

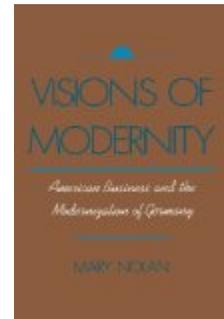
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Mary Nolan. *Visions of Modernity: American Business and the Modernization of Germany*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994. x + 324 pp. \$128.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-507021-7; \$45.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-508875-5.

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Trade Unionist A. Braunthal wrote in 1926, “In view of the current economic situation, there can only be one opinion about the necessity of rationalization. The only question is what is meant by rationalization” (71). As Mary Nolan demonstrates, this positive yet ambiguous opinion on “rationalization” characterized German society throughout the Weimar era. It was also a major component of Germany’s tenuous embrace of modernity. Nolan presents a nuanced, complex picture of the ideology of rationalization, which in the German mind was connected with “Americanism” and “Fordism,” and of attempts to apply that ideology to the specifics of German society. Nolan closely examines production and consumption on both the shop floor and the kitchen floor; the thoughts and policies of officials, engineers, industrialists, trade unionists, and bourgeois reformers; and the effects of rationalization policy across gender and class lines. She sheds new light on a number of ongoing discussions, including that on the relationship of modernity and modernization to a wide range of issues concerning interwar Germany. These issues include the connection between business, labor, corporatist potential, and the ultimate foreclosure of political and economic possibilities for Weimar; continuities and discontinuities of industrial practices as related to the broader political scene; and the international discussion which centered on the implications of rationalization for different national settings.

Nolan illuminates the love-hate attitude Germans held toward America and Americanism, which was related to the undesirability and impossibility of wholesale application of US-style rationalization to Germany. This difficulty in application was also related to deep (though often unacknowledged) differences in long-term vision and opinions regarding the purpose of rationaliza-

tion among the very diverse segments of German society which embraced the concept in principle. Industrialists and trade unionists alike registered great “‘technological optimism’” (39) – a belief in a utopia achievable through the science of technology. This shared belief initially led to improved potential for corporatist arrangements and, partially, to mutual perception of a positive, cooperative relationship even in economically unstable times. But attempts to apply rationalization soon raised the question of what exactly was to be rationalized (machinery and/or the motions of workers), what the short-term ends were to be (increased productivity and/or increased wage levels and/or increased consumption) and what the long-term implications were to be. Some industrialists envisioned a control that surpassed that of Wilhelmine “yellow” factory regimes, while trade unionists of all stripes balked at the specter of dehumanizing time-and-motion studies. If industrialists’ eyes shone with prospects for a capitalist utopia of efficiency, Social Democrats heralded the coming of socialism through rationalization (begun in the form of decreased work time), more “healthfully” enacted work, and higher wages.

Ultimately, the German Institute for Technical Labor Training (DINTA), which was independent from industry but which in the end served its vision of rationalization, helped give primacy to industry’s vision. DINTA sent its engineers to rationalize (in ominous terms) by “creat[ing] a new worker” (179), practicing “psychotechnics,” “human management,” and “Menschenfuehrung,” rather than concerning themselves with machine design and its potential to shorten the work day. At the same time, DINTA helped to mitigate concerns that rationalism as “Americanism” clashed intolerably with German cultural mores. To some degree it reconciled the

concomitant “deskilling” with “Qualitaetsarbeit,” “Berufsethos,” and “joy in work.” The role of the engineer as rationalization expert was contested in Germany but DINTA itself thrived. Indeed, DINTA stretched its tentacles from the workplace to the home, with significant consequences for gender relations and consumer culture as well as for the sphere of production. Nolan draws out the disparate visions of rationalization to examine their implications for consumption in this “underconsuming” society and for the welfare state, while also demonstrating the winners and losers in the rationalization process.

German society across class and other divides agreed on the importance and desirability of rationalization; and it was this agreement which elevated the process to such importance. Yet disparate ideas on what rationalization actually meant created insuperable societal divisions – divisions which aided the National Socialist cause. Moreover, the ultimate triumph of DINTA’s view of rationalization meshed all too well with National Socialist visions of modernization. Thus, by the time of the 1928 Ruhr lockout, it became clear that rationalization had become a point of serious difference between industry and labor leaders; this difference played a significant

role in the well-known story of industry’s decision to break off cooperative, corporatist relations, and to renege on former agreements with labor. The Depression served only to entrench divergent views of rationalization, and, as the crisis deepened, it pushed industry and labor further apart. Nolan suggests further that although DINTA’s achievements may have helped workers to distance themselves from Nazi political ideology, the apolitical and individualistic emphasis DINTA successfully preached ultimately served to stabilize the Nazi regime (205). Nolan makes clear on a variety of fronts that Germany’s particular take on “Americanism” ultimately created a society ripe for Nazification.

Thus Nolan demonstrates that an examination of the adoption and adaptation of rationalization, as a major component in Germany’s complex relationship with modernity, is central to an understanding of Weimar’s successes, its collapse, and its replacement with National Socialism. This is an important book; moreover, while the topic is a difficult one, the volume is written and organized with a clarity and precision (as well as a healthy dose of humor) which makes it accessible for classroom use as well.

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