Reply to Volker Berghahn

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I AM grateful to Volker Berghahn for the chance to clarify our differences as well as for the characteristic civility of his critique. In what follows, I will 1) take issue with his view of German historiography; 2) rebut his charge that the recent scholarship has left us with a "fragmented," ultimately undecipherable picture of the Kaiserreich; and 3) explain why I think my own argument in *Practicing Democracy*, which he agrees takes seriously the oppressive features of German society, is more persuasive than his picture of "deterioration to the point of impasse and ungovernability."[1]

I

Any author would be flattered to have her work singled out as *pars in toto* for two generations of historiography. Whether those cultural historians who have written on art, *Bürgertum*, childhood, *Heimat*, monuments, pub life, old age, rural piety, science, urban crime, and women are equally delighted to be dispatched by proxy via a critique of a book focused relentlessly on electoral politics, I leave to them. They may well feel that my faults, and even my virtues, are not theirs. The narrative that allows Berghahn to group such disparate works together is a simple one. For him, the modern historiography of the Kaiserreich begins in the 1960s and early '70s on a Fischerite and "Bielefeldian" foundation. Then comes the historiographical *Zweite Reichsgründung* of 1978–81: a brief moment to be sure (bounded by the Evans collection at one end and Eley-Blackbourn-Lüdtke on the other),[2] but one so powerful that its consequences are visible

1. Berghahn, *Germany and the Approach to War* (New York, 1993), 13.

2. The very short time span—1978–1981—covered by these controversies is obscured in Berghahn's citations, which give the revised editions of the books and the anthologized versions of the articles. E.g., by 1978, "Bielefeld" had already responded to many challenges, with Hans-Jürgen Puhle's "Zur Legende von der 'Kehrschen Schule'," in *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 4, no. 1 (1978): 108–19. "Blackbourn and Eley" first appeared in German in 1981, as *Mythen deutscher Geschichtsschreibung*, and the *Sonderweg* had been thrashed out that same year: Hans-Ulrich Wehler, "'Deutscher Sonderweg' oder allgemeine Probleme des westlichen Kapitalismus?"; Geoff Eley, "Antwort an Hans-Ulrich Wehler;" Wehler, "Rückantwort an Geoff Eley;" Heinrich August Winkler, "Der deutsche Sonderweg: eine Nachlese," all in *Merkur* (1981): 478–87, 757–60, 793–804. Lüdtke launched his *alltagsgeschichtliche* initiative at least as early as 1977, in an Italian

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into the next century. What are the qualities this "after" scholarship is thought to share? The first is generational. Everything that followed the refounding of the Kaiserreich comes, apparently, from "younger scholars," of a "younger generation," under the "influence" of the 1978–81 watershed, and therefore "drifting" in its "wake." Since my own *Jahrgang*, alas, comes before that of Evans, Blackbourn, Eley, and Lüdtke, I must decline the compliment.[3] The other commonality is the quality of being "not Bielefeld." To that I plead guilty, although I note that this category is now so large as to include Hans-Ulrich Wehler himself.

Can the paternity of a work be tracked by the dates of a particular controversy or even the DNA in its footnotes? Many of us rejoiced in *Mythen deutscher Geschichtsschreibung*,[4] which formulated so brilliantly misgivings that were widely shared, without being "influenced" by it. My own first book was suggested by an émigré teacher who died in 1967, and its subject matter—political Catholicism—led me down paths that, absent Klaus Epstein, I would not have seen, much less have taken. *Practicing Democracy* was inspired by two books read in 1977, a year generally considered the peak of the New Left's cultural influence. Eugen Weber's *Peasants Into Frenchmen* (1976), with its dazzling depictions of the slowness of change, left me at least with a diminished sense of the impact of France's great revolution on French society. Norman Gash's *Politics in the Age of Peel* (1953) did the same for the Whigs' Great Reform Bill, and suggested both a new subject—the often invisible "medium" in which political fish swim[5]—as well as the sources for investigating it. The intellectual biography of M. L. Anderson is not, of course, the issue. My point is that the Berghahnian narrative of how research has evolved, while indeed "very familiar," because "rehearsed at regular intervals," to the point of becoming "*de rigueur*," is not recognizable to me, and perhaps not to others.

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publication that then appeared as "Alltagswirklichkeit, Lebensweise und Bedürfnisartikulation: Ein Arbeitsprogramm zu den Bedingungen 'proletarischen Bewusstseins' in der Entfaltung der Fabrikindustrie," *Gesellschaft: Beiträge zur Marxistischen Theorie* 6 (Frankfurt am Main, 1978): 311–50, with others following on its heels. By 1981 Wehler had already responded, as Berghahn's footnote 5 shows, and by 1982 the "debate" on *Alltagsgeschichte* had reached the rebuttal stage with Lüdtke's "Rekonstruktion von Alltagswirklichkeit-Entpolitisierung der Sozialgeschichte?" in *Klassen und Kultur*, ed. Robert M. Berdahl (Frankfurt am Main, 1982), 321–53.

3. It is hard to tell who belongs to this "younger generation," as Berghahn notes their contributions by referring the interested reader to Jürgen Kocka.

4. Subtitled *Die gescheiterte bürgerliche Revolution von 1848*, this was the first edition of Blackbourn and Eley's *Peculiarities of German History*.

5. A "medium" is not the "structure" that Berghahn calls for—the different metaphor implies something more fluid and pervious—but it very much recognizes "the conditions under which" people "willy-nilly had to operate."

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II

Chief among Berghahn's charges against post-Bielefeld scholarship is that the past "is seen . . . as totally fragmented and decentered." He believes that "we have lost sight of the forest, because we are so firmly focused on the trees." Is that charge true? To show the ways in which cultural historians have built up a picture of the German Empire that is both more accurate, and quite as intelligible, as the old one, would require a separate review article. In the field of politics, however, a glance at just three themes of postwar historiography is all that is needed to demonstrate that the paths taken in the last decades have led us, not into a thicket, but in sight of a broad landscape whose contours are clear.

Take (1) *Nationalism*. Its depth and propulsive power before 1871 have been shown to be considerably weaker than we thought in the days of Carlton Hayes, Lewis Namier, and Hans Kohn. Its *breadth* after 1871, on the other hand, appears much greater than it did even in the sophisticated social and intellectual histories of the sixties and seventies. Nationalism did not play the role that "functionalist" historians then imagined: uniting and stabilizing a society vulnerable to class and other conflicts. On the contrary, in both official and popular forms, it exacerbated Germany's divisions by giving people a new vocabulary with which to articulate their differences. Nor did nationalism mean, to its enthusiasts, an escape from industrial society, a retreat from modernity, or even a form of romanticism, but often quite the opposite. Nationalism can no longer be labeled, even after the 1870s, as largely conservative or "Right." Do these revisions cause the German "forest" to disappear? No. Nationalism's demonstrated links with liberal (as well as conservative) causes and with progressive milieus allow us to establish continuities that stretch across not only the entire imperial period, but into the Weimar Republic—to its very end.

(2) *Liberals* themselves, on the other hand, no longer seem so feckless, weak, and/or tragic as they once did. We do not have to agree with Tip O'Neill, that all politics is local, to appreciate their power: not just in the municipalities, where liberals pretty much had things their own way, but also in the state governments of Bavaria, Baden, and Württemberg, they usually ran the show. Even in Prussia, they were, after the turn of the century, a growing part of the establishment, while nationally, liberal politicians proved shrewd, supple, and by no means the dupes either of the government or of economic interests. Moreover, Liberalism and Social Democracy were not impervious "milieus," as both the flexible voting behavior of their constituents and the ad hoc coalitions of their party leaders show.

(3) The overriding significance historians once accorded to class and to the urban-rural cleavage has now been transferred to *Confession*, which shaped everything from the canon that defined German literature (and therefore German nationality) to voting behavior from 1870 to 1933—and arguably

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from 1848 to 1998. Confessional identity was often powerful enough to bridge the urban-rural, agricultural-industrial divide and even to trump class. Does the new research on confession fragment our picture? In the classroom, the confessional theme provides a way to link Germany's modern history with the early modern period without falling into the teleologies of the nation-state, while its challenge to the secularization narrative links the German story to that of the world beyond its borders.

These three sets of revisions engage debates that have always been central to modern German history. But they have indeed broken up the familiar categories of Left-Right, progressive-reactionary through which we once understood them. These (ultimately normative) categories were psychologically compelling, indeed inevitable, in the wake of World War II. Understandably they continue to be attractive to citizens of the Federal Republic, for whom Germany's history will always be a reservoir for arguments they want to make for their own team today. But for the rest of us, leaving the good-guy, bad-guy categories behind gives us a picture of the Kaiserreich that, while less simple than the old one, is no less coherent than that of any of its contemporaries.

III

And it was here—on a perch "high" enough to see Germany's contemporaries—that I hoped my own contribution to this picture lay. Berghahn does not give much weight to Germany's manhood suffrage, observing "never mind the other half that remained completely disenfranchised until the fall of the monarchy in 1918" (an oddly anachronistic aside, given that before 1918 no large state allowed women to vote; Britain excluded unmarried women under thirty until 1928; and France excluded all of them until 1946). Everyone knows the unequal voting power that the three-class voting system gave to Prussia's upper classes in state elections until 1918; but how many of us are aware that the property qualifications of contemporary Britain (which did not enjoy manhood suffrage) allowed some two-hundred thousand-plus wealthy men to cast up to thirty ballots apiece, an inequity that accounted, in some reckonings, for an additional seventy-eight Conservative seats in Commons in 1910? or that plural voting continued, in a reduced form, until 1949? It was contemporary comparisons such as these, rather than in projections of the German future beyond 1914, that I felt were most relevant to analyzing the electoral culture of the *Kaiserreich*, since unlike the future, this was information available to Germans themselves.

In assessing the forces within German society, Berghahn asks us to "ponder . . . the strange experience" of Eda Sagarra's father, who, on a visit to a colleague at the Humboldt University in 1913, found himself upbraided by a young officer for failing to give way on the sidewalk—and was apologized for

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by his professorial companion. But then should we not also ponder the experience of another visitor to the Humboldt, the African-American W. E. B. Du Bois, who stayed in Germany two years and was treated so well that he confessed that for the first time "I began to realize that white people were human"?[6] Of course Du Bois was a citizen of a country where from 1890–1920 an average of two African-Americans were lynched weekly, occasions whose carnival atmosphere was commemorated by photos of the victim and surrounding picnickers, made into postcards to send to friends or paste into albums.

Although I tried to attend to the experiences of the less powerful, experiences do not an argument make. One must indeed be aware, as Berghahn reminds us, of the structures of power in which these experiences take place. But what structural conclusions can one draw from the "anxieties and miseries" he asks us to imagine of those thousands of Germans whom Bismarck hauled into court for libel?[7] The very number of these libel actions suggests that the intended "chilling effect" failed—something that would be hard to maintain about lynching picnics.

Berghahn urges also that we "continue to ponder the significance of the Zabern Affair." Agreed. In a brilliant book published in 1982, David Schoenbaum compared Zabern to two other contemporary military-civilian conflicts, the Dreyfus Affair (an analogy dear to contemporaries) and the "cold mutiny" at Curragh, comparisons not to Germany's disadvantage. In Zabern, civilians had been illegally arrested, and the perpetrators, Prussian officers, had been officially defended and left—at least *pro forma*—unpunished. "But what impressed me," Schoenbaum confessed, "was both obvious to contemporaries and somehow lost from view. . . . [That] while both government and army responded reluctantly and defensively, they none-the-less confirmed that public clamor and parliamentary debate could be remarkably effective even in Imperial Germany. For anybody inclined to look behind them, no amount of fig leaves could conceal the subsequent transfer of officers, the metamorphosis of archaic military regulations or, perhaps more interesting, the army's obvious hesitation to take its chances before a civil court." When Schoenbaum showed this evidence to a German colleague, however, "one of the young stars of his generation,"

6. *The Reminiscences of William Ewart Burghardt Du Bois*. Oral History Research Office, Columbia University (1963). Cf. "This was the land where I first met white folk who treated me as a human being." Both quotes are from a lecture by Kenneth D. Barkin at University of California, Berkeley, Spring 1998.

7. Hans Fenske's review of *Practicing Democracy* in the FAZ said that I had magnified the number of libel suits by a factor of ten. My number was based on a secondary source. A check with another work—Irene Fischer-Frauendienst, *Bismarcks Pressepolitik* (Münster, 1963), 18—gives an estimate of 1,600. She says the libel actions declined in the 1880s and disappeared in the 1890s.

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> Like generations before him, my friend was reluctant to look. If imperial Germany had been as flexible, responsible, even liberal as this implied, he ruminated between mouthfuls, there was no way to account for the coming of Hitler twenty years later. Then what, I asked him, did he make of the demonstrable facts of the case? Well, he said cautiously, they showed that people were wrong to invoke Zabern, as they traditionally did, as imperial Germany's typical case.[8]

The crucial issue between Berghahn and me is whether there was political development in the German Empire, and if so, in what direction. As he acknowledges, *Practicing Democracy* documents in considerable depth the ways in which the rich and the powerful might influence the outcome of elections, and their unembarrassed willingness to do so. But the very weight of that evidence obligates me—and him—to try to answer the question: why then were opposition parties so successful, and especially after 1887? If he wants to have his crisis after 1890, his "worsening situation," his "growing polarization," he's got to explain how oppositional forces grew, under these oppressive conditions, strong enough to bring polarization about.

My own explanation—tentative and open to improvement by others—stressed the motor power of conflict itself, controlled and channeled by a combination of cultural traditions, economic development, and legal-institutional structures. The "proverbial six-ton elephant" that I conceded that my emphasis on the positive role of conflict risked overlooking was not, *pace* Berghahn, the decision to launch the Great War, and certainly not National Socialism. (National Socialism is an elephant indeed, but the question is: when does that particular elephant walk into the room?) *My* elephant, rather, was "the destructive feelings" that conflict produces and that may indeed poison the political climate. My inquiry into this "climate" did not, however, suggest that it was getting worse. In venturing to read the crystal ball for a future that we can never know—as opposed to the future that we know only too well—I was moderately pessimistic. That is, to the question whether German institutions would have *evolved*, absent World War I, into a democracy of the English parliamen-

8. David Schoenbaum, *Zabern 1913: Consensus Politics in Imperial Germany* (London, 1982), 2–3. To add my own supporting footnote to this excellent book: in December 1913, the Orientalist C. H. Becker (twice Minister of Culture in the Weimar Republic), reported to a friend serving as German Consul in Angola that "At the moment all Germany is filled with the Zabern Affair. It is simply incomprehensible how ineptly the government has handled this whole thing. Basically it's a pretty trivial matter (*Bagatelle*). Nonetheless I have *doch* learned to think rather better of our *Volksvertretung*. In general, of course, I'm for enlightened despots, since popular representation can mostly only just translate the government's expert proposals into something dilletantish. In this case, however, one sees *doch* what great utility press and parliament can have for sharpening the conscience of the government." Becker to Ernst Eisenlohr, 6 December 1913, Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz, NL Becker, Mappe 327.

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tary sort, I thought "no." The regime itself would have had to have changed ("jumped"). But I noted that we have in fact an example of a state undergoing a regime-jump without violence: Spain in 1975. When one reflects on how much greater were Francisco Franco's dictatorial powers and the "*Drohfunktion*" of *his* army than the kaiser's, and how much more severe Spain's previous domestic conflicts (three years of civil war) than Germany's, my one-sentence thought experiment of a nonviolent regime-jump at the death of the kaiser in 1941 (at the same age as Franco: 83) does not strike me, for all of Berghahn's shock, as especially "audacious."

We must beware of begging the question about trajectory by our choice of words. "Crisis" is Berghahn's description of the situation from the 1890s on. Elements of crisis are to be found in any society in any era, and crisis was a term with which contemporaries were certainly familiar, as Berghahn notes when, quoting Peter Jelavich, he says that the political views of Munich's modernist avant-garde were becoming "increasingly polarized and radicalized," because of a "myriad of tensions, uncertainties, and frustrations." But for all the frustrations, however painful, of the avant-garde, "crisis," for contemporaries, was more likely to have meant the agrarian unrest in southern Italy, estimated to have cost more lives than the Italian wars of independence; Russia's 1905 Revolution and the ensuing two years of pogroms; the bloody Balkan Wars with their refugees in the hundreds of thoussands; Abdülhamid II's massacre in the '90s of ca. one hundred thousand Armenians. Had I compared Imperial Germany to *these* contemporaries, my picture would have looked optimistic indeed. But these were not the Europeans against which Germans measured themselves.

Only the last eighteen of *Practicing Democracy*'s 437 pages engage the continuity question that has so exercised historians of the Kaiserreich. I had a reason. All attempts to describe the direction of politics, to map a trajectory, have to point beyond their own terminus: that is, to predict the future on the basis of the past. It might be argued that this task is easy, because the "future" of the Kaiserreich is known. But precisely this knowledge, this terrible knowledge, makes the task of prediction *too* easy for comfort. For a lasso thrown from 1914 to 1933, or 1945, passes over the Great War, not a parenthesis but a cataclysm whose full weight must be taken seriously. I fully agree with Berghahn about the need to understand the origins of this catastrophe. I do not agree that we have been "distracted" from this task by the much-rehashed "Bielefeld" debate—and even less that we have been pulled by "the more conservative *Zeitgeist* in the Federal Republic." Rather, five decades of intense and international scholarship (and debate) had led most of us, by 1972, to believe that we knew the answers. Berghahn's own answer, which was published that year (and which I assigned without interruption for the next quarter century), indicated

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no uncertainty.[9] He reissued that book in 1993, with little change. I am now far less certain. The great contribution of Fritz Fischer's *Griff nach der Weltmacht* was that it offered a way of connecting the world before 1914 with the world that followed. I hope that by accepting that the future of the German Empire was more open than we once thought, we can discover new ways of understanding both the war's origins and its place in the master narrative that connects the empire to the disasters of 1933–45, as well as to the achievements of 1949–2001.

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9. Volker Berghahn, *Germany and the Approach to War* (New York, 1972). The revised edition of 1993, while formulating its argument about Germany's "chronic crisis" somewhat less emphatically, especially in its introduction and conclusion, is substantially unchanged.

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