The proper left bourgeois response to my wearing the cap was that I was an idiot and nothing more.

## **WINDOW PHOTO**

Going back to the scene in Weißwasser we see Snow White (a form of ideal woman constructed by the Grimm brothers out of much less ideal and moralistic folk tales) and two gnomes behind glass, two strange Adams and an Eve, all East of Eden, looking out into the garden where they used to live.

The safety they seek behind this glass is also a dare to the immigrants in the local dormitories (or whomever is responsible for the crimes) for, after all, what could be more of a statement that these newcomers are unwelcome than the fact that the garden gnomes must be separated from the garden which they love most? The glass is a transparent but very real line or barrier between states of taboo and transgression, daring one to touch, to leave a fingerprint or the smash the glass and seal ones fate. As the immigrants move in close to the glass they see themselves and, alternately, Snow White and the two gnomes smiling back. Both groups stand behind the glass, simultaneously inside and outside, longing to move through to the other side, to home. Yet, alternately, both see themselves

as well. If the owner of the house were to return to find the glass smashed and the gnomes gone would he even think to inquire if the glass had been smashed inward or outward? What is it that the gnomes see in the window looking out and at themselves, and what is it that the immigrant sees in this double yet single view from the other side? In our photo from the left newspaper all reflection is denied, negated in all powerful photographic lens, freezing history and killing the life as it moves and changes with the sun as it crawls across this window sill each day that passes in Weißwasser, far from Berlin and its cafes.

*Kristallnacht*, a night named for the sparkling shimmer made in the moonlight and under street lamps by the millions of tiny crystals of glass from smashed windows of Jewish businesses, synagogues and homes. Countless times had countless non-Jewish Germans stood outside of Jewish shops looking in and alternately seeing themselves reflected in the glass. Countless times had young men dreamed of smashing and grabbing what they could from these and other windows, of breaking through this strangest and most inviting of barriers. How many fingerprints and smudges, traces of desire, were shattered, fragmented when these windows went? From on high came the commandment “Thou shalt fingerprint and smudge only Aryan windows from now on, and none other.”

But is the garden gnome, or his “penis cap” beholden to this commandment? Are not all (non-immigrant) Germans in him and under this cap in the same way as those panes of glass which they, touching themselves and moving toward objects of wonder,

continue to print and smudge? To eliminate this reflection, and this touch, to eliminate the reality of the window itself leads to a form of negation which can only be validated in smashing, in a violent sacrifice of some sort, but a sacrifice of what, to what end, and for what or whom? The young men smashing garden gnomes across Germany are acting on this image given by the left media in which the gnomes are panes of glass which reflect an image which is unbearable, which history and the left media continue to deny its readers and viewers. And the more it denies the greater the shock, the greater the confusion, the greater the *ressentiment* which leads to its further isolation and irrelevance. In the end these young men, strangely but rightly called “murderers” sacrifice only themselves to a greater power which they are not allowed to see.

Thus, as crime rises in the East and among immigrants, as violence builds, this media continues to make strange apologies to who knows whom and for who knows what.

“Uprising of the Garden Gnomes” it writes, with a smirk, yet strongly feeling that these gnomes threaten to overwhelm them at any given moment, should the camera slip to reveal their own figure in the window behind its lens. Yet who are the garden gnomes, we might ask? A German sociologist from Kiel, after years of extensive research, has concluded that the figure of the garden gnome originally came from Turkey, leading to the conclusion that if the garden gnomes are (or at least depict) German ancestors, then the German ancestors are Turks. Of the many corrections to be made to this particular scenario, the irony of which being apparent to most who heard the news the week of this discovery, foremost would be that ancestor devotion and fetishism is not so much about

the past but rather much more about the present. Who the real garden gnomes are is a question which changes with time and place. Supposedly, the real garden gnomes would be images of those to whom the Germans sacrifice, or, in terms of structural functionalism, to whom the Germans entrust the rights of maintaining the stability of the state and conduct these sacrifices for them. In this respect, it is surely the left, including scholars, aid and care workers, and countless bureaucrats, who perform this function and maintain this sacred power in which a direct line of causality between the newspaper story, the schools and universities and the angry young men smashing gnomes can be drawn. If any group is the garden gnomes it is this group, a priestly class (alternately degraded and glorified), whose own ancestors are the ancestors of the German nation - Leibniz, Kant, Goethe, Marx, Wagner, Luxemburg, Brecht, Benjamin and so on, many of whose words are bound in fancy volumes seldom, if ever, taken off the shelves of German homes and actually read.

These copies of the works of scholarly, left ancestors, whom all would like to in a certain sense feel to be their own as well, are the glass panes of the left, the masks of the left, behind which, in the actions of the priestly classes who sacrifice to them the German people and those immigrating would like to be able to discern their intentions and would like to at least feel that somehow their own understandings of the sacred would be mirrored in and validated by this class. They would like to at least feel that those upon whom they depend do not resent their joys in life, their basic sentiments, however unlearned they be, and their attempt at sacrifice if only in comfort, beer, fun and small gardens. To understand them as not in the devotion to maintaining a structure but

in following the learned sentiment which makes up the essentially maleable and playful of the social itself.

## **GREENS AS GNOMES**

If the facts be known, a great deal of responsibility in German society (and in other European and American societies as well) is placed in the hands of the educated left, much more than it continually complains it does not have in terms of political power. To not see this and to deny this power is certainly naive, though maybe endearing to some, but to offer only resentment and envy of those who provide one with ones own self-recognition cannot help but lead today to a loss of this sacred power to another, newer priestly class, a new army of gnomes housed in sleek office buildings whose post-modern one-way mirror glass never lets one see behind their masks. In the end this new priestly class has one-upped the left, making the left, its workers and scholars into a race of garden gnomes who, according to their own moralist vision of the little people, amount to passionate, foolish, and deviant race who are as unable to see, to perceive and to inspire as the deaf, dumb, blind cold clay figures they always thought the garden gnomes, those dreaming of the rural, and the Germans overall, to be.

## **PIPE GNOME AND SPADE GNOME**

So let us see in this way, let us smudge window leaving our prints for all to see, let us don our caps laying aside the hammer to take up pipe and spade and, in the most

earnest of silliness, dare I say, let the garden gnomes of the world unite, as they have nothing to lose but their ignobility.