Traveling the Twisted Road of German Conservation

The middle-class movement to preserve the unique customs, traditions, and rural landscapes of the German Heimat has attracted considerable attention from historians since the publication of path-breaking works by Celia Applegate, Edeltraud Klueting, and Raymond Dominick in the early 1990s. Leading conservationists’ support of the Third Reich, the passage of the first nationwide conservationist law (Reichsnaturschutzgesetz) in 1935, and conservationist involvement in some of the regime’s genocidal imperialist planning for the occupied East during the war have sparked a great deal of critical inquiry into the ideology and ethics of early, Heimat-centered environmentalism.[1] With this extraordinarily detailed Habilitationsschrift on Heimat and nature protection from the Wilhelmine era to the postwar period of division, Willi Oberkrome has written the most ambitious study of this topic to date.

Due to Oberkrome’s complex analytical method, a short review cannot summarize adequately his narrative of twentieth-century Naturschutz. The book incorporates an overarching chronological narrative that, in fact, focuses most thoroughly and originally on Weimar and beyond, despite the title. The author’s approach is complex because he undertakes comparisons of ideology and practice on four different levels. First, Oberkrome compares the national conservationist leadership with that of regional groups, demonstrating that the latter tended logically to think in terms of protecting the interests and allegedly unique characteristics of the regional Heimat. Second, he contrasts the regional movement in Westfalen-Lippe with that of Thuringia. Because of the political polarization there in the early Weimar years, the Thuringians were latecomers to organizing an effective conservationist movement. In making this argument, Oberkrome implies that a certain degree of political stability is necessary for such movements to take root. Third, Oberkorme compares the state’s conservationist policies during the communist and National Socialist dictatorships. He convincingly argues that both did their best to marginalize the glorification of the regional (as opposed to the national) Heimat, casting regional Heimat protectors as culturally staid and politically useless. Fourth, Oberkrome compares the two most significant and persistent ideological currents that often divided the movement during the twentieth century, regardless of the political and regional context. This review focuses on the latter comparison, between what the author describes as a preservationist (his term: museale), regionalist, and traditionalist current, and a strain of technocratic, modernist “landscape planning” (Landschaftsgestaltung). It is here that Oberkrome most directly addresses what seems to be his central question—whether the ideology and practice of German conservation has been modern or backward-looking.

Oberkrome’s choice of an opening leads one to suspect that he will attempt a throwback to the cultural Sonderweg argument about early German naturist movements, according to which organized conservation, nudism, and youth hiking were all essentially anti-modern and “romantic” and thus helped pave the way for the
research into this strain of modernist conservationism, “General Directive Nr. 20/VI/42,” which Heinrich Himmler sponsored in his wartime capacity as Reich Commissioner for the Strengthening of Germandom. This document, which certain leading conservationists formulated in collaboration with SS planners, was an important element in the blueprint for the “Germanization” of the occupied, formerly Slavic landscapes of the Wartheland and beyond. The general directive reveals that plans for Germanization entailed, along with genocidal ethnic cleansing, some genuinely ecological notions of preserving the rural landscape from erosion and “restoring” the healthy, holistic relationship between soil, water, climate, and topography. Few, if any, historical examples of environmentalist thinking have been as contemptuous of social justice and human life. By beginning with this sinister mid-century text, Oberkrome makes clear at the outset his teleological view of the subject.

Indeed, in chapters on Wilhelmine, Weimar, and Third Reich conservationism, Oberkrome seeks out the reasons for the despicable wartime collaboration between bourgeois conservationists and the Nazis. He does not, however, uncover its roots in anti-modern, anti-urban, irrationally “romantic” nature worship. Instead, he shows convincingly that the 1942 Directive resulted from the growing influence of an entirely modern and technocratic Landschaftsgestaltung current within the conservationist movement. “Landscape planning” on a massive scale had been discussed internationally and even put into practice in the United States since the late nineteenth century. Its aims were, first, to find ways of blending modern technological installations into the landscape’s topography and second, to improve ecological sustainability through the “protection of the fertile soil of agricultural land from wind and water erosion” (p. 391). In Germany, notions of landscape planning had, from the beginning, contained a strong element of racialist, völkisch nationalism that intensified following defeat in the First World War. Thus it is not at all surprising that the Nazi leadership easily made Landschaftsgestaltung a central element of its construction plans, as exemplified by the Reich Work Service and the Autobahn project.

Oberkrome thus focuses on something that Thomas Zeller, Frank Uekötter, I, and others have also recognized—that is, a growing emphasis on harmonizing modern technology with the rural landscape that took hold among many leading conservationists during the late Weimar and the Third Reich. Yet, Oberkrome’s research into this strain of modernist conservationism is unprecedented in its thoroughness. Using interesting metaphors for the essentially forward-looking character of this group’s worldview during the Second World War, Oberkrome depicts their minds “following the tank tracks of the invading German army” (p. 233) and taking an untried path toward “an ‘alternative,’ essentially new type of modernity” (p. 245). In arguing that the philosophy behind Landschaftsgestaltung in the Third Reich was rationalist, racist, and fundamentally modern, Oberkrome breaks with both the cultural Sonderweg historiography and the more recent “reactionary modernism” thesis of Jeffrey Herf.[3]

Moreover, he demonstrates in great detail that the Landschaftsgestaltung strain was often at odds with the older, more traditionalist, and anti-industrial, romantic current in the Naturschutz movement. As the Nazis undertook their imperialist war, “backward-looking” conservationists mostly refrained from the kind of ambitious, inhumane technocratic fantasies to which “landscape planning” advocates succumbed. These traditionalist Heimat protectors maintained negative views of industry and the city as well as strong commitments to their own regions. As Thomas Lekan and now Oberkrome have demonstrated, they managed to preserve a kind of particularist Eigensinn at the regional level despite the regime’s efforts to ram its centralized power down everyone’s throats. While Oberkrome is careful not to equate local Heimat groups’ insistence on regional identity with actual resistance against the Nazis, he does give them their due for carving out and maintaining a realm of relative ideological autonomy. Terms like “non-conformity” or “inner emigration” come to mind, even though Oberkrome himself never uses them.

Oberkrome does deploy Raymond Williams’s categories of “residual” and “emergent” very effectively to trace the lasting differences between these two strains of Naturschutz throughout the century. Yet he also points to their ideological common denominators, demonstrating that völkisch nationalism and a socially elitist disdain for mass consumer culture and tourism were central to nearly all bourgeois conservationist rhetoric from its fin-de-siècle beginnings until 1945. Even though the movement’s ideologues were obliged to tone down their ethnocentric glorification of Germandom in the Cold War atmospheres of the Federal Republic and the GDR, the desire to help Germans become a stronger Volk remained a residual feature right up into the 1970s. In West Germany, however, the conservative critique of mass consumer culture began to fade from Naturschutz rhetoric in the 1960s as the class and gender of the movement’s rank-
and-file began to diversify beyond the bourgeois and the male. Ironically, in view of their staunchly conservative past, traditionalist avatars of regional Heimat in the 1970s unintentionally provided new grassroots citizens’ initiatives with localist identities and venues. Thus anchored in a context of local solidarity, these Bürgerinitiativen were able to launch challenges against the state’s claim to sole decision-making authority.

Oddly, Oberkrome does not state outright his basic rejection of the cultural Sonderweg. Perhaps openly challenging the Sonderweg is not easy in a German historical profession over which the “old guard” triumvirate of Hans-Ulrich Wehler, Jürgen Kocka, and Heinrich August Winkler still exercises enormous influence. But another reason for this omission may be that the author is not fully aware of the extent to which he has undermined the older view of conservation as anti-modern. In fact, Oberkrome often reverts to Sonderweg-style language and attitudes. Nearly every time he turns his attention to traditionalist conservationists, he subjects their emotional, aesthetic outlook on nature to reflexive accusations of “cultural despair” and, indeed, barely disguised contempt.[4] Admittedly their elitist, ethnocentric writings render them unsympathetic in the eyes of present-day readers, but Oberkrome’s judgmental asides make one wince. For instance, one “eccentric” who continued to fight against outdoor advertising for aesthetic reasons even into his seventies “was not about to show even the slightest hint” of the kind of “old-age mellowness” (Altersgelassenheit) that Oberkrome seems to prefer in the elderly (p. 482). This kind of irritable sarcasm would be easier to take if the author’s targets were not all so dead.

Moreover, it is puzzling that Oberkrome reserves most of his criticism for the traditionalists when he himself clearly shows that technocratic, “planning-obsessed optimism” was the root of conservationists’ involvement in the Nazis’ genocidal plans. In keeping with the anti-Romantic bias of Sonderweg historians, Oberkrome never seems to have met an emotional landscape description that he liked. For him, non-rationalist rhetoric about nature is merely “sentimental.” Ironically, he demonstrates in his own investigations of more “modernist” conservationists in the Third Reich, GDR, and FRG that they themselves denigrated the traditionalists’ “silly romanticism” and “crazy gushing about nature” (Naturschwärmerei). In other words, a problematic history lies behind Oberkrome’s simplistic critique of the romantic, emotional concept of nature.[5]

These residues of the Sonderweg are frustrating to encounter, for by analyzing so convincingly the complex dialectic of modernism and traditionalism in the history of Naturschutz, Oberkrome has made an important contribution to a growing and sophisticated body of research on the “greener” features of recent German history. Although reading this massive tome can be quite a slog, the effort will reward all those readers who are interested in the contested development of cultural policymaking, conservative social thought, national and regional identity construction, and the relationships between the Germans and their physical environments.

Notes


[2]. A founding text in this historiography is George Mosse, The Crisis of German Ideology: The Intellectual
The word “romantic” usually appears in Sonderweg historiography in the strictly pejorative sense of “quixotic” and “irrational.” Some works published since 1980 have provided a far more complex alternative to the Sonderweg narrative of German culture, such as Joachim Radkau, Das Zeitalter der Nervosität. Deutschland zwischen Bismarck und Hitler (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1998). Yet, studies influenced by the cultural Sonderweg and its oversimplified dichotomy between modernity and reaction continue to turn up regularly, particularly in Germany. See, for instance, Jochen Bölsche’s article on the Germans’ “collective forest craze” (kollektives Waldschwärmerei), “Lebt denn der alte Holzmichel noch?” Spiegel Spezial Geschichte: Die Erfindung der Deutschen (2007), 136-137.


[5]. This subject is considered in more detail in my Turning to Nature in Germany: Hiking, Nudism, and Conservation, 1900-1940 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, forthcoming).

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