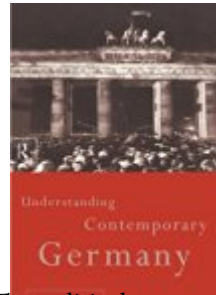


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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Stuart Parkes. *Understanding Contemporary Germany*. London and New York: Routledge, 1997. xxvii + 247 pp. \$69.95 (cloth), ISBN 0-415-14123-0. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-14124-6.

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In *Understanding Contemporary Germany*, Stuart Parkes, who is a Reader in German Literature and Society at the University of Sunderland, provides an overview of political, social, and intellectual developments in Germany since unification in 1990. He seeks to answer the question of whether the new Germany—given Germany's checkered past—is living up to its promise as a "healthy democratic state and reliable partner in international relations" (p. xxv). On the basis of his survey, he concludes that "the Federal Republic of Germany [FRG] some five years after unity remains a success, not just because of its economic prowess and political stability but because of the commitment of so many to ideals and values that are the opposite of those frequently promulgated to such devastating effect in the past" (p. 214).

Parkes finds the roots of unified Germany's success in the FRG from 1949 to 1989 (Chapter Two). The FRG's success as a stable, democratic state derives from its Basic Law, which eschewed the destabilizing features of the Weimar constitution; its party system, based on a broad consensus among its major parties; and its economic system, which provided for both a high rate of growth ("economic miracle") and a balancing of economic interests ("social market economy"). The GDR, in contrast, failed because it denied its citizens both the political power and standard of living enjoyed in the FRG (Chapter One). Another stabilizing factor in West Germany, Parkes contends, was the "political culture," which he narrowly defines in terms of the relationship of the intellectual elite—mainly writers and students—to the FRG's political order. He argues that by the 1960s their political engagement helped stabilize West German democracy.

In Part II, Parkes assesses whether the Federal Republic after unification retains the traits that made it a

successful democracy before 1990. The political system, Parkes concludes in Chapter Three, "remains a beacon for stability, and fears for the future of democracy based on the imminent danger of political instability are exaggerated" (p. 71). The author spends most of Chapter Three explaining that a number of potentially destabilizing factors are not as serious as some analysts claim: the feeling among East Germans that their state was "swallowed up" by the FRG; the *Politikverdrossenheit* (disillusionment with politics) that took hold of German society in the early 1990s; and a growth in political extremism, mainly on the right. Chapter Four, on the German economy, maintains the same pattern. According to Parkes, the high unemployment of the 1980s and early 1990s, caused by a global recession, were never a cause for panic. Germany maintained its share of world exports, the D-Mark remained strong, and the German economy demonstrated a flexibility that critics of the "social market economy" could not have predicted.

According to Parkes, the only potential weak spot lies in German society (Chapter Five), which lacks the broad consensus that characterized the FRG before unification. The least serious social problem for Parkes are the divergences between *Ossis* (easterners) and *Wessis* (westerners). Although the easterners, he believes, have legitimate grounds for discontent, their discontent will not threaten the FRG's stability unless "it continues to express itself in the form of political extremism (99)." A more significant source of fragmentation, Parkes believes, is the growing inequality in Germany, as reflected in issues of migration and poverty. The long-standing citizenship law, which determines nationality on the basis of blood (*jus sanguinis*) rather than place of birth (*jus soli*), makes it virtually impossible for the 1.9 million Turks living in Germany—some since birth—to obtain the cit-

izenship that is guaranteed to ethnic German “resettlers” from Eastern Europe. The growth in poverty and homelessness since 1990 might also come to undermine social stability.

The weakest chapter in Parkes’s survey is the sixth, “New Germany, Europe and the World.” Parkes ignores Great Britain and France in his discussion of Germany’s relations with the “major powers.” This omission seems particularly glaring since many of the international concerns voiced about Germany originate in Britain and France; they are also Germany’s most important partners (and potential rivals) within the EU. Some consideration of Germany’s relations with its neighbors to the East, other than Russia, would have rounded off the chapter. Nevertheless, Parkes provides a solid overview of recent debates over the European Union and Germany’s participation in UN peacekeeping. His conclusion also seems valid: Germany is living up to its international responsibilities and is unlikely to indulge in any international “adventures” (p. 134) in the near future.

In Part III, Parkes examines issues of German identity and culture before and after unification. Chapter Seven, “Coming to Terms With the Past,” discusses the difficulties that German history presents for the formation of a democratic national identity. If autocratic Prussia cannot provide a positive model for a democratic Germany, the Nazi era presents even greater difficulties. For Parkes, recent debates over the commemoration of (which?) anti-Nazi resistance groups, the end of World War II (defeat or liberation?), and the uniqueness of Nazi crimes (e.g., the *Historikerstreit*) reflect the lack of a common identity. In Chapter Eight, Parkes deals with the efforts of (mainly West) German writers to construct a new national identity after World War II. Their conceptions of a new Germany ranged from a denial of nationality (Hans Magnus Enzensberger), to proposals that Germany follow a “third way” and play a mediating role in Europe (*Gruppe 47*), to proposals for a totally new beginning based on “positive” German traditions (the GDR’s Johannes R. Becher). Even today, the question of German identity remains “fluid” (p. xxvii).

The book concludes with an examination of “The Intellectual Climate Since Unification” (Chapter Nine). One can speak after unification, Parkes asserts, of “two groups

of intellectuals: those who wish to preserve the ethos of the pre-unification Federal Republic and those who see change as necessary. Although it would be wrong to see the second group as invariably nationalistic, it is wise to remember that the democratic development of the old Federal Republic was in many respects exemplary” (p. 205). Given the broad range of debates and individuals that Parkes covers in Chapter Nine, his conclusion seems to be something of an oversimplification. The critics of Christa Wolf in the “German-German literature debate,” the supporters of “hard politics” and action against Iraq in the Gulf War, and the writers calling for a “new nationalism” are not necessarily the same people and should not be lumped together. This does not detract, however, from the value of Parkes’s survey of the often confusing intellectual debates that have occurred since unification.

Many of Parkes’s opinions are likely to spark debates of their own. For example, liberal economists would contend that the attraction of the D-Mark in 1995 constituted a vote of confidence in the hard-money policies of the *Bundesbank*, rather than a vote of confidence in the “social market economy” (Chapter Four). His assertion that *Politikverdrossenheit* “undoubtedly” springs in part “from populist anti-political attitudes that have their roots in the German past” (p. 58) ignores the general weariness with politics that has afflicted most of the West since the early 1990s. Even if one agrees with his spirited defense of Christa Wolf in Chapter Nine, the comparison of Wolf as a “dissident” (p. 186) to Vaclav Havel seems unwarranted.

Nevertheless, Parkes’s broad-ranging and opinionated survey succeeds in giving its reader a sense of current and less-recent controversies in German culture, politics, and society. His book will serve as a valuable supplementary text in courses on German politics, contemporary German literature, and German history since 1945. It will also help initiate students and scholars on academic exchanges into the often volatile world of German intellectual politics.

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