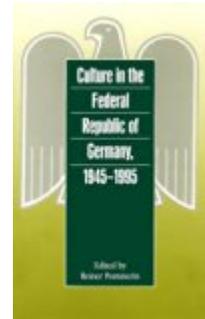


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Reiner Pommerin. *Culture in the Federal Republic of Germany, 1945-1995*. Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1996. ix + 151 S. \$34.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-85973-105-5; \$99.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-85973-100-0.

Reviewed by Sabine Schmidt (Rhodes College)
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This is the eleventh volume in the German Historical Perspectives series edited by Gerhard A. Ritter and Anthony J. Nicholls. The series was initiated to provide insight into current German research to an English-speaking readership, using material from seminars organized by Visiting Fellows at St. Antony's College in Oxford. Reiner Pommerin, Professor of Modern and Contemporary History at the University of Dresden, collected eight lectures held in early 1995 during his tenure as visiting fellow. Recognizing the dearth of comprehensive studies in postwar German cultural history, Pommerin brought together surveys and analyses from various perspectives. The speakers included renowned professors of literature, history, cultural studies, urban planning, political science, philosophy, and bioinformatics. The resulting anthology presents a multi-faceted interpretation of contemporary culture. At the same time, certain synchronicities in thought become apparent which bring the main ideas in contemporary German cultural history to light.

All contributions in this volume are by male scholars—an apt illustration of the continuing lack of equal participation of women in Germany's academic culture. Not surprisingly, most references and quotes are not of the works of women writers, directors, historians, or political thinkers.

Biomedical scientist Jens Reich, the prominent East German political leader and founding member of the *Neues Forum*, shares personal observations of the East German state of mind and the ways in which East Germans are adjusting to the post-unification world. He considers a geographical boundary, the Elbe river, to be at the root of differences in mentality and culture within

eastern Germany. He also discusses the widespread support for the PDS as an expression of defiance and nostalgia in the face of a difficult new reality.

Wolfgang Welsch, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Magdeburg, provides an excellent analysis of the modernity/ postmodernity debate. Clear and concise, his text defines the terms as both descriptive and transformative. He also sketches their history and their relevance within various disciplines while describing the negative attitude toward postmodernism that prevails in Germany. Welsch conclusively outlines “the strict dichotomy of modernity and postmodernity [that] is, viewed in the international context of the debate, a particularly German feature. It constitutes the fundamental mistake in this debate, for it implies a basic misunderstanding of postmodernity” (p. 122). The essay is well matched with the text by Thomas Sieverts, in which the author shows the influence of political and social currents on urban planning in the Federal Republic.

In “Tendencies in Post-War German Literature,” Horst Albert Glaser surveys fifty years of writing without mentioning a single female author. In his view, “German literature of the last 30 years bears the stamp of many different authors and stylistic modes ... Literary affairs in Germany could have continued along their tranquil path ...” (p. 71), but the events of 1989 brought an end to what he perceives as stasis. Actually they included the development of a whole new movement. International Germanists have long been studying the impact of women's literature, represented by writers as diverse as Verena Stefan, Karin Struck, or Anne Duden. Similar interest is developing for minority literatures—a growing body of texts written by minority Germans and immigrants—

among them Yoko Tawada, Emine Sevgi Oezdamar, and Rafik Schami.

Kurt Sontheimer, an influential public figure who describes himself as “somewhere on the centre-left” (p. 75), presents a chronological insider’s look at the role of intellectuals—which in Germany usually refers only to those on the left—and their lack of true influence in German politics. But the essay ends on an optimistic note. Hermann Glaser, author of the seminal *Kulturgeschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, summarizes the development of the arts after the end of World War II and points out their peculiar blend of “continuity and discontinuity” (p. 33). In his “Perspectives of Political Thought,” Ernst Vollrath defines concepts of state and the place of German political thought in an international context.

Originally written as oral presentations, most contributions in this collection are fairly accessible. While that may facilitate comprehension, there are a number of editorial flaws. Several texts have endnotes without proper bibliographical information and some use undocumented quotes or the translation of a German text without naming the source for the translation. There is no information on whether the lectures were originally written in English or translated from the German. Except for what seems to be a translator’s note in Horst Albert Glaser’s text (p. 72), the book makes no mention at all of translators. An index would help in locating related information in the thematically diverse individual contributions.

The most curious lack of formal accuracy appears in Reiner Pommerin’s own lecture, which begs the question of who edited the editor’s writing. Bertolt Brecht’s name is misspelled twice (“Berthold” and “Bertold”), and there are other misspellings of names and titles of plays. Describing “two of the hotly debated new plays” (p. 13) of the 1960s, Pommerin lists Martin Walser’s *Guerillas*, which did not appear until 1970. Fifteen years ago, filmmaker Daniele Huillet in an interview criticized the public failure to recognize that she and her husband Jean-Marie Straub have co-directed since 1962: “In those days it was not fashionable to mention the women. No one noticed ... that I was always listed in the credits” [1]. Naming several directors of the New German Cinema, Pommerin, too, ignores her work. His text also suffers

from numerous Germanisms and awkward syntax, both of which are likely to confuse students.

Complaints about such formalities may appear insignificant, but the frequency of flaws casts a somewhat suspicious light on the accuracy of the content. It puts into question the usefulness of this volume in the classroom. Pommerin correctly states that “English language books on the history of the intellectual and cultural developments in Germany after 1945 are not to be found in the catalogues of either the British Museum or Washington’s Library of Congress” (p. 1). There is indeed a lack of texts that provide both a good overview and analysis of German post-war culture in English. Pommerin’s anthology unfortunately cannot fill the gap— not because of the quality of speakers in the lecture series, but because it fails to turn the mostly excellent and thought-provoking lectures into equally high-quality essays.

The diverse group of scholars represented in this volume illustrates Reiner Pommerin’s broad definition of cultural history. It is puzzling that he would ignore forces indispensable for the shaping of a German *Kultur*, if not the ideological or social nation, and decide to exclude perspectives on the women’s movement and the emerging immigrants’ cultures. Both challenge traditional understandings of post-war German culture. In teaching this topic, it might be effective to use Pommerin’s collection alongside Rob Burns’s *German Cultural Studies* [2], a recent British anthology on German culture (encompassing the twentieth century) which is careful to be more inclusive.

Notes:

[1]. “Das Feuer im Innern des Berges.” *Frauen und Film* 32 (1982): 5, quoted in English in Julia Knight, *Women and the New German Cinema* (London and New York: Verso, 1992), p. 11.

[2]. Rob Burns, ed. *German Cultural Studies. An Introduction* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

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