

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Thomas Weber. *Our Friend "The Enemy": Elite Education in Britain and Germany before World War I*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007. 360 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-0014-6.

Reviewed by Amy M. Harris (Department of History, Purdue University)

Published on H-Education (August, 2011)

Commissioned by Jonathan Anuik



In *Our Friend "The Enemy"* Thomas Weber examines the role of nationalism and internationalism in student culture at two of Europe's most prestigious universities—Oxford and Heidelberg—in the years preceding the First World War. Arguing that past studies of pre-1914 Anglo-German relations have been tainted by “teleological reduction,” based on paradigms of national exceptionalism, Weber presents readers with a lucid, well-researched, and convincing study that complicates and expands readers’ understanding of the role of nationalism and internationalism in early twentieth-century elite universities in Great Britain and Germany (p. 4). Rather than employing long-held notions of historical antagonism, Weber’s investigation of elite culture proposes that, at least within the realms of Oxford and Heidelberg, British and German students shared many more cultural similarities than differences. By questioning the paradigms of both British exceptionalism and German Sonderweg, the idea that Germany’s “illiberal” modernization inevitably led to the rise of Nazism, Weber provides readers with a study both comparative and transnational in scope, a study that seeks to redefine how scholars view the era leading up to the First World War.

Weber begins his study by examining the national contexts of Oxford and Heidelberg. Founded in the Middle Ages, both Oxford and Heidelberg possess rich histories within their respective realms. Yet the trajectories of these two universities were quite divergent. Nestled within the English countryside, Oxford attracted many of Britain’s most elite young men with not only the promise of a classical education but also entrée into the civil service. Heidelberg, by comparison, focused much of its resources on scientific research and attracted many of the

leading European scholars of its day. Beyond the curriculum, student populations at each university varied considerably. While Oxford attracted mainly students with privileged backgrounds, Heidelberg, and German universities in general, attracted large numbers of bourgeoisie students seeking to enter into new professions. Despite these differences, the scholarly reputations of both Oxford and Heidelberg attracted foreign students to their respective communities. Moreover, each university produced many of the political elites who would govern during the years preceding the First World War.

The second chapter, intriguingly titled “Transnational Nationalists,” explores Anglo-German life at each university. Mining the rich archives of each institution’s student publications, Weber vividly examines cultural exchanges between the two universities. Noting that contrary to popular belief, and until recently scholarly belief, cultural exchange between German and British students thrived during the decades preceding the outbreak of war. Weber goes so far as to claim that both “Anglophilia” among German academics and “Germanophilia” among British academics greatly outweighed nationalistic tensions often assumed to be present at each university. Beyond intellectual discourse, Weber uses evidence of a significant German student community at Oxford as well as an elite British student community at Heidelberg to refute the existence of widespread antagonism between students attending the two universities. These exchanges, rather than fanning the flames of historical rivalry, sought to reaffirm strong ties between Great Britain and the recently formed German Empire. As the royal houses of Heidelberg and Britain were historically linked so too was the future

prosperity of each nation. Weber challenges readers to consider whether German nationalism and Anglophilia could exist not as mutually exclusive but mutually reinforcing cultural phenomena strengthening the German Empire and promising, in the words of Cecil Rhodes, a new, “‘Germanic era of human history’” (p. 63).

After examining the formation of nationalism among Anglo-German students, Weber next turns his attention to what many scholars have assumed to be its logical culmination: militarism.[1] Weber turns this argument on its head, proposing that military training was a long-held tradition among both British and German elites and, therefore, should not be interpreted as evidence of belligerence. Chapter 3 explores sports culture at both universities, including such activities as military and paramilitary training and dueling. While few students had any formal military experience before the outbreak of the First World War, sports training in British, university-sponsored clubs and German, semi-private student corporations provided essential experience in training and fighting that ultimately affected military prowess. Voluntary associations, such as the Oxford University Officer Training Corps, offered young Brits the opportunity to hone skills that they would employ on the battlefield, while German sports corporations offered students training in a variety of sports, including swimming and gymnastics. Weber focuses his analysis on a comparison of two sports: rowing and dueling, each rife with nationalistic connotations, and argues that an analysis of these two sports serves as a fitting allegory to the popular conceptions linked to British and German militarism. Rowing, seen as a gentleman’s sport, seemed indicative of British refinement and sobriety whereas dueling and its persistence in German culture, as argued by both Norbert Elias (*The Germans: Power Struggles and the Development of Habitus in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* [1996]) and Peter Gay (*Cultivation of Hatred: The Bourgeois Experience Victoria to Freud*, vol. 3 [1994]), was seen as evidence of the “uncivilized” and ultimately violent nature of German society. But, as the author asserts, when one takes a closer look not at the universities and their official curricula but at the Oxford voluntary associations and Heidelberg student corporations that existed outside the formal bounds of each university, one is struck by the similarities in each group, including the sizable Anglophile and Germanophile membership of each. Thus, for students at Oxford and their counterparts at Heidelberg, sports training served as a means to bolster both individual and national strength without necessarily identifying “an inside or outside enemy” (p. 115).

Following his analysis of students’ national and transnational affiliations, Weber shifts his focus from student assemblage to student identity at each institution. Using the link between the “cult of militarism” and masculine identity as a transition, the latter half of the book examines three dominant discourses that shaped student identity: sexuality, gender, and race. This change in focus signifies a dramatic shift in the author’s analysis as power and its distribution in both British and German universities becomes “front and center” in the last three chapters. Weber seeks to give visibility to sexual, gendered, and racial identities, identifications that existed beyond the limits of hegemonic power, by examining the construction of social norms. In probing student sexuality, Weber explores the construction and implications of heteronormative desire at each institution. Using student correspondence, student publications, and satirical novels as his main sources, Weber constructs conflicting views of sexuality at each institution. Central to his examination of heterosexuality is the reception of women in each community. Although female students faced limited accessibility to Oxford and Heidelberg, male students and their interactions with, and sentiments about, women both inside and outside each campus makes readers aware of dominant, heterosexual norms. Moreover, Weber questions George Mosse’s assertion that notions of “respectable sexuality” were unquestionably linked to the rise of nationalism, arguing that Mosse’s examples were “highly untypical” of realities at each university and, by extension, in German and British societies (pp. 137, 142). Weber’s evidence shows that while each university had restrictions regarding physical contact between members of the opposite sex, “German university culture allowed such relationships to happen, while any such relationship was forbidden and potentially punished at Oxford” (p. 151). Weber goes on to note the uproar and shame over the Oscar Wilde trial to challenge Oxford’s reputation as a haven for same-sex desire.

Weber turns his focus from the bedroom to the classroom in the following chapter, examining the experiences of female students at each institution. As with his analysis of sexuality, here too the author asserts that the traditional view of German “Teutonic backwardness” toward women in academia simply does not prove true (p. 163).[2] In fact, as early as 1900, women were able to fully matriculate in Baden universities. Before this, wives of foreign students were able to study alongside their husbands, with doctorates awarded to women as early as the 1890s. Oxford, by comparison, could boast no similar feat, with the first honorary doctorates bestowed on

women in the 1920s. While women could study at Oxford as early as the 1870s, women were not recognized as full students and were often segregated from male colleagues. Yet one cannot simply label Oxford's reluctance to admit women as British phallocentrism. If one examines the whole of British academia, one sees that Oxford was the exception to the rule, with most British universities having sizable, female student populations by the turn of the twentieth century. If anything, Oxford's reluctance to admit female students was indicative of elite misogyny rather than national sentiment.

Weber ends his analysis by exploring the reception of foreign students at both institutions. More specifically, he probes the existence of anti-Semitism and xenophobia at each institution during the prewar era. It is in this final chapter that Weber most directly challenges the teleology of past historiography. While there is no question of the existence of anti-Semitism in prewar Europe, Weber contests the assumption that German universities functioned as havens of intolerance. The relatively high ratios of Jewish professors at Heidelberg and other liberal German universities stood in stark contrast to the small number of Jewish academics not only at Oxford but also at all British universities. Although anti-Semitic rhetoric was certainly present at Heidelberg, Weber links Germany's comparably large Jewish population with the greater visibility of anti-Semitic sentiments. Moreover, Weber argues that Oxford's small Jewish population did not correlate to the existence of a "Philo-Semitic" culture, quite the contrary. The author points to anticolonial rhetoric in student publications that championed restricting the admittance of Indian students as evidence of xenophobia at Oxford. In addition, Weber cites efforts to restrict Jewish membership in student associations and corporations at both universities as proof of the existence of anti-Semitism throughout elite European institutions, not only those in Germany. Thus, Weber uses this chapter to clearly and strongly reiterate that the rise of National Socialism in interwar Germany was a result of a variety of historical events and circumstances rather than an unavoidable cultural aversion to Jewishness.

*Our Friend "The Enemy"* is a commendable piece of scholarly work. With his comparative, transnational approach, Weber illustrates the promise of incorporating many different lines of inquiry into one cohesive work. The methodological implications of this approach are nearly limitless and reflect what Weber calls the "interwoven reality of life" (p. 3). By emphasizing the connected and sometimes reciprocal nature of political, social, economic, and cultural factors in understanding his-

torical events, Weber argues for a holistic and nonbinary approach to comparative history. Despite the exceptional nature of the majority of this study, careful readers might find areas of contention with the author's narrative and assertions, notably, the author's treatment of nationalism and sexuality. Though it is understandable, and perhaps unavoidable, that Weber's treatment of sexuality is interwoven with a fair amount of gendered analysis, his discussion of the reception of women at each university is preceded by a significant discussion of gendered discourse aimed at female students, yet he fails to give concrete dates pertaining to women's acceptance into each institution until well into the subsequent chapter. This leaves the reader pondering the question while trying to focus on the analysis at hand. And while I do not contest his assertion that Mosse's examples were atypical, I do question Weber's assertion that student sexuality was not linked to nationalism. If, according to the author, militarism could exist without directing its ambitions at any particular enemy, could the same be said about nationalism? How could adopting a non-adversarial view of nationalism, perhaps even a transnational view of nationalism, complicate the author's analysis of student sexuality at each university? While these questions may fall outside the scope of Mosse's original study, pursuit of such areas could have been a valuable avenue of inquiry for a book that seeks to dispel long-held historical misconceptions and breakdown scholarly boundaries.

Nevertheless, *Our Friend "The Enemy"* is an excellent study of elite, educational culture at Oxford and Heidelberg during the decades preceding the First World War. Weber's study emphasizes the importance of both scholarly sobriety and innovation in approaching one's subject. Moreover, his focus on education, class consciousness, and gender emphasizes the complicated and complex process of identity formation that cannot possibly be contained by teleological paradigms, making it an essential read in the fields of the history of elite education in Europe and early twentieth-century Anglo-German relations.

#### Notes

[1]. See Wolfram Wette, "Der Militarismus und die deutschen Kriege," in *Schule der Gewalt: Militarismus in Deutschland 1871-1945*, ed. Wolfram Wette (Berlin: Aufbau Taschenbuch Verlag, 2005), 9-30.

[2]. See Thomas Neville Bonner, *To the Ends of the Earth: Woman's Search for Education in Medicine* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

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

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

**Citation:** Amy M. Harris. Review of Weber, Thomas, *Our Friend "The Enemy": Elite Education in Britain and Germany before World War I*. H-Education, H-Net Reviews. August, 2011.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=32975>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.