

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**William Brustein.** *The Logic of Evil: The Social Origins of the Nazi Party, 1925-1933.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996. Ppp. 235 + Cloth. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-06533-6.

Reviewed by David A. Meier

Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (January, 1998)



## W. Brustein: The Logic of Evil

In collaboration with Juergen W. Falter (University of Mainz), William Brustein (Professor of Sociology, University of Minnesota) has examined 42,004 pre-1933 files drawn from the 'Ortskartei' and 'Reichskartei' of the NSDAP. He incorporates numerous variables into his analysis, including "political traditions, unemployment figures, city size, region, geographical location, and confessional, occupational, and economic structure of locality." As a social scientist, Brustein's intent is not to present a history of the rise of the Nazi party. Rather, he tests existing theories of macro-political phenomena in light of the data collected. He has drawn several powerful conclusions. First, "Nazi supporters were no different from average citizens elsewhere." Second, the Nazi program found an audience primarily in the lower middle and working classes. Third, and finally, "the Nazi Party's emergence between 1925 and 1933 as the most popular political party in Germany resulted from its superlative success at fashioning economic programs that addressed the material needs of millions of Germans" (xii-17).

Brustein sets the stage in his first chapter by outlining the weaknesses in existing theories attempting to explain the social origins of the Nazi Party. The irrationalist explanation, represented by such authors as Hannah Arendt, assumed that Germans were "quick to follow [the Nazi Party] without thinking about the content of party appeals." Without denying a certain irrationalism in popular support for the Nazi Party, Brustein rejects the follow-up assumption that "Nazism can arise only in an irrationalist context." On the other hand, narrowly focused explanations, for example, a lower-

middle-class panic or political confessionalism, failed to acknowledge the Nazi Party's evolution into a "successful catchall party." Brustein's central argument against existing theoretical explanation is their "disproportionate emphasis on Nazi followers' reactive response, while ignoring the degree to which individuals' support for the Nazi Party stemmed from their desire to improve their material condition." In short, irrational outcomes fail to prove "that individual supporters behaved less than rationally" (3-11).

Moving into the results of his research, Brustein outlines the limits and shortcomings of existing empirical studies. Brustein's general criticism of these studies focuses on their limited data and unsubstantiated general claims. For example, several studies address the correlation between unemployment and the pro-Nazi vote (realizing that there are important differences between those voting for the Nazi Party and those joining it). Irrational or mass-based explanations placed a heavy emphasis on urban support for the Nazi Party. However, Nazi Party-joiners from cities with a population over 100,000 constituted only 28% of total party joiners. Combining his research with that of others, Brustein demonstrates how newer research has generally moved away from previous emphases on either religious orientation or on Germany's lower middle class. He finds that only an account of "interest-based action" reveals the clearly wide appeal of the Nazi Party. As the "logical choice for millions of Germans," the Nazi Party drew into its ranks a large percentage of "blue-collar workers, livestock farmers, and independent artisans." Politically, the Nazi Party offered

a “third path between Marxist centralized state planning and laissez-faire capitalism” (23-29).

Weimar’s traditional political parties, namely, the German Nationalist People’s Party, the German People’s Party, the German Democratic Party, the Catholic Center Party, the German Social Democratic Party, and the German Communist Party, contributed to the rise of the Nazi Party by underestimating the appeal of nationalist-statist economic planning and/or by participating in unpopular Weimar governments. Nazi Party ideas about “state socialism, autarkic development, and Lebensraum” were largely gleaned from discussions already in popular circulation. Nazi policies, however, were unique in their emphasis on more aggressive and innovative planning in the face of a growing economic catastrophe (52-55).

Brustein’s research significantly refines our understanding of who joined the Nazi Party, namely, “that members of the old middle class, married white-collar employees, workers in import-oriented industries, and skilled blue-collar workers constituted the backbone of the Nazi Party’s membership before 1933.” Those who cast their lot in with the Nazi Party did so largely out of an economically defined self-interest. Xenophobia, anti-semitism, racism, and hyper-nationalism cannot account for the rise of the Nazi Party. These elements had been well represented in numerous other political groups long before the arrival of the Nazi Party but had failed to propel their promoters to seats of power (57-62, 179-183).

Reviewers have so far not focused on the theoretical and empirical contributions made by Brustein’s research. For example, James Sheehan’s review in ‘The New York Times’ (September 15, 1996) underestimates the explanatory power of the rational choice model employed in Brustein’s book. In fact, the theory can easily account for the facts that Sheehan cites to refute it. First, Sheehan argues that “the concept of rational self-interest” cannot explain the wide fluctuations in Nazi

party voting and membership between 1928 and 1933. However, as Brustein stresses, individual interests depended on the conditions faced, and those conditions changed dramatically in this period due to the depression. To take just one example, the increasing unemployment rates of skilled workers made them more favorably disposed to Nazi promises of job creation and tariffs in 1933 than they were in 1928. Second, Sheehan claims that Brustein’s stress on the role of selective incentives and disincentives (the personal benefits and costs associated with joining the party, such as paying dues or getting a job) “undermine[d] the basic structure of his argument.” Far from undermining it, this is an essential component of any rational choice analysis. All cost-benefit models include not only the costs and benefits associated with particular parties gaining power, but the personal costs and benefits of joining as well. Moreover, this part of the model explains the second issue that Sheehan cites as a criticism, namely the importance of prior political party affiliation. Brustein’s theory implies that individuals with jobs or friendship networks tied to other political parties would be less likely to join the Nazis, because losing those jobs and friends would be a costly disincentive.

Overall, ‘The Logic of Evil’ is an impressive academic analysis of the social origins of the Nazi Party, resting on a mountain of research. Brustein moves through existing theories and publications at a breathtaking pace. Those already acquainted with social science research into the origins of the Nazi Party will be impressed with this work. It presents a society confronted with immediate ‘economic and political crisis’ whose resolution appears in the programs advocated by the Nazi Party. Brustein effectively advances his central thesis of interest-based action as a more effective analytical tool and based upon a larger body of empirical evidence than all existing studies. Despite its apparent brevity, this work will help stimulate a rethinking of contemporary ideas about the rise of the Nazi Party.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/>

**Citation:** David A. Meier. Review of Brustein, William, *The Logic of Evil: The Social Origins of the Nazi Party, 1925-1933*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. January, 1998.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=16103>

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved. This work may be copied and redistributed for non-commercial, educational purposes, if permission is granted by the author and usage right holders.

For permission please contact [H-SOZ-U-KULT@H-NET.MSU.EDU](mailto:H-SOZ-U-KULT@H-NET.MSU.EDU).