

# Stalinism and Nazism: Dictatorships in Comparison

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## German exceptionalism and the origins of Nazism: the career of a concept

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Every national historiography seems to have its own 'exceptionalism' thesis. The underlying structure of these theories is roughly similar: one's own history is shown to deviate from a standard model of development in ways that produce some unique outcome. But most exceptionalism theories become visible to a non-academic public for only a brief moment, and are otherwise only interesting for a narrow circle of specialists. Discussions of the 'open frontier' or the 'absence of socialism' in the United States are not likely to quicken the pulse of the contemporary reader. Debates over France's 'delayed' economic development probably seem even more recondite. By contrast, the thesis of the German *Sonderweg*, or special path to modernity, has continued to capture the imagination of a much wider audience, seemingly impervious to the waves of criticism directed against it.

The *Sonderweg* can best be understood as a complex and changing field of discourse held together by certain core ideas and texts, rather than a single, unified statement. At the core of most contemporary discourse on the *Sonderweg* is a problem and the outlines of an answer. The central question is: why did Nazism come to power in Germany, or, why did a system like Nazism come to power in Germany and not in other advanced industrial countries?<sup>1</sup> The basic

<sup>1</sup> Kershaw suggests that the *Sonderweg* approach has little to say about the specific character and cumulative radicalisation of Nazism, and is mainly a theory of the *origins* of Nazism (*Nazi Dictatorship*, p. 18). It is true that the critical exceptionalism approach has focused mainly on the Kaiserreich, and paid less attention to the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich. Yet the origins of Nazism are interesting to exceptionalists mainly because of the regime's longer-term effects. Key contributors to the *Sonderweg* thesis like Wehler clearly understand their project as one of working out the preconditions for Nazism, including the virulent antisemitism that culminated in the Holocaust (e.g. Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgechichte*, p. 1293). As Wehler noted in the introduction to the English-language edition of *The German Empire*, 'The guiding question underlying this book has been to investigate why Hitler's National Socialist regime came to power some dozen years after the end of the monarchy; why this regime succeeded in establishing a system of unprecedented terror and barbaric mass extermination; and

answer focuses on the deviation of Germany's developmental path from its western neighbours. Germany is both part of the west and different from it. The notion of a German difference from the rest of the Occident has been around for centuries, of course, including strands which viewed Germany's distinctiveness in positive terms (see Part I). Since 1945, however, and especially during the past three decades, the exceptionalism 'thesis'<sup>2</sup> has been discussed extensively and refined. Earlier versions of the exceptionalism thesis often sought the seeds of Nazism as far back as the Reformation (cf. McGovern, *From Luther to Hitler*) or Romanticism (Butler, *Roots of National Socialism*; Kohn, *Mind of Germany*), while more recent contributors have located the decisive turning-points in the mid-nineteenth century (1848) and unification periods (1866–71), and have focused especially on the Kaiserreich (1871–1918). The most influential statement of the Sonderweg thesis during the past two decades has been Hans-Ulrich Wehler's *The German Empire* (1973), which focused attention on the final third of the nineteenth century. The recently published third volume of Wehler's encyclopaedic *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte* (1995), revisits in much greater detail Germany's fateful branching off from the West between 1849 and 1914.<sup>3</sup>

The exceptionalist historiography has hardly gone uncontested. David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley have criticised the exceptionalists' reading on both theoretical and empirical grounds. There are also various alternative explanations of Nazism which downplay the importance of historical continuities (see Ayçoberry, *Nazi Question* and Kershaw, *Nazi Dictatorship*). One of the most significant developments since the 1980s has been a 'normalising' German historiography that offers a positive reading of the Empire and of 'traditions and patterns worth cherishing'.<sup>4</sup> Yet despite these criticisms and counter-trends,

why it proved capable of conducting a second total war' (*German Empire*, p. 7; see also Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, p. 461).

<sup>2</sup> I use the term 'exceptionalism' *thesis* rather than 'exceptionalism' *theory* deliberately in this paper to refer to the subset of Sonderweg discourse that tries to account for Nazism. On the distinction between *theories*, which are concerned with underlying causal mechanisms, and *explanation*, which deals with actual events, see Bhaskar (*Realist Theory; Naturalism; Scientific Realism*); also Wright ('Reflections'); Steinmetz ('Regulating the Social', pp. 16–17; 'Bhaskar's Critical Realism').

<sup>3</sup> The third volume of Wehler's *Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, which appeared as this volume was going to the editor, is discussed briefly below. Wehler does now acknowledge several arenas in which Imperial Germany was quite modern, but still emphasises the importance of the negative 'exceptional conditions' for the country's longer-term development – i.e. the rise of Nazism.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Stürmer, quoted in Kershaw (*Nazi Dictatorship*, p. 201). This 'upbeat' view of the Kaiserreich and German history more generally permeates the ongoing exhibition at the German Historical Museum in Berlin (cf. Stölzl, *Bilder*; also Kramer, 'Letter').

exceptionalist discourse has continued to proliferate beyond the universities, in a wide variety of texts and contexts.

Several factors seem important in understanding the broad resonance of Sonderweg discourse in Germany.<sup>5</sup> One has to do with the growing public interest in the Nazi period, and in German history more generally, since the early 1980s.<sup>6</sup> Despite the efforts by German politicians and intellectuals to 'historicise' the Nazi era,<sup>7</sup> to 'put the past behind us', the Nazi period has not yet been abandoned to the professionals. The question that seems to underlie much of the interest is still: 'How did this happen in the middle of Europe in a "civilised" century?'<sup>8</sup> Yet a broad interest in trying to understand Nazism cannot explain the appeal of any particular approach to that problem, such as exceptionalism.

One general reason for the robustness of the Sonderweg is its proven strategic usefulness.<sup>9</sup> The Sonderweg thesis has been used repeatedly to legitimate the post-war German states, especially (though not exclusively) the Federal Republic.<sup>10</sup> The exceptionalism narrative suggested that

<sup>5</sup> As discussed below (see note 10), exceptionalist discourse was quite restricted in GDR historiography and even more so in East German public opinion. So 'Germany' here refers mainly to pre-1989 West Germany and post-1989 Germany.

<sup>6</sup> I am referring here to the growth of phenomena like the History Workshops, mass-circulation history journals, and high-school research projects on the local area during the Nazi era. For an early overview, see *Der Spiegel* No. 23 (1983), pp. 36–42, 'Ein kräftiger Schub für die Vergangenheit'.

<sup>7</sup> On 'historicising' the Nazi era, see Kramer ('Letter') and Broszat (*Nach Hitler*).

<sup>8</sup> Jens Reich, former leader in the East German citizens' movement, quoted in Kramer ('Letter', p. 63).

<sup>9</sup> This is not a functionalist *explanation* of the prevalence of exceptionalism theory. To point to the usefulness of an idea is not to explain its genesis, i.e., a description of functions is not the same as a functional explanation.

<sup>10</sup> The GDR's position vis-à-vis the exceptionalism thesis is quite complex. Some eastern Marxists (most importantly Lukács, *Die Zerstörung*, and Abusch, *Der Irrweg*) proposed a variant of the exceptionalism narrative that indirectly legitimated the GDR as having successfully overcome feudalism, irrationalism, and the Prussian aristocracy. The difficulty was that the Sonderweg account made it difficult to attack West Germany politically as the heir of Nazism, since the Federal Republic had broken even more decisively with the Prussian-agrarian past, even in crudely geographical terms. Moreover, the connotations of the 'east' within exceptionalist discourse were almost entirely negative. Official East German ideology quickly settled on a simple equation of capitalism with 'fascism', of West German politicians and capitalists with crypto-Nazis. Another factor in the rejection of the Sonderweg by the early 1950s was the effort to define the 'nascent East German state . . . as the heir of a progressive, democratic tradition' (Iggers, 'Forward', pp. 16–17). But if the exceptionalism approach in its integral form was marginalised, elements of it crept back into East German historical writing through a reception of Marx's and Engels' own proto-exceptionalist view of nineteenth-century Germany. The interpretative incoherence that resulted from combining Marxist textual orthodoxy with political necessity is glaringly evident in much East German historical writing on the Bismarckian state. Especially in the 1980s, GDR historians offered internally contradictory readings of the Kaiserreich as both a modern capitalist state and an agrarian-Junker state (see Steinmetz, *Regulating the Social*, pp. 252–3). The complexity of the relationship between the Sonderweg thesis and

post-war Germany had eliminated the main source of Nazism: the agrarian Junker class, with its political and cultural power, and its inhibiting effects on liberalism. The Sonderweg thesis also diverted attention away from an array of possible alternative causes of Nazism which could be seen as surviving in post-war Germany: capitalism, economic crises, deep-rooted psychological structures or cultural forms, etc. According to the Sonderweg perspective, the roots of Nazism are 'history'.<sup>11</sup>

Since 1989, the Sonderweg trope has been deployed with increasing frequency in German political debate as a rhetorical weapon (see Part IV). The 'Sonderweg' has been uncoupled from the specialised historiography, and has started to accrue new meanings. Nonetheless, the historical writing continues to provide the concept with its power, through its claim to account for Nazism. The Sonderweg also retains its core reference to German deviation from the west. By accusing one's political opponent of steering Germany back onto an 'exceptional', non-western track, it is possible to raise the spectre of Nazism indirectly without engaging in libel. And a speaker who embraces the Sonderweg perspective is still aligned with the forces of liberalism and western social science.

This brings us to an additional set of reasons for Sonderweg theory's strength, having to do with the sociology of the German historical profession, cultural capital, and the ways in which exceptionalism theory meshes with certain understandings of serious social science.<sup>12</sup> However embattled its defenders may feel, the Sonderweg approach still has excellent credentials within the German academic field. It is associated with distinguished<sup>13</sup> historians at major German universities and research institutes. Two of Germany's leading periodicals, *Der*

the GDR has been further compounded since 1989, as several historians have described East Germany itself as a continuation of the German Sonderweg (see Part IV below).

<sup>11</sup> Since the Sonderweg thesis is critical of Germany's past it might seem paradoxical to emphasise its legitimatory function. Kramer ('Letter') seems to miss this point, counterposing the view of German history as 'bad until 1945' (Habermas) against the German Historical Museum's staging of a positive continuity in German history. In fact, *both* views are normative and legitimating, even if they valorise different things.

<sup>12</sup> Some forms of discourse are 'profitable' within a given cultural field while others seem awkward and foreign. The latter may neglect or contradict taken-for-granted assumptions in a given cultural context, or seem to lack taste or seriousness. A discourse about history that fails to 'fit' in this way may remain marginal *despite* its potential usefulness. Bourdieu's work (cf. especially 'Forms') theorises the way in which variable amounts of cultural capital accrue to different positions within a cultural field. In the current case, contending interpretations of Nazism can be seen as conferring differing amounts of cultural capital upon their adherents. In Germany, 'academic', 'scientific', and 'rationalistic' discourse is still more powerful than alternative forms of discourse (the outcome of the 1980's 'Historians' Conflict' is a good illustration of this).

<sup>13</sup> See Wehler ('Nationalismus', p. 74), for the use of the term 'distinguished' in this context; also Bourdieu, *Distinction*.

*Spiegel* and *Die Zeit*, turn to Wehler frequently for book reviews and commentary on German politics. Exceptionalism has a prestigious international and 'western-liberal' lineage among exile historians in Britain, the USA and elsewhere. Politically and morally, exceptionalism theory takes the side of modernity against tradition, liberalism against conservatism, reason against irrationality.<sup>14</sup> Methodologically, exceptionalism is associated with 'structural' approaches in the social sciences, which are still coded as scientific, serious, liberal, and Anglo-American. Many of the rival explanatory accounts of the rise of Nazism, by contrast, are associated with approaches seen as 'unscientific', less serious, or even politically suspect.<sup>15</sup> Exceptionalism theory is a well-established account of nineteenth-century German history and the genesis of Nazism. Reports of its death have been highly exaggerated.

This does not mean that the Sonderweg approach is currently hegemonic among German historians, even if twenty years ago it seemed to have become a 'new orthodoxy'.<sup>16</sup> The Sonderweg thesis is rooted in a form of modernisation theory which, along with other structural theories and historical 'metanarratives', has been sharply challenged by the turn to cultural and post-modern theories.<sup>17</sup> An equally significant challenge to the left-liberal Sonderweg thesis has come from the steady growth of a neoconservative 'intelligentsia' in Germany since the late 1979s, and from the changes in political culture

<sup>14</sup> The very 'will to explain' exemplified by the Sonderweg approach might be seen as an implicit rejection within historiography of a tainted irrationalism, romanticism, and anti-scientism, which exceptionalists have associated with the ancestry of Nazism (see Kohn, *Mind*).

<sup>15</sup> Such alternative include the 'evil genius' or 'great man' approach, focused exclusively on Hitler; 'mass society' theory, which since the 1960s has seemed suspiciously conservative; Nolte's view of Nazism as a radicalised mimesis of Stalinism (cf. Nolte, *Bürgerkrieg; Streitpunkte*); and any explicitly Marxist approaches (although, as I will argue below, the critical Sonderweg thesis is inextricably related to a certain form of Marxism). In addition to these unpopular forms of analysis, recent years have seen a huge proliferation of fragmented research projects on 'every conceivable aspect of Nazi rule' (Kershaw, *Nazi Dictatorship*, p. 211). Like the various culturalist, anthropological, and post-modern approaches, however, these have not yet resulted in a synthetic revisionist account of Nazism. See Reichel (*Der schöne Schein*) and NGBK (*Inszenierung*) for interesting moves in this direction. (One possible exception is the formerly unfashionable concept of 'totalitarianism', whose academic capital has skyrocketed since the collapse of the GDR and the Soviet Union.) The most promising new approach sees Nazism as a 'hegemonic project', one in which Hitler and the Nazis successfully bundled together and radicalised a variety of traditions and cultural materials, some of them quite old (like antisemitism), others traceable to the Kaiserreich period (eugenics and modern racism), and some originating in the post-World War I period (e.g. anti-Sovietism). For an interesting sketch of such an account, see Eley ('Fascism'). This approach has not been fully fleshed out, but is compatible with my discussion in Part III.

<sup>16</sup> James Sheehan, quoted in Blackbourn and Eley (*Peculiarities of German History*, p. 12).

<sup>17</sup> For an interesting analysis of these challenges to historical social science, see Wehler ('Selbstverständnis').

resulting from German unification, which have placed the critical exceptionalist approach 'even further on the defensive than it had already become during the *Tendenzwende* of the 1980s' (Kershaw, *Nazi Dictatorship*, p. 200). Wehler and other representatives of the Sonderweg thesis have been the object of conservative attacks.<sup>18</sup> German historians may thus have good tactical reasons for defending a view of pre-1914 German history as 'pathological' (Wehler, 'Westbindung', p. 141). On the other hand, as Wehler himself has noted, only two 'distinguished historians' ('angesehene[n] Historiker'; Wehler, 'Aufklärung', p. 191) were 'prepared to offer a feeble defense' of the *Tendenzwende* represented by Nolte and Hillgruber in the German 'historians' debate' of the late 1980s. In the context of this volume, however, there is no need to worry about providing ammunition to the far right, especially since the criticisms of the Sonderweg presented below are of a fundamentally different sort than those of the nationalist historians.

The first section of this essay traces the development of the discourse on German exceptionalism up through the consolidation of the 'critical' Sonderweg thesis during the 1970s. The second section focuses on the critique of this approach that emerged during the 1980s. David Blackburn and Geoff Eley's pathbreaking books *Mythen deutscher Geschichtsschreibung* (1980) and *Peculiarities of Germany History* (1985) challenged the critical exceptionalism thesis on nearly every count, from its construction of Britain as a standard for comparison to its description of German middle-class behaviour in the later nineteenth century as 'feudalised'. An array of specialised historical monographs also contributed to the attack on the critical Sonderweg thesis, detailing various ways in which Imperial Germany's politics and culture resonated with capitalist industrialisation rather than contradicting it. The third section casts a critical eye on the terms in which this assault on the critical Sonderweg thesis has been framed. I argue that the critics share with their opponents a questionable set of assumptions about societies and social explanation. The fourth section discusses the development of Sonderweg discourse in the wake of the historiographic and political debates of the 1980s and early 1990s. Although many former proponents of the Sonderweg thesis have abandoned theory and explanation for the comforts of empiricism and straight narrative, the basic tenets of the Sonderweg remain quite influential among historians and within German political discourse.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Schöllgen (*Angst*, pp. 109–11); Zitelmann (*Westbindung*, pp. 11, 15, 184); and Weissman ('Der "Westen"'). The critical Sonderweg thesis is the obvious target of Nolte's hysterical polemic against a certain 'interpretation of National Socialism' which he views as the 'barely disguised motive' behind anti-racist and multicultural politics and the 'transformation of the German nation into a mixed-nationality population' (Nolte, *Streitpunkte*, p. 431).

In the conclusion I recommend that the concept of the *Sonderweg* should be redefined, since it is unlikely to disappear. German culture and politics have been indelibly marked by the exceptional crimes perpetrated by Germany during the years 1933–45. By arguing that German 'exceptionalism' *begins* with the Nazi era rather than culminating in it, we can reject the critical *Sonderweg* thesis without playing into the hands of those who would 'normalise' German history.

### I. *The many lanes in the 'German road'*

The thesis of a 'special German road' originated long before – centuries before – the appearance of Nazism and theories of Nazism. An archaeology of this discourse must distinguish between a positive strand, which *praises* Germany's differentiation from the West, and a *critical* strand that codes this deviation as backwardness. Further distinctions within *Sonderweg* discourse concern the specific *explanation* offered for Germany's differentiation and the main *location* (politics, culture) of exceptionalism.

The positive understanding of German exceptionalism appeared as early as the Reformation in the self-understanding of the Protestant territorial rulers (Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, p. 462). As a result of the French Revolution and Napoleonic wars, this crystallised into a contrast between an authentic German 'culture' and a superficial French 'civilisation' (Elias, *History*, pp. 30–4). Later in the nineteenth century, and into the Weimar Republic, the ideologists of the 'German Path' celebrated Germany's unique combination of east and west, archaism and modernity (cf. Faulenbach, *Ideologie*; Olszewski, 'German Road'). Max Weber partially participated in the positive *Sonderweg* thesis with his sometimes idealised descriptions of the Prussian and German bureaucracy (Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, p. 463; Weber, 'Bureaucracy'). The positive *Sonderweg* thesis then disappeared after 1945, only to resurface in neoconservative and far-right political discourse during the past decade (see Part IV below).

The *critical* contrast between Germany and its western neighbours may reach back as far as Tacitus' *Germania*, which constructed the Germans as backwards vis-à-vis the Gauls and the Romans in all respects other than military prowess.<sup>19</sup> The negative evaluation was expressed in the eighteenth century around the nobility's horror of the German language and its veneration of all things French (Elias, *History*,

<sup>19</sup> The militarisation of German culture is a perennial theme in negative exceptionalist discourse. To the contemporary reader, the combination of exoticisation and mockery in the *Germania* recalls nineteenth-century colonial anthropology. On the other hand, Tacitus' text has also been a favourite on the far right.



pp. 3–34). Heine (*Deutschland*) was only the most brilliant satirist of the *deutsche Misere* during the Vormärz (pre-March) period. In the 1860s, Marx and Engels ridiculed the Prussian ‘Cabbage Junkers’ and the *Spießbürger* who grovelled at their feet. After 1871, Engels continued to describe the Junkers as hegemonic, and saw Bismarck as organising ‘the demolition of German industry, under the pretext of protecting it’.<sup>20</sup> This line of criticism was kept alive by liberals during the Kaiserreich. Weber (despite his partial adherence to a positive version of exceptionalism) argued in 1895 that ‘an economically declining class’ – the Prussian aristocracy – was ‘politically dominant’ in Germany (Weber, ‘National State’, p. 203).

The view of German society as dominated by an atavistic elite and an outdated culture was elaborated by Thorstein Veblen (*Imperial Germany*) during World War I and by the historian Eckart Kehr in the Weimar Republic (*Battleship Building; Economic Interest*).<sup>21</sup> Similar ideas were put forth in the 1930s by the unorthodox Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch (*Heritage*) and the ex-Communist Franz Borkenau, who spoke in 1933 of a ‘non-correspondence between national economic and political conditions’ in the Empire (‘Soziologie’, p. 172). Trotsky suggested in 1932 that the emergent Nazi regime represented a ‘dwindling majority’ of Junkers (*Struggle*, p. 265). During World War II, Talcott Parsons (*On National Socialism*), Alexander Gerschenkron (*Bread and Democracy*), and the American anthropologist Robert Lowie (*German People*) continued in a similar vein.<sup>22</sup> Lowie focused on the nineteenth century, and the Kaiserreich in particular, as the key era for bringing out ‘those features which distinguish Germany . . . from contemporary Western countries, and also to make clearer thereby the rise and maintenance of Hitler’ (*German People*, p. 39). Among the central elements in Lowie’s account of the rise of Hitler were the absence of a ‘thoroughgoing revolution’ (p. 39), Germany’s late but explosive industrialisation (p. 54), the Junkers’ dominant social status (p. 59), and a middle class that ‘naively strove to attain the noble’s status’ by ‘aping them’ (pp. 59–60).

<sup>20</sup> Engels (*Origin*, p. 329) and ‘Le socialisme’ (n.d.). Increasingly, however, Engels described the Bismarckian state as allied with capital rather than the agrarian Junkers. On the shifts in Marx and Engels’ views of Germany, see Steinmetz (*Regulating the Social*, Ch. 4).

<sup>21</sup> Kehr’s work was quite influential in the development of the critical exceptionalist historiography during the 1960s and 1970s. See Eley (*From Unification*) and Puhle (‘Zur Legende’).

<sup>22</sup> Lowie, best known for his work on American Indians, lectured on German culture to US soldiers during World War II (cf. Lowie, *Toward Understanding Germany*, p. vii) and published the results of these lectures in 1945. A substantial reworking of the wartime material was published in 1954 after a research trip to Germany (Lowie, *Toward Understanding Germany*). I am grateful to Bernard Cohn for bringing Lowie’s German work to my attention.

After World War II, a number of works based in disparate political and theoretical perspectives began to converge around a 'structural' variant of the critical Sonderweg thesis. This version explained German 'peculiarities', and ultimately the origins of Nazism, in terms of a fundamental disjuncture between the German Empire's rapidly modernising industrial economy and its 'traditional' political structures and/or cultural values. German history was seen as having been pushed repeatedly in destructive and anti-democratic directions by this clash between modernity and tradition. This structural argument about the non-contemporaneous levels of the German social formation was linked to a more specific focus on pre-1933 German liberalism as underdeveloped in comparison with western countries. Responsibility for this inadequacy was located with the German bourgeoisie, which was seen as having failed repeatedly to take the lead in promoting its supposed class interest in liberal democracy. In short, Germany failed to experience a 'bourgeois revolution'. The key moment in the narrative is 1848, when 'German history reached its turning-point and failed to turn' (Taylor, *German History*, p. 68). The middle class shared responsibility for the failure of liberalism and democracy with the Prussian nobility. The Junkers wielded undue influence within German politics and culture well into the twentieth century. The unnatural influence of the nobility was also reflected in the 'feudalisation of the bourgeoisie' and in the spread of anti-modern cultural values (conservative anti-capitalism, anti-urbanism, 'cultural pessimism'). Bourgeois weakness and aristocratic strength resulted in a fateful imbalance: while German industry grew swiftly, pre-modern values and political practices were preserved and reproduced well into the twentieth century. Germany's susceptibility to Nazism is ultimately explained by the social strains resulting from the coexistence of tradition and modernity.

Marxists such as Lukács (*Die Zerstörung*) and Kofler (*Zur Geschichte*) foregrounded Germany's lasting failure to embrace bourgeois modernity. Lukács claimed that the German bourgeoisie from the sixteenth century onward was 'characterized by a servility, pettiness, baseness, and miserabilism' which distinguished it from other European bourgeoisies (*Die Zerstörung*, p. 41).<sup>23</sup> As Lukács (*Die Zerstörung*, p. 80) put it:

So, if we often hear the astonished question, how could great masses of the German people have accepted the childish myths of Hitler and Rosenberg, we can respond with a historical version of the question: how could the most educated and intellectually

<sup>23</sup> For even more official East German statements along these lines, see Alexander Abusch, *Der Irrweg*, and *Neues Deutschland*, 31 October 1947, Insert, Otto Grotewohl '30. Jahrestag der Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution'.

advanced Germans have believed in Schopenhauer's mythical 'will', in the prophesies of Nietzsche's Zarathustra, in the historical myths of the Decline of the West?

Again, the primary source of Nazism was located in the absence of a bourgeois democratic revolution during the nineteenth century and the continuing weakness of liberalism and rationalism, along with the lack of synchronisation between economy, culture, and society.

During the 1960s, social scientists in the USA and Germany advanced similar explanations, often with only superficial variations in terminology.<sup>24</sup> The American sociologist Barrington Moore, Jr. emphasised the 'retention of a very substantial share in political power by the landed élite' (*Social Origins*, p. 438) in the countries that went fascist. However, his comparisons between fascist, communist, and democratic cases led him to recognise that the German bourgeoisie was at least strong enough to have been a 'worthwhile political ally'. If the bourgeoisie had been too feeble, a 'peasant revolution leading to communism' would have been a more likely outcome than fascism (Moore, *Social Origins*, p. 437). Dahrendorf (*Society*, pp. 381–96) analysed the Kaiserreich as riven by political and cultural atavisms.<sup>25</sup> Hans Kohn (*Mind of Germany*) argued that Germany succumbed to Hitler not 'because she had become part of modern western society' but 'because this modern society had been imposed on premodern social and intellectual foundations which were proudly retained' (*Mind of Germany*, p. 8). This surprising convergence of liberal and left-wing thought probably escaped most observers' attention due to the greater familiarity of popular-front style of interpretations of Nazism as the 'dictatorship of the most reactionary, the most chauvinistic, the most imperialistic elements of finance capital' (Dimitrov),<sup>26</sup> or Third International and SED slogans that simply equated fascism with capitalism.

There was also variation within the emergent critical Sonderweg paradigm in the relative emphasis placed on cultural as opposed to political backwardness. Like Lukács, Mosse (*Crisis*), Plessner (*Nation*), and Stern (*Politics*) stressed the prevalence of illiberal, anti-modern and idealist ideology in nineteenth-century Germany.<sup>27</sup> By contrast, the

<sup>24</sup> In 1973 Wehler praised Marxism's 'nearly unsurpassed' explanatory power (quoted in Weissmann 'Der "Westen"', p. 353). In addition to the texts discussed here, see also Hans Rosenberg (*Bureaucracy*) and most recently, Norbert Elias (*Studien*).

<sup>25</sup> Like some recent German historians, Dahrendorf also described Nazism as a modernising revolution (*Society*, pp. 381–96). See Kershaw (*Nazi Dictatorship*, pp. 203ff) on the more recent literature on Nazism as 'modernisation'.

<sup>26</sup> Dimitrov's 1935 report to the Seventh Congress of the Comintern, quoted in Ayçoberry (*Nazi Question*, p. 53).

<sup>27</sup> See also Brunschwig (*Enlightenment*); Hermand (*Sieben Arten*); and Greenfeld (*Nationalism*).

West German historians of the late 1960s and 1970s tended to emphasise politics – the autonomous Prussian-German state and the persistence of Junker domination of state and military (cf. Böhme, *Deutschlands Weg*; Stegmann, *Die Erben Bismarcks*; Wehler, *German Empire*). The most elaborate versions of critical Sonderweg theory stressed both cultural and political backwardness (e.g. Kohn, *Mind of Germany*; Dahrendorf, *Society*). Talcott Parsons' wartime essays ('Democracy'), for instance, discuss political peculiarities, especially the power and prestige of the Junkers and civil servants, alongside Germany's cultural 'atavisms' – the obsession with uniforms and titles, interpersonal formality, patterns of masculine superiority, underdevelopment of the 'romantic love' pattern, absence of economic individualism, and the old elites' contempt for everything 'bourgeois', including industry and trade, 'the bourgeois virtues', and 'liberal and humane culture'.

By the 1970s, many young historians had come to accept the thesis that 'the internal structure of the Kaiserreich was riven by a discrepancy between the political and social constitution' (Düding, *Der Nationalsoziale Verein*, p. 15).<sup>28</sup> The notions of a 'feudalisation' of the German bourgeoisie, a 'failed revolution', and a causal chain leading forward to Nazism were also widely accepted. The influential culmination of this 'sociological' variant of the critical Sonderweg thesis was Wehler's *German Empire*. As Wehler summarised his argument about the origins of Nazism (*Nicht verstehen*, p. 70):

The Prussian submissive mentality (*Untertanenmentalität*), Prussian reverence for authority (*Obrigkeitsdenken*), Prussian militarization of society, the unholy alliance of Prussian Junkers, politicians, and the military first brought Hitler to power . . . and then supported and consolidated the National Socialist system of domination.

The influence of this model has been extensively documented in the work of Eley, Blackbourn, Evans, and others.

By the end of the 1970s, however, this historical model was being subjected to a mounting barrage of theoretical and empirical critique. The most important event triggering this reevaluation was the publication in 1980 of David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley's *Mythen deutscher Geschichtsschreibung*, followed by their *Peculiarities of German History* (1985), and a string of articles and monographs by other critics.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Another important turning-point in the rising influence of the critical view of the Kaiserreich was Fritz Fischer's (*Griff*) study of German elites' expansionist war aims in World War I.

<sup>29</sup> In addition to the essays cited above, see especially *Deutscher Sonderweg* (1982); Moeller ('Die Besonderheiten'); Grebing (*Der 'deutsche Sonderweg'*); Caplan ('Myths'); Aschheim ('Nazism'); and Fischer ('Anmerkungen'). For detailed accounts of the critique of the Sonderweg thesis, see especially Eley ('British Model'; *From Unification*;

*II. Critiques of the German exceptionalism thesis*

Geoff Eley articulated the most fundamental critique of the exceptionalism thesis, challenging its elision of socio-economic class locations with specific political/ideological positions. The assumption that bourgeoisie should 'normally' be in the forefront of liberal and historical change provides the standard by which exceptionalism theories judge the German middle classes and find them wanting (Eley, 'British Model', pp. 58, 75–90). Echoing Ernesto Laclau, (*Politics*), Eley insisted, however, that values and ideologies cannot be associated in a one-to-one way with social classes and modes of production. One cannot assume a necessary affinity between the bourgeoisie and parliamentary structures, liberal ideas, or democratic revolutions. The standards applied to nineteenth-century German liberalism are essentialist and anachronistic (Eley, 'Bismarckian Germany', p. 25):

In maintaining the traditional view that German liberals failed – capitulated and denied the essential principles of liberalism in fact – historians like Böhme and Wehler bring an unrealistically twentieth-century standard of successful liberalism to bear on the problem, in which advanced criteria of liberal democracy, welfare statism and civil rights are used to evaluate the consistency and effectiveness of a mid-nineteenth-century liberalism.

A related criticism was directed against the implicit assumption that industrial capitalism as a system normally corresponds to democratic and liberal forms of politics and ideology (cf. Jessop, 'Capitalism'). Eley and Blackbourn also reject the idealised history of Britain (and the USA) which the critical exceptionalists used in their comparisons with Germany.

Another set of disagreements concerned the 'facts', or the interpretation of facts. Most political and cultural forms in Imperial Germany, according to Blackbourn and Eley, were quite serviceable for Germany's growing capitalist economy, even if they diverged from the norms of modernisation theory and liberal political philosophy. Various elements of the Kaiserreich which the Sonderweg model viewed as atavistic could be recast as modern and as compatible with capitalism. These included the Imperial German state, the legal system, liberalism, the Kulturkampf of the 1870s, and the norms and forms of everyday bourgeois life. The German unification settlement of 1867–71, for example, far from consolidating neo-feudal power

'Bourgeois Revolution'; 'German History'; 'Bismarckian Germany'); Evans ('Myth'); Faulenbach ('Eine Variante'); Groh ('Le "Sonderweg"'); and Kocka ('Der "deutsche Sonderweg"'); 'German history').

against the rising middle class, was 'an elaborate framework of capitalist enabling laws' (Eley, 'Bismarckian Germany', p. 28) comprising standardised markets, measures, and laws governing commercial transactions.

This counter-image of the German Empire as bourgeois and modern has been strengthened by recent studies of other areas, such as law (John, *Politics*), urbanism (Gall, *Stadt*; Ladd, *Urban Planning*), administrative change (Barmeyer, *Hannovers Eingliederung*), science policy (Feldman, 'Politics', pp. 259–63; vom Brocke, 'Hochschulpolitik'; Burchardt, *Wissenschaftspolitik*), and education (Blessing, *Staat*). The national system of poor relief promoted movement of labour power to sites of economic growth, and both national social insurance and municipal relief policies were attuned to the needs of industry and the logic of capitalism (Steinmetz, 'Myth'; *Regulating the Social*). Immigration laws were also adapted to German employers' labour needs (Herbert, *Foreign Labor*; Bade, *Deutsche*). Smith (*German Colonial Empire*) argued persuasively that German overseas colonial policy was driven less by the emigrationist goals favoured by conservative agrarian circles than by business concerns (even if few firms in the overseas colonies were actually profitable).<sup>30</sup> Various aspects of middle-class existence have also been reexamined, from fencing (Frevert, *Ehrenmänner*; 'Bourgeois Honour') to family life (Gall, *Bürgertum*), undermining the notion of a 'feudalised' German bourgeoisie (Blackbourn and Evans, *German Bourgeoisie*). Indeed, recent 'detailed studies seem to show that the aristocratic influence on the high bourgeoisie was not more but *less* pronounced in Germany compared with England or France' (Kocka, 'German History', p. 9). Wilhelmine Germany had a multifaceted discourse on modern sexuality and the largest gay liberation movement in Europe (Steakley, *Homosexual Emancipation Movement*). And the so-called 'primitivism' in German art at the beginning of the century is best interpreted not as literal cultural regression but as a distinctly modern appropriation of the 'primitive' in an effort to solve specifically aesthetic problems.<sup>31</sup>

Some exceptionalist historiography has depicted even the supposed-

<sup>30</sup> Detailed research on specific colonies has tended to reinforce these conclusions (cf. Sunseri, 'Social History'; Michel 'Les plantations'). Even in the German settler colony of South West Africa (Namibia) the tide turned against the German settler-farmers after the discovery of diamonds in 1908 (cf. Bley, *South-West Africa*, pp. 196ff). The settlers' displeasure with the administration of the colony, especially its land policies, can be seen graphically in pre-1914 South-West-African newspapers like the *Lüderitzbuchter Zeitung* and the *Keetmanshooper Zeitung*.

<sup>31</sup> See Lloyd (*German Expressionism*), who has argued against the standard view (Rubin 'Primitivism') that French cubism broke more decisively than German expressionism with older forms of visual representation in response to non-European art. See also Ekstein's study of German modernism (*Rites of Spring*, pp. 68, 80–9).

ly 'normal' stream of Imperial Government development, industrial expansion, as permeated by atavistic employer practices. German employers are said to have used repressive or paternalistic forms of industrial relations that are deemed 'traditional'. Recent studies have argued, however, that German capitalists were quite rational to employ such strategies (Crew, *Town*; Eley, 'British Model', pp. 108–10). On a related note, Biernacki (*Fabrication*) has shown that German managers and workers in late-nineteenth-century textile mills operated with more abstract ('modern') notions of time and labour than their contemporaries in British textiles.

One of the most powerful rebuttals of the critical Sonderweg approach has thus involved simply reversing the terms and emphasising elements of cultural and political modernity and *Bürgerlichkeit* in the German Empire. It is important to emphasise, however, that most of the critics are not returning to the views of conservative historians who *deny* the existence of connections between Nazism and pre-1914 German society. Only a few of the younger critics of exceptionalism have tried to send a 'good Empire' into battle against the 'evil Empire' of the Sonderweg theorists.<sup>32</sup> Instead, the central questions have been whether Imperial German institutions and practices were really so different from those of contemporary European societies, whether the 'evils' that undeniably existed in the Kaiserreich were an integral part of capitalist modernity or antithetical to it, and whether and how these evils are related to Nazism.

Opposition to the Sonderweg thesis is logically compatible with a number of different explanatory approaches to Nazism. Some of these alternatives concentrate on the Weimar period and deny the existence of deeper historical causes. Yet there is overwhelming evidence for various types of continuity between the Nazi era and earlier periods (cf. Kershaw, *Nazi Dictatorship*, pp. 143–7). Most critics of the Sonderweg thesis have not denied the existence of connections between Nazism and pre-1918 Germany, but have tried to be more specific about the exact character of 'continuity', about the varying historical depth of different causal strands, and about their interaction with factors originating during the 1918–33 period. The sources of Nazism and the practices and ideological elements that made up the Nazi repertoire cannot be seen as unchanged 'traditions'. As Eley writes 'the crucial problem becomes that of establishing how certain "traditions" became selected for survival rather than others – how certain beliefs and practices came to reproduce themselves under radically changed

<sup>32</sup> For an odd exception, see Dukes and Remak (*Another Germany*). Even the new conservatives have focused their energies on the Nazi era and have had less to say about the Kaiserreich, with a few important exceptions like Michael Stürmer.

circumstances, and how they became subtly transformed in the very process of renewal' ('Facism', p. 261).

Although the Nazis relied on elements of earlier ideologies rather than conjuring their policies out of thin air, they redefined these materials and combined them in unprecedented ways. The Nazi eugenics programme, for example, was the outcome of a continual radicalisation of the most reactionary elements of pre-1933 eugenics and the marginalisation of the 'respectable' (i.e. non-racist and non-repressive) sections of the eugenics movement (cf. Weindling, *Health*; Weingart, Kroll, and Bayertz, *Rasse*; Weiss, *Race Hygiene*). Before 1933, German eugenics was neither more extremist nor more successfully implemented than elsewhere.<sup>33</sup> One can see a similar mix of continuity and radicalisation in the policies concerning German youth (Peukert, *Grenzen*) and foreign workers (Herbert, *Foreign Labor*). Nazi race policies, 'colonisation' of Eastern Europe, and genocide were prefigured, albeit on a much smaller scale, in the pre-1914 colonial empire.<sup>34</sup>

An illustration of the way adherents and critics of the Sonderweg thesis give sharply different readings of the same apparent continuities in German history can be illustrated using the example of the disproportionate support for Nazism among the German petty bourgeoisie. Both sides may agree on the 'problem': As Walter Benjamin wrote in 1930, echoing other critics such as Kracauer (*Die Angestellten*) and Geiger ('Panik'), 'today there is no other class whose thoughts and emotions are more alienated from the concrete reality of its existence than the white-collar workers (*Gesammelte Schriften*, p. 220). The supposed paradox is that white-collar workers did not think and vote according to their 'objective' class position, which resembled that of the skilled working class. The exceptionalism narrative understands this 'alienation' partly in terms of the 'continuing presence [in Germany] of pre-industrial corporatist/bureaucratic traditions at advanced stages of industrialisation' (Kocka, *White Collar Workers*, p. 265; 'Class Formation', p. 78).<sup>35</sup> The critics might respond that sharp divisions between white- and blue-collar workers were not specific to Germany, but

<sup>33</sup> Indeed, eugenic sterilisation policies were first put into effect in the USA, and served as an inspiration to German eugenicists (Proctor, *Racial Hygiene*).

<sup>34</sup> Most significant are the urban land expropriation policies in the coastal city of Douala in German Cameroon (Eckert, *Die Duala*), efforts to repress racial mixing (Schulte-Althoff, 'Rassenmischung'), and the 'extermination order' against the Herero people by German troops during the 1904-7 war in South West Africa (Bley, *South-West Africa*).

<sup>35</sup> Kocka's (*White Collar Workers*; 'Class Formation') account of the different strength and location of the 'collar-line' in Germany is more multifaceted, of course, evoking *inter alia* the 1911 white-collar workers insurance law, which is not usually considered part of the negative exceptionalism syndrome.



common throughout Europe (Eley, 'Fascism', p. 260).<sup>36</sup> German white-collar workers' support for Hitler might have resulted less from any deep-seated mentality or habitus than from specific political and ideological processes, especially the left-wing parties' failure to respond productively to the shift to the Left by many white-collar workers in 1918 (Speier, *White-collar Workers*; Eley, *Fascism*', p. 261). Thus even if the finding of white-collar over-representation among Nazi supporters was sustained – and there is increasing evidence that petty bourgeois supporters were less central to the Nazis' success than had previously been thought (Kocka, 'German History', p. 8) – the same facts may be constructed as continuity by one analyst and as change by the other.

In sum, German historians have pointed to serious shortcomings with the Sonderweg theory's overall comparative framework, its conceptual apparatus, and its evaluation of the evidence. Careful empirical work has chipped away at the image of the Kaiserreich as plagued by cultural atavisms and political backwardness. German politics were less democratic than the rest of the 'West' in some respects but more advanced in others, such as the autonomy of municipal governments, universal male suffrage, and the strength of the socialist party. The state was possibly more independent of society than in France or Britain, but its policies were no less 'bourgeois' or 'modern'. German colonial policy was on average no more brutal or exploitative than French, Belgian, Dutch, Spanish, Portuguese, or Italian colonialism. In areas such as social and urban policies, education, science, and (after 1900) the arts, Imperial Germany was 'exceptional' only in a positive sense.

### III. *Transcending the social ontology of the exceptionalism debate*

In response to these criticisms, proponents of the critical Sonderweg thesis were quick to insist on the differences between their respective positions or the non-existence of a distinct interpretive 'school' (Puhle, *Zur Legende*). Some even seem to have retreated into an ostensibly non-theoretical narrative historiography, with its more implicit forms of arguing through emplotment (White, *Metahistory*). Wehler's recent statements, however (see especially *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*), explicitly reaffirm the main arguments of the 1973 book with respect to the political Sonderweg, while retracting some of the cultural arguments, which were less central in his account anyway. Wehler now places the term *Sonderweg* in quotation marks, preferring to speak of *Sonderbedingungen*—special or exceptional conditions (*Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, p. 470). He still insists on the peculiar relationship of the Junkers to the

<sup>36</sup> The exceptional case calling for explanation might then be the United States and not Germany; see Kocka (*White Collar Workers*).

Imperial German state and on the German bourgeoisie's unusual 'striving for proximity to the state (*Staatsnähe*)', its 'submissive obedience to the state' (*Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, p. 1268). Other 'special conditions' included Germany's authoritarian regime, powerful bureaucracy, and militarized form of nationalism, and the intensity of its antisocialism (*Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, p. 1290). But Wehler now recognises that urban policy, education, and science in Imperial Germany were internationally advanced and acknowledges the untenability of the 'earlier formula of a "deficit of embourgeoisement" as a basic constituent of the "Sonderweg"' (*Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, p. 1288).<sup>37</sup> There was nothing unusual in comparative terms about the German bourgeoisie's 'imitation of the aristocracy' (*Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, pp. 473, 719, 1270). Yet Wehler still insists that 'the German "Sonderweg" leading to National Socialism was deeply influenced by the Prussian aristocracy' ('Der Niedergang', p. 15).

None of this represents a revision of the basic model of society underlying the critical Sonderweg thesis, which is usually based implicitly (or, as in Wehler's case, explicitly – see Wehler, 'Modernisierungstheorie') on some version of modernisation theory.<sup>37</sup> Societies are conceptualised in terms of an array of subsystems or fields, each of which can be evaluated in terms of its relative degree of modernisation. Societies whose subsystems exhibit radically different levels of modernisation are subject to stress, crisis, or Durkheimian 'anomie'. Versions of exceptionalism based on Marxism are not much different in this regard. Marxists also emphasise the differential penetration of the various sectors of a social totality by the processes of commodification and capitalist rationality. Of course, Marxism has always seen social change as driven by contradictions between 'non-contemporaneous' forces – in the orthodox formulation, between the forward-pushing 'forces of production' and the outdated class relations that fetter the forces' further development (cf. Cohen, *Marx's Theory*).<sup>38</sup> Such contradictions are the very 'motor of history' within Marxism, and not some sort of unusual 'pathology'. Of course, traditional Marxism had difficulties making sense of the long-term coexistence of societal forms at radically different levels of capitalist development, or of 'superstructures' that

<sup>37</sup> On modernisation and political development theory, see the works published by the Committee on Comparative Politics of the US Social Science Research Council in the 1960s; also Huntington and Dominguez ('Political Development') and Inkeles (*Becoming Modern*). For the explicit connection to fascism and Nazism, see Scheuch and Klingemann ('Theorie') and the classic analysis of Parsons, who understood the juxtaposition in Germany of rapid industrialisation and urbanisation with cultural and political conservatism and leading to 'malintegration, tension, and strain' ('Democracy', pp. 236, 241).

<sup>38</sup> This is not to say that Marx himself necessarily understood social change in this way, even if some of his simpler formulations (such as the 1859 preface) support this reading.

diverged radically from their 'bases'. Non-orthodox Marxists, however, have been fascinated by such complexities, which they have addressed with such varying formulations as 'relative autonomy', 'Bonapartism', the 'articulation of modes of production', or *Ungleichzeitigkeit* (e.g. Althusser, 'Contradiction'; Poulantzas, *Fascism*; Wolpe, *Articulation*; Bloch, *Heritage*). Nonetheless, the sheer existence of *Ungleichzeitigkeit* is usually seen as sufficient for explaining Nazism or other crises.<sup>39</sup>

Marxists and modernisation theorists thus share key ontological assumptions about societies, even if they have different views of the substance of the key historical process. Both assume that there *is* such a fundamental process, that all spheres of social life should be assessed in terms of the degree to which they have been seized by this process, and that unequal development is unstable and possibly dangerous. Blackburn and Eley (*Mythen; Peculiarities*), for instance, do not challenge the assumption that correspondence among the levels of a social formation is a normal condition.<sup>40</sup> Instead, they set out to show that Imperial Germany was in fact characterised by just such contemporaneity, by redescribing various phenomena as modern and bourgeois.<sup>41</sup> More specifically, the critical Sonderweg approach shares the following assumptions theory with its critics:

- (1) That all societies are composed of a predefined set of separate subsystems (typically called the political, economic, cultural, etc);
- (2) That the level of development within each of the subsystems can

<sup>39</sup> At a deeper level, the similarity between Bloch's analysis of the effects of non-simultaneity and Althusser's ('Contradiction', pp. 114-16) analysis of Stalinism begins to crumble. Althusser's discussion of 'over-determination' suggests that simple non-contemporaneity of one social level vis-à-vis the rest of the social formation would not be enough to create an overall societal crisis, a 'ruptural unity', that could give rise to Stalinism or Nazism.

<sup>40</sup> My own study of social policy in Imperial Germany (Steinmetz, *Regulating the Social*) is not exempt from this criticism.

<sup>41</sup> A further problem is the impossibility of agreeing on what should be taken as 'modernity' or 'Bürgerlichkeit' within any given field. This undecidability is due in part to the different theoretical frameworks of the exceptionalists and their critics, but equally limiting are the features they both share as products of the same historical epoch. Thus, until recently, both Marxists and modernisation theorists regarded industrial concentration as the hallmark of economic modernisation or capitalist development. Within German historiography, this led both groups to focus on Germany's large, bureaucratic corporations. Gary Herrigel's study (*Industrial Constructions*), however, argues that the *Gewerbelandschaften* of highly specialised small and medium-sized firms have been a crucial component of German economic growth since the eighteenth century. Yet it has only become possible to perceive the modernity of these small firms in the past decade or so, *after* they had already emerged as the leading sector in the advanced capitalist world, and after the development of theories of post-Fordism and flexible specialisation. In other words, today's atavism may become tomorrow's avant-garde.

be measured in terms of some quality that applies across subsystems, like modernity or *Bürgerlichkeit*;

- (3) That normal or stable societies exhibit roughly similar levels of modernity or *Bürgerlichkeit* in the different subsystems;
- (4) That lack of correspondence across subsystems may lead to psychological, social, and political 'pathologies' (including fascism).

Much contemporary social theory, including the work of Luhmann (*Communication*) and Bourdieu ('Forms'; *Logic*), would reject these assumptions. Rather than comparing these theories in any detail, my goal here is to use their shared insights to criticise the way in which the Sonderweg debate has been framed. Contemporary social theory rejects the notion that one can determine a priori a 'normal' set of distinct social subsystems<sup>42</sup> for all modern societies, or that each of the subsystems should evolve in the same direction or at the same pace. Instead, the number of distinct subsystems, their character, and their degree of closure will vary as a function of contingent struggles, accidents, and histories. Each subsystem has its own autonomous forms of capital (Bourdieu) or operating codes (Luhmann), not to mention its own distinctive temporality.<sup>43</sup> For Luhmann, there is no common yardstick with which to compare the subsystems other than the simple fact of their closure or lack thereof. The *contents* of the subsystems cannot be compared; there is no 'superordinate standpoint of representation' for the entire system (*Communication*, p. 114).<sup>44</sup> In fact, Luhmann construes *convergence* in the logic of different functional subsystems as societal de-differentiation, hence regression (*Communication*, pp. 109–10). For Bourdieu, each field has its 'indigenous' forms of cultural capital and its own specific stakes. Economic capital cannot directly dominate each field, nor can economic scales of measurement be uniformly applied across fields – even if it is possible to translate 'cultural capital' into

<sup>42</sup> My use of Luhmann's term 'subsystem' in the following discussion rather than Bourdieu's 'field' does not express a preference for Luhmann or a denial of the massive differences between these theorists. Both theorists (as well as Laclau and Mouffe) fulfil the same critical purpose, however, with respect to the Sonderweg debate.

<sup>43</sup> On 'subsystem'-specific temporalities, see Braudel ('History'); Althusser (*Reading Capital*, pp. 91–118); Bourdieu (*Outline*).

<sup>44</sup> Against post-modernism, and in common with modernisation theory, Luhmann's theory does have a strong criterion of *progress*. The relevant difference from modernisation theory, however, is that progress has to do with the structural fact of subsystem differentiation and not with the specific contents of the various subsystems. A subsystem might well be based on a code that seems 'traditional', or on 'programming' that valorises the more 'primitive' pole of the binary code (cf. Luhmann, *Ecological Communication*, pp. 44–50 on 'coding' vs. 'programming'). For an assessment of the system's overall modernity, however, only the existence of autonomous (autopoietic) subsystems is relevant. On autopoiesis, see Luhmann (*Ecological Communication*) and Jessop (*State Theory* pp. 320–31).

economic capital through more or less complicated and arduous processes (cf. Bourdieu, *Distinction*).<sup>45</sup>

The main point of these brief comments is that the condition of pervasive modernity cannot be held up as a 'normal' (or 'unexceptional') feature of modern societies. Historians interested in understanding the forms and nature of continuity in German history do not have to demonstrate the pervasive modernity or lack thereof in nineteenth-century Germany. The absence of modernity in some spheres, the existence of a *décalage* between structural levels, does not automatically explain the rise of Nazism. On the other hand, if it could be shown that the hegemonic projects of conservative groups were successful in the Kaiserreich, this would be an important place to look for continuities into the 1930s. Wehler's term 'special conditions', once stripped of its residual sense of comparison to an ideal-typical benchmark or baseline, seems to point in this direction. Who could deny, for example, that the autocratic and socially insulated character of the central state and politics in the Kaiserreich continued to shape Weimar politics, playing a role even in the abdication of power by the Reichstag and the collaboration with Hitler of state bureaucrats? The emphasis should be on exploring the actual institutions and ideologies, the fields of power and discourse, the successes and failures of hegemonic projects in German history, and then on showing how some of these materials eventually played a role in the rise and evolution of the Nazi regime.

Rejecting the critical Sonderweg thesis does not entail abandoning the notion of the singularity of the Nazi crimes, as some have implied (Faulenbach, 'Eine Variante'). Nor can the critique of the inherited Sonderweg thesis be equated with arguments (cf. Broszat, *Nach Hitler*) about the so-called 'historicisation' of Nazism. Indeed, the alternative approach proposed here is *more* open to the role of contingency and unique constellations of causes, and hence to *singularity*, than the exceptionalism approach.<sup>46</sup> The social-theoretical assumptions underlying the exceptionalism thesis suggest, somewhat perversely, the (potential) non-uniqueness of Nazism. By assuming the existence of a specific and delimited set of causal mechanisms determining macro-social outcomes, the exceptionalism thesis implies that the 'outcome' in

<sup>45</sup> Economic capital thus operates across the social formation as a sort of abstract common denominator. This means that Bourdieu is able to handle societal-wide logics as well as field-specific ones, and, unlike Luhmann, does not need to construe the former as a threat to societal 'differentiation'. On attempts to reintroduce such society-wide codes into Luhmannian systems theory, see Rempel ('Systems Theory').

<sup>46</sup> See for example Eley's (1986) essay 'What Produces Fascism', which adumbrates a conjunctural causation model that points inexorably toward Nazism's uniqueness, as against the generalising 'theories of fascism'.

question could arise elsewhere. All societies have to traverse the 'crises of development' which produced the tensions leading to Nazism in Germany (cf. Wehler, *German Empire*, p. 239; Pflanze, 'Sammlungspolitik', pp. 158, 192). Whatever its ostensible emphasis on Germany's peculiarities, on a deeper level the exceptionalism thesis is based on a generalising model. But all recent philosophy of social science agrees that 'covering-law' models of social change are untenable in open systems like societies.<sup>47</sup> This does not invalidate the use of theory or comparison, only the search for general, repeatable explanatory models. Historical explanation is unavoidably conjunctural (Sewell, 'Three Temporalities').

As we will see in the next section, Sonderweg discourse is used so widely that we can hardly expect it to disappear any time soon. I will suggest in the conclusion that the Sonderweg should be redefined and not abandoned to the politicians and publicists. Rejecting general models of development does not require that we renounce the term 'Sonderweg' altogether. It does require that we leave the rarefied world of social theory and enter the terrain of ideas as 'weapons' (Kondylis, 'Sonderweg', p. 24).

#### IV. *The Sonderweg as a political weapon*

At the conference that gave rise to this volume, Eric Hobsbawm suggested that the Sonderweg thesis was 'no longer so burningly contemporary'.<sup>48</sup> This was also my initial reaction when I was asked to write on the Sonderweg for this volume. There is massive evidence, however, that while the critical exceptionalism thesis is on the defensive, Sonderweg discourse is alive and well. The notion of a German Sonderweg crops up in *New Yorker* articles (Kramer, 'Letter', p. 59) and in *New York Times* book reviews, where readers were recently assured that 'the roots of the Third Reich are to be found in Imperial

<sup>47</sup> More specifically, the ontology of both modernisation theory and its critics suggests that societies can be treated as quasi-'closed systems' (similar to experiments in the natural sciences; cf. Bhaskar *Realist Theory; Scientific Realism*), with a limited and predetermined set of 'independent variables' determining outcomes. But the causal mechanisms which produce social effects cannot be isolated as in a laboratory; human societies (like most natural systems as well) are unavoidably 'open systems'. As Bhaskar has shown, even many natural sciences cannot be understood in terms of single mechanisms or 'constant conjunctions of events', and therefore do not allow prediction but only post hoc explanation. The outcomes of natural evolution, for example, are the unpredictable result of interactions between diverse causal mechanisms, including not just random genetic mutations and natural selection, but also those mechanisms driving changes in the physical environment. If such natural events cannot be predicted or classified into a finite set of categories, why should historical structures as complex as 'German society' be amenable to such analysis?

<sup>48</sup> From the author's handwritten notes on the conference.

Germany'.<sup>49</sup> In this section I want to explore some of the sites of this proliferation, especially the increasing use of the Sonderweg as a rhetorical weapon in German politics.

As noted earlier, the critical Sonderweg thesis has been used 'politically' since its inception. This began in the context of World War I and crystallised during World War II in the Allied countries. United States Vice President Henry Wallace drew on a major theme of exceptionalism discourse in a national radio address in 1942:

The German people must learn to un-learn all that they have been taught, not only by Hitler, but by his predecessors in the last hundred years, by so many of their philosophers and teachers.<sup>50</sup>

Talcott Parsons' wartime radio broadcasts, newspaper articles, and lectures in the military government training programme at Harvard's School of Overseas Administration were also based on an exceptionalism model (Gerhardt, 'Introduction'). The Sonderweg notion guided the western Allies' early policies in occupying Germany, as Berghahn ('Afraid') has recently recalled:

When British and American soldiers advanced into Hitler's rapidly disintegrating empire in the spring of 1945, they carried with them mental images not only of a murderous dictatorship, but also of a backward Germany in which democracy and other benefits of modernity had never firmly taken root. As their officers and occupation manuals were telling them, this was a society run by a band of Nazi war criminals with the backing of authoritarian landowners, Prussian militarists and reactionary coal and steel barons, a society that had been swept by an irrational ideology into an orgy of destruction. There was also much serious talk about the peculiarities of the German mind.

By this time, the figure of the German Sonderweg had accumulated powerfully charged historical associations. The term 'Sonderweg' was also a 'multi-accentual' signifier, open to radically disparate uses by different actors.<sup>51</sup>

Since the 1980s, the boundaries between the political and intellectual uses of the Sonderweg theory have become increasingly blurred. The warning against an 'exceptionalist relapse' has been deployed in various settings, often with little connection to the original problematic

<sup>49</sup> Book review of Hannah Pakula's *An Uncommon Woman* by Olivier Bernier, *New York Times Book Review* (17 Nov. 1995, p. 22).

<sup>50</sup> Quoted in Gerhardt ('Introduction'), p. 40. Gerhardt also discusses the wartime participation of US academics and psychiatrists in government functions concerning Germany.

<sup>51</sup> On the notion of 'multi-accentual' signifiers, those bearing different meanings for different groups or speakers, see Hall ('Rediscovery').

(cf. Glotz, 'Sonderweg', pp. 333–4). In the early 1980s, Wehler evoked the Sonderweg in his polemic against the German peace movement's 'neutralism' (Wehler, 'Wir Brauchen'). After 1989, numerous historians and social scientists reached spontaneously into the exceptionalist toolkit when called upon to make sense of the collapse of the GDR and German unification (e.g. Offe, 'Wohlstand'). Jürgen Kocka, whose detailed explorations of the history of the German bourgeoisie in the 1980s led him to propose a much more limited application of Sonderweg discourse, fell back on the familiar category in 1990 (Kocka, 'Revolution'; 'Sonderweg'). The seminar of experts called together by Margaret Thatcher in 1990 to discuss German unification was organised around an exceptionalist question: have the Germans changed?<sup>52</sup> Wolfgang Mommsen ('Die DDR', p. 23) referred to the 'peculiar German path to modernity' and Germany's 'absence of an authentic democratic tradition' in accounting for the establishment of Communist rule in the GDR. According to Lutz Niethammer ('Erfahrungen', p. 114), the German Sonderweg not only led to the Third Reich but also conditioned the development of the GDR. Niethammer concludes ominously that 'we have landed once again in the track of the German Sonderweg, or perhaps in its *Ausläufer*'.<sup>53</sup>

German political actors have also latched onto Sonderweg terminology. In 1989 and 1990, warnings against efforts to retain a second, democratised German state in the East were often framed in terms of the Sonderweg.<sup>54</sup> Accusations of flirting with exceptionalism were used extensively to attack opposition to German participation in the Gulf War and other joint military missions.<sup>55</sup> Evoking exceptionalist

<sup>52</sup> Fritz Stern, 'Die Hoffnungen der Deutschen und die Sorgen der anderen', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 26 July 1990.

<sup>53</sup> The word *Ausläufer* ambiguously suggests both 'offshoots', as if the Sonderweg was starting down a new path, and 'end portions', as if the Sonderweg were in its final stretch. Cf. Niethammer ('Erfahrungen', p. 115).

<sup>54</sup> For CDU statements explicitly equating opposition to unification with a German 'Sonderweg', see 'Kohl beruhigt die Verbündeten – Deutschland beschreitet keinen Sonderweg', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 18 July 1990; 'Erfurt und Mainz sind eins', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 4 December 1989. The Sonderweg was even broadened to include any condition provoking the 'scepticism of the western countries'. See 'Fallstricke. Die Vereinigung Deutschlands und die Europäische Integration'. *Gewerkschaftsreport* No. 1 (1991), pp. 14–19 (journal of the German industrial institute for labour union questions).

<sup>55</sup> See also: 'Sonderweg in die Sackgasse', *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 16 June 1993; 'Am Ende des Sonderweges', *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 13 April 1993; 'Deutschlands Bündnisrolle vor dem Richter', *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 3 April 1993; 'Germany's "Special Way"', *Washington Post*, 13 February 1991; 'Der Uno-Generalsekretär am Rhein', *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 12 January 1993; 'Scholz: Deutschland muss Verantwortung übernehmen', *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 3 Dec. 1992; 'Le retour de la "question allemande"', *Le Monde*, 23 December 1991; also the essays by Wolfgang Thierse and Jürgen Manthey discussed in Glotz (*Die falsche Normalisierung*).



arguments, far-left groups have tried to stop a resurgence of present-day 'Junkers'.<sup>56</sup> And while the idea of exceptionalism is usually negatively charged, far-right intellectuals and parties have revived the older approach which praises Germany's supposed deviation from the west rather than condemning it (Habermas, 'New Intimacy'). Franz Schönhuber, founder and former leader of the far-right Republican Party, rails against Germany's impure 'Vodka-Cola culture' and endorses a German 'third way' between East and West.<sup>57</sup> Fulminating against those who would replace the 'historical nation' with a 'super-market civilisation', Ernst Nolte (*Bürgerkrieg*, p. 429) draws on this rich vein of anti-western exceptionalism.

The boundaries between the Sonderweg as formal historical hypothesis, as myth, and as political ideology have thus become extremely fluid. Social science again has become a part of the very reality it purports to analyse.

*Conclusion: a post-Holocaust Sonderweg*

I suggested above that the underlying sociological assumptions of the critical exceptionalism thesis might impair its ability to theorise 'singular' political outcomes. This becomes even clearer when we consider the exceptionalists' view of post-1945 German history. The standard position has been that 1945 marked the 'end of the Sonderweg', at least for West Germany (Kocka, *Revolution* 495–9; Winkler 'Mit Skepsis', p. 8). Some historians insist rather anxiously that the Federal Republic has overcome Germany's peculiar legacy by becoming an 'integral component of modern western civilisation' and 'a functional western democracy' (Sontheimer, 'Der "Deutsche Geist"', p. 238), and by acquiring an 'international face in the cultural arena' (Mommensen, 'Die DDR', p. 29). As Kocka remarked in an interview concerning German unification, 'West Germany had become a "post-Sonderweg" Germany... Now we are getting a new mix.'<sup>58</sup> The Sonderweg thesis distracted historians from deeper continuities with the Nazi era in both West and East German political culture, leading them to underestimate the distinctiveness of post-war Germany.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>56</sup> The persistence of the anti-aristocratic theme was evident in 1993 when a group of left-wing 'Autonomists' burned the land registers in an east German town (Barby on the Elbe) in order to obstruct the return of expropriated land to its earlier owners. Their argument, which resonated unmistakably with the critical Sonderweg thesis, was that the 'Junkers' had been a key cause of Nazism and should be prevented from recovering their property. Cf. *tageszeitung*, 28 April 1993.

<sup>57</sup> *tageszeitung*, 25 May 1992. For an overview of fifty contemporary far-right publications in Germany, see Lange (1993).

<sup>58</sup> In *Los Angeles Times*, 2 October 1990.

<sup>59</sup> Certainly there were other reasons for this lack of attention to post-1945 continuities,

It is probably more realistic to argue that the gulf between the political culture of Germany and its neighbours has actually *widened* as a result of the unparalleled events between 1933 and 1945. Nazism has made it much more difficult for Germany – even a unified and democratic Germany – to be just another European country (cf. Fisher, *After the Wall*). One of the most striking signs of long-term continuity in German political culture, of course, was revealed by the unexpected ease with which many Germans in 1989–90 accepted the notion that East and West Germany ‘naturally’ belonged together, long after the separate existence of the two states had been taken for granted.<sup>60</sup> Many observers have noted the extent to which post-1989 discussions of the GDR’s past have been shaped by Nazism, to the extent that the Stasi debate has sometimes seemed a metaphor for discussions of earlier crimes (Habermas, *Past*, pp. 67–8). And if the movement of right-wing violence that erupted at the end of the 1980s is an international one, the specific constellation of victims and ideologues in the German ‘manhunt’ (Enzensberger, ‘Great Migration’) can only be understood in terms of historical Nazism (Steinmetz, ‘Die (un-)moralische Ökonomie’).

I cannot discuss here the multiple ways in which contemporary Germany is still influenced by the Nazi past – although these include the strenuous and incredulous denials that contemporary Germany is deeply shaped by that past. Suffice it to say that these lasting effects make it more appropriate to use the concept of ‘exceptionalism’ for the post-war period, reaching into an indefinite future. There is then truly no need to worry about giving even indirect support to the programme of ‘normalising’ the German past, even if we then abandon the critical Sonderweg position. Positions in the battle over the Sonderweg are probably much too entrenched to hope for such a change. On the other hand, without a concept as powerful as the Sonderweg it will be difficult to recognise the extent of the lasting effects of the Hitler regime on German culture.

including West Germany’s long-term political stability and public opinion polls showing declining levels of approval for Hitler during the decades after 1945. See Kershaw (1989, pp. 264–9); but see SINUS (1981).

<sup>60</sup> This observation is based on my own conversations with German friends and acquaintances throughout the 1980s and then in late 1989 and 1990. Even during the allegedly ‘neutralist’ upsurge of the early- to mid-1980s peace movement, unification was a fringe theme. Military neutralisation was typically seen as compatible with the continuing existence of the two states. Of course there were often high levels of support for reunification in opinion polls (Zitelmann 1993, pp. 173–5), but it is difficult to assess the real meaning, if any, of such results. In 1989–90, everything changed. Acceptance of unification by a large majority of West Germans was suggested by the electoral outcome of 2 December 1990, in which 54.7 per cent of West German voters approved the CDU-led governing coalition (and thus its stance in favour of immediate unification, which was the main issue in the election).

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