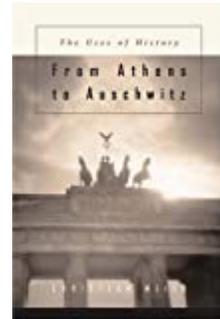




Christian Meier. *From Athens to Auschwitz: The Uses of History.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005. xii + 239 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-01692-7.



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History after the *Sonderweg*

A noted historian of antiquity, Christian Meier has never settled for studying the ancient world. He has spent considerable time and energy engaged in historiography, historical methodology, and, as his involvement in the *Historikerstreit* of the 1980s and the volume under consideration attest, the role of history in contemporary society. The work is based on the Krupp Lectures in Essen delivered in 2000-2001. The six chapters represent six lectures that could stand independently, but were reworked to give the volume a strong sense of coherence. Ultimately, the chapters do hang together and represent an impassioned defense of the relevance of history, even in a rapidly changing world where the circumstances of the past appear to be more and more immaterial to both the present and the future.

Chapter 1, "The Absence of History," attempts to assess the place of history in contemporary public awareness in European society. Using Jacob Burckhardt and Johann Gustav Droysen as his springboard, Meier launches into a discussion of how, in his view, history has apparently become irrelevant to the modern world.[1] For the basis of his analysis, Meier borrows from Reinhart Kosel-

leck and argues that the rate of change in virtually every phase of human life has increased to such an extent that the past does not appear to have any prophetic value and is of no use as a guide.[2] Past events may not help predict the future, but Meier suggests that there are past epochs that experienced similar upheavals and the method by which the people handled such rapid change could prove instructive. Meier finds one such epoch in fifth-century Greece, and another in revolutionary France. He also suggests that current trends in history are a main reason that history has become less accessible, focusing on "structures and processes" that are "more difficult to grasp than specific actions and events" (p. 23).

Meier equates the lack of ideas about future with the term "postmodern," which he describes as "a society that undertakes nothing beyond its immediate concerns, that does not want (or is unable?) to define itself by what it *is*, but only by what it *comes after*." Does this mean that our era is also 'post-history?'" (p. 15). Meier finds evidence of this post-history malaise in the problems surrounding the discussion of the European Union, in which it appears that Europeans want to differentiate

themselves from other peoples as little as possible. Meier, however, wants to establish that Europe has a "special path" when compared to other civilizations, and that the origins of this special path are to be found in antiquity. The term "special path" or *Sonderweg* is a deliberate decision. Meier writes, "In the late twentieth century there was a great deal of dispute over a supposed German 'special path.' It was said to have been not only a 'particular path,' in the sense that it was one of many particular paths taken by different nations, but also a unique one that distinguished Germany from *all* others (whose paths were thus asserted to have been general and 'Western'). One hears little of this nowadays. When I speak of a European special path in this book, in all probability what does not apply to Germany *does* apply to the Continent: Europe followed a path that differed from that of *all* other cultures (as different as they may have been from one another) in essential ways" (p. 199, n.1).

The note is quoted at length because it reveals fault lines that may trouble many readers. Aside from the irony that Germany is on its own special path while the rest of Europe follows its special path, the first chapter raises a number of issues about what constitutes Europe's specialness. Granting Meier's contention that Europe (and its extension, the United States) has had a greater impact on modern history (that is, in the last five hundred years) than the other ancient continents/civilizations, one can still debate what exactly is meant by "essential ways" and how one determines exactly when that special path began.

Chapter 2, "Around 1500," begins Meier's exploration of the special path that takes the reader from Athens to Auschwitz. Defending Europe's special role as a promoter of change around the world, Meier acknowledges that the "European Miracle"[3] that separates the Europe (or the West) from the rest of the world begins around 1500. However, he contends the foundations of this miracle can be found in antiquity, and that Athens, Rome, and Christianity are responsible for Europe's special development. The key to this idea is the Athenian notion of the citizen and the willingness to question, alter if necessary, established traditions and institutions when confronted with new circumstances. In spite of Meier's claim that his view is not Euro-centric, his cursory comparison of non-European cultures suggests a lack of familiarity with the literature of non-Western history that is essential to support his hypothesis.[4]

"Athens and Rome," the third chapter, presents a more detailed account of the contributions of Athens,

Rome, and Christianity to Europe's "pre-history." After another cursory view of ancient non-Western cultures, Meier begins with a lucid overview of Athenian history. Drawing from his previous works, Meier maintains that the involvement of the average citizen in politics and the individual's understanding of both freedom and responsibility were indispensable in the development of Athenian life, thought, and culture. He emphasizes that these circumstances were strictly a political development. Athenian economic life was not affected by these developments. Rome absorbed Greek influences and applied them to its own circumstances. The chief contribution of the Romans was the development of Roman law, which played a crucial role in its second achievement: assimilation. Christianity's contribution centered on providing an attractive alternative to the failing public religions. Christian theological debates appealed to intellectuals and its promise of salvation attracted lay people. Meier includes the need and willingness to ask questions as part of the legacy that Christianity passed down to future generations. This trait can fairly be attached to the early Church, but it is not clear to this reviewer how well that legacy is preserved once Orthodoxy is established. Meier's triumvirate of Greece, Rome, and Christianity was a necessary condition for Europe.

In a limited sense, Meier is correct. One cannot dispute that the events of antiquity played a role in the development of medieval and modern Europe. But the "proof" Meier offers here seems more chronological than philosophical. Preceding events influence subsequent events. One can have an infinite regression in terms of causality and make sense, but not be persuasive. And Meier is not persuasive here. Meier writes, "For the first time a culture arose that was free of domination, free of the hardships that repression brings for the mass of the population" (p. 98). This bold claim overlooks what he noted in passing earlier, that even in Athens, the most "enlightened" of the Greek polities, the majority of people were excluded from the process that Meier extols.

The fourth chapter, "Deeds and Contingencies, Politics and Processes," addresses the question of accountability. Reinhart Koselleck claims that "[m]en are responsible for the histories they are involved in, whether or not they are guilty of the consequences of their action. Men have to be held accountable for the incommensurability of intention and outcome, and this lends a background of real meaning concerning the making of history" (p. 106).

Meier defines history or historical change as “the product of action—political action performed by politicians and nations.” (p. 110). Looking at political and military history as the key to historical change was the Greek way of looking at history. The unforeseen played a role, but only a relatively minor role. People were expected to act in responsible fashion in the political sphere. Meier argues that this view of history lasted almost 2000 years until it was gradually replaced by a more teleological view of history, which maintained that human conflict served an end of nature (or God). The rate and scale of change, after say 1800, becomes so accelerated that notions of personal and civic responsibility seemed antiquated. But the idea of responsibility remained. However, how does one talk about responsibility when addressing the cumulative effects of countless small actions that have an outcome that was not part of the intentions of any of the actors? Here the author provides an example of how actions intended to save the Roman Empire ultimately contributed to its demise. Meier notes that in our time nongovernmental organizations have arisen in an attempt to address issues where governmental action has been inadequate. Meier wonders “how they [NGOs] will affect the existing system for making decisions and whether humanity—or at least significant portions of it—can regain control of processes it has set in motion” (p. 135).

Auschwitz is the end point of Europe’s special path and the subject of chapter 5. As virtually every historian before him, Meier notes the difficulty facing anyone who wants to try to talk about or understand, if that is possible, the enormity of the Holocaust. After running through the litany of conditions and circumstances that culminated in the systematic murder of European Jews (and it is worth noting that nothing before 1918 is mentioned), Meier wants to explore how to come to terms with Auschwitz. Failure to do so, he argues, would be “repression, regret and ritual” (p. 160). Approaching the problem from the perspective of “who knew?” is unfruitful for Meier unless it is paired with “the question of what ordinary people alone could have done with the knowledge if they had it” (p. 165). He maintains that most would have repressed the knowledge as much as possible, for there was little they could have done.

Now surpassed by its former offspring, the United States, Europe is one of many competing interests in global affairs. Auschwitz marked the end of Europe’s special path. Auschwitz was not the necessary end of that path, but the tragic and monstrous reminder that with great progress come great risks, and that human be-

ings must never forget the destruction of which they are capable. The legacy of Europe’s special path is the topic of the concluding chapter. Auschwitz may aptly sum up the dark side of the legacy, but there is also a positive side that Meier does not want to be neglected, not the least of which is a freedom which permitted innovation, development, and respect for human dignity. The current generation must decide if it wishes to maintain this legacy and the obligations that come with it. This does not mean just lamenting the crimes of Auschwitz, but taking responsibility for the consequences of Europe’s actions in and outside the continent. It is a call for a renewed sense of civic responsibility, as the Greeks understood the concept, on a global scale. Meier argues that history has an important role to play in this endeavor when he writes: “History can provide a sense of orientation in one’s own time, and assist in the process of self-determination.” History can also gather information from the past to help illuminate future scenarios. Finally, Meier claims that history is especially valuable during times of change “because it helps us study and grasp unisimultaneities of the simultaneous” (p. 194). He finishes with the rather unoriginal claim: “In order to understand ourselves, we must know what we have received from the past” (p. 195).

The reader cannot help but admire Meier’s sincerity as he crafts a defense for the relevance of history. However, the work is not without its difficulties. Meier’s focus on the actions of people and nations as the producers of historical change betrays his own analysis. The pace of change that characterizes modernity, or post-modernity to some, and the “unisimultaneities of the simultaneous,” another notion borrowed from Koselleck, seem to show the limits of the methodological approach that Meier has practiced in his own work and suggested that the average person can understand more readily. “Action and events” may be easier to put into a narrative form for the reader, but the scale and rate of change that Meier concedes characterizes our age may require a greater focus on “structure and process” than he is willing to concede. The choice of Auschwitz as the end point is also problematic. Meier explains why he chose Auschwitz and it is a reasonable defense. The problem comes from the endnote cited earlier. If Germany did not partake in the special path that Europe undertook, then is Auschwitz really the appropriate end point? Ultimately, this book is better suited for a lay audience. In its discussion of Auschwitz or Europe’s special path, it has little to offer the specialist in German history.

Notes

[1]. See Jacob Burckhardt, *Reflections on History*, trans. M. D. Hottinger (1943; reprinted Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1979); and Johann Gustav Droysen, *Historik*, ed. Peter Leyh (Stuttgart-Bad Canstatt: Frommann Holzog, 1977). Meier observes that neither work needed a preamble to justify the study of history.

[2]. See Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past. On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985).

[3]. Meier borrows the term from E. I. Jones, *The European Miracle: Environment, Economics, and Geopolitics in the History of Europe and Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

[4]. There is no bibliography in the book, and the notes in the chapter cite only one work that explicitly engages a non-Western culture: Max Weber, *The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism*, trans. and ed. Hans H. Gerth (Glencoe: Free Press, 1954).

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