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Looking Back on the *Sonderweg*

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Central European History has opened its pages again and again to the controversial debate about the so-called German *Sonderweg*. With that in mind, and on the occasion of this important journal's fiftieth anniversary, the following essay presents some very selective and personal thoughts on this topic. Although discussed and promoted much less frequently now than in previous decades, and although there are understandable reasons why it has left the center stage of scholarly debate, the approach to modern German history signified by this problematic concept has not been disproven or become obsolete. But, confronted by severe criticism, it has been—and can be—rethought and revised.

American voices and experiences have been important in the development of approaches to German history frequently signified by the term *Sonderweg*—which, it should be noted at the outset, has always been used much less frequently by scholars who sympathize one way or another with the approach it takes, than by those who criticize it.[1] Among the intellectual ancestors of the *critical Sonderweg* thesis were not only German authors—from Friedrich Engels to Max Weber to Thomas Mann—but also at least one major American intellectual: Thorstein Veblen.[2] When this *Sonderweg* approach assumed a more precise shape and really started to have an impact on the historical profession—even if it never became mainstream in Germany itself—American experiences and voices again played an important role.[3] It was against the background of their experiences in the United States that scholars who had fled from or been driven out of Germany in the 1930s (i.e., "émigré scholars" of the first and second generations) decisively shaped the *Sonderweg* approach to German history, which corresponded, after all, to fundamental experiences in their lives. Hans Rosenberg, Ernst Fraenkel, Hajo Holborn, Felix Gilbert, George Mosse, Fritz Stern, and Georg Iggers

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[1]For a good introduction to the debate, see Helmut Walser Smith, "When the *Sonderweg* Debate Left Us," *German Studies Review* 31, no. 2 (2008): 225-40. The following remarks are partly based on Jürgen Kocka, "Asymmetrical Historical Comparison: The Case of the German *Sonderweg*," *History and Theory* 38, no. 1 (1999): 40-51. That article contains detailed references not included in the present essay.

[2]Thorstein Veblen, *Imperial Germany and the Industrial Revolution* (New York: Macmillan, 1915). Historians in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries advocated a more positive variant of the *Sonderweg* thesis, one that stressed the benefits and advantages of German history relative to "the West." This *affirmative* variant of the *Sonderweg* is not discussed in the following essay. On that, as well as on many other important points that I cover here, see James J. Sheehan, "Paradigm Lost? The 'Sonderweg' Revisited," in *Transnationale Geschichte. Themen, Tendenzen und Theorien,* ed. Gunilla Budde et al. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010), 150–60.

[3]It is not correct to assume that the *Sonderweg* thesis held a monopoly of sorts in German-language historiography. See Edward Ross Dickinson, "Biopolitics, Fascim, Democracy: Some Reflections on Our Discourse About Modernity", *Central European History* (*CEH*) 37, no. 1 (2004): 1. On debates in the interwar period, see Annie Everett, "The Genesis of the *Sonderweg*," *International Social Science Review* 91, no. 2 (2015) (https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1130&context=issr).

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are particularly well-known examples. They had escaped Nazi repression and persecution in Central Europe, found a new home in the United States, and virtually owed their very survival to the fact that "the West," and especially the United States, had been decisively different from Germany and Central Europe. The "German divergence from the West"—as some historians, like Gordon Craig, aptly paraphrased what others called the German *Sonderweg*, or German "exceptionalism"—was an essential part of the life experience of these exile scholars. It became a central concern of their intellectual lives, and sometimes of their professional work as well.[4]

Some of us who later used the idea of a temporary German divergence from the West as an intellectual cornerstone for comparative historical studies (e.g., scholars working in Berlin and Bielefeld, particularly during the third quarter of the twentieth century) were influenced by research stays in the United States, by close contacts with American colleagues and friends, and by (usually) positive, sometimes idealized images of American (and English) history. These experiences influenced the questions with which we approached the German past; some of us even produced elaborate comparisons of certain topics in German and American history. Later on, criticism of the *Sonderweg* approach, which became pronounced in the 1980s, was also formulated, supported, and contested in a more lively manner in the United States (and Great Britain) than anywhere else, except Germany itself. In other words, America and the United Kingdom have been very present in the *Sonderweg* approach to German history, as practiced in previous decades. The debate about the *Sonderweg* has primarily been a German-Anglo-American debate, then—one in which historians from other countries hardly participated.

It is important to specify what is meant by *Sonderweg*, since not everybody associates the same meaning with the term—and also because there have been variations of the critical *Sonderweg* argument that are untenable (e.g., the drawing of a straight line "from Luther to Hitler"). On the basis of implicit and explicit comparisons with Western countries—sometimes more broadly with "the West" as a whole—the *Sonderweg* argument tried to provide answers to the question why Germany, unlike other (Western) countries during the crisis of the interwar period, transformed into a radical, fascist dictatorship. It was in the context of this basic scholarly concern that the critical *Sonderweg* argumentation emerged, and it is only within this context that it makes sense. The argumentation identified long-term structures and processes that were seen as having contributed to the collapse of the Weimar Republic and to the triumph of National Socialism—in addition to, and in combination with, short-term factors, such as Germany's defeat in World War I or the personality of Adolf Hitler, and with supranational dimensions, e.g., the crisis of contemporary capitalism and the challenges of class conflict. More specifically, a finger was pointed at the weakness of the German *Bürgertum* and the tenacious strength of "feudal" elites and traditions, at the enduring impact of an old and powerful bureaucracy never challenged by a successful revolution, at the strength of illiberal elements in German culture and everyday life, at the relatively late formation of the German nation-state and the way this was achieved under the leadership of Otto von Bismarck's Prussia, as well as at the blocked and delayed transition

[4]For a penetrating case study, see William W. Hagen, "Descent of the *Sonderweg:* Hans Rosenberg's History of Old-Regime Prussia," *CEH* 24, no. 1 (1991): 24-50. Also see Andreas Daum, Hartmut Lehmann, and James J. Sheehan, eds., *The Second Generation: Émigrés from Nazi Germany as Historians* (New York: Berghahn, 2016).

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to a parliamentary system of government. The existence or the particular strength of these factors were interpreted as peculiarities of German history that had made the development of liberal democracy there especially difficult—something that ultimately facilitated the rise of National Socialism. To a large extent, scholars identified these factors by looking into earlier periods of German history, particularly Imperial Germany from 1870 to World War I. But the detrimental effects of these traditions had to be traced to the Weimar Republic as well: their causal weight and explanatory power related more to the weakness and breakdown of Weimar than to the victory and specific characteristics of National Socialism.

It later became clear that the *Sonderweg* thesis—or, rather, *Sonderweg* approach (I prefer the second term because I prefer to think of a specific approach to a period of German history rather than of fixed results)—had certain implications that could be explicitly used to interpret German, especially West German, history after 1945 as well. It could lead to the thesis that the Nazi dictatorship and its catastrophic consequences had not only brought the German *Sonderweg* to its low point, but also contributed to creating preconditions for its demise—a step-by-step process after World War II in the Federal Republic of Germany. For, despite the existence of two, in many ways opposite, postwar German states, and despite the burden of the legacy of the pre-1945 period, the Federal Republic managed to become a relatively "normal" Western country that did not define itself anymore in contrast to and as distant from "the West"—and that did not return to anything like a German *Sonderweg*, even after absorbing the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and again becoming a relatively sovereign state in 1990.[5] One needs to emphasize this dimension of the *Sonderweg* interpretation because it helps to understand why its supporters have defended it so vigorously against various types of criticism. In the views and the writings of German authors, the self-critical *Sonderweg* approach (or parts of it) was frequently connected to a strong commitment to, and hope for, the development of a democratic Germany after Hitler and the Holocaust, as well as to various attempts to build a new Germany, not least by "reconstructing" its history and setting it apart from its past. This mixture of scholarly and political concerns surfaced during the so-called *Historikerstreit* of the mid-1980s.[6]

Sketched in such an abbreviated and generalized way, the *Sonderweg* argument may appear as overly structural, schematic, and "constructed" (*konstruiert*) to many readers today. However, it should be noted that nearly all authors who have somehow contributed to, sympathized with, or used the *Sonderweg* approach have done so by dealing only with specific parts of the overall thesis, and by posing and examining specific questions and topics (e.g., a comparison of British and German parliamentarism in the 1920s) that were then empirically

[5]See the interpretations of German history after World War II by two historians who subscribed to the *Sonderweg* approach with respect to earlier periods of German history: Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Deutsche Geschichte,* vol. 5*: Bundesrepublik und DDR 1949-1990* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2008); Heinrich August Winkler, *Der lange Weg nach Westen. Deutsche Geschichte, Bd. 2: Vom "Dritten Reich" bis zur Wiedervereinigung* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2000).

[6]See Peter Baldwin, ed., *Reworking the Past: Hitler, the Holocaust, and the Historians' Debate* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990); Andrew I. Port, ed., "Holocaust Scholarship and Politics in the Public Sphere: Reexamining the Causes, Consequences, and Controversy of the *Historikerstreit* and the Goldhagen Debate: A Forum with Gerrit Dworok, Richard J. Evans, Mary Fulbrook, Wendy Lower, A. Dirk Moses, Jeffrey K. Olick, and Timothy D. Snyder," *CEH* 50, no. 3 (2017): 375–403.

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developed and contextualized.[7] This was usually *not* presented as evidence in favor of a *Sonderweg* thesis per se (in fact, most of these autors did not use the term at all); instead, they used this approach (or parts of it) as a way in which to get at larger issues.

Criticisim of the *Sonderweg* thesis has been manifold, substantial, and effective. It has been partly of a methodological nature, leading to interesting debates about the logic of historical comparison and, for instance, about the problematic assumption of a "normal path" from which Germany allegedly deviated.[8] The criticism has been empirical as well. The *Sonderweg* thesis challenged historians to do extensive research and produce results that would eventually modify central parts of the *Sonderweg* approach, e.g., its interpretation of the political system of the *Kaiserreich* as authoritarian and "premodern"—and thus more or less doomed to fail.[9] The *Sonderweg* thesis also triggered extensive comparative research, the results of which ultimately demanded basic revision of central parts of the *Sonderweg* thesis. To cite the most important example: detailed investigations showed, for one, that aristocratic influence on the upper bourgeoisie was probably not greater in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Germany than it was in many other parts of Europe, and, second, that the social distance between the nobility and the bourgeosie remained more clearly drawn in the German Empire than in contemporary France and Britain.[10] As a consequence, the long cherished "feudalization" thesis, which had been important since the nineteenth century for emphasizing the particular weakness of the German bourgeosie, lost much of its explanative power.

[7]See, e. g., Gerhard A. Ritter, *Deutscher und britischer Parlamentarismus* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1962). For new insights on this topic, see Hartwin Spenkuch, "Vergleichsweise besonders? Politisches System und Strukturen Preussens als Kern des deutschen Sonderwegs," *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 29, no. 2 (2003): 262–93; Michael Kreuzer, "Parliamentarization and the Question of German Exceptionalism, 1867–1918," *CEH* 36, no. 3 (2003): 327–57.

[8]This was one of several central arguments in David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984); a slimmer German version had appeared in 1980 as *Mythen deutscher Geschichtsschreibung. Die gescheiterte bürgerliche Revolution von 1848* (Berlin: Ullstein, 1980). On the origins and impact of this important book, see the interviews with the authors that was published as a "Forum" in *German History* 22, no. 2 (2004): 229-45. It was here (p. 233) that David Blackbourn compared the *Sonderweg* thesis to Frederick Jackson Turner's "Frontier Thesis." There are certainly less significant intellectual constructs with which to be compared. For a discussion of related problems of comparison, see Jürgen Kocka and Heinz-Gerhard Haupt, "Comparison and Beyond: Traditions, Scope, and Perspectives of Comparative History," in *Comparative and Transnational History: Central European Approaches and New Perspectives*, ed. Heinz-Gerhard Haupt and Jürgen Kocka (New York: Berghahn, 2010), 1-30. Also see Kenneth F. Ledford, "Comparing Comparisons: Disciplines and the *Sonderweg*," *CEH* 36, no. 3 (2003): 367-74.

[9]To cite just one important contribution: Margaret Lavinia Anderson, *Practicing Democracy: Elections and Political Culture in Imperial Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000). Also see the exchange between Anderson and Volker R. Berghahn in *CEH* 35, no. 1 (2002): 75-90.

[10]See Hartmut Kaelble, "Wie feudal waren die Unternehmer im Kaiserreich?," in *Beiträge zur quantitativen deutschen Unternehmergeschichte*, ed. Richard Tilly (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1985), 148-74; Dolores L. Augustine, *Patricians and Parvenus: Wealth and High Society in Wilhelmine Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). These findings correspond to the results of a major comparative research project conducted in Bielefeld in 1986-1987 on the bourgeoisie in nineteenth-century Europe; this is documented in Jürgen Kocka and Allan Mitchell, eds., *Bourgeois Society in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1993). Geoff Eley correctly emphasizes that the criticism of the *Sonderweg* approach, especially in the book he coauthored with David Blackbourn (see note 8), was a stimulus—one among several, it should be emphasized—that motivated this large-scale research project; see p. 235 of the 2004 *German History* forum cited in note 8.

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There were other changes that relativized the *Sonderweg* approach, not least as a result of new focuses that became paramount in the study of National Socialism. Several questions had long been central to the *Sonderweg* approach: "how could it happen, why did it happen, and why did it happen in Germany?" The breakdown of democracy and the institutionalization of the Nazi dictatorship in the years around 1933 were, as a result, central as *explananda*. Later on, scholars became more interested in the processes of radicalization of German fascism, as well as in its destructive and violent strategies and operations, in the perpetrators and victims, as well as in the Holocaust itself. For such investigations, the later years of the regime became more important.[11]

The *Sonderweg* approach continued an old tradition of German self-comparison with its Western neighbors—or, more generally, with "the West." But, since the end of the East-West division of Europe in 1989-1991, we have become accustomed to a more balanced "Europeanization" of the perspectives we adopt; this includes comparisons with neighbors and regions in the East. This has had important consequences: when compared with east-central, southeastern, or east European cases, the German bourgeoisie does not look weak at all, but rather strong. From the perspective of the eastern parts of Europe during the interwar period, where the transition from democracy to dictatorship was the rule, the German record also looks less exceptional. As this suggests, basic elements of the *Sonderweg* approach need to be modified when German history is placed within broader comparative frameworks. Comprehensive, comparative European and global historical approaches of this nature tend to relativize the *Sonderweg* thesis, leading perforce to different approaches to German history.[12]

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This essay began by emphasizing the fact that the critical *Sonderweg* thesis had first been promoted by a generation of scholars whose life experiences had led them to ask urgent questions that the *Sonderweg* approach seemed to answer. Since then, new generations of historians have asked other questions and come to expect different answers. The tendency to interpret German history *sub specie* 1933 has declined, and, with it, the relevance of the *Sonderweg* thesis. The foregoing remarks have also stressed the connection between the *Sonderweg* interpretation of modern German history and the postwar political commitment in the Federal Republic to overcome the traditional distance between Germany and the West, i.e., between Germany and Western values, constitutional principles, and ways of life. One can argue that this has been achieved, by and large, and that the historical profession has contributed to this fortunate outcome by helping to develop a relatively sober historical self-understanding in the Federal Republic—something to which the *Sonderweg* view has strongly contributed. The German *Sonderweg* seems to have come to an end in real or actual history—though there may be some remaining elements that, under changing circumstances, could reappear in new guises. At the same time, "the West" has become a more problematic frame of reference than it used to be or appeared to be—and that was true even before

[11] See Helmut Walser Smith, "The Vanishing Point of German History: An Essay on Perspective," *History and Memory* 17, no. 1/2 (2005): 269-95.

[12] See Matthew Fitzpatrick, "The Pre-History of the Holocaust? The *Sonderweg* and the *Historikerstreit* Debates and the Abject Colonial Past," *CEH* 41, no. 3 (2008): 477-503. By contrast, the *Sonderweg* approach is used to criticize unilinear concepts in postcolonial studies. See Jie-Hyun Lim, "A Postcolonial reading of the *Sonderweg*: Marxist Historicism Revisited," *Journal of Modern European History* 12, no. 2 (2014): 280-94.

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Donald Trump became president of the United States. The constellation has, in short, changed in ways that make the *Sonderweg* approach seem less compelling and relevant.[13]

Leaving aside the merits and problematic aspects of its individual elements, the *Sonderweg* approach has made German history—the *way* historians deal with German history—more comparative, and that is an important advance.[14] More specifically, it has spawned productive discussions and empirical research. The methodological and empirical criticisms it had to face led to its eventual clarification, revision, and relativization. Its claims have been carefully reduced in scope, and the arguments made by its advocates have become more nuanced.[15] But central elements of the *Sonderweg* thesis have nevertheless survived.[16] The question why Germany turned into a radical, fascist-totalitarian dictatorship, while other comparable countries did not, remains a central question—and not just for historians of Germany. It is certainly not convincing to identify the general contradictions of capitalism at the time, or the perils of modernity in general, as major causes since countries that were at least as capitalistic and modern as Germany—again, Britain and the United States come to mind—did not become fascist and totalitarian. The *Sonderweg* approach holds elements of an answer to such questions—one that continues to be convincing.[17] But contexts change, the guiding interests of scholars shift, new questions and answers take center stage. The *Sonderweg* approach has not been disproved but rather relativized. Its relevance has declined, and its position within the field of Central European studies has become more marginal. It can neither be predicted nor excluded that this process will be revised at some point in the future.

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[13]For comments by a staunch defender of the *Sonderweg* approach who has long advocated the "Westernization" of Germany, see Heinrich August Winkler, *Zerbricht der Westen? Über die gegenwärtige Krise in Europa und Amerika* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2017).

[14]See Heinz-Gerhard Haupt, "Historische Komparatistik in der internationalen Geschichtsschreibung," in *Transnationale Geschichte. Themen, Tendenzen und Theorien*, ed. Gunilla Budde et al. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006): 137-49 (esp. p. 143).

[15]A comparison of Hans-Ulrich Wehler's treatment of the German Empire in *Das Deutsche Kaiserreich 1871–1918* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1973) with his *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte, Bd. 3: Von der "Deutschen Doppelrevolution" bis zum Beginn des Ersten Weltkrieges, 1849–1914* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1995) shows that the author's use of the *Sonderweg* approach became much more subtle and nuanced over time.

[16]As formulated in Kocka, "Asymmetrical Historical Comparison," 45-46. For a more detailed discussion, see idem, "Bürgertum und Sonderweg," in *Sozial- und Kulturgeschichte des Bürgertums*, ed. Peter Lundgreen (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000), 93–110.

[17]See Volker Berghahn, "German Colonialism and Imperialism from Bismarck to Hitler," *German Studies Review* 40, no. 1 (2017): 147-62 (esp. p. 158).

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