

# Thomas de Maizière, “A Leitkultur for Germany—What Exactly Does It Mean?” (2017)

## Abstract

After defining what so-called “lead” or “guiding” culture was *not*—the burka—Thomas de Maizière attempted to lay out what it was in a series of points or theses. He stressed education, achievement, the ability to compromise, and a shared responsibility for German history as key components of *Leitkultur*. He also pointed out that Germany’s federal legal structure stood above any and all religion.

## Source

### “A *Leitkultur* for Germany—What Exactly Does It Mean?”

Who are we? And who do we want to be? As a society. As a nation. These are questions that are easier asked than answered: In his 600-page book “Memories of a Nation,” Neil McGregor attempts to give an answer, as does Dietrich Borchmeyer in “What is German?,” which comprises even more than 1,000 pages.

Some things are obvious. They are also undisputed: We respect fundamental rights and the Basic Law. Respect for human dignity is paramount. We are a democratic state governed by the rule of law. We speak the same language; our official language is German. There is a word to describe all of this: *Verfassungspatriotismus* (constitutional patriotism). A good word. But is that all? Democracy, respect for the constitution, and human dignity apply in all Western societies.

I think that there is something more. There is something like a “Leitkultur” (guiding culture) for Germany. Some people resent the term “Leitkultur.” This has to do with a debate we had many years ago. One might put it differently, e.g. by saying that apart from the language, the constitution and the respect for fundamental rights there is something else which holds us together at the core, which defines us and distinguishes us from others.

I like the term “Leitkultur” and want to stick to it, because it is a compound word. First there is the word “Kultur” (culture). This word indicates what this is all about, i.e. not about legal rules but about the unwritten rules that govern the way we live together. Then there is the word “leiten” (to guide) which means that this is not about dictating anything to anybody or about imposing anything on anybody. Instead, what I am concerned with are the things that guide us, that matter to us, and that serve as our guidelines. Such a guideline for the way we live together in Germany—that is what I would subsume under the term “Leitkultur.”

Who are “we”? Who belongs to us? This, too, is a question that is often asked and frequently discussed. To my mind the answer is clear: We are—that is—first of all the citizens of our country. Not everyone who has been staying in our country for a certain time will become a part of it. In our country we also have many people who have been living here for a long time without having German citizenship and they, too, are part of our country. But when I talk about “us” or “we,” I refer first and foremost to the citizens of our country.

Anyone who attempts to describe a *Leitkultur* for Germany is likely to be criticized for making undifferentiated generalizations. Whoever describes the general rules will be confronted with the exceptions that deviate from

---

these rules. That is the way it is, and it is true: Our country is characterized by many differences. But who would dispute the fact that there are well-tested and traditional habits which deserve to be preserved? Hardly anybody, I assume.

Nor does any given country have a monopoly on specific convictions or habits. What applies in Germany may just as well apply in France. On the other hand, it is also true that other countries have different customs. If habits abroad are different from those in Germany, it just means that they are different—not better or worse. It is the mix which makes a country unique and which ultimately makes up its culture. And is not this precisely what we look for when we travel to explore the culture of foreign countries, to experience a different culture which in turn makes us more aware of our own culture?

Let me put forward a few theses to invite a discussion on a *Leitkultur* for Germany.

1. We attach importance to some social habits not because they are the substance but rather the expression of a certain attitude. We introduce ourselves by our name. We shake hands to greet each other. At demonstrations there is a ban on face coverings. “Show your face”—that is an expression of the way we live together in our democracy. In our daily lives, it is important that we be able to see whether the person we talk to shows a friendly or a sad face. We are an open society. We show our face. We don’t do burkas.
2. We regard education to be a value in its own right and not merely a means to an end. Though they sometimes fail to understand the purpose of the exercise, students are required to learn things that they will hardly ever need in their future careers. This is why some people insist that schools should focus more on preparing students for their future vocational life. But this is not in line with our understanding of education. General education is a value in its own right. This awareness defines our country.
3. We consider achievement to be something that every individual can be proud of, no matter whether it be in sports, in society, in the academic world, in politics or in business. We expect a high level of performance. Performance and quality generate prosperity. It is the focus on performance which has made our country strong. We also provide assistance; we have social insurance systems and offer support to those who are in need. This is something that we as a country want and are able to afford. And this, too, is an achievement that makes us proud.
4. We are heirs of our history with all its highs and lows. Our past shapes our present and our culture. We are heirs of our German history. To our mind our history has been a struggle for German unification in freedom and peace with our neighbors, the integration of the *Länder* into a federal state, the struggle for freedom and an acknowledgement of the darkest periods of our history. This implies that we take a special position regarding Israel’s right to exist.
5. We are a nation that prizes culture. There is hardly any other country that is so strongly defined by culture and philosophy. Germany has greatly influenced the cultural development of the whole world. Bach and Goethe “belong” to the whole of mankind and they were Germans. We have our own concept of the importance that we attach to culture within our society. Music is always on the program of official political ceremonies or school anniversaries. Major concert halls are inaugurated with the Federal President and representatives of government, parliament, the judiciary and society in attendance. And there is hardly any other country that has so many theatres per inhabitant as Germany. Each county is proud of its music school. We are therefore defined also by culture in a wider sense of the term, by the way we look at it and what we do in order to foster culture.
6. In our country, religion is not something that divides our society but something that holds it together. This is

---

what the churches in our country stand for with their tireless work on behalf of our society. They keep our society together—they bring people together not only in faith but also in everyday life, in day-care centers and schools, in retirement homes and active community work. It is the Christian churches, the synagogues and the mosques which assume this bonding function. This year we commemorate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. Europe and Germany paid a steep price for the division between the Christian churches which was followed by wars and centuries of conflict. Germany is characterized by a special relationship between the state and the churches. Our state is neutral in terms of religious belief but takes a friendly stance towards the churches and religious communities. Religious holidays are part of our calendar. Church spires are part of our landscapes. Our country is based on Christian tradition. In our country there is peace between the religious communities, a peace which is based on the principle that law takes absolute precedence over all religious rules in state and society.

7. In our country we have a civic culture that governs the settlement of conflicts. Compromise is a constituent element of democracy and of our country. Maybe our society is more consensus focused than other Western societies. The majority principle and the protection of minorities go hand in hand. We are concerned that things have gone somewhat amiss in this respect. Respect and tolerance are important to us. We accept different lifestyles, and those who do not withdraw from what is a broad-based consensus. In our society, violence is not acceptable, neither at demonstrations nor anywhere else. To us there is no linkage between the concept of honor and violence.

8. We are enlightened patriots. An enlightened patriot loves his country and does not hate others. We Germans, too, can be enlightened patriots. “And because we’ll make it better let us guard and love our home, love it as our dearest country as the others love their own,” as Bert Brecht put it in his Children’s Hymn. Yes, we did have problems with our patriotism in the past. There were times when it drifted into nationalism, then there were times when many people did not dare to openly acknowledge that they were Germans. All this is a matter of the past now, in particular for the members of the younger generation. Our national flag and our national anthem are a natural part of our patriotism: Unity and justice and freedom.

9. Our country had to cope with many pivotal changes. Some of them involved fundamental decisions. Key among them was the decision that we are part of the West. Culturally, intellectually and politically. NATO defends our freedom. It links us with the U.S.A., our most important friend and partner outside Europe. As Germans we always are at the same time Europeans. In many cases, Europe is the best place to represent and pursue German interests. On the other hand, Europe will not flourish without a strong Germany. We are perhaps the most European country in Europe—after all, no other country in Europe has more neighbors than Germany. Our geographic location in the heart of Europe and our relations with our neighbors have shaped us over centuries—for worse in the past and for better at present. This shapes our way of thinking and our policy.

10. We have a collective memory for places and remembrances. The Brandenburg Gate and November 9th for example are part of this collective memory. Or Germany’s victories at the Football World Championships. And then there are regional traditions: Carnival, folk festivals. People are deeply rooted in their region and love the market squares of our towns and cities. They identify with places, smells and traditions. Regional mentalities that are identifiable by the way a person speaks are a part of our identity and shape our country.

So what is the conclusion to be drawn from this list? Some things may be missing; others may be added to the list. Is this an educational canon which everyone should know and study, for example in the 100 orientation lessons provided in our integration course? I would this were the case. Is it possible to impose a *Leitkultur*? Is it binding? No, it is not. As the term “culture” already suggests this is not about rules that are to be imposed from above. The

*Leitkultur* shapes and is supposed to shape. It can and should be imparted.

Above all, *Leitkultur* can and should be lived. Whoever is sure of his *Leitkultur* will be strong. Strength and an inner sense of being at home with one's own culture enable us to be tolerant towards others. Therefore, *Leitkultur* is first and foremost what shapes us. If it guides us in the best sense of the word it is bound to have a shaping effect on others, too, including those who come to us and are allowed to stay. We extend our hand to them.

But what about those who have come here with a chance of being allowed to stay but who are not familiar with the concept of *Leitkultur* or not willing to familiarize themselves with it or maybe even reject it? Well, they will hardly be able to integrate successfully, because they will not develop a sense of belonging if they are neither familiar with our *Leitkultur* nor at least willing to respect it.

In dealing with these people we should distinguish between what is not negotiable and what is tolerable. We will not relinquish anything that is not negotiable; here, we must insist on compliance. This means that those who come here must not have a criminal record and that they must respect our fundamental values but also that they must show respect in the way they interact with others and accept the precedence of law over religion. We remain—and this is not negotiable—a part of the West, proud Europeans and enlightened patriots. Human dignity in particular is not negotiable for us; this applies also with regard to the way people interact with each other.

On the other hand there are certainly quite a few things that we must and can tolerate. However, if we make sure that we are aware of and actually live our *Leitkultur*, we will become aware of its inherent strength. This in turn will enable us to tolerate quite a few things and we will have less to tolerate the more convincing our *Leitkultur* is. If we are aware of what it is that defines us, what makes up our *Leitkultur*, who we are and who we want to be, cohesion within our society will remain stable and integration will be successful—today and in the future.

06 | **Debatte**[illegible][illegible][illegible][illegible][illegible]

# LEITKULTUR FÜR DEUTSCHLAND

**WAS IST DAS  
EIGENTLICH?**

Der Mann, der in dieser Woche eine Verurteilung unserer Gesellschaft beklagte und warnte, »da ist etwas ins Rutschen gekommen«, sagt in BamS, was Deutschland jetzt braucht.

**Der Mann, der in dieser Woche eine Verrohung unserer Gesellschaft beklagte und warnte „da ist etwas ins Rutschen gekommen“, sagt in BamS, was Deutschland jetzt braucht**

---

Source: Thomas de Maizière, “A *Leitkultur* for Germany – What Exactly Does It Mean?” *Bild am Sonntag*, April 30, 2017, pp. 6–7. © Bild am Sonntag / Axel Springer Verlag. Republished with permission. Available online in English translation at: <https://www.bmi.bund.de/SharedDocs/interviews/EN/2017/namensartikel-bild.html>)

Recommended Citation: Thomas de Maizière, “A *Leitkultur* for Germany—What Exactly Does It Mean?” (2017), published in: German History Intersections, <<https://germanhistory-intersections.org/en/germanness/ghis:document-243>> [July 08, 2025].