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Remapping the German Past: Grand Narrative, Causality, and Postmodernism.

The efforts of the GHI to foster a transatlantic exchange of ideas among scholars from Germany and the United States in the fields of historical theory and methodology started with a workshop in 1995 and continued on a broader scale with this conference. It brought together about thirty historians from Germany, Great Britain, and the United States to discuss the epistemological consequences that have resulted from new approaches in contemporary historiography and have had differing impacts on historical scholarship in both countries. Linking specific theoretical concepts with empirical research, the meeting surveyed the common cognitive principles of historical understanding and methods of historical research. The conference also aimed to investigate the advantages and limitations of different theoretical approaches and their transformations in historical practice by comparing modern epistemological principles to postmodern theoretical concepts. The sessions therefore focused on three epochs in German history: the German Empire, the Weimar Republic, and the events of 1989-90. However, in contrast to academic debates that have taken place in Germany over the past two decades, the sessions did not center on interpretations of specific developments in German history but rather on three systematic concepts in particular: the advantages and limits of grand narrative, the problem of causality, and the issues of objectivity, memory, and historical meaning.

After some introductory remarks, Detlef Junker read Otto G. Oexle's (GÃ¶ttingen) keynote lecture, which analyzed past and current trends in the study of history in Germany. Drawing an impressive picture of the history of German historiography since the nineteenth century, Oexle tried to trace the origins and historical dimensions of the "cultural turn" in the Historische Kulturwissenschaft. By comparing traditional and cultural historians Oexle showed that the dividing line be tween cultural history and traditional historical scholarship could be found in both the object of study and the epistemological orientation. He suggested an alternative to Ranke's historiographical and theoretical concept that is offered by the epistemology of cultural history, which readdresses two challenges of the nineteenth century, namely, the relative status of historical versus scientific knowledge and the concept of objectivity. Oexle then analyzed Troeltsch's books on historicism and made clear that German historians of the 1920s and 1930s - in contrast to French historians - did not accept the new challenges of cultural history - and probably were not even aware of them, a development that has affected German historiography to the present day.

The first session of the conference, chaired by Ernst Breisach (Kalamazoo), dealt with the concept of grand narrative, focusing on the possibilities of a synthetic historiography and its cognitive elements.

Deconstructing the book, The Peculiarities of German History (1984) by David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, Allan Megill (Charlottesville) discussed the concepts of synthesis, necessity, and contingency in the narrative of German history. He distinguished between four types of narratives: the narrative simpliciter, the master narrative, the grand narrative, and the metanarrative. According

to Megill, a postmodern approach denies a master narrative, on the one hand, but it cannot be replaced by the reduction of history to memory, on the other, because it makes history the servant of the interests and desires of particular groups. Arguing against a deterministic interpretation of history, he suggested that contingency and accident have their legitimate places within the academic historical discourse.

In his talk, "Writing German Microhistory: The Small Story and the Big Picture," David Blackbourn (Boston) gave an overview of the broad shift toward microhistory in the historical profession since the late 1970s. He addressed the basic assumption of this challenging approach and emphasized the skepticism that it faced in Germany. His evaluation of the advantages and disadvantages of microhistory led to the conclusion that German historians should continue to reflect on the many different ways of interweaving the small stories of microhistory and the big picture of macrohistory as the basis of new synthesis. Roger Chickering (Washington) addressed the topic, "The Kaiserreich and the Grand Narrative." He demonstrated the changes in interpretations of and approaches to the history of the Kaiserreich in Germany. He especially emphasized the ideological implications of those narratives that caused the "academic wars," which began in the 1960s and continue to this day. In investigating the most important debates, such as the Fischer controversy, the rise and fall of the Sonderweg theory, and the challenges of the modernistic interpretations of the Historische Sozialwissenschaft by practitioners of Alltagsgeschichte, Chickering made clear that no consensus has yet been reached on the place of the Kaiserreich in a new grand narrative.

The second session, chaired by Ute Frevert (Bielefeld), concentrated on new approaches to the history of the German Empire. In his paper, "Problems with Culture: German History After the Linguistic Turn," Geoff Eley (Ann Arbor) opposed Hans-Ulrich Wehler's attack on "culture" and "cultural history." He argued especially against attempts to reconstruct a specifically German lineage of influences since the nineteenth century, particularly by Dilthey and Weber, that both deinternationalize the debate on cultural history and reconstitute a national-historiographical paradigm. After a fundamental critique of the perceptions of cultural history by German social historians, Eley pointed out that the contemporary discussions among American cultural anthropologists, which are more pluralistic than the debates on cultural history, were not recognized by the Bielefeld school at all. Calling for a productive dialogue between historians and anthropologists, he stressed the plurality of approaches and mutual respect that led to an acknowledgment of each others production of history.

Wolfgang J. Mommsen (DÃ¼sseldorf), in his paper "Bourgeois Culture and Semi-Autocratic Rule in Imperial Germany," took a different view of culture and cultural history. As he did in his book, BÃ¼rgerliche Kultur und kÃ¼nstlerische Avantgarde (1994), he did not refer to the broader, anthropological notion of culture but to a more narrow definition that was limited to high culture. Therefore, his main focus was the status of bourgeois culture and its significance for the political order. He argued that even though bourgeois culture was an important element in strengthening the political and social position of the middle classes, a clear dividing line between an aristocratic and a bourgeois culture could not be drawn. Mommsen pointed out that the relationship between culture and politics was very complex. But whereas bourgeois culture was closely associated with the ideas of liberalism, it nevertheless did not have profound consequences for the political order, mainly because of the change in the bourgeois ethos after 1870 and the dissociation of the avant garde from the mainstream of bourgeois culture.

In the final paper of this session, Alf LÃ¼dtke (GÃ¶ttingen) presented a "History of the Kaiserreich as History of Everyday: People's Practices and Emotions Writ Large." Using examples from the magazine Simplicissimus, he demonstrated how rudimentary our knowledge still is concerning readership and audience. LÃ¼dtke analyzed the sentiments expressed in caricatures and cartoons and how they represent bourgeois culture in general. LÃ¼dtke made a strong plea to historians to consider the study of feelings, emotions, and mentalities as part of Alltagsgeschichte and to link it with other historical approaches.

The third session, chaired by Detlef Junker, focused on the problem of causality. At the center of all three papers presented were the specific question of why Hitler came to power and the related problems of causal development, historical proof, and varying interpretations. Hagen Schulze (Berlin), in his paper "Explaining the Failure of the Weimar Republic," started with a list of various factors that have been identified in scholarly debates as the causes for Weimar's failure. In relating them to actual historical events, he suggested a hierarchy of primary and secondary causes. Whereas the collapse of Weimar was probably caused by certain necessary factors and conditions, it was not, as Schulze claimed through

counterfactual arguments, inevitable. For him, causality does not refer to scientific causal concepts, but it is used to reduce the complexity of phenomena. Therefore, the concept of causality is to be used, from a heuristic point of view, as a regulative idea but not as a means to prove deterministic causal laws in history. In contrast to Schulze, Henry A. Turner (New Haven) closely analyzed the last thirty days of the Weimar Republic in order to demonstrate the "uncaused causes" in the descent from democracy to dictatorship. "Uncaused causes" are to be understood as those developments that could not be accounted for in terms of the sorts of chains of causation accessible to historians. In Turner's view, the failure of the first German republic cannot be explained by historical causation but rather by individual decisions, emotional attitudes, and actions. Hitler's survival of a car accident in 1930 is used by Turner as a classic example of an "uncaused cause." Whereas structural history is essential to an understanding of the past, it cannot explain why the Third Reich happened. In his paper, David Lindenfeld (Baton Rouge) suggested a nonlinear model of causality based on chaos theory. He attempted to distinguish the meanings and uses of key terms and propo-sitions of complexity theory that are applicable to history and those that are not. He therefore investigated the various dimensions of chaos theory, such as linearity and nonlinearity, sensitivity to initial conditions, similarity across differences in scale, dissipative systems, phase space, and attractors, and demonstrated how these concepts can lead to new perspectives on causality regarding the rise of the Third Reich. Lindenfeld saw in their application and use for historical narratives a way to prevent an "indiscriminate pluralism" by counterfactual arguments.

The fourth session, chaired by Konrad H. Jarausch (Chapel Hill/Potsdam), dealt with the events of 1989-90 in East Germany and the question of whether a paradigm shift in German contemporary historiography has resulted from this major historical break. Martin Sabrow (Potsdam), in his paper "The Second Reality of GDR Historiography," analyzed the different modes of historical interpretation of the June 1953 uprising. He distinguished between hagiographic, normative, and pragmatic approaches before 1989 and exculpatory or sympathetic (pragmatic) and accusatory (normative) discourses for the post-1989 era. In suggesting a discursive reconstruction as a new paradigm, Sabrow showed that the normative and pragmatic approaches before and after 1989 shared one important element: the analysis and evaluation of the second German historiography (East) within the auspices and categories of the first German historiography (West). These approaches therefore do not sufficiently explain the inner structures of GDR historiography. In order to understand the phenomenon of a "fettered history," Sabrow suggested a model of discourse reconstruction that avoids the interpretation of eastern scholarship within western categories and understands East Germany's modes of operation on its own terms, such as the concepts of scholarliness, historical truth, correctness, and so forth. Claus Leggewie (New York/GieÃen) took the events of 1989-90 as the starting point of his analysis in "The Berlin Republic - What's New About the New Germany?" He raised two questions: First, was 1990 a turning point in German history such as 1933 and 1945, assuming a common history since World War II; second, how do we assess the place of Central Europe in the political, social, economic, and cultural history of the twentieth century? Leggewie stated that the new Berlin Republic was not only the result of a national revolution but also an unaccomplished refoundation of the Bonn Republic. He suggested a multidimensional scheme of periods in the Federal Republic between 1949 and 1990, narrowing it down to a generational perspective that allowed him to show how long waves of social and cultural modernization had converged with shorter cycles of political change.

The last paper of this session, Wolfgang Ernst's (Cologne) "The Archi(-ve)texture of 1989 in a 'Postmodern' Perspective (A Disclaimer)," was presented in two parts. First, Ernst suggested different postmodern ways to interpret the events of 1989-90, focusing on an "archivological" perspective. Whereas he stated the different views of postmodern history, he also made clear how such a perspective restrained itself from historical imagination and dismembered any attempt at a coherent representation. In the second part, Ernst therefore tried to disclaim postmodernism as a mode of coping with the events in Eastern Europe. For him the postmodernist aesthetic of "anything goes" since 1989 has been replaced by focusing on memories of the past. The most important question is which agency governs the access to memory; that is to say, access to power corresponds with archival access to the memory of power. In analyzing the archival identity and memory of East Germany, Ernst stressed the problems that arose from the fact that digital memory in the form of electronic data banks were accessible only for those who knew the programs or codes. The fact that many sources on the GDR are stored electronically raises methodological problems for historians, who are mostly only skilled in working with print documentation.

The third day's session opened with JÃ¶rn RÃ¼sen's

(Essen) paper, "Narrativity and Objectivity." He introduced various concepts of the two categories of objectivity and narrativity, which were considered to be contradictory characterizations of historical studies. In order to realize a return of truth claims to historical thinking, RÃ¼sen redefined the meaning of objectivity and suggested a new concept in which objectivity does not mean neutrality but, by contrast, includes the features of practical life in historical representation. Historical narratives can therefore enforce experience and intersubjectivity in cultural orientation.

Alexander Demandt (Berlin) concluded the conference with a paper titled "Finis Historiae?" in which he gave a historical overview from Hesiod to Fukuyama on how men had thought about the end of history. He showed that people always identified their own wishes with history's supposed last stage. Regarding the new millennium, hopes will probably concentrate on a new age, but it will soon emerge that human events are always qualitatively historic.

As the variety of papers anticipated, the debates touched on a broad spectrum of historical theory and methodology. Opened with the comments of JÃ¼rgen Kocka (Berlin), Volker Berghahn (Prov-idence), Chris Lorenz (Amsterdam), Mary Fulbrook (London), and Thomas Haskell (Houston), the discussions showed that recent challenges to traditional historiography have broadened the historical perspective but have left certain epistemological problems unresolved. The conference demonstrated how important these problems are not only for the historical practice but also for the public function of the historical profession and its ability to mediate between past and present and to meet a need for guidance in giving the present meaning. The debates also underscored the fact that academic discourse among historians does not differ according to geography but rather according to different theories and methodologies. An openness toward plurality and the mutual acceptance of different approaches to history are the only way to bridge these gaps.