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MODERNITY AT THE LIMIT: RETHINKING GERMAN EXCEPTIONALISM BEFORE 1914

Geoff Eley

'MODERN' AS A CATEGORY OF THE PRESENT

How shall we historicize modernity? To a perhaps surprising extent, modernism and modernity have become pervasive terms of contemporary social theory and cultural critique. A variety of events have converged on this space, where the category of the modern seems to allow all the twentieth-century preoccupations to be addressed. One is Marxism's disarray as a grand narrative of revolutionary transformation (the projection of a viable and attainable future beyond modernity), capable of producing the coherence of the present in epochal terms, with reference to its wider historical and philosophical frontiers. Another is the creeping catastrophe of global ecological change, which has done extensive damage to the self-confidence of modernity's programmatic definition: environmentalism's critique of industrialism, science, and rationalization has prompted social theorists to examine what might still be viable in the classical constructions of modernity, now that the hubris of the triumph of science over nature has been exposed. A third is the collapse of Communism since 1989, which intellectually has decisively released the pressure from the privileging of the West, particularly from those structures of thought concentrated around the importance of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution as the crucible of liberalism and of a belief in the progressive logic of history.

But the need to conceptualize modernity also comes from the intellectual challenge posed by the philosophical and cultural discourse of postmodernism. For one thing, postmodernism establishes its own specificity partly by a negative positioning, via the determined othering of an essentialized conception of the modern as what came before. Its main dimensions of critique − of Enlightenment universalism, of the grand narratives of modern historical development, of the coherently centred and rationally acting human subject − are by now familiar. The postmodernist perspective has come to imply a conception of modernity in dissolution or supersession, grounded in a universe of discourse that the otherwise opposing camps of twentieth-century social and political theory held in common (say, both the modernization theorists and their Marxist critics) − one constructed epistemologically around totalizing notions of transcendent truth and the universalizing meta-narrative of the rise of 'western civilization' and 'Man's' mastery over nature, in a way which allowed the world to be known in a scientific, historical, and predictive sense. Such an understanding of modernity implied a strongly centred notion of identity and
agency, of directionality in history, of the power of knowledge to shape the environment, and of the progressive impact of the West on the rest of the world (even where such transformations have proceeded through immediately destructive and exploitative encounters). There is much diversity of perspectives among and within these intellectual traditions, of course – liberal, Marxist, and others – as the triumphalist anti-Marxism of our post-communist era amply and retroactively confirms. But some version of this outlook, which combines assumptions about the reasoning individual with the overarching logics of universal rationalization, economic progress, and the West’s expansion in the world, has been constitutive for the main forms of social theory since the end of the last century:

With regard to its economic programme and its cultural organization, this concept of modernity represents an effort to synthesize its progressive and emancipatory ideals into a globalizing, integrative vision of the individual’s place in history and society. It rests on the assumption that there exists a legitimate centre – a unique and superior position from which to establish control and to determine hierarchies.¹

The most aggressive and apodictic of postmodernist commentaries, therefore, have a strong and clear answer to modernism’s historicity: it is the time – whether as a general condition of society, a structure of meaning, a stage of knowledge production, or a system of rules and practices for producing coherence in the world – that no longer works, the time that is past. This hard and elaborated distinction between modernity and postmodernity has achieved greater currency in some national, political, and disciplinary contexts than others. In Britain, the disparate enthusiasms within some sectors of sociology, cultural studies, literary studies, and feminism were convened rather successfully into a generalized discourse of politics during the 1980s, for instance (I’m thinking of Marxism Today and the New Times agenda and their widespread effects), whereas the US discussion is shaped far more by a politics of cultural studies in the academy, heavily marked by literary theory, with intermittent explosions into a wider public sphere, under the unstable signs of an identity politics taking its recognition.

Among historians the popularity of this framework is rather low.² Moreover, when we turn to the history of Germany, we find this effect especially clear. In the German intellectual context more generally there is in any case far less scepticism about Enlightenment traditions: western values remain much more strongly centred, and the field of meanings of the ‘postmodern’ is far less in play. The former have no shortage of critics – both from a Green political and cultural perspective on the left, and from the partisans of a regenerative German identity on the right. But on the whole, it is still the strong orientation towards the values of the West that holds the centre of public debate, from the market-oriented ideology of the Free Democrats and the CDU centre, to the remaining welfare statism of the SPD, and the obdurate rationalism and


² An exception is Patrick Joyce, who has marked out an important place for such a discussion during the last few years. See most recently, Patrick Joyce, Democratic Subjects: The Self and the Social in Nineteenth-Century England, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1994, and ‘The End of Social History?’, Social History, Volume 20, Number 3, 1995, pp73-91.
power of knowledge to shape the of the West on the rest of the proceeded through immediately. There is much diversity of al traditions, of course — liberal, Marxist of our post-communist version of this outlook, which individual with the overarchingic progress, and the West’s for the main forms of social

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postmodernist commentaries, modernism’s historicity: it is the structure of meaning, a stage and practices for producing the time that is past. This hard and postmodernism has achieved nd disciplinary contexts than thin some sectors of sociology, text were convened rather politics during the 1980s, for New Times agenda and their s shaped far more by a politics reed by literary theory, with re, under the unstable sign of work is rather low. Moreover, this effect especially clear. In there is in any case far less ern values’ remain much more he ‘postmodern’ is far less in th from a Green political and partisans of a regenerative is still the strong orientation of public debate, from the and the CDU centre, to the obdurate rationalism and philosophical modernism of most liberal and social democratic intellectuals. In Germany, of course, the unavoidable context of discussion (although after the dramatic events of the collapse of the GDR and German unification, this is now in flux) remains the experience and legacy of the Third Reich. For Jürgen Habermas especially, an explicit, systematic, and continuously reaffirmed allegiance to the ‘political theory of the Enlightenment’ has become the unavoidable antidote to Germany’s baleful pre-1945 past. In this case, an abstract and normative constitutionalism deriving from the historic break of 1945-49 – the necessity of a ‘constitutional patriotism’, or a post-conventional identity based on rationalist adherence to an idealized construction of the liberal political community of the West – had become for Habermas: the only permissible form of a German collective identity, because more traditional appeals to history and nation (‘identity’ and ‘meaning’, as privileged in the discourse of the intellectual right) had become morally forfeit due to the years 1938-45. The sense of a new beginning, of strict demarcation against certain older German continuities or traditions – political romanticism, decisionism, diverse illiberalisms and anti-modernisms – has been crucial to Habermas’ political thinking, which during the 1980s staked out the terms in which the sustaining of postwar German democracy needed to be thought. As he insisted during the so-called ‘historians’ conflict’ almost ten years ago:

The only patriotism that will not alienate us from the West is constitutional patriotism. Unfortunately, a commitment to universal constitutional principles based on conviction has only been possible in German national culture since — and because of – Auschwitz. Anyone who wishes to expunge the shame of this fact with facile talk of ‘guilt-obsession’, anyone who wants to recall the Germans to more conventional forms of national identity, destroys the only reliable basis of our tie to the West.3

Thus for Habermas certain ideas are profoundly disqualified by their associations with the past, and this connotative chain precludes the opening of contemporary debate towards the discourse of postmodernism. For him, critiques of Enlightenment are inseparably linked – logically and historically – to politically destructive and reactionary agendas. His worst fear is that the late twentieth-century crisis of modernity – which is otherwise freely acknowledged, and rightly defined by the catastrophe of scientific domination over nature – will open the door to political irrationalism and a rehabilitated tradition of the anti-democratic right. This vigilance on Habermas’ part in the 1980s had a variety of important fronts, including his difficult and obscure positioning in relation to the reception of Foucault; the more general polemics against French poststructuralism and postmodern philosophy, whose German advocates he stigmatized as ‘Young Conservatives’, with the intended evocations of fascist intellectualism from the 1920s; the holding of the line against the rehabilitation of Heidegger and Carl Schmitt; and the challenging of historians such as Ernst Nolte in contexts such as the Historikerstreit

3. The Historikerstreit raged in West German public life during 1986-87, in response to an article by Habermas in Die Zeit, where he attacked several conservative historians (Ernst Nolte, Andreas Hillgruber, Michael Stürmer) for a dangerous apologues. In the name of rebuilding a healthy German patriotism, he argued, such voices wanted to bury the issue of continuing German responsibility for Nazism, and thereby vitally disavowed the moral-political foundations of West German democracy since 1945. See Geoff Eley, ‘Nazism, Politics and the Image of the Past: Thoughts on the West German Historikerstreit, 1986-1997’, Past and Present, Number 121, 1985, pp171-208.
mentioned above, For Habermas, postmodernism is an 'aesthetic pseudo-
radicalism', which in embracing the cultural critique of modernity simul-
taneously abandoned the ground of democracy, or at least surrendered the
ground from which democracy could be convincingly reaffirmed:

The farewells sung to cultural modernity and the veneration of capitalist
modernization can only confirm those who, with their blanket antimo-
radicalism, want to throw out the baby with the bathwater. If modernity had
nothing to offer but what appears in the commendations of neoconservative
apologetics, one could well understand why the intellectual youth of today
should not rather return to Nietzsche via Derrida and Heidegger and seek
their salvation in the portentous voices of a culturally revived, an authentic
Young Conservatism not yet distorted by compromise.4

It is worth pausing with this field of German difficulty for a moment, in order
to understand how powerfully an authorized reading of history and its
ethico-political claims – in this case the construction of the pre-1945 German
past as a story of failed modernization – can draw the intellectual agenda
against certain possibilities of discussion, establishing persistent protocols for
what can and cannot be thought. To give Habermas his due, the contours of a
new conservative agenda have been visible enough since the early 1980s. At an
intellectual retreat sponsored by the CDU in 1983 soon after returning to
government, on the theme of ‘German Identity Today’, the philosopher Günther Rohrmoser
counterposed to the Enlightenment what he called a
specifically German ‘answer to ... modern society and the problems of human
alienation connected with it’. In the late twentieth century, Rohrmoser argued,
the Enlightenment tradition’s moral hegemony could no longer persuade. The
‘project of modernity’ had entered its crisis, and now an older heritage of
German critique should come back into play: Is it really the case that the
answers of an ideologically exhausted liberalism and a socialism that has failed
in all its variants are better than those we can derive from the memory of the
greatest philosophical and cultural achievements of the Germans? In fact, the
post-1945 determination to treat the difference between the Germans and all
the ahistorical-abstract traditions of the West founded on natural law as
‘nothing but an error’ has produced only the neuroticization of our national
self-understanding’, and it was time to reappropriate nineteenth and early
twentieth-century German thought without worrying about Nazism’s
retroactive association.5 Here the seamless unity of political romanticism,
appeals to identity, and historical apologetics feared by Habermas – the
harmful logic of departing from the Enlightenment tradition – seems clearly at
work.

This is a field of undoubted complexity. The earlier Wende in West German
politics, which marked an authoritarian constriction of public life between the
‘German autumn’ of 1977 and the 1982 return of the CDU to office, began a
slow and remarkably effective reoccupation of the public sphere by the

4. Jürgen Habermas, ‘Neoconservative Cultural Criticism in the United States and
West Germany’, in: Habermas, The New Conservatism, Cultural Criticism and the
pseudo-radicalism’ is taken from Richard Wolin’s Introduction. p.199.

5. Cited by Jürgen Habermas, The New Intimacy between Politics and Culture:
intellectual right, most visibly tracked through the pages of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, the German paper of record, and a variety of high-profile publishing operations, but also proceeding via the slow advent to mainstream respectability and influence of journals such as *Critique* and *Mai* on the extreme right. Academics such as Rohrmoser, the historian Helmut Duddel, and the political scientist Bernhard Willms, with a variety of journalists and other public intellectuals employed in research foundations, policy-making agencies, and on the fringes of the CDU-CSU, have successfully challenged the centrist pragmatism and strategic 'westermatism' of Christian Democracy's official culture. Such voices construct a self-consciously 'Conservative' lineage for themselves, avowedly 'fascist' (but equally explicitly not Nazi), and drawing systematically on Italian and French Fascist intellectuals of the 1930s, the French New Philosophers of the 1970s, and especially Ernst Jünger, with Armin Mohler, Jünger's secretary from the late 1940s and early 1950s, and the author of the crucial handbook, *Die konservative Revolution in Deutschland 1928-1932* (Stuttgart, 1950; new ed. 1989), as the *spiritus rectus*. An extremely sophisticated and intellectually coherent set of positions, shaped by political elitism and nationalist desire within formal rhetorics of democracy, this was long demarcated against the CDU by the latter's refusal of Conservatism with a capital 'C', and its passage into political respectability in the late 1980s marks an important realignment. The explicit inclusion of the philosophical postmodernism of Lyotard and Baudrillard by Mohler and others in this anti-Enlightenment critique seems to vindicate Habermas's hostility to theories of the postmodern after all, providing welcome grist to his mill.

In this respect, Habermas speaks for a considerable body of German historical opinion, basically those responsible for the main progressive departures of the 1960s and 1970s historiographically, including Hans Mommsen and other so-called 'structuralist' historians of Nazism, Wolfgang Mommsen, labor historians, and Hans-Ulrich Wehler, Jürgen Kocka, and other members of the so-called Bielefeld network. But is that really all there is to say? Can we really lump together all the present hesistancies and reservations about the Enlightenment tradition in all its dimensions and mark them negatively as *danger*, a re-emergence of tainted German traditions from before 1945, so that precisely in [Germany] a "grand coalition" of critics of enlightenment has formed, a coalition in which the brown, black, and green fringes meet", as Habermas has (very tendentiously) put it? Quite apart from the merits of current philosophical and theoretical critiques themselves (which, after all, many others on the left have found compelling), the commitment to enthroning the Enlightenment so intransigently also leads to a highly synthetic *historical account* of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in which the complexity of the processes which actually moved progressive or democratic change is flattened. Moreover, as feminist and post-colonial critics have taught us, the political theory of the Enlightenment also involved silences and suppressions, so that the founding moments of modern democratic advance became predicated on the gendering of political capacities, the social


qualification and limitation of citizenship, and the exploitative domination of some peoples by others. Social improvement and cultural goods involved similar privilegings and exclusions, in which certain constructions of value, agency, and interest were centred at the expense of others. The great movements of modern reform since the French Revolution were constituted from fields of contradiction in this way.9

If that is so, then Habermas's connections look less automatic. Once we accept that the story of the Enlightenment tradition is one of contradictory movement and effects, so that the ideals of progress, rationalism, secularism, and science may be treated problematically as well as affirmatively, then the issue of negative continuities (which Habermas wants to locate in political romanticism and right-wing anti-Enlightenment oppositions) can be very differently posed. Such dangers can be found not only in new conservatisms and right-wing anti-Enlightenment critique, but also - and more insidiously - working away at the heart of the Enlightenment ideas themselves. It is this point - which destabilizes the rationalist unity of economic and cultural progress Habermas wishes to hold together, and problematizes the postwar 'anti-totalitarian consensus' on which he believes West German political culture to have been based - that Habermas's affirmative centring of 'western values' tends to obscure.

BACKWARDNESS AND MODERNITY IN GERMAN HISTORY

Since the 1960s, a powerful structure of interpretation has dominated perceptions of nineteenth-century German history, with implications for how we see the entire period up to 1933. This entails a familiar deep-historical perspective of the origins of Nazism, stressing how the interests of traditional elites and their pre-industrial, pre-modern mentalities prevented the democratic modernizing of the political system and allowed 'authoritarian and anti-democratic structures in state and society' to endure.10 This argument from political backwardness also attributes an experience of successful modernization to the histories of Britain, France, and the USA, or 'the West', which then becomes the measure of Germany's allegedly peculiar path, the Sonderweg. On the one hand, the Kaiserreich (in the political system of the Empire between 1871 and 1918) is 'authoritarian' in the generally agreed typology of nineteenth-century regimes. But on the other hand, authoritarianism's victory in the shaping of the Imperial-German state is considered an exceptional case, an abnormal interruption of the democratization process that proceeded successfully elsewhere, as a political logic accompanying economic growth.

This interpretation hinges on the weakness of German liberalism. In Germany, the argument runs, a 'truly realistic' appreciation of what a lasting and consistent modernization would require was precluded after the 1870s by a profound shift in the dominant ideological orientations, resulting from a conjuncture of factors - from the liberals' changed access to government influence once Bismarck had turned decisively to the right in 1878-79, from the discrediting of liberal and political life' in the post-conservatism of German Empire, and from the de-careerism and advance of civic pride. This key idea of political values for the G constellation, in the words from its previous integral liberalism and liberal bourgeois consciousness (tended to see it) respond to anxieties produced by t growth and the fears of s by the political manager successors at the turn of h Tipitz).11

It is hard not to be impressed account. 'Modernization' forms of pluralist democracy the structures of econo diverges from this mode surprisingly been thrown blokages', and 'mistaken modern society attempt change' logically require democracy.12 Conversely, the institutional express modernization-obstructing radical disjunction is post modern' basis of the indus arrangements which the be away. In the long run, st 'modern' institutional an conflicts - that is, by replacements for 'the rule social groups centring arc Otherwise, the inescapabl industrial economy could integration', which Weihl imperialism', or the diversi imperialist accumulation backward state there across artificially bridged by man solution of 'modernizing' c
the discredit of liberal economics and the general 'deliberalizing of public and political life' in the post-1873 depression, from the growing aggression and conservatism of German nationalism as a new integrative ideology for the Empire, and from the degeneration of the ideal of Bildung into a culture of careerism and advancement, divorced from notions of civic responsibility and civic pride. This key ideological watershed amounted to a new structure of political values for the German bourgeoisie - 'this fundamental change of constellation', in the words of Hans-Ulrich Wehler - which displaced liberalism from its previous integrative role, or the 'triangular constellation of Bildung, liberalism and liberal nationalism' that dominated the 1860s. The new bourgeois consciousness (or 'false consciousness', as German historians have tended to see it) responded to a powerful combination of new developments: anxieties produced by the depression, with its irregularities of economic growth and the fears of social unrest, but also the manipulation of those fears by the political managers of the 'old elite' (first Bismarck, and then his successors at the turn of the century, like Bernhard von Bülow and Alfred von Tirpitz).

It is hard not to be impressed by the powerful teleology running through this account. 'Modernization' here is avowedly abstracted from the present-day forms of pluralist democracy in the West. As such, it is thought to be built into the structures of economic growth, and to explain why German history diverges from this model until after 1945. German historians have not surprisingly been thrown back on to a vocabulary of 'wrong turnings', 'failures', 'blockages', and 'mistaken development'. As Wehler has baldly put it, 'any modern society attempting to be equal to the demands of constant social change' logically requires a constitutional framework of parliamentary democracy. Conversely, the authoritarianism of the Imperial state becomes the institutional expression of the 'pre-industrial traditions' and their modernization-obstructing dominance in the pre-1914 political culture. Such a radical disjunction is postulated between 'wealth' and 'power', between the 'modern' basis of the industrial-capitalist economy and the 'traditional' political arrangements which the bourgeoisie in Germany proved incapable of sweeping away. In the long run, stability could only be secured by developing more 'modern' institutional arrangements for containing and handling social conflicts - that is, by 'welfare-statist' and parliamentary-democratic replacements for the rule of an authoritarian leadership and of privileged social groups centring around the pre-industrial elites of the aristocracy'. Otherwise, the inescapable dictates of power legitimation in the developed industrial economy could be satisfied only by artificial forms of 'secondary integration', which Wehler has argued may be conceptualized as 'social imperialism', or the diversion of tensions outwards into expansionist drives for imperialist accumulation. Thus between the modern economy and the backward state there arose destabilizing contradictions, which could only be artificially bridged by manipulative techniques of rule, so long as the 'real' solution of 'modernizing' democratic reform was not embraced. In this view.
the unreformed Imperial state was incapable of reproducing itself other than by an escalating procession of crises, culminating eventually in the miscalculated risk of July 1914.14

Of course, this structure of interpretation is rationalized by the need to explain Nazism: backwardness and traditionalism are found so easily in the Kaiserreich’s political culture because the difference of ‘1933’ seems to require clear and unambiguous divergences from the histories of other countries (in the West) earlier on. If Germany produced fascism, and the other developed capitalist countries experiencing the world economic crisis of the early 1930s did not, then deep historical peculiarities must be in play. The most influential approach to the place of 1933 in German history now proceeds from a strong conception of authoritarian handicaps descending from the nineteenth century, whose legacy of traditionalism was far more important than the dynamics of capitalist crisis per se in determining the outcome of the events of 1929-33: ‘Prussian militarism … Junker cliques … veneration of the state by clergy and professoriat … preponderance of heavy industry in the political decision-making process’. Fascism resulted from a blockage of modernization in this sense, from the failure of liberalism to sweep such vectors of backwardness away. It was produced by the pathology of an only partly ‘bourgeois’ society: ‘In Germany there was no “bourgeois dominance” based on successful industrial capitalism that tipped over into fascism’ (i.e. supposedly the Marxist interpretation), but precisely its opposite, namely, ‘a deficit of civility [Bürgerlichkeit], of bourgeois parliamentarism, and of firmly anchored bourgeois political culture, that opened the way to the abyss’.15 And:

The reasons why democracy was liquidated in Germany in the course of the world economic crisis and not in the other developed industrial societies have less to do with the course of the crisis itself than with the different pre-industrial histories of these countries. The conditions for the rise of fascism have at least as much to do with feudalism and absolutism as with capitalism.16

In this way, German history forms one key element in the contemporary discourse of modernity since 1945, recharged since 1989, where it forms the negative historical counter-case (the modernity not attained) to the liberal positivity of the ‘West’. The twentieth-century resistances to democracy, the right-wing defence of privilege, exclusivity and elitism, coercive and authoritarian systems of political rule, police repression, attacks on civil liberties, and everything out of keeping with an idealized construct of western liberal democracy in the world since 1945, become aligned on the ‘traditional’ side of the backwardness/modernity opposition – as histories destined to be overcome, rather than problems or possibilities persisting in the structures of modernity itself. While they persist, in fact, they are ipso facto evidence of a crisis-proneness that only fundamental liberalization can lay to rest. The pathologies of German history were modernity’s absence. Thus the failure of political modernization un crisis’, whose effects desc succeed:

Without a transformative relationship, without which the political pre maintained in the period clearly between 1914 all time, the politics had smoothed the way for N.

This is the specifically Ger German difference from 1l Sonderweg.

ANTI-MODERN

There is a further dimension. German liberalism entered supporters gave up on the imperfections of the part pre-industrial elites, with and self-assertion in the capacity became constructed antithese separation could simultaneous status quo. On the one hand, on the other hand, highest good, a superior n mundane and pragmatic affected. The aspirations project – from an activist e social emancipation, to cultivation bounded by prer a retreat to the private cultivation. It produced a sense, but also for civic res

This syndrome is what unpolitical German’. It is an older set of non-pol nineteenth century, the re the mass market and the gave this pulling back from
political modernization under the Kaiserreich entailed a 'permanent structural crisis', whose effects described a space in which Nazism could eventually succeed:

Without a transformation of the social structure and the traditional power relationships, without social emancipation, modernization seems not to be possible ... The fatal consequences of the government politics through which the political predominance of the pre-industrial elites was to be maintained in the period of high industrialization were revealed quite clearly between 1914 and 1929, when these structures crumbled. By that time, the politics had helped create the dangerous conditions which smoothed the way for National Socialism.17

This is the specifically German master narrative of the origins of Nazism, of German difference from the West, of German exceptionalism, of the German Sonderweg.

ANTI-MODERN

There is a further dimension to this critique of the German bourgeoisie. As German liberalism entered its crisis, it is usually argued, its bourgeois supporters gave up on their desire for political power and adjusted to the imperfections of the parliamentary constitution and the dominance of the pre-industrial elites, withdrawing to depoliticized forms of social achievement and self-assertion in the cultural sphere. In the process, 'culture' and 'politics' became constructed anachronistically, as discrete realms of value and action. Such a separation could simultaneously relativize and legitimate the constitutional status quo. On the one hand, Kultur compensated for political disappointments; on the other hand, it subtly supplanted political engagement as the highest good, a superior realm of emancipation and freedom, from which the mundane and pragmatic world of politics could be judged, but not directly affected. The aspirations of Bildung transmuted from a public into a private project – from an activist ethic of moral improvement, civic virtue, and general social emancipation, to a restricted and unpolitical ideal of individual cultivation bounded by property and privilege. The flight from society became a retreat to the private sphere of family, aesthetic value, and individual cultivation. It produced a disregard not only for politics in the party-political sense, but also for civic responsibility and the public life.

This syndrome is what Fritz Stern called 'the political consequences of the unpolitical German'. It foreclosed the emergence of a modern and publicly minded outlook on the part of the German bourgeoisie, and kept it wedded to an older set of non-political values. Moreover, towards the end of the nineteenth century, the rise of the masses in politics, as well as the growth of the mass market and the first signs of a mass-produced commoditized culture, gave this ruling class from politics an increasingly conservative valency. This is
where the line became powerfully drawn: the new materialist civilization became identified with a pattern of social development already occurring in the West, whose modernity the German bourgeois observer thereby refused. According to many historians, an ideology of the superiority of German values to those of the West, with their ‘arid rationalism’, then developed, foregrounding a peculiarly intense relationship to nature, and a tendency to prefer the “organic” to the “mechanical” society, with the general hostility to “modernity” and a strong leaning towards “cultural despair”. David Blackbourn has described this line of interpretation very well:

... this ‘vulgarized idealism’ ... formed a substitute for a healthy and proper engagement in social and political affairs. A retreat into the private world of sensibility and inwardness therefore helps to explain the fateful figure of the ‘unpolitical German’, symbolized by Thomas Mann’s defence of these peculiarly German virtues during the First World War. Thus, in turn, a star-struck and supine response to authority has been diagnosed. This amounts to an indictment of the German bourgeoisie, especially its university-educated part, for its divergence from western standards of rationality and pragmatism. Irrationalism, inwardness, and cultural pessimism appear as burdens which prevented the German bourgeoisie from fighting for its own proper objectives. 18

Here we reach the ‘core’ of the argument about ‘anti-modernism’ in German history. The notion of a cultural and political revolt against modernity, generated in the contradictions between Germany’s rapid industrialization and its inherited structures of political backwardness, remains central to conventional understandings of Nazi ideology and the origins of Nazism tout court. Here is Jeffrey Herf’s rendition:

The ‘Prussian path’ was a form of capitalist industrialization that fostered a peculiarly intense cultural and ideological protest, the politicization of which constituted a decisive chapter in the history of German nationalism. The language of romanticism, soul, Volk, Gemeinschaft, Kultur, life, blood, inwardness (Innerlichkeit) stood for specifically German virtues confronted with the danger of Zivilisation – capitalism, liberalism, science, soulless rationality, international communism, and, of course, the Jews. 19

Nazism is understood as an anti-modern revolt against reason, progress, and the political values of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, a pathological consequence of Germany’s peculiar social and political development in the nineteenth century. In one typical statement, for instance, Nazism was the ideological expression of a ‘crisis of modernization’, taking the form of a ‘utopian anti-modernism’, whose essential feature was ‘an extreme revolt against the modern world and an attempt to capture a distant mythic past.’ 20

Equipped with this perspective, the motif of German history behind the rise of the NSDAn and internally complex moti-mov doing some violence to their Kaiserreich, and producing a comparatively co-opted into this explanation of the Nazis: for instance Christianity, nature mysticism uncovered in every corner anthropologists, folklorists, educational visionaries, free Swedenborgians, occultists, Germans are all recruited with the German ideology, which is general. 22 This desire to make a logic of proto-Nazi development the Volk, which have norm thinking about racial or an ‘folkish’ ideology, linking Nazi in the late nineteenth century to connotations of ‘national’ an Invoking the Volk in turn of the ‘people-nation’, although Complex histories of contesta Nazis appropriated it for their distinctive ideology by virtue of this discursive field.

MODERNITY’S CONTRAD

How might we develop an approach depends on an analysis of backwardness, the mark of interpretation of the social as become the collective bearer put by Fritz Stern, whose imagination of German hestitate German history in character of Imperial Germ “illiberal”, meaning ‘not on restrictions, or class chicanery; free man ... not generous if others; narrow-minded’ -- a cultural style. By contrast w
Equipped with this perspective, which sees ‘anti-modernism’ as the defining motif of German history between unification and Nazism, and the motive force behind the rise of the NSDAP, historians have homogenized widely disparate and internally complex movements of ideas into a single proto-Nazi lineage, doing some violence to their contextual resonance and meanings under the Kaisertum, and producing a completely artificial coherence and linearity. Ideas are co-opted into this explanatory framework because they seem to prefigure those of the Nazis: for instance, ‘nineteenth-century racial doctrine, Germanic Christianity, nature mysticism, sun worship, and theosophy’. Traces are then uncovered in every corner of pre-1914 literary culture, so that racists, anthropologists, folklorists, Heimatkünstler, land reformers, communitarians, educational visionaries, free-thinkers, aesthetes, prophets of youth, mystics, Swedenborgians, occultists, new romantics, anti-semites, bikers, and Pan-Germans are all recruited willy-nilly to form a wholly artificial composite of ‘the German ideology’, which is then identified with the political culture in general. This desire to make Wilhelmine intellectual history obey an iron logic of proto-Nazi development is especially clear in discussions of the idea of the Volk, which have normally attributed a peculiar mystical tradition of thinking about racial or national matters to Germany, namely, völksch or ‘folkish’ ideology, linking Nazism to early nineteenth-century romanticism. Yet in the late nineteenth century the term Volk carried the same double connotations of ‘national’ and ‘popular’ to be found in other countries too. Invoking the Volk in turn of the century Germany entailed political languages of the ‘people-nation’, although the precise discursive charge varied widely. Complex histories of contestation and transformation were required before the Nazis appropriated it for their own goals. If we speak too easily of some distinctive völksch ideology before 1914, we neglect and obscure the openness of this discursive field.

MODERNITY’S CONTRADICTIONS

How might we develop an alternative perspective? So much of the existing approach depends on an a priori view of Germany’s self-evident difference (its backwardness, the mark of 1933), which in its turn centres on a particular interpretation of the social and political agency of the bourgeoisie, its failure to become the collective bearer of progressive change. The view has been sharply put by Fritz Stern, whose influence lay so heavily across the conceptual imagination of German historians in the 1960s and 1970s and their ability to situate German history in its comparative frame. In Stern’s view, ‘the character of Imperial Germany after 1878 can best be caught in the term “illiberal”, meaning “not only the structure of the political regime, suffrage restrictions, or class chicanery, but a state of mind” – an outlook “not befitting a free man ... not generous in respect to the opinions, rights or libertics of others; narrow-minded” – a mix of practices and attitudes that were “part of a cultural code”. By contrast with Britain or France before 1914, the amazing


quality of German illiberalism was its pervasiveness: 'German society, far from keeping down the illiberal impulse, fostered it and formed it into a habitual response'. Thus Germans failed in the basic civic virtues, preferring instead to clung to an illiberal structure, embrace an illiberal stance, live in an illiberal political milieu'. German illiberalism also embodied the old virtues of obedience and the uneasy adulation of authority: it embodied the new faith in nationalism and the supreme value of the nation state. It signified the acceptance of a kind of civic nonage.24

Recent scholarship allows us to go beyond this view in some important ways. In fact, a large and substantial literature has been accumulating on the social and cultural history of the nineteenth-century German bourgeoisie, which challenges the simplifications and schematisms of the Sonderweg thesis in this respect. But here I want to indicate only some broad outlines of this developing critique. First, it's by no means as clear that the German bourgeoisie was either as alienated from politics or as disempowered as the older approaches suggest. Second, the hardness of the boundary between those movements, interests, policies, and ideas conventionally regarded as 'modern' and those thought to be 'anti-modern', 'traditional', or 'backward' has become blurred. Together, these two points upset the field of distinctions between liberalism and authoritarianism, the traditional and the modern. They confuse the intelligibility of German history within the comparative frameworks of political development on which we've come to rely.

After a decade of intensive research and discussion, there is now a much greater willingness to acknowledge the degree to which bourgeois values permeated German society after unification and set the tone of public life. For instance, Wehler now finds two such areas of bourgeois success under the Kaiserreich involving values originating sociologically in a specifically bourgeois milieu in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but expanded during the nineteenth century to become universal social and cultural goods. He mentions first 'définit bourgeois organizational forms', including a particular model of the family, and the Vereins or voluntary association as the all-purpose medium of sociability, cultural exchange, and political activity in a public sphere, which acquired generalized and normative validity. Then secondly, he sees 'bourgeois norms and values' becoming culturally dominant – most decisively in the 'system of law', but also in 'the revolutionary principle of efficiency, orientation towards work, secularization, rationalization of thought and action, autonomy of the individual, individualism per se, and also the association of individuals for the purpose of clarifying their problems in public discussion'.25 We can go even further, arguably, and extend this reevaluation to the public culture and institutional arrangements of the new German Empire – to the legal and institutional infrastructure of the Kaiserreich, and to the growth and elaboration of public opinion via the modalities of an institutionally complex and legally guaranteed public sphere – while in the dynamically expanding late nineteenth-century capitalist economy (odd, really, that this massively struct.[discussion] bourgeois value:

Of course, it was the pa..thought to have revealed that...in the economy and understood, bourgeois ach...political system (the argument strong as before. Wehler a bu:...of the Kaiserreich’s core p...military, aristocratic privie...bureaucracy, but in genera...pre-industrial interests and...ideal of the modernity, the bourgeois politics’ since th...subordinate position (the at...traditional elites, above all...from below. Of the neces...that is, for the breakthr...bourgeois self-assurance, a...political know-how, resist a...not much sign. To this exte...structuralism of the account...of the bourgeoisie, in this vi...was what counterposed the...successful modernizations of...immense. Nazism was

the bill for bourgeois co...before the risky trial of s...culture, of successful bor...society in general.27

One of the problems b...liberalism and bourgeoisie, in...expression of a bourgeois...the passage from bourgeois abnegation (by the 1880s) – the bourgeoisie’ – it is not bourgeo...force, v the and transformations of...understanding of liberali...strong forms of twentieth
that this massively structuring fact should remain so understated in the discussion bourgeois values and achievements had their core domain.\textsuperscript{26}

Of course, it was the political domain in the stricter sense that was always thought to have revealed the weakness of the German bourgeoisie most clearly: thus in the economy and civil society, even in the public sphere broadly understood, bourgeois achievements could be shown; but in the state and the political system (the argument runs), the power of the traditional elites was as strong as before. Wehler and others have made some revisions on this front, but on the whole they reiterated the central argument about the backwardness of the Kaiserreich’s core political structures (to do with the monarchy, the military, aristocratic privilege, Prussian predominance, more ambivalently the bureaucracy, but in general the institutionally secured societal primacy of the pre-industrial interests and elites), which have always been counterposed to the ideal of the modernity that was not attained. After the recession of ‘vigorous bourgeois politics’ since the 1870s, the bourgeoisie accommodated itself to a subordinate position (the argument runs), or at most to co-partnership with the traditional elites, above all due to the rising pressure of the labour movement from below. Of the necessary presence of a combative bourgeoisie (necessary, that is, for the breakthrough to modernity) – recognizable elsewhere in ‘bourgeois self-assurance, confidence in victory, deliverance from self-doubt, political know-how, resistance to the new dangers from the right’ – there was not much sign. To this extent, the master narrative of the Sonderweg, the deep structuralism of the account of the origins of Nazism, is still intact. The advance of the bourgeoisie, in this view, stopped at the gates of the political system. This was what counterposed German history in the nineteenth century to the successful modernizations of the West. And the long-term consequences were immense. Nazism was

the bill for bourgeois conservatism and nationalism, for bourgeois timidity before the risky trial of strength, for the deficit of liberal-bourgeois political culture, of successful bourgeois politics, of the bourgeois stamp on state and society in general.\textsuperscript{27}

One of the problems here is the persistent conceptual slippage between liberalism and bourgeoisie, in which discussion of one elides into discussion of the other, and liberalism is typically assumed to be the logical correlate or expression of a bourgeois collective interest. When Wehler sets out to explain the passage from bourgeois self-confidence (the 1860s and 1870s) to bourgeois abnegation (by the 1880s) – what he calls ‘the origin of the fatal pathogenesis of the bourgeoisie’ – it is not the economic, social, and cultural strength of the bourgeoisie as a social force, which unfolded much as before, but the difficulties and transformations of political liberalism that he addresses. Here, the understanding of liberalism tends to be abstracted inappropriately from the strong forms of twentieth-century liberal democracy (including the latter’s


\textsuperscript{27} Wehler, 'Wie ‘bürgerlich’ war das Deutsche Kaiserreich?', p81ff.
welfare statism), whose possibility is projected quite unhistorically on to the collective agency of the bourgeoisie in German unification a hundred years before. In the process, the more appropriate context for judging German liberalism, the political ‘modernity’ of its time – that is, the Europeanwide conjuncture of constitutional revision, nation-forming, and state-making in the 1860s, together with the culture of progress and the general remaking of the social environment for capitalism – gets confused. Moreover, the common equation of ‘liberalism’ and ‘democracy’ in these discussions compounds the conceptual elision of ‘liberal’ into ‘bourgeoisie’ still further, making the connotative continuum of ‘bourgeoisie=liberalism=democracy’ into an implied causal chain. But specifically democratic impulses came from elsewhere, from the labour movement and other popular traditions, and were seldom part of the bourgeoisie project until after the First World War. Indeed, the articulation of bourgeois aspirations in the late nineteenth century, including their liberal versions, usually took an exclusionary anti-democratic turn, but were no less bourgeois for that.

In other words, we might consider the possibility that bourgeois interests and aspirations were establishing dominance in the political as well as in the socio-economic and cultural realms before 1914, because at present the main argument to the contrary is an attributed failure of the Imperial State to acquire a liberal or even a liberal-democratic form. If we can free ourselves from the assumption that the achievement of bourgeois hegemony (in the sense of the political dominance of bourgeois values) can only be conceptualized or registered via the organization of the bourgeoisie’s collective political agency within a specifically liberal movement or party, then the way could be clear for considering other, non-liberal forms of political articulation. Then the social coding of ‘authoritarianism’ before 1914 as ‘aristocratic’, ‘pre-industrial’, and ‘traditional’, as opposed to ‘bourgeois’ and ‘modern’, would start to look more questionable. In other words, ‘bourgeois’ interests and values could be at work, and ‘modern’ political forms could be in play, even if ‘liberal’ ones were not.

MODERNITY’S DARK SIDE

Deconstructing the powerful identities of social and political history that organize our understandings of the German past, and dismantling the conceptual unities ascribed to ‘liberalism’ and the ‘bourgeoisie’, is a complex and contested project, because so many important beliefs of the post-1945 world are attached. One site of such critical engagement would be the character of the Imperial-German state between 1871 and 1914, and much progress has been made in re-theorizing this question. It is now much less clear why a state with authoritarian features should be deemed to have expressed the political dominance of a landowning aristocracy and other pre-industrial elites, rather than articulating the interests of the bourgeoisie and providing a framework for the latter’s hegemony in its specifically late nineteenth-century German form. Arguably, the state of less adaptable, that is, than comparable challenges) to perform – securing the condition legitimation, organizing the consent of the people, and s reactionary elements were Constitution was more flexi more penetration – and indeed – than historians have been re

Thus perhaps we should th ‘traditional’ and the ‘moder circumstances of the Kaiserreich authoritarianism, right-wing one side, and ‘backwardness’ other side, is highly misleading ‘modernizing’ tendencies in ‘anti-modern’ ones, that were imperialist and anti-democrat argue is that some recent revision thesis of an abject and supin restaging the Empire’s cultu even further. The complexity relationship to the expanding us to give up the conceptual traditions’ altogether. If we forms, and reject the premise: a logical or lawlike requirement another, then we become f Kaiserreich more constructively

In concluding, I want to suggest explored, areas where politics modernizing liberalism and I grown used to encountering it who deal with Germany are still (1) The first area concerns by the nationale Verbände or : League and the Pan-German crystallized an extra-parliamentary governmentalism of the con exploding into an open confi during 1907-8. There were r political formation. But here I point of view.

On the one hand, radical nat
form. Arguably, the state of the Kaiserreich was proving perfectly adaptable (no less adaptable, that is, than the states of Britain and France when faced with comparable challenges) to the tasks which a 'modern' state is called on to perform – securing the conditions of capitalist reproduction, doing the work of legitimation, organizing the unity of the dominant classes, mobilizing the consent of the people, and so on. If this is so, then the 'backward' or strictly reactionary elements were more isolated in the political system, the Constitution was more flexible, and the 'modernizing' forces had achieved more penetration – and indeed, the 'traditional' elements were less 'traditional' than historians have been ready to allow. 29

Thus perhaps we should think again about what exactly the categories of the 'traditional' and the 'modern' mean, both in general and in the specific circumstances of the Kaiserreich. In particular, the common equation between authoritarianism, right-wing politics, and imperialist foreign policies on the one side, and 'backwardness', archaism, and 'pre-industrial traditions' on the other side, is highly misleading. It may be, in fact, precisely the most vigorous 'modernizing' tendencies in the Kaiserreich, rather than the recalcitrantly 'anti-modern' ones, that were the most pugnacious and consistent in pursuing imperialist and anti-democratic policies at home and abroad. What I want to argue is that some recent revisions – which abandon the extreme 'feudalization' thesis of an abject and supine bourgeoisie for a picture of bourgeois values reshaping the Empire's cultural and institutional world – should be pushed even further. The complexity now acknowledged in the Imperial polity and its relationship to the expanding dominance of bourgeois influences should lead us to give up the conceptual framework of the primacy of 'pre-industrial traditions' altogether. If we accept the irreducible contingency of political forms, and reject the premise that the dominance of a particular social class has a logical or lawlike requirement for one type of state and political culture over another, then we become free to think through the specificities of the Kaiserreich more constructively.

In concluding, I want to suggest six areas where these possibilities might be explored, areas where political life disobeyed the binary distinction between modernizing liberalism and backward authoritarianism in the form we've grown used to encountering it, and which many historians and social theorists who deal with Germany are still trying to maintain.

(1) The first area concerns radical nationalism, the distinct politics generated by the nationale Verhönde or nationalist pressure groups (notably the Navy League and the Pan-German League between the 1890s and 1914), which crystallized an extra-parliamentary 'national opposition' against the moderate governmentalism of the conservative party-political establishment before exploding into an open confrontation with the Imperial government itself during 1907-8. There were many complexities to radical nationalism as a political formation. But here I want to present its central paradox from our point of view. 30

On the one hand, radical nationalists were clearly on the right of the political
spectrum. Despite the populism of their political practice and ideology, they were profoundly anti-socialist and anti-democratic to the core, and on the face of it corresponded closely to the type of aggressive and anti-modernizing authoritarianism that supposedly preserved the Kaiserkriege in the backwardness of its illiberalism before the First World War. But in other ways radical nationalists don’t fit into this interpretative framework. Sociologically, they were not the casualties or opponents of modernization, but mainly the self-confident beneficiaries of Imperial Germany’s new industrial civilization. Politically, they committed themselves to the powerful modernity of the new German national state, which they constructed through the discursive novelty of a ‘German-national’ (deutschnational) rhetoric. Most obviously, this new deutschnational ideology was focused on Weltpolitik and the naval arms drive, which were considered both the logical correlate of German industrial strength in the world market and the condition of the latter’s continued growth. But it also embraced a range of other concerns, including an anti-clericalism originating in the Kulturkampf (the secularizing campaign against the Catholic Church in the 1870s), and a relentless hostility to all particularism (especially that of Catholic Bavaria, but also ultimately the Prussian particularism of aristocratic privilege East of the Elbe), both of which expressed the positive desire for a unitary state. The political drive for a strengthening of the centralized state fabric produced a range of specific reforming commitments, including the demand for an Imperial system of national taxation to harness the nation’s material resources more effectively, and the pressure to ‘nationalize’ the school curriculum, which was also linked to the general ideological call for ‘civic education’ or staatsschulische Erziehung. At the height of their tensions with the government in 1907-8, radical nationalists assumed positions that were highly disruptive of the given patterns of right-wing politics, and even potentially anti-monarchist.

In all of these ways, radical nationalism amounted to a modernizing ideology of ‘national efficiency’ (to adapt a British political catchword of the same time), which was extremely subversive or destabilizing of a traditional conservative standpoint. For instance, while the militants of the nationale Verbände were vociferously anti-socialist and bitterly opposed to many of the consequences of the parliamentary system, they were undismayed by the entry of the masses into politics, and castigated their conservative opponents for ignoring the fact that ‘the masses have come of age (through elementary schooling, mass conscription, universal suffrage, and the cheap oil lamp)’, as one of them put it.31 ‘Parts of our fatherland’, another observed, ‘are unfortunately still dominated by traditional bureaucratic residues of the narrow subject mentality’ and were obstructing ‘the elevation of all parts of the nation to consultation and participation in national matters’. The conventional politicians could ‘not understand that the caste spirit in the upper strata has nourished the class spirit in the lower, and than an obstinate persistence in the old mistakes has aided and abetted the alienation of the masses from the state and the monarchy’.32

Many of the leading radical nationalists came from strongly liberal family and personal backgrounds, and in the cultural moment of Goethe's language of ‘freedom’, ‘in importance of a free politics, the fossilized trace of an old Wilhelmine present (the p denotes the angry comm parents’ generation to org radical nationalist critique: established discourse of high Government ‘what the Genn jingoism, and undignified sys responsible tribunes of and ambiguous hybrid, sus formation might be fitted in German historiography is nc.

(2) Radical nationalists pres, its ability to consumm internal divisions of class, with a missionary zeal. Thr s a second important area educational reform at the at functionalist account of the to legitimate the Empire’s attacks, and to establish a particularist, confessional, proceedings of the two Prus can certainly be read in the ‘German’ learning themesl language of Germanizing th aimed at rendering Germa intensifying international ec points here relevant to the it the basic project of devising common currency of pub even socialists no less th radical-nationalist critics. On with the desire to promote il Germany’s entry to the twent the latter purposes was no anti-democratic, and other system of distinctions arou modernization is defined: examples.

The first is Hermann Ra
personal backgrounds, and were basically formed as children or young adults in the cultural moment of German unification in the 1860s and 1870s. But the language of ‘freedom’, ‘independence’, the ‘will of the people’, and the importance of a ‘free political life’ in radical nationalist rhetoric was more than the fossilized trace of an older discourse, and articulated real aspirations of the Wilhelmine present (the period from the 1890s to 1914), forming in one dimension an angry commentary on the inability of the liberalism of the parents’ generation to organize sufficient popular support. At all events, radical nationalist critiques opened a crucial ideological fracture in the established discourse of right-wing political legitimacy. They aimed to show the Government what the German people needed – courtly sneaks, empty-headed jingoists, and undignified sycophants, or independent citizens, intrepid patriots, and responsible tribunes of the people. Radical nationalism was a complex and ambiguous hybrid, sui generis to the Wilhelmine era. How this new political formation might be fitted into the conventional tradition/modernity schema of German historiography is not clear.

(2) Radical nationalists proclaimed the healing properties of the ‘national idea’, its ability to consummate Germany’s internal unity by transcending the internal divisions of class, religion, region, and party-political partisanship, with a missionary zeal. The search for an effective national pedagogy is accordingly a second important area of complexity. At one level, the discourse of educational reform at the turn of the century can be readily assimilated to a functionalist account of the Imperial government’s need for integration – both to legitimate the Empire’s institutions against Social Democratic and other attacks, and to establish new forms of national cohesion over the older particularist, confessional, and parochial solidarities. The very interesting proceedings of the two Prussian School Conferences called in 1890 and 1900 can certainly be read in this fashion, but the debates around classical versus ‘German’ learning themselves contained a ‘modernizing thrust’, for the language of ‘Germanizing the curriculum was also practical and technocratic, aimed at rendering German society dynamic and efficient for an age of intensifying international economic competition. In fact, we can make two points here relevant to the tradition/modernity conundrum. On the one hand, the basic project of devising and promulgating a national pedagogy was the common currency of popular politics before 1914, common to liberals and even socialists no less than to governmental conservatives and their radical-nationalist critics. On the other hand, all manner of ideas could co-exist with the desire to promote the learning, knowledge, and skills appropriate for Germany’s entry to the twentieth century, and being an extreme modernist for the latter purposes, was no hindrance to espousing a variety of radicalist, anti-democratic, and otherwise right-wing goals. This again destabilizes the system of distinctions around which Imperial Germany’s alleged deficit of modernization is defined, and we can illustrate this best by a couple of examples.

The first is Hermann Rassow, senior teacher at an Elberfeld Gymnasium.


before moving to the headmastership of a school near Magdeburg in 1901, and later to a prestigious post in Potsdam, the most tireless and creative of nationalist agitators, whose activity was framed by a mobile political eclecticism, unattached to particular parties, equally comfortable with populisms of 'right' and 'left'. Focusing on the navy, as an issue ideally suited for raising 'the German national consciousness', for easing the workers 'return to patriotism', and for 'winning back the embittered masses' to the monarchy, he found all manner of platforms – the local Pan-German League (he was a member of the national Council), Young Men's Associations, groups of former pupils, the Elberfeld Christian-Social Association, the Elberfeld Evangelical Workers Association, the Royalist Association of Railway Craftsmen, the Provincial Conference of Conservatives in the Rhineland, the Elberfeld 'Tuesday-Society', and all sorts of workers' clubs and 'patriotic associations'. A supremely well-connected Bildungsbürger, he was the prototype of the disinterested nationalist intellectual, driven by an ideal of social conciliation under the banner of national community, formed by the experience of unification, for whom loyalty to the new nation-state per se was the thing. Accepting that social democrats should be reasoned with rather than suppressed, and with a lively interest in the 'social problem', he believed in the expanding capitalist economy as the answer to working-class discontent, as opposed to remedial interventions by the state. In this double respect – the primacy of nationalist loyalty to the state, and acceptance of capitalist Germany's changing social reality – Rassow was truly a child of the Empire, in this sense a Wilhelmian, attracted neither by the anti-capitalist counter-utopias of conservatives nor by the prospect of a more democratic state. He loved the new technologies of industrial power, both in the battleships that focused his nationalist desire and in the varied media of his popular agitation. He collaborated with the Navy Office, characteristically supported the Reich fiscal reform which ran aground on Conservative opposition in 1909, and was mainly drawn electorally to the more imperialist tendencies of left liberalism. In the 1890s he was simultaneously an admirer of Adolf Stöcker (the anti-semitic populist former chaplain to the Kaiser, who led the Christian-Social Party), Friedrich Naumann (former associate of Stöcker and heroic figure of patriotic left liberalism, who launched the short-lived National-Social Association in 1896), and Friedrich Lange.55

Lange is the second example. Anti-semitic and believer in a Germanic 'aristocracy of race', author of a well-known racist tract and founder of the German-Union (1894), the small Pan-German-like sect that combined mystic crankiness with clear-headed pursuit of anti-Socialist coalition building, Lange was superficially a prime candidate for the kind of proto-Nazi pedigree criticized above.56 Yet he turns out to have been a far more complex figure. He specifically repudiated that 'ecstasy of habitual German patriotism' and 'beloved self-deception', which looked backwards to the tradition of 'Arndt, Jahn, and Körner', insisting that the nationalist tasks of the Wilhelmine era were fundamentally different.57 He denied that the German-Union was 'a refuge for Deutschritterei' and countered that 'it knows how to think modern'.58 A favourite issue was school

35. The quotations and details are assembled from various collections of Rassow's correspondence. For a full account see Eise, 
   Rekhting den German Right, especially pp571, 720-1, 845, 2295.

36. See Friedrich Lange, Rekhting den German Right, pp571, 720-1, 845, 2295.

37. Ibid., pp575, XV.

38. Ibid., p573.

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A favourite issue was school reform, and Lange initiated the movement in the 1880s to launch the Society for School Reform (1889): this was partly a desire to 'Germanize' the classical education, but the central demands for a modern curriculum and the unitary grammar school also reflected more technocratic concerns with national efficiency. Moreover, his critique of Christianity and search for a new secular religion of nationality, with its stress on the 'native idealism of our popular stock', had affinities with the cultural criticism of the non-SPD Left; in 1893 his anti-capitalist and anti-clerical play Der Närkste was performed by the New Free People’s Theatre in Berlin. Lange’s advocacy of a ‘national socialism’, as ‘economic nationalism combined with a better balance between work and leisure’, certainly had a prophetic ring. But when we also find him speaking of ‘natural science and socialism’ as ‘the main levers of recent time’, we should perhaps pause before assimilating him too easily to an irrationalist pre-history of Nazi ideology. His ideas are not to be located midway on a continuum from Romanticism to Nazism. They were a complex hybrid of ‘progressive’ and ‘reactionary’ motifs, which was sui generis to the period between the 1880s and 1914.

3. A third area concerns industrial relations and the political and ideological valency of the industrial paternalism dominating heavy industry in the Ruhr, Saarland, and Silesia, and other sectors of large-scale industry before 1914, including shipbuilding and heavy engineering. Briefly, the issue here is whether such paternalism may best be seen as a ‘pre-industrial’ type of authoritarianism (the so-called Herr-im-Haus outlook), which involved the taking-over of older pre-liberal and aristocratic cultural patterns inappropriate for a modern society; or whether it articulated specific forms of capitalist rationality, in presupposing certain conditions of large-scale and well-organized capitalist production. I have discussed this question at some length elsewhere. The point I wish to make here is that there are other ways of interpreting the repressive industrial relations described by the paternalist model than seeing them as a backward impediment to the evolution of forms of labour conciliation which historians such as Wehler identify with modernity. In fact, it makes more sense to see company unions, company housing, black-lists, and company welfare schemes as both illiberal and modern. It was no accident that such practices were adopted by all the most advanced industrial sectors in pre-1914 Germany, regardless of the employers’ particular political affiliations — that is, by a self-consciously liberal employer such as Siemens in the more dynamic electro-technical sector, as well as by a reactionary heavy industrialist such as Krupp. How this issue fits into recent discussions of Bürgerlichkeit is an interesting question.

4. Fourthly, social imperialism, which is elevated by Wehler into a grand-interpretative framework for considering questions of continuity and the relationship of the Kaiserreich to the Third Reich, also complicates the discussion of German modernities. In Wehler’s influential view, Germany’s later nineteenth-century imperialism had conservative functions and effects for domestic politics. As he sees it, the breadth of the ideological consensus for
overseas expansion during the so-called Great Depression of 1878-96 combined with Bismarck’s manipulative skills to produce social imperialism as a diversionary strategy of rule, mobilizing popular nationalism behind the demand for colonies, the big navy, and other aggressive foreign policy goals as a way of solidifying support for the status quo and blocking the pressure for reform. This politics – ‘the diversion outwards of the internal tensions and class contradictions arising from the process of industrialization’ – laid down a lasting pattern of government policy that persisted until the First World War. For Wehler, social imperialism set German history on a particular course in this way, one of conservative retrenchment and defence of the status quo: he draws an explicit contrast between the authoritarian governing system that social imperialism successfully guaranteed and the alternative developmental trajectory of ‘welfare-state mass democracy’ that remained blocked in Germany till after 1945.

However, this approach constructs social imperialism and social reform into a false dichotomy. Taking the nineteenth century as a whole, it is surely hard to deny the positive relationship between liberal or social democratic reform politics and imperialism. Whether we look to the mid-century forms of free-trading imperialism, to the new imperialism before 1914, or to Fabian views of empire between and after the two world wars (just to take the British case), reformist projects have been predicated on the continuities of empire. Indeed, the most compelling voices for liberal renewal in Germany before 1914 elaborated their reformist projects (in relation to social legislation and political reform) precisely via an engagement with the possibilities of imperialist expansion. In that case, the dichotomous opposition of ‘social imperialism and social reform’ breaks down. Neither liberalism nor Wehler’s abstract utopia of bürgerliche Gesellschaft, nor constructions of modernity itself, can be protected against imperialism’s contamination, because the colonial aspiration was inscribed in the Enlightenment tradition from the start.

For precisely this reason, it is important to begin exploring the ways in which forms of social relations, patterns of culture, and increasingly racialized discourses of national superiority developed in the colonies became powerfully reinserted into metropolitan society. ‘Colonial knowledge’ in this sense should be a rich field of enquiry, for it has become clear from recent work on British and French colonialism how far metropolitan understandings of nationality have been constructed since the eighteenth century via elaborate encounters with colonial ‘Others’. Forms of colonial representation through literature, museums and exhibitions, entertainment, and popular culture have been especially fruitful in this regard. The gendering of national identity, whether in militarist activities and warfare, or in the more general ordering of nationalist representations around conceptions of sexual difference, also had key colonialist roots. Intensive discussions of colonial intermarriage generated a complex discourse around gender inequalities, sexual privilege, class priorities, and racial superiority, which then became powerfully rearticulated into nationalist discourse at home. This was the real ground of social imperialism, arguably – that governing elites focused on process of ideological structure field of relations between en imperialism certainly can’t b identifying social imperialism modern strategies of rule.

(5) We also need to instate the kind of formalism thatACK the complex and variable co women and men, and necessa whole. As a ‘useful category’ enrich our understanding of of citizenship and the public s relationship of masculinity ; established questions of Ger gender perspective, and one c For example, whereas the charity, and social insurance arguments (Christian respon national efficiency), these we particularly regarding the sc both national and local state welfare, all of which reflect orderly domestic living arra changing bases of women’s industrial, blue versus white industrial and parliamentary regarding German national ( charged with new meanings, a professional expertise in so women’s movement. When w and maternal welfare, public general regulation of moralt field for gender sensitive ana discourse of the ‘New Woms series of radicalizations arou women’s history to our grasp need for similar analysis of areas unambiguously involve capacities in the liberal sense, for that.

(6) The ambivalence of refo modernizing’ initiatives of liberal-democratic normativ
imperialism, arguably – that is, not so much the conscious manipulations by governing elites focused on by Wehler and others, but the more insidious process of ideological structuration. At all events, this implies a much richer field of relations between empire and domestic politics. The consequences of imperialism certainly can’t be bracketed from the ‘modernization’ project by identifying social imperialism so unidimensionally with conservative anti-modern strategies of rule. 46

(5) We also need to instate the importance of gender to our analysis, not just as the kind of formality that acknowledges the previous neglect of women, but as the complex and variable construction of sexual difference that affects both women and men, and necessarily influences our understanding of the world as a whole. As a ‘useful category of historical analysis’, gender can challenge and enrich our understanding of a range of general questions, from the gendering of citizenship and the public sphere, to the gendered discourse of class, and the relationship of masculinity and femininity to nationalist ideology. But the established questions of German history per se can also be illuminated by a gender perspective, and one of these would be the ‘social question’.

For example, whereas the late nineteenth-century apparatus of poor relief, charity, and social insurance may have been formally based on a mixture of arguments (Christian responsibility, capitalist rationality, political calculation, national efficiency), these were also predicated upon gendered assumptions, particularly regarding the social importance of the family. This was true of both national and local state provision, charitable work, and company-provided welfare, all of which reflected definite assumptions about what constituted orderly domestic living arrangements. Moreover, from the 1890s on, with the changing bases of women’s work (waged versus unwaged, domestic versus industrial, blue versus white-collar), the growth of urban living, the rising industrial and parliamentary strength of labour, and the manifold concerns regarding German national efficiency, the discourse of social reform became charged with new meanings, not least through the involvement of new forms of professional expertise in social policy and the pressure of the emergent women’s movement. When we include certain additional issues, including child and maternal welfare, public health, policies for the control of youth, and the general regulation of morality and sexuality, we have an especially promising field for gender sensitive analysis. Of course, the First World War, the Weimar discourse of the ‘New Woman’, and the Nazi counter-revolution produced a series of radicalizations around these issues, and the valuable contributions of women’s history to our grasp of these later moments should re-emphasize the need for similar analysis of the Kaiserreich. 47 My point is that none of these areas unambiguously involved an enlargement of women’s rights or political capacities in the liberal sense, but that the meaning was none the less ‘modern’ for that.

(6) The ambivalence of reform, and the difficulties of assimilating the actual ‘modernizing’ initiatives of the turn of the century to the progressive or liberal-democratic normativity against which historians have insisted on


measuring the German past, brings me to the last of my proposals, which concerns the dynamics of disciplinary power in Foucault’s sense — that is, the framing and application to the ‘social body’ of new knowledges of science and ambitions of control. Here we connect back to the question of Imperial continuities with Nazism, though not in the conventional sense of deficits of modernity producing pathologies that were the condition of Nazi success. On the contrary, I would argue, it was precisely the most striking manifestations of modern scientific and technocratic ambition in the sphere of social policy that laid the way for Nazi excess. For example, there is a growing literature on the eugenicist consensus that formed the disquieting background to Nazi racism between the late nineteenth century and the 1920s, and in whose light Nazi anti-semitism has increasingly appeared as the most virulent form of a much more extensive biological politics that systematically naturalized and essentialized social, cultural, and political phenomena under the sign of race. In Robert Proctor’s view, ‘the ideological structure we associate with National Socialism was deeply embedded in the philosophy and institutional structure of German biomedical science’. Consequently, if we take a broad view of the biomedical sciences as an ideological field, in which the Nazis’ racial programmes (from genocide to the anticipatory treatment of Sinti and Roma, and the 1939 euthanasia program, back through population policies aimed at women and the 1933 sterilization law) were authorized by much longer traditions of racial hygiene from before 1914, then the Judeocide appears as the most vicious part ‘of a larger attempt ... to medicalize or biologize various forms of social, sexual, political, or racial deviance’. Moreover, we know from the work of Paul Weindling and others on the origins, rise, and mature elaboration of the eugenicist complex between the 1870s and 1945, that this was a restless aggrandizing ideological field. It convened biomedical knowledge, public health, and racial thought on the ground of social policy, and it was there that not only the politics of family and motherhood, but also the most progressive achievements of the Weimar welfare state were completely embedded.

Perhaps the key point to emerge from this recent literature concerns the ‘normality’ of racial science in the Kulturian sense. So far from corrupting ‘true’ science by the intrusion of irrational and anti-intellectual pressures from the outside, Nazism worked within an established eugenicist paradigm by appealing to the existing ‘imagery, results, and authority of science’. Rather than politicizing science in some illegitimate sense, Nazism worked upon traditions of discourse that had been articulating science to politics since the Kaiservich. On the one hand, not just entire nationalities (Jews, Sinti and Roma, Poles, other Slav groups), but also entire social categories (gays, the handicapped, and mentally ill, various groups of the socially incompetent and incurably ill, and then Polish intellectuals, Soviet prisoners-of-war, ‘political commissars’, and so forth) became slated for racist and eugenicist attack. On the other hand, this was possible because of the prior diffusion of eugenicist and related ideologies of social engineering, which to a great extent had permeated the thinking of the Nazis arrived.

In both respects the group limited sense of ‘linguistic’ p and system of practice aims people and restructuring p policy could be. This is what knowledges and the impor Burleigh and Woodruff Sm and ethnology also helped specifically Nazi project con understanding of the race/g policies: Claudia Koonz sa naturalized poles of biologic a ‘social order founded on volume, When Biology Becomes ‘biological politics’ as a w imbrication of these two sets perhaps clear enough — ce biologically constructed con one understood the place c family, and reproduction to have been prefigured ver reproduction (population, lization) that go back to t recognize once again that reform as a set of abstract l modernizing reform as we a simply do not fit. Instead, th what passed as the ruling kn the irrational than an extra we’re to understand the orig. deficient modernization thi modernity’s dark side — to ‘i science’, in Detlev Peukert’s c

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permeated the thinking of social-policy and healthcare professions long before the Nazis arrived.

In both respects the ground for Nazi racism was discursively laid – not in the limited sense of ‘linguistic’ preparation, but by an entire institutional apparatus and system of practice aimed at defining deviant or ‘worthless’ categories of people and restructuring popular assumptions about what an acceptable social policy could be. This is where my two earlier points concerning colonial knowledges and the importance of gender also converge. Work by Michael Burleigh and Woodruff Smith has shown how the disciplines of anthropology and ethnology also helped compose the ideological context from which the specifically Nazi project could come. Likewise, Gisela Bock pioneered our understanding of the race/gender connection in her study of Nazi sterilization policies: Claudia Koonz saw the Third Reich doubly ordered around the naturalized poles of biological distinction, male/female and aryahn/aryan, in a ‘social order founded on race and gender’; and the programmatic essay volume, *When Biology Became Destiny*, successfully made the case for seeing ‘biological politics’ as a unifying principle of Nazi practice. The logical imbrication of these two sets (the racialized and gendered fields of discourse) is perhaps clear enough – centering one’s understanding of society around a biologically constructed concept of race had immediate consequences for how one understood the place of women, given the key importance of sexuality, family, and reproduction to both – and the Nazis’ racial policies do seem to have been prefigured very strongly in a complex of policies affecting reproduction (population, welfare, family, motherhood, euthanasia, sterilization) that go back to the late Kaiserreich. Consequently, we need to recognize once again that the conventional understanding of modernizing reform as a set of abstract liberal-democratic desiderata and the discourse of modernizing reform as we actually encounter it in the early twentieth century *simply do not fit*. Instead, the Nazis’ racialized policies were continuous with what passed as the ruling knowledge of the time, and were less an eruption of the irrational than an extreme form of technocratic reason in that sense. If we’re to understand the origins of Nazism, therefore, it is not to the Kaiserreich’s deficient modernization that we must look, but to early twentieth-century modernity’s dark side – to the genesis of the “Final Solution” from the spirit of science’, in Detlev Peukert’s compelling phrase.

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Where does this leave us? At one level, the argumentation evokes some classic views of the Enlightenment’s dark side. Peukert’s self-conscious Weberianism (for instance) is a very good example of this effect, but the stronger version is the Frankfurt School’s pessimistic inscription of fascist domination in the fundamental dialectic of the Enlightenment. For Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse, Nazism was in this literal sense the apotheosis of rationalized domination. As the first sentence of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* said: “The

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fully enlightened world radiates disaster triumphant. Fascism appears here as
the self-destruction of the liberal Enlightenment, 'the truth of modern
society'.\(^{54}\) As Herf says, in a critique of this view: 'Adorno and Horkheimer
went on to argue that implicit in the beginnings of the Enlightenment, in
Rousseau, Kant and Hegel, was the synthesis of reason, domination, and myth
that was revealed in all its truth in de Sade's orgies and Nietzsche's aphorisms,
and then put into practice in Auschwitz. Auschwitz was the Enlightenment's
truth: reason as total domination'.\(^{55}\) For the Frankfurt philosophers, German
history revealed the full enormity of a fate that beckoned to the modern world
in general, enlightenment taken to its awful state-bureaucratic extreme.

We need not embrace the fullness of this philosophical critique to notice the
resemblance to the structure of argument presented above. On the one hand,
the view from Frankfurt (or rather from exile in New York) is incorrigibly
overintellectual and grandiose, substituting philosophical abstraction of the logic
of history for conjunctural specificity and carefully historicized comparative
analysis, and all but removing fascism from the prospect of resistance or
realistic political contestation. Such an approach effaces the overpowering
importance of the First World War in brutalizing contemporary sensibilities,
agitating and transforming the state-society relationship, escalating the
capacity for societal mobilization, radicalizing the dialectic of technology and
violence, and pioneering the mass production of death. It also ignores the
fundamental importance of the Russian Revolution, the broader revolutionary
turbulence in Europe during 1917-1923, and the resulting polarization of
political options, in authorizing the extremism which Nazism needed to thrive.
The importance of successive conjunctures before 1914, whether the
Wilhelmine period opened by the 1890s, or the earlier moment of German
unification, is also diminished by such a perspective. This essay has argued
consistently against these effects.

On the other hand German modernity before the First World War displayed
many of the logics Horkheimer and Adorno diagnosed. Though in some
respects a more authoritarian state than the parliamentary politics of France,
Britain, and north-west Europe, with an official culture that seemed
aggressively militaristic, and a foreign policy that was restless expansionist,
Germany's most visible characteristics in the European landscape of the time
were its turbulent industrialism and modernizing energy. As European
contemporaries saw, the Kaisertreich was the most compelling example of a
modern state yet in existence, a model of 'national efficiency', sustained by the
most dynamic capitalism in Europe. The Empire's achievements in science,
technology, engineering, design, planning, architecture, and other applied
fields, together with the strength of its cultural institutions and the growth of
the public sphere, allow us to speak realistically of bourgeois dominance in
society, anchored in the growing structural primacy of industrial production in
the capitalist mode. Moreover, if the bourgeoisie was not the class directly and
exclusively in charge of the state (but which nineteenth-century bourgeois, in
this sense of collective political agency, ever was?), it increasingly dominated the
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social, institutional, and ideological arenas where politics and government had to be conducted — that is, by exercising hegemony in the Gramscian sense. The capacity of German society to generate so many authoritarian and ‘illiberal’ symptoms before 1914, so many potentials for a radical right-wing politics, is inseparable from its modernities in this sense — and not as a reaction against the latter, but as an extrusion from their leading edge.

So in the end German history does contain a pre-1914 dynamic whose complicated effects Nazism presupposed. But this was not one deeply inscribed in the primacy of pre-industrial traditions descending from the early nineteenth century and before, and from a set of oppositions and resistances to modernity, from a peculiarly German anti-modernism, which idealized the past, but that of a modernizing society profoundly fixed on its future. The real distinctiveness of Germany’s national history will only be captured if we abandon the framework of German exceptionalism altogether — that is, if we stop reasserting the essential otherness of German history and acknowledge the authenticity of the German experience as a successful but conflict-ridden (conflict-ridden because so successful) capitalist modernization. The German Empire before 1914 was not a backward state comparable to the Tsarist Empire, the underdeveloped European periphery, or many of the polities of the late twentieth-century Third World. Contemporary observers, envious of Imperial Germany’s passage to a position of restless expanding industrial strength, saw this completely. In these terms, I’ve tried to argue, both the internal conflicts of German society and its foreign expansionism were precisely an expression of its modernity, the effects of a modernizing society pushing against its limits. The subsequent possibility of Nazism is then to be understood far more via the postwar crises of military defeat and revolutionary upheaval than through some deeper rooted pathology of backwardness. ‘Normalizing’ German history in this way — holding on to its self-evident particularities, while freeing them from the teleology of exceptionalism — may be more disquieting. But it will get us much further in historical and political understanding.