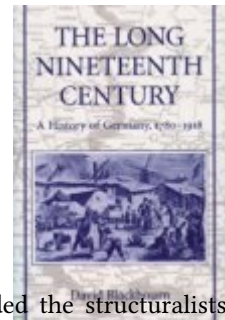


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David Blackbourn. *The Long Nineteenth Century: A History of Germany: 1780-1918*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. xxiv + 578 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-507672-1.

Reviewed by Richard S. Levy (University of Illinois-Chicago)  
Published on H-German (September, 1998)



Such is the frantic pace of scholarly studies in all areas of modern German history that there is room for yet another work of synthesis on the grand scale—especially, one of this quality. Better than half of this book’s citations are for works written since 1980. Fully twenty percent of the bibliography bears imprints later than 1989, the year in which James Sheehan published his rethinking of *German History 1770-1866*, also with Oxford University Press. Blackbourn continues the tradition begun in America by Hajo Holborn’s nearly forgotten *A History of Modern Germany* (1959-69), using a deceptively simple recipe: identify the disputed issues of historical interpretation, read everything, summarize the varying schools of thought, and say something noteworthy of your own. Holborn thought this could only be done at the end of a long career. Blackbourn disproves him.

The task is no longer as manageable as it once was. Demographic, socio-economic, and cultural history have become highly sophisticated. Blackbourn can deal with war and high politics, but he is also at home with the newer sub-disciplines. He devotes continuing attention to the changing roles of women and the ongoing importance of religion. He provides periodic updates on population growth and movements, infant mortality, life expectancy, public health, communications and travel, diet, education, standards of living, lifestyles, and leisure activities. The breadth of knowledge is truly admirable, as is the refusal to cloak difficulties of interpretation in the jargon du jour. Not one “paradigm shift” or “gendered” anything mars his clean, lean prose.

Blackbourn’s impulse is to revise and refine our understanding of modern Germany. No cliché, no piece of received wisdom remains immune to his scrutiny. Although a “kinder, gentler” historian is on view here, the

old cast of mind, which so offended the structuralists around Hans-Ulrich Wehler in the 1980s, also remains visible. Blackbourn is more comfortable in the work of demolition than in the construction of over-arching theories. He is neither dogmatic nor schematic and knows a worthless fad when he sees one. This work builds on the strengths of his earlier ones: the methodical treatment of problems from many perspectives, succinct summaries, and clear language. *The Long Nineteenth Century* succeeds in doing what it proposes to do.

The book follows chronological lines, generally using the traditional periodization. But along the way it does much to undermine, obscure, and alter these standard divisions. Blackbourn acknowledges few distinct breaks or discrete chunks of history. He also avoids the pitfalls of Prusso-centrism, admonishing that 1866 was only one of many possible outcomes. Breaking out of the confines of Austro-Prussian dualism, he describes the many “small worlds” of German-speaking Europe before the Revolution. Telling phrases energize the argument. The Holy Roman Empire is a ramshackle “invertebrate entity.” Its “archipelago of jurisdictions” will give way to the compact territorial sovereignties of the nineteenth century. Bringing new scholarship to bear, the author punctures the myth of the Frankfurt National Assembly as “all talk and no action.” He questions the severity of the reaction of the 1850s, considerably softening its hard edges. He disputes the significance of the joint stock corporation in the take-off of German capitalism and rejects the “common knowledge” that the protective tariffs on grain were an exclusive boon for the Junker class. He deconstructs the monolith of the proletariat, leaving in its place “a many-layered, many-hued set of realities.” Blackbourn also poses the occasional counterfactual question to great effect. Why, he asks, was there no Grand or

Weimar Coalition during the Kaiserreich? Answering the question launches him on a wide-ranging and illuminating discussion of the nature of party politics, ideological agendas, economic interests, old grudges, and structural obstacles to such cooperation. Finally, the author finds neither Fritz Fischer nor his critics wholly satisfactory in their explanations for the outbreak of World War I. His treatment of the war concentrates on war aims and domestic politics and amasses wonderful details that capture the texture of life on the home front.

This is not a perfect book. Its virtues are also its defects. Although grad students preparing for prelims who neglect this work do so at their peril, a more general readership is hard to envision. One problem is the scanting of narrative in favor of analysis. To be fair, Blackbourn covers a much longer period than Sheehan, in half as many pages. Something must be sacrificed. But this is not the major drawback, at least for me. Through nearly half the book, the author states an interpretive argument, usually a well-worn one, and usually better than the original framers of the position in question. He then always follows it with a version of the formula: "It is hard to quarrel with this verdict, although the case is less open-and-shut than it might appear." Repeatedly, he begins discussions with a solid generalization, then systematically eats away at it. The thesis and the antithesis are clear; the synthesis is sometimes a series of fine and very fine distinctions, likely to elude the reader's grasp. Ironically, the resulting vision of German history is too undifferentiated, too lacking in postulates, "laws of development," or thematic continuities. These are, of course, exactly what Blackbourn intends to destroy. But, considering the absence of conceptual "handles" along with the muted story line,

the question arises: can this book teach German history to the inexpert reader?

It is not clear to me that this lack of certitude is intentional, a decision that conforms to the author's philosophy of history. When he comes to the *Kaiserreich*, the area of his great expertise, the tone and method shift strikingly. Especially in Chapter Seven, a tour de force describing the "New Economic Order," Blackbourn speaks with great authority on the transformation of Germany into an urban industrial state and the premier economic power in Europe. He has strong opinions on the nature and influence of the *Verbaende* and their relationship to government. He politely but firmly restates and amplifies his objections to the *Sonderweg* school. On the question of the "feudalization of the bourgeoisie" in Chapter Eight, he maintains his hard line against the notion, granting far less validity to differing views than he habitually does in Parts I and II. In Part III, one of the most important historians of Germany speaks his mind.

I, for one, prefer the more assertive Blackbourn. Generalizations, definitive statements, and bold hypotheses need not be facile. They are necessary to our understanding of history, even if impermanent. We may live history as a seamless web, but we cannot understand it that way. Hajo Holborn regularly told his students that the function of the historian was to generalize without distorting. He never told us how difficult that would be.

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied in whole or in part, with proper attribution, as long as the copying is not-for-profit "fair use" for research, commentary, study, or teaching. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

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

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

**Citation:** Richard S. Levy. Review of Blackbourn, David, *The Long Nineteenth Century: A History of Germany: 1780-1918*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. September, 1998.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2349>

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).