

Hans-Ulrich Wehler. *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte: vol. 5: Von der Gründung der beiden deutschen Staaten bis zur Vereinigung 1949-1990*. München: C.H. Beck Verlag, 2008. xviii + 529 pp. (cloth), ISBN 978-3-406-52171-3.

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## Amazing Changes, Arresting Continuities

This fifth and final volume of Hans-Ulrich Wehler's magisterial survey of "German social history" since 1700 focuses chiefly on West Germany, with some perspective on East Germany, in this "short half" of the twentieth century. Wehler makes a persuasive case for using 1990 as the end of the twentieth century: the constellation of world politics was completely reshaped by the collapse of the Soviet Union in the following year; within Europe the two Germanys came back together; globalization attained unprecedented levels, notably in the emergence of China and India; class differences in the capitalist western countries that began to deepen in the 1980s had begun to solidify. And there was a striking new emphasis on religion, of which Islam's fundamentalist extremists alone have been inimical to the West, marked by the creation of the theocracy of Iran and the destruction of 9/11. What 1990 demonstrated for Germans, and all other observers, Wehler asserts, was that the Federal Republic (FRG) had created a new state that was genuinely viable, and sufficiently so (as we can easily agree two decades later) to absorb and gradually assimilate its former neighbor simply in the form of five new German federal states.

Wehler's analysis proceeds along four axes—the three Weberian ones of politics, economics, and culture, cross-cut with social inequality—and he devotes a section to each of these prefaced by two sections on, respectively, the political underpinnings of the two new states and the turbulent demographic changes in the aftermath of the war. Since the basic political decisions had already been

made by 1949, Wehler covers the more general "political context and circumstances of the two new states" in section 1. West Germany had the good fortune to be embedded in the western world just at a moment when, between 1950 and 1973, this world experienced a "golden age." This participation was basically made possible by the British and American occupying forces, which initially steered a renaissance of political life in the western sectors and then gave them their joint independence. Most thought recovery would take thirty years, but West Germany was able to conjure a *Wirtschaftswunder* (economic miracle) in a mere five.

The new German "basic law" rested on the familiar past and the lessons of its failures—the chancellor was still at center but he could be removed only by a strictly defined majority vote of the parliament. Entirely new was the Federal Constitutional Court, modeled on the U.S. Supreme Court. But the new country was lucky, Wehler contends, to have Konrad Adenauer, who had national credibility as an opponent of the Prussian power elite and particularly of its military, and was smart to keep him for fourteen years.

The political parties adapted. The Christian Democratic Union (CDU) became bipartisan (both Catholic and Protestant) and the Social Democratic Party (SPD) became a broader people's party, too, as it accepted a market economy and western integration. The Free Democratic Party (FDP) meanwhile was pretty heterogeneous,

and included libertarians. The Greens only emerged in the 1980s. Pressure groups representing industry and agriculture reemerged. These were countered only by the fact that a large number (one third in 1980) of employees joined unions and soon got West Germans the best wages in Europe. Thus corporatism persists, which Wehler rightly deploras.

The pre-existing bureaucracy was taken over pretty much as it was. Admitting that 65 percent of all higher bureaucrats had been party members, Adenauer defended this as a “pragmatic” decision to retain their expertise and give them “a second chance.” The benefit of this was that it did provide the necessary efficiency to facilitate the economic miracle, given the chaotic postwar circumstances, and it also, Wehler stresses, prevented the kind of radicalization witnessed after WWI and thus enabled the “democracy miracle.”

The political culture was shaped, to begin with, by the Nuremberg trials because these for the first time showed all Germans what had really gone on. The major trial punished twenty-two leaders; more than five thousand others were tried but most of these eventually got off one way or another. There was a strong desire to draw a *Schlussstrich*, to make a clean break with the past. But there was a large literature, Günter Grass’s *Tin Drum* (1959) best known, that sought to keep this past, and its aftermath, in the public’s consciousness.

In the GDR, the old bureaucracy was replaced with party loyalists, which along with the dispossession of the nobility and the wealthy, created the most sweeping change of elites, especially since it also brought in a younger generation. 118 Nazis were put to death and hundreds more into Soviet internment camps. The forced fusion of the SPD with the German Communist Party (KPD) into the Socialist Unity Party (SED) was obviously a communist totalitarianization of power, as the violent suppression of the 1953 uprising palpably demonstrated. Huge numbers continued to flee until the Berlin Wall was built, after another 199,000 left in 1960. (And of course these were the most professional, youngest, and otherwise capable.)

In section 2, Wehler depicts the era’s unprecedented demographic upheavals: After the war eight million refugees came from East Germany and Eastern Europe, followed by three million from the Soviet Occupied Zone/German Democratic Republic (GDR) before the building of the wall. But the refugees benefited the new republic by the rich increase in “human capital” (22 percent of the workforce) they contributed to the eco-

nomie miracle. Germany has been an “immigration nation” since the late nineteenth century, though it has only recently and then begrudgingly acknowledged this. The continuing need for workers led to agreements, first with Italy, then Spain, Greece, and Portugal, and finally Turkey in 1961. By 1973 (the high and end point of the economic miracle) 2.6 million *Gastarbeiter* (guest workers) amounted to 12 percent of the workforce. Since most of the Turks come from Anatolia which is still 33 percent illiterate and 100 percent Islamic they do not find much inclusion and hence have wound up as a separate subculture in its own ghettos. And while a many of those from Italy, etc. returned to participate in their own countries’ economic upturns, the Turks had nothing comparable to go back to.

The GDR demographic history falls into two clear phases: mass flight from 1949 until 1961; steady seepage since. This made the GDR, despite its pro-family policies, the only European country with a declining population—from 19.1 million in 1949 to only 16.4 million in 1989. Staying there produced the highest suicide rate, second only to Finland and an alcoholism rate aspiring to Russia’s.

Section 3 addresses the economy. The reasons the FRG could recover so rapidly, Wehler correctly notes, were both internal and international: Its industry was highly modern, but it took the Korean War to gear this up and put the country back into international business and a global economy. By 1973 incomes had tripled and this enabled the government to sustain the *Lastenausgleich*—a huge transfer of incomes—that put retirees on livable incomes (60 percent of their working incomes)—one of several significant factors that legitimized the new government.

In the GDR wages had gone up too and Erich Honecker began his reign with further increases—though as would become evident post-1989—there had been no money to support these increases. It was all borrowed, but this gerontocracy wholly refused such reforms as promoted by Mikhail Gorbachev to make itself more economically viable.

In section 4 Wehler turns to social inequality as determined by “power, economics, and culture.” While the existing elites had obviously been completely discredited by the outcome of the war, after the currency reform the market-dependent classes began to emerge again along with the successors to the *Bildungs* bourgeoisie—the academic intelligentsia, doctors and lawyers, and the more elite functionaries in the bureaucracy and the universi-

ties. Much has been said about a fairly level middle class or even a relatively classless society in which individualism and “lifestyle” were everything, but he shows clearly that classes have persisted along pretty traditional lines.

Thus, though per capita income grew from DM 8,600 to 36,000 between 1950 and 1989, the basic distribution pattern remains firm: By 1989 the top quintile had 43.6 percent of income and the bottom, 7.4 percent (50.4 versus 3.4 in the United States), with the distribution of wealth, as usual, even more drastic—63 percent versus 4.5 percent. This economic elite is fairly constant and closed (family ownership still plays a large role), while the political one is a bit more porous. But this is not the case when one looks at administrative elites: as recently as 1990, 80 percent of top managers (and 90 percent of the board chairs) came from upper bourgeois families.

The biggest change has been in the service sector and its *Angestellten* (“white-collar” workers), which has grown from 16 percent of the workforce at the beginning of our period to 40 percent at its end. The working class has changed dramatically. Thanks to the economic miracle they were able to enjoy full employment at high wages, which they were able to sustain through codetermination, though they still make less (82 percent of the per capita average versus 115 percent for the *Angestellten*). While they thus have relatively good consumer power, they nonetheless remain within their own class and marry within it. Children of specialized workers, however, are increasingly joining the ranks of the *Angestellten* as that sector grows and the other declines. This is less likely for the large army of *Gastarbeiter*.

Wehler then documents a decline, which he justly deems far insufficient, of discrimination against women, in work, education, politics, and family, observing that the increasing “feminization” of the work world represents one of the greatest social changes of our time. But women’s pay still averages only 70 percent of men’s. And their representation at the top is ludicrously low—.5 percent: 12 women among 2,286 men in the 626 largest corporations. They are 59 percent of the teachers, but at best 10 percent of the principals, and so on. Their position has, however, improved in politics, with the Greens unsurprisingly leading with 36 percent and the SPD with 29, the others less.

It has always been assumed that education is the way to a more egalitarian society, but there is still a strong class factor although the children of *Angestellten* are going to university at greater rates, which has been the biggest factor in the increase of students from some two

hundred thousand in the late 1950s to almost two million today. Of these 44 percent belong to this group; those of *Beamten* make up 24 percent, and those of workers a mere 7 percent. (With these data it is important to keep in mind the relative proportions of the groups in the work force.)

The GDR’s “classless” society had a very distinct social hierarchy: The gerontocracy (40 members) was the absolute elite, followed by the nomenklatura (520-600 people), and the “operative service” class with approximately 250,000 members in mid-level leadership positions within the party and the “people’s enterprises,” along with the top professors, engineers, etc. Quite a few of the “new intelligentsia” were able to rise into this class because of the huge vacuum of talent left by the exodus to the West; this bit of opportunity gave the GDR a certain internal legitimacy for a while, and the beneficiaries of it bequeathed these benefits to their children, thus entrenching inequality. What made people more “equal” here were the initial expropriation along with a certain leveling of incomes (enough to prove a disincentive to bureaucratic leadership), social security and equal if very modest health services, the limited availability of goods, the inadequacies of the infrastructure, the increasing pollution, and, of course, the impossibility of traveling. Given its huge loss of human capital, the GDR made much more effort to put its women to work so that by 1989, 91 percent of them were employed. But the SED remained a “men’s club,” and while women could work in all kinds of fields they were almost never the bosses.

Section 5 focuses on politics. This new state in West Germany was able to fully legitimate and institutionalize itself chiefly, as he stresses repeatedly, because of the economic growth between 1950 and 1973 which cannot be overrated in social-psychological terms either: The economic miracle promoted a high level of identification with the state. To avoid the vulnerabilities of the Weimar Republic, the new government had been made “checkable” by not only the new constitutional court but also by the “big four” organizations of industry, employers, farmers, and unions, which were given greater access to the pertinent ministries; by the national bank which can exercise a veto power; and by a federal system (though more unitary than the American one). Similarly, a more critical “fourth estate” developed after the war, with Rudolf Augstein’s British-licensed *Spiegel* news magazine perhaps the best illustration, because the famous 1962 “*Spiegel* Affair” vindicated the freedom of the press: Most instructively, the public sided with the *Spiegel*, suggesting that a liberal-democratic *Weltanschauung* had

begun to emerge in West Germany, as Wehler is correct to observe, citing Ralf Dahrendorf's 1965 *Society and Democracy in Germany*.

History has been more important in Germany than in any other western country, perhaps because, as he aptly notes, there is so much more that calls for historical explanation. The big *Historikerstreit* (Historians' Dispute) of 1986/87 featured one writer who contended that Adolf Hitler had saved western civilization from Soviet tyranny and another who distinguished the noble *Wehrmacht* (army) soldiers from that small cadre of SS (*Schutzstaffel*) murderers. In addition to Wehler's own vehement attack, the prominent public philosopher Jürgen Habermas fulminated at these misrepresentations of history, and the widespread support his argument enjoyed likewise demonstrated this new German political culture. (It had only been since the 1979 American TV *Holocaust* "soap opera," as he somewhat infelicitously labels it, that Germans got any real idea of this.) He downplays the significance of the 1968 movement and stresses instead its extremist outgrowth in the Baader-Meinhof gang whose kidnapping and eventual murder of the president of the employers' association created the worst internal crisis the FRG had had to suffer, but Wehler contends, Chancellor Helmut Schmidt saved the republic by handling it adroitly.

The events of 1989-1990 that brought about the fusion of the two German states he attributes to the interaction of five forces: First, there was Gorbachev promoting reform and refusing military interference in satellite countries. Second, George H. W. Bush and James Baker favored unification. Third, there was the irresistible force of the East German population, whose rising also brought about the fourth, the rapid demise of the ruling system, the total decline of its authority, and the discrediting of its legitimacy, as attested by the complete incapacity of the party or state apparatus to act in the event. (This regime's grip on power was not such, for example, that they could risk what the Chinese had done at Tiananmen Square just a little earlier that year.) Fifth, the Bonn regime was able to act and had prepared for this eventuality by talking with Gorbachev so that when this "window of opportunity" opened between November 1989 and May 1990, Helmut Kohl seized the moment (and had he tarried this window would have been shut—Gorbachev did not last much longer).

Wehler rightly stresses the role of the GDR population: In the 1980s it had about half the income of its western counterpart (though they could not buy much

of anything with it) and of course they could watch the West Germans on television every night. So there was huge latent opposition that was just waiting for the critical moment. Handfuls of dissidents participated in the peace movement groups that met in church basements across the country, which amounted to a sort of opposition. This latent crisis turned "blatant" in the summer of 1989 when thousands traveled to West Germany via Hungary and Czechoslovakia—this was the critical match that lit the fire—and he gives all the details. The growth of the demonstrations was amazing—but so was the fact that only approximately 10 percent of the Lutheran pastors participated.

The party's heroic claim to be the only ones to oppose the Nazis had faded very rapidly, not just because of its dubiousness (furious purging at the outset was followed by much pragmatic compromising) but also because of its total everyday irrelevance. They did have real socialized medicine, though for lack of skills and other resources they were not able to do much for their population, which had much shorter life expectancy than its western counterpart. Overstaffing masked unemployment. Retirees got very little—and they were always welcome to go west. Unlike the Nazis the SED could not mobilize any popular support because it was always viewed as a foreign imposition. As such it produced a "culture of organized irresponsibility"—since your superiors were essentially infallible, when things went wrong obviously nobody was at fault. The political system, as Wehler rightly assesses it, had no correctives, no learning process, built into it. Those who wanted to get into the system and get ahead could do so only by doing what their superiors did.

The party was not able to afford "home improvements." Cities were falling apart, more than half of all streets were in bad shape, the telephone system was antiquated. Worse than anything was the pollution that produced all sorts of illnesses. Requests to leave had been rising steadily—from 20,000 in the mid-1980s to 113,000 in early 1989. Criticism, though not open, was growing, articulated in the basements of those few brave pastors. (One of the problems GDR opposition folks had, as Wehler nicely pinpoints, was that, unlike their fellows in other East Bloc countries, they could not claim to want to return to their own original national state, which would be taken to mean West Germany—and hence prison for treason.) The Stasi reckoned there to be no more than 2,500 dissidents. Yet the palpable unrest led the regime to increase the Stasi; in 1989 it had 91,000 employees and 180,000 "informal coworkers" (this for a state of 16 mil-

lion; the Gestapo only had 9,000 employees for a population of 80 million).

Section 6 focuses on culture. As problematic as cultural history is, Wehler sticks to his largely institutional approach, beginning with the churches: Though it was clear that Hitler could not have risked alienating one or both of them, neither the Catholics (he aptly cites Rolf Hochhuth's 1963 docudrama on *The Deputy*) nor the Protestants provided any substantial opposition, and after the war they seemed to be trying to outdo one another issuing *Persilscheine* (whitewash certificates) to former Nazis.

The schools experienced the greatest expansion in German educational history, with those finishing the *Abitur* ("college-prep" high school) rising from 4 to 26 percent. This was because more of the new *Angestellten* wanted their children to get the *Abitur* but it also undermined the *Gesamtschule* ("comprehensive" school) democratization movement. The period also saw the creation of twenty-four new universities to accommodate the 1.7 million students there would be in 1990. Now more than 20 percent of each age cohort go to university (still less than the approximate one third typical of other European states), with the portion of women increasing from 27 to 41 percent.

On the literary/publishing market Wehler observes that this has grown exponentially too, despite television, with sixty-six thousand books published a year. Paperbacks helped democratize literary culture, though 33 percent of adults own no books whatsoever and only 5 percent are regular buyers. While there are still hundreds of dailies, there is nothing with the national reach of the *New York Times*—the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* is perhaps the closest, but the tabloid *Bild* is by far the most popular.

The GDR marginalized the churches as much as possible, with remnants surviving only thanks to generous financial support from their western counterparts. Education, which was taken seriously to produce new socialist citizens, was mandatory, on the Soviet model, through the tenth grade, for better indoctrination, and sport was tied in with pre-military education. The six traditional universities and fifteen technical schools were augmented by twenty-five new institutions, including three medical schools (since so many doctors had left). The intelligentsia, such as it was, made sure its children went to these schools—to the degree that by the end these made up 84 percent of students.

That concludes his survey. In a longish "Epilog" Wehler writes that there's been so much specialized scholarship on Germany from 1700 until today, it seemed worthwhile to him to undertake a synthesis (he began this project in 1981, planning a fairly substantial single volume). While political factors have changed amazingly over this whole period, the social stratifications remain remarkably similar. Given the *Kanzlerdiktatur* of Bismarck and then that of Hitler, the FRG is all the more of a bright spot in German history. That does not mean, *a la* Heinrich von Treitschke, that we are finished. If this final volume teaches us one thing, he concludes, it is the dynamics and differentiating power of a market society in which powerful disparities between the market-determined upper, middle, and under classes have opened up and seem to be continuing to widen. While the erstwhile proletariat has turned into a class of employees with a right to codetermination, the growth of a new ethnic subculture has emerged in ghetto-like circumstances in which there's the threat of Islamic fundamentalism. This he rightly wants to see addressed with carefully targeted integration policies.

Wehler has given us an impressively embracing synthesis, but there are some things to nuzzle about. Since this is the final volume and covers, as it were, his own lived history, it is also a tad crankily opinionated. His depiction of the GDR is thin and unequivocally negative—but perhaps deservedly so. The treatment of culture, too, is thin—nothing about the arts, literature, theatre—but there he would probably point us to the wealth of cultural histories and specialized studies available. And there is much to be criticized about the Adenauer era, but we'll probably have to grant him that, given the previous experience, any new Germany was going to require some authoritarian oversight. Which leads to another point: It may be true that 1968 was no big deal, but Wehler fails to note the significant "culture shift" that came out of it, so richly documented by Ronald Inglehart, that turned people toward more post-materialist and environmental values as well as toward increasing participatory democracy. If he's super-positive about the success of the new German state, he remains rightly hypercritical of its inequalities. But that makes him wrong to be concerned that the social welfare state has been extended too far in Germany—which was done, as noted, to buy the people's trust—so that people feel less of a sense of responsibility for themselves. If anything, it would seem we need a little more of that welfare state to empower people to diminish some of those inequalities.

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