



Lars Rosumek. *Die Kanzler und die Medien: Acht Porträts von Adenauer bis Merkel*. Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 2007. 325 pp. EUR 29.90 (paper), ISBN 978-3-593-38214-2.

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Spin Doctors and Media Chancellors in the FRG

Playing against the claim that Gerhard Schröder was the first German chancellor who “owed his office to the media” (*Frankfurter Rundschau*), or that the much-noted Schröder-Edmund Stoiber televised debates of fall 2002 somehow marked the collapse of West German public discourse into politics American-style, this book argues that West German chancellors eagerly engaged in media politics from Konrad Adenauer on. The Schröder-Stoiber debates hardly represented a grand trivialization of the political discourse of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), author Lars Rosumek claims, though that was indeed the story line in 2002. According to Rosumek, “Americanization” or modernization was well in place in the 1950s, when public relations media campaigns based on U.S. models already drove the relationship between government and the governed.

An accomplished communications consultant and public relations specialist, Rosumek shows that the notion of a “media chancellor” in West Germany goes back at least to the 1950s. To make his case, Rosumek traces the connections between the mass media and German political culture in detailed accounts of the administrations of Adenauer, Ludwig Erhard and Kurt Georg Kiesinger, Willy Brandt, Helmut Schmidt, Helmut Kohl, Schröder, and Angela Merkel (who receives comparatively brief treatment, not surprising for a book published in 2007). The book reconstructs the way each chancellor related to, tried to use, and in turn was used by journalists and the mass media. Each of these chapter-length studies concludes with a transcript of an interview the author conducted with a surviving media adviser who worked for these respective administrations; for a list of these men, see below.[1] These “conversations” have a *Spiegel*-esque ring, ending with the familiar tag line “Herr XYZ, ich danke Ihnen für dieses Gespräch.” Though the interviews were apparently recorded with a casual disregard for the conventions of oral history, they enliven each chapter

with entertaining anecdotes about practices and personalities and revealing accounts of the famous and forgotten.

At its best, Rosumek’s book does a solid job outlining the close connections among national politics, public relations, and the mass media—particularly television. He packs a lot of material into a relatively short book, starting with the 1950s, when Adenauer used opinion polls to shape media campaigns that “personalized the political” in broadly appealing ways. A “new television reality” emerged in the 1970s—building on the 1960s, when the numbers of televisions in West German households mushroomed—and Schmidt became the first “TV Chancellor,” because of his adroit ability to use television to shape his public image. Things were more difficult for Kohl. Rosumek reconstructs the mutual hostility between the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the media that dominated Kohl’s first term, when the chancellor crafted (or perhaps failed to dispel) his image as a folksy rural bumpkin. In a twist, Kohl successfully built on this image in the transitional election of 1994 to successfully present himself as a man of the people. As for Schröder, Rosumek argues somewhat harshly that the Social Democratic Party (SPD) chancellor was a “political chameleon” who craftily manipulated public opinion by presenting himself first as a best friend and then as a victim of the press.

Along the way, Rosumek calls attention to a major transformation in postwar media politics. From the 1950s into the 1970s, the public apparently took the links between political campaigns and their representation in the mass media more or less for granted; media response was an invisible aspect of the campaign trail. More recently the success or failure of a campaign’s media image itself became news. West German pundits and reporters increasingly expended much energy to construct analyses of a campaign’s public relations efforts and its effective-

ness in winning the media to their side. As Rosumek concludes, “the professionalism of the orchestration [of the media landscape] is itself orchestrated” for media consumption (p. 293). A similar trajectory is depressingly familiar in the United States.

As a straightforward primer on the evolving relationship between West German politicians and the mass media this book has much to recommend it. Yet Rosumek’s concluding remark that his book is meant to be “a plea for an understanding of the “history” of media politics falls flat (p. 294). This is a book oddly lacking in history, if one takes that to mean engagement with the books on similar topics written by professional historians or engagement with well-established historical narratives.

Rosumek rather naively buys into outdated notions of 1945 as a *Stunde Null*. “The foundation of the Federal Republic of Germany was in almost all regards a fragile new beginning, which could depend on nothing but the ruins out of which it emerged” he writes in the first sentences in the chapter on Adenauer. “The deep national-historical caesura of the total breakdown of 1945 is a world historical event without example” (p. 48). Such notions ignore entirely the numerous scholarly works focused on continuities across 1945. What would a chapter on Adolf Hitler as a “media chancellor” who “personalized the political” do to Rosumek’s story?

Moreover, the lessons of Joseph Goebbels were hardly lost on postwar politicians and media workers, but they are barely mentioned in this book. Rosumek is interested in democratic political systems, so perhaps it makes sense to excise the Nazi years. But at what cost? Rosumek overlooks significant continuities in personnel and ideologies between the Hitler and Adenauer eras. As Christina von Hodenberg has shown, many media workers kept their jobs across the transition. The notion of the “public sphere” itself was hotly contested between conservative “Schmidtians” who favored an organic and rather fascist view of the *Volk* and reformers who sought to liberalize the mass media, with Adenauer and his administration generally cleaving to the right.[2] This crucial political debate is lost in this account.

Rosumek’s insights into issues of modernization and Americanization are likewise overshadowed by his failure to engage the scholarly literature that might have put his assertions on firmer ground. Rosumek argues that there were indeed clear similarities between the politicization of the media in the United States and West Germany. What was actually going on, however, was not West German “Americanization” but rather a “universal remaking of traditional, country-specific qualities”

that the author believes accompanied the arrival of the mass media wherever it went across the globe. The term “Americanization,” he argues, should be replaced with the term “modernization,” which better captures this putatively universal process. Such a theoretical switch, Rosumek concludes, can lead to a more realistic understanding of the relationship between the United States and the FRG (pp. 30-31). The continuities in media effects across regions and/or chronologies are certainly worth pondering and may well be underplayed in a postmodern intellectual world more interested in fragmentation, difference, and “modernities.” But Rosumek’s assumptions fly in the face of any number of studies that portray Americanization as a subtle process of cultural interaction and others that challenge blanket definitions of modernization and modernity as useful interpretative concepts.[3]

In the end, however, theoretical blind spots are really not that important in a book whose strengths lie in its empirical narrative. Rosumek’s account sums up fifty years of West German media politics and includes intriguing first-hand accounts from people “who were there.” His focus on the chancellor’s office offers compelling and often dramatic accounts of West Germany’s most important leaders that underscore the importance of public relations for making and breaking individual careers. Readers seeking a scholarly approach grounded in the secondary literature or a more sophisticated theorization of the Americanization and modernization of postwar West Germany will simply look elsewhere.

Notes

[1]. The list of seven interviewees includes: Klaus-Otto Skibowski, public relations man in the Adenauer administration; Klaus Harpprecht, speechwriter for Willy Brandt; Klaus Bölling, press secretary for Helmut Schmidt; Eduard Ackermann, chief of staff for Helmut Kohl; Andreas Fritzenkötter, media expert in the Kohl administration; Uwe-Karsten Heye, press secretary for Gerhard Schröder; and Ulrich Wilhelm, press secretary for Angela Merkel.

[2]. Christina von Hodenberg, *Konsens und Krise: Eine Geschichte der westdeutschen Medienöffentlichkeit 1945-1973* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2006). It is also worth noting that despite his deep interest in television’s effects on politics, Rosumek overlooks the most basic historical literature on the topic, including the voluminous works of Knut Hackett and the indispensable Helmut Kreuzer and Christian W. Thomsen, eds., *Geschichte des Fernsehens in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, vols. 1-5 (Munich: W. Fink, 1993-1994).

[3]. The literature is massive on both counts. On West German “modernity” see among many others Axel Schildt, *Moderne Zeiten: Freizeit, Massenmedien und 'Zeitgeist' in der Bundesrepublik der 50er Jahre* (Hamburg: Christians, 1995); for a challenge to the concept itself see again among others Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), especially pp. 113-149.

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