

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Bernhard Rieger, Peter Baldwin, Christopher Clark. *Technology and the Culture of Modernity in Britain and Germany, 1890-1945: New Studies in European History.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. 319 S. \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-84528-1.



Reviewed by Anselm C. Heinrich (Department of Theatre, Film and Television Studies, University of Glasgow)

Published on H-German (October, 2005)

The importance of, indeed the need for, comparative approaches in historiography has for some time now been stressed by leading historians.[1] Despite discussions having gathered pace recently studies based on comparative historical analysis remain thin on the ground. Although he does not place his study specifically in this context Rieger goes some way to rectify this situation.

The book's structure may at first seem confusing. Apart from an introduction and a conclusion and two chapters putting the topic in a wider context ("Technological Innovation and Public Ambivalence" and "Technology and the Nation"), two chapters are concerned with film, one with airplanes, one with passenger shipping, and one with accidents. But what about the rise of the automobile and the growing importance of high-speed trains? What about photography and radio? Although Rieger addresses these questions in the introduction and explains his choice of three technologies because they "either came into existence or embarked upon vigorous technological development during the 1890s and early 1900s" (p. 4), the reader might want to learn a little more about the supposedly greater prominence in public discourse of these technologies in comparison to others.

Rieger bases his argument on a wide range of sources (although he obviously did not consult any archival ma-

terial in the Public Record Office or the German Federal Archives) and competently places his study in the framework of the existing research literature. At the same time, however, it would have been desirable for Rieger to elaborate more on the reasons for choosing Britain and Germany for his investigation. The fact that "each country regarded the other as a technological competitor and was consequently involved in a contemporary process of perception of the other" together with the observation that the "British and German publics often reacted towards new technologies in similar ways" (p. 12) certainly holds true for other countries just as well and is no peculiarity of the Anglo-German comparison. Until quite late in his study (pp. 222-223 and chapter 8) Rieger does not appear to be interested in possible differences in attitudes to technology between Britain and Germany but states their similarity from the outset as a fact. It would have been interesting, however, to look more generally at changing attitudes towards the "other" especially with regard to the two World Wars and the Third Reich.[2]

Rieger argues convincingly that while the press and the public at large constantly praised technological innovations as "wonders" public discourse was also characterized by a profound ambivalence and even fear of creating machines beyond human control. Technology advancing further into unknown territories created "a problem of

knowledge.” Rieger’s central question is, therefore, “why and how did British and German societies foster a cultural climate conducive to innovation processes despite considerable public insecurity about technology between 1890 and 1945” (p. 5). The author is at his best when working out and conceptualizing the different ways in which the German and the British public reacted to technological innovations. In this context Rieger’s concept of “ambivalence” is most convincing.

Concerning accidents Rieger rightly points out that they hardly affected the underlying belief in technological progress. Even disasters such as the sinking of the *Titanic* in 1912 or the blaze that destroyed the *Hindenburg* airship in 1937 did not fundamentally change perceptions although they have left deep traces in public memory until today. The belief in European progress, however, persisted. This does not mean that disasters did not attract a huge public interest in both countries. Rieger works out the different mechanisms at work both regarding the dissemination and perception of such news in the German and British “risk societies.”

In contrast to the more immediate physical dangers of aviation and passenger shipping the medium of film posed an altogether different danger. Rieger convincingly argues that the fact that film denied its technological nature and, therefore, rather appeared as a cultural phenomenon and even deliberately attracted attention to aesthetic questions instead of technical formulae established the medium as a technology fundamentally different from the other two. The lack of knowledge in turn fueled public fears of manipulation and moral dangers as many could not understand how film achieved its remarkable effects on audiences. At the same time, however, film was immensely popular, and the interwar years saw a more general acceptance and enthusiasm for film both as a means for entertainment and as an aesthetic medium.

Rieger then chooses the pilot rather than the film star or the racing driver as a typical phenomenon of the time. The “cult of the solo pilot” (p. 115), he argues, not only illustrated fascination with the dangerous life of these adventurers and their heroic qualities but was also proof of an admiration which ranged across social and political boundaries. This “cult” had virtually ended by the mid-1930s though largely because safety issues in aviation received more attention and the advance in radio technology and navigation robbed the solo pilots of some of the mysticism which had surrounded their lonely (and silent) long-haul flights in the 1920s. Apart from that airlines

such as Lufthansa and Imperial Airways had established near regular transatlantic flights by the late 1930s stressing the unexceptional character of such undertakings.

In terms of luxurious travel, however, even these passenger planes could not compete with the huge ocean-liners, the “floating palaces,” of the time. In that respect, as Rieger rightly maintains, ocean-liners much more than planes stressed the triumphant aspects of technology, theirs was an entirely positive message lacking the risks related to aviation (after the end of the First World War that is). Lavish cruises on luxurious ships in elegant company became the epitome of modern holidays for those who could afford them. The Nazis deliberately played with these social fantasies by apparently making “KdF” cruises affordable for everyone.

As an example of technology mastered by laypersons and as a possibility to bridge the knowledge “gap” Rieger presents the rising amateur film movement. Contemporary commentators praised the wholesome qualities of amateur films in contrast to the commercial and corrupt character of the cinema. The question remains, however, in how far Rieger can draw representative conclusions from his findings especially given the fact that both the number of people involved in amateur filming and the importance in public discourse remained relatively small (p. 201).

Rieger’s argument regains its poise in the last chapter on the national importance of technology. In both Germany and Britain technological leadership was seen as crucial, and by the 1890s both countries stood in direct economic and technological rivalry with each other (as expressed most notably perhaps in the scramble for the Blue Riband awarded for the fastest transatlantic crossing by a passenger ship). However, assessments of the national importance of technology in Germany and Britain differed notably. Rieger makes it clear that the British public saw technological innovation as part of maintaining a status quo whereas Germans tended to see technology as a means to aggressively regain political power and challenge the world at large.

In sum, Bernhard Rieger’s book is well written, well researched and well argued. It not only fills an important gap in research but by following a comparative approach also pushes the boundaries of historiography further. For example, Rieger has brought to light many similarities in public perception of technology in the two countries which have hitherto been overlooked. His final call for a reassessment of works following the Frankfurt School which link modernity to the Holocaust is well founded

by this convincing study.

Notes

[1]. The merits of such approaches were stressed recently by Horst Möller, "Diktatur- und Demokratieforschung im 20. Jahrhundert. Wo liegen neue Zugänge zur Zeitgeschichte?" *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 51 (2003): pp. 29-50. Classic studies include Heinz-Gerhart Haupt, Jürgen Kocka, eds., *Geschichte und Vergleich: Ansätze und Ergebnisse international vergleichender Geschichtsschreibung* (Frankfurt: Campus, 1996); and Jürgen Kocka, ed., *Arbeiter und Bürger im 19. Jahrhundert. Varianten ihres Verhältnisses im europäischen Vergleich* (Munich: Old-

enbourg, 1986).

[2]. Public attitudes towards Nazi Germany remained largely positive in Britain throughout the 1930s, indeed the "social experiment" of the Nazis was often praised by commentators and politicians. See, for example, Neville Henderson, *Failure of a Mission. Berlin 1937-1939* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1940). Contemporary statements show that visitors generally grossly underestimated the dangers of Nazi Germany's policies. See Angela Schwarz, *Die Reise ins Dritte Reich. Britische Augenzeugenberichte im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland (1933-1939)* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993). Only with the imminent military threat to Britain in 1940 did a notable anti-German sentiment set in.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Anselm C. Heinrich. Review of Rieger, Bernhard; Baldwin, Peter; Clark, Christopher, *Technology and the Culture of Modernity in Britain and Germany, 1890-1945: New Studies in European History*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. October, 2005.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11164>

Copyright © 2005 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.