Book Review: The Peculiarities of German History

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The seemingly incomprehensible atrocities committed during the Third Reich has spawned among historians an enormous number of interpretations of their causes. Earlier theories relied on ideas of Germany's tenuous geographical position, the primacy of Prussian militarism, or the preponderance of irrational, "bad" Germans, for explanations. These ideas gave way in the 1960s to more structural and sociological explanations. The problem, David Blackbourn states, is that when viewing nineteenth-century German history, instead of asking "what happened?" these structuralists are posing the question "what didn't happen?" It is a dissatisfaction with looking at the past from such a perspective that inspired the dual-essay work The Peculiarities of German History.¹ Blackbourn and co-author Geoff Eley are primarily concerned with the notion of a German Sonderweg, or peculiar path, and the role this concept plays in explaining the German past. Their book created a large historical debate when it was first published, and it is the object of this brief essay to summarize the ideas to which the book was responding, and consider the positions it puts forward for further discussion.

The notion of a German Sonderweg is not a post-1945 invention, though its negative connotation is. From the early nineteenth century, the positive denotation of a Sonderweg stressed a German superiority to the tenets of the French Revolution; a belief that a strong monarchy, army, and authoritarian structure destined Germany for world power status; and a belief in the importance of placing spiritual over material values -- Kultur over Zivilisation. Two world wars later, Germans would have a difficult time convincing anyone that their special path had done them any good. Historians, then, simply turned the tables on the concept of Sonderweg. Now Germany's peculiar story, whose conclusion was the tragedy of National Socialism, was described as one fraught with repression and capitulation. Scholars told a tale in which the movements among the nation's political, economic and social spheres became unsynchronized. Whereas in other countries these spheres moved in tandem, in Germany they did not, as the political and the social failed to keep pace with economic modernization. In this interpretation, the Frankfurt Liberals shoulder much of the blame. Because of their failure in 1848, and their subsequent acceptance of a "revolution from above" by Bismarck, the middle class failed to carry out a bourgeois revolution—as all good bourgeoisie should—and allowed the pre-industrial elites to remain in power. This supine middle class, so the argument goes, submitted to the aristocracy and aped its values, hence Weber's "feudalization of the bourgeoisie." This argument was made as early as 1912, when Walter Rathenau remarked:

It will be difficult for future writers of German history to understand how, in our time, two class systems could penetrate each other; the first is a survival of the feudal system, the second the capitalist system... But it will strike him as even odder that the newly arisen capitalist class had first of all to contribute to the strengthening of the feudal order.²

This bolstered feudal elite, it is argued, was able to survive the crisis of 1918 and, it is implied, played a significant role in Hitler's accession to power in 1933.

But why is this seen as "peculiar?" What was so sonder about this Weg? Concomitant with these ideas is a comparison of Germany's development to that of her western neighbors, France and Britain. Germany missed out, it is argued, on the bourgeois revolution that instituted the liberal constitution and societies in both Britain and France, the two countries credited with establishing the norm from which Germany is thought to have deviated.

These ideas have been very persuasive, and were best synthesized by Hans Ulrich Wehler, a German historian portrayed as the chief representative for this "new orthodoxy" in the study of Imperial Germany. In 1973 Wehler published Das deutsche Kaiserreich,³ in which he declared a direct continuity from Bismarck to Hitler, thus identifying the sources of fascism. Robert Moeller noted that this path of continuity "had few bends," and was instead the timeline of a pathological imperium:

The infant Kaiserreich had suffered through a depressed and unhappy childhood, dominated by an authoritarian father. Even after 1896, a prosperous adolescence was not enough to undo the ravages of youth or loosen the repressive mechanisms of "preindustrial" elites. A cowardly bourgeois adult remained incapable of overthrowing the "pre-industrial" father, succumbing rather to abnormal "feudalization." The trauma of Weimar, though never fully described by Wehler, was foreshadowed in the Kaiserreich, and represented a recapitulation of many of these youthful experiences.⁴

Wehler's diagnosis was criticized by many. For some, his decision to view the Kaiserreich from the vantage point of 1933 was symptomatic of a "staring at Hitler" mentality.⁵ Others lamented that despite the more structuralist approach, the focus remained on the economic and political elites. German society, unfortunately, was still being viewed "from the top down." Regardless of these critiques, it was evident to most that "the level of discourse about the Kaiserreich and the nineteenth-century origins of.

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National Socialism had been shifted to a far more sophisticated, critical level and driven irreversibly into new directions.\(^6\)

David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley would agree. They thank Wehler for leading the historical discussion down the path it has taken, yet their agenda is undoubtedly one of critique. They state in their introduction:

Our own arguments are not in any sense an attempt to roll back these substantial achievements [of Wehler and others]. On the contrary, as both text and footnotes should make clear, our book could only have been written in response to arguments that these historians have helped to establish. Still, as the oft cited Max Weber would have been the first to agree, the voices of epigoni do not constitute the best of tributes.\(^7\)

In the case of *The Peculiarities of German History*, it seems as if the demolition man is congratulating the architect on his design before wielding the wrecking ball.

Published originally in Germany in 1980 as *Mythen deutscher Geschichtsschreibung*, the English edition contains both expanded text and footnotes, and an introduction which allows the authors to comment on the criticisms to the first edition. Their modestly stated purpose is to explore the problems raised by the *Sonderweg* theory, and suggest alternative ways of interpreting these "peculiarities." Their objections operate on two levels. First they reject what they believe is a casual and historically inaccurate notion of the existence of a "normal" bourgeois evolutionary pattern, and Eley in particular attempts to locate a correct theoretical model in Europe to compare to Imperial Germany. Second, having rejected the idea of a "heroic" bourgeois revolution, they contend that in the broader realm of an evolving "civil society" we actually can uncover a truly successful bourgeoisie. This is the chief concern of Blackbourn's contribution, and he approaches the question in a less theoretical manner than Eley. "My emphasis," he writes, "has been to recover the texture and meaning of... civil society as it unfolded in nineteenth-century Germany."\(^8\)

It is Eley who bats first, and he immediately sets out to attack the abject branding of the German bourgeoisie as "unsuccessful" in comparison to its English and French counterparts. His attack comes from many angles. Since when have we re-accepted the previously demolished social interpretation of the events of 1688 and 1789, he wonders? Even if we were to accept this inaccurate, tidy schematic, why must it be the norm? If by "normal" we mean average, or most frequent, are not the French and British cases necessarily abnormal? One can even argue, as Jurgen Kocka does, that "every country has its own 'Sonderweg'."\(^9\)

Eley also takes issue with a set of assumptions which guide the beliefs of the "new orthodoxy." Specifically, he takes to task the notion of defining the existence of a class by its displayed forms of public consciousness. What he is after here is the assumption

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\(^6\) Moeller, 658.

\(^7\) Blackbourn and Eley, 9.

\(^8\) *Ibid*, 288.

\(^9\) Kocka, 7.
among historians that the bourgeoisie is inexorably tied to notions of liberalism. Once again, he points to the English case as the propagation of this link. Thus, in Germany's case, the absence of liberalism proves the absence of a successful bourgeoisie. Eley contends that historians subscribing to this view have fallen into the "general reductionist trap" in which liberalism is viewed as the exclusive property of a "rising" bourgeoisie, and authoritarianism as the natural product of a "feudalized" bourgeoisie. "Rather than asking why the German bourgeoisie failed to act in an apparent liberal way," Eley states, "we should ask ourselves why we should even expect it to be liberal in the first place." 

What is needed, he suggests, is a less narrowly defined, mandated outcome of a bourgeois revolution. Defining such a revolution simply by the end result of a constitutional and democratic liberal state is overly dogmatic. Eley writes:

The concept of bourgeois revolution... should be related more generally to the conditions of bourgeois predominance in society. In other words, the concept could be freed from its present dependence on the notion of forcibly acquired political liberalism and could be redefined more flexibly to mean the 'inauguration of the bourgeois epoch' -- i.e. 'the successful installation of a legal and political framework for the unfettered development of industrial capitalism'.

In the book's German edition, this was referred to as the *embourgeoisement* of German society, and it is this concept that David Blackbourn focuses on in his essay.

Bourgeois revolution is not to be beholden to the heroic criteria of Marx and Weber, Blackbourn believes, but is instead defined as a "broader pattern of material, institutional, legal, and intellectual changes" that spawned a bourgeois civil, not liberal, society. He points to changes in property relations, the prominence of the rule of law, and the overall rise of a Habermasian "bourgeois public sphere" as cultural markers for a bourgeois epoch. He directly confronts contentions that the German middle class was guilty of the "sins of omission"—civic quietism and a timid genuflecting before the almighty state—instead highlighting the "silent bourgeois revolution" in which bourgeois strengths were rooted in the capitalist mode of production and articulated through the increased dominance of civil society.

Blackbourn takes other historians to task for failing to see the protection of private property and free speech, the legal accountability of the bureaucracy, and especially the creation of the humanist Civil Code of 1900, as indicative of a situation in which the state could actually be seen as the executor of bourgeois interests. Just as Eley saw the bourgeoisie's alliance with the Junkers not as an indication of a lack of self-confidence, but as a rational pursuit of self-interest, so does Blackbourn imply that the bourgeoisie had no real grounds for discontent with the new economic order. His is a detailed and fascinating examination in which philanthropic associations, fashion, the rejection of

10 Blackbourn and Eley, 90.
dueling, even the prominence of the zoo, can be seen as proof of the diminishing private, aristocratic sphere in the wake of the fast-charging public, bourgeois society.

The book's greatest strength lies in its rejection of safe and commonplace assumptions and definitions. Eley is correct in dismissing the belief that there exists an exclusive relationship between one particular class and one particular ideology, and both authors raise questions about such oft-used and worn out ideas as "the rise of the bourgeoisie" and "normalcy." They also adeptly highlight the difficulties of historical comparison. Who one compares oneself with goes a long ways towards determining the results. Obviously a comparison of nineteenth-century Germany to Tsarist Russia—or even Habsburg Austria—rather than parliamentary Britain, would produce a different list of "peculiarities."

Especially interesting and original is Blackbourn's contention that the seeds of bourgeois weakness were to be found internally, within the realm of their own successes, and not from external threats. Bourgeois achievements were most successful, he argues, when most silent—that is, when they seemed to be the most natural. The implementation of the rule of law, for example, while not especially dramatic, was a critical, quiet victory for the bourgeoisie. It was the openly and "noisily" successful achievements, what Blackbourn calls the "shadow side" of the silent revolution, that created a more visible target at which opponents could take aim. Increasingly it was in the arena of politics, "the soft under-belly of the bourgeoisie,"13 that bourgeois successes began, paradoxically, to take their toll. Blackbourn believes it was the extreme speed and resulting pressures of economic and social transformation that created the political discontent among the "subaltern" groups of the bourgeoisie, namely the working class, the peasants, and the petty bourgeoisie. Only through "painful containment" were these discontents countered, but by then the dream of bourgeois unity and hegemony had been stalled by an overly thorough bourgeois transformation.

*The Peculiarities of German History* is a stimulating contribution to a debate which obviously has implications beyond Germany and Europe. It is a work that has the power to revivify old questions and create new ones, and it offers an opportunity for, and a challenge to, serious reconsideration of basic historiographical positions. Perhaps the book's most important contribution, however, is to be found in Blackbourn's conclusion, where he makes a case for Germany being "much more the intensified version of the norm than the exception."14 arguing that *Deutschland* experienced a heightened version of the dynamic capitalism, crass materialism, and cultural despair that occurred elsewhere. This is an echo of Eley, who chooses to speak of British, French, and German particularities, rather than only German peculiarities. Blackbourn warns of the dangers of relying on the notion of the peculiar to explain what happened between 1933 and 1945, believing that an exaggerated emphasis on German peculiarity merely serves to mystify the tragedy of National Socialism. However, if German history is viewed as normal, or even possible, rather than as an aberration, one's sense of the tragedy of National Socialism becomes more acute. What lesson, after all, is to be learned from an aberration? To conclude with some advice from Blackbourn to future historians:

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13 Ibid, 271.
14 Ibid, 292.
That does not mean that we should write the history of Germany as if it were like the history of everywhere else; only that we should not write it as if it were quite unlike the history of anywhere else.15

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15 Ibid, 291.