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Uwe Jean Heuser. *Tausend Welten: Die Aufloesung der Gesellschaft im digitalen Zeitalter.* Berlin: Berlin Verlag, 1996. 231 S. ISBN 978-3-8270-0208-2.

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U. J. Heuser: Tausend Welten

Although primarily directed toward a German-speaking audience, Uwe Jean Heuser's book holds important insights for American readers as well. Establishing an intercultural comparison among the United States, Europe, and Japan, Heuser, the business editor of the renowned German weekly *Die Zeit*, cogently demonstrates that economic and technological forces of the digital age are decisively shaped by American culture and traditions. Through recourse to the German example of socially responsible government (Sozialstaat), Heuser attempts to develop an alternative to the American model of the postindustrial society. Heuser's main argument is that the "meritocratic economy of ideas" is fragmenting society into a thousand worlds and dissolving traditional forms of solidaric communities. Especially affected are government-supervised social programs in Germany (e.g., welfare and health insurance) which depend on values of community and solidarity. By drawing on American prophets of the postindustrial society such as Daniel Bell, Peter Drucker, and Alvin Toffler, Heuser makes the immensely important observation that current attempts to reform Germany's ailing social system by simply cutting costs and to reduce its level of unemployment by extending existing regulations are based on an obsolete industrial model which presupposes stable, lifelong, and dependant employment.

To American readers Heuser reveals that the belief in the uniform character of the digital revolution (represented, for example, in Nicholas Negroponte's 1995 bestseller *Being Digital*) is a form of technological determinism. Rather than simply importing patterns of the American postindustrial economy, Heuser argues that each society will have to find its own mode of entering the digital age by drawing on its own distinct "culture, social traditions, and common beliefs" (10). He bases this assertion on the work of the American economist Robert Heilbroner who, in the 1960s, posited that technology is influenced by political decisions as well as social, cultural, and individual attitudes.

Heuser shows that since the United States dominates the idea-intensive fields of popular culture, computer software development, the Internet, and corporate organization, these areas are in turn shaped by American culture, history, and traditions. The postindustrial economy thus stresses the flexible organization of work and social relations, reflects American technological optimism, and emphasizes individual freedom over consensus and solidarity. Often compared to the opening of the Western frontier, the Internet is said to be characterized by the American pioneering spirit and the American ideal of freedom. Despite acknowledging the dissolution of traditional forms of government-supervised solidarity in Germany, Heuser wants to preserve the German model of socially responsible government to ensure social stability and minimize newly emerging inequalities of income in the transition toward the digital age. He thus develops a modified version of the American postindustrial society in which the government institutionalizes learning as part of every individual's working life, reforms the educational system so that it is less oriented toward traditional jobs and careers, and guarantees the long-term existence of voluntary grassroots movements and their right to impact public decision-making.

Heuser's predominantly economic argument about the interrelationship of culture and technology would have greatly benefited from work in STS, in particular, David Hess's pioneering study *Science and Technology in a Multicultural World* (1995), in which he argues that science and technology are not only socially but also culturally constructed. Moreover, Heuser misses a chance to add an analysis of recent political events in Germany to his investigation of the economic and technological forces that have contributed to the dissolution of the German social state. He could have easily extended his speculations about the connection between the United States' economic and technological leadership and its

acceptance of difference, institutionalized in its (admittedly imperfect) model of multiculturalism to Germany. Heuser notes that American products appeal to an international audience because they reflect various ethnic influences (106) and synthesize different ideas, not necessarily of American origin, into new, unique concepts (101). Perhaps the model of the German social state is also failing because it sees no virtue in accommodating cultural difference (be it those of East Germans, guest workers, or immigrants) and because its government-sponsored social programs presuppose and reinforce a high degree of homogeneity.

These criticisms aside, *A Thousand Worlds* is the first book-length study that, to my knowledge, begins to even the balance with respect to the preponderance of American work on new information technologies and one that urges the German public and German policymakers to revise their attitudes about the digital age. Its focus on the persistence of national and cultural differences in the information society is immensely valuable in questioning the still widespread assumption that the digital age will be characterized by processes of "global Americanization" and cultural homogenization.

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