

Dieter Langewiesche, Nikolaus hrsg. von Buschmann, Ute Planert. *Zeitwende: Geschichtsdenken heute*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008. 251 S. ISBN 978-3-525-36378-2.



Reviewed by Stefan K. Berger

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Dieter Langewiesche is undoubtedly one of the 'big shots' among German historians today. The Tübingen professor is not only a distinguished scholar, whose outstanding work has been recognised with the Leibniz Prize. He has also been a long-serving member of the *Wissenschaftsrat*, a seasoned board member of the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* and, as one of the founding deans of the University of Erfurt, heavily involved in university reform and the Bologna process. If he publishes a book on 'historical thinking today', many historians will listen up and read what he has to say. And the slim volume will not disappoint its readers, as it is full of interesting reflections and insights, which are broadly divided into three parts.

The first part deals with reflections on how to write history, on the relationship between past, present and future and on historical theory more generally. His perceptive comments on the reception of historical writing by the public point to the urgent need for more research on the reception of historiographical knowledge production and its impact on the formation of historical conscious-

ness. Langewiesche is probably correct in stating that professional historians are not the most popular and widely received sources of historical knowledge today, but he himself raises the question whether the professionals are still setting the trends, even if others popularise them.

In his reflections on the popularity of memory history, Langewiesche pleads for competing memory cultures and multiple historical perspectives as benchmark for truly democratic societies. Looking at the rise of social history in West Germany since the 1960s, he understands its agenda of a negative inversion of the German *Sonderweg* as a form of 'historical therapy' for West German society, which could build on the Social Democratic view of German history in Imperial Germany. Some of the essays are less intriguing than others. So, for example, his thoughts on postmodernism amount to little more than the notion that postmodernism arises out of the crisis of a modernity based on notions of progress and exclusivity against which postmodernism postulates ideas of radical plurality and diversity. But there are also real gems in this collection, for example Langewi-

esche's rediscovery of Richard Koebner as one of the founding figures of *Begriffsgeschichte*.

The second part of the volume assembles essays which investigate history as politics and looks at the public uses and abuses of history. Langewiesche sees German historical consciousness as being particularly contested and fragmented because of the many breaks in German history, but holds that debate and differing perspectives are a healthy sign of a democratic culture. One might want to ask, whether Germany is as unique as this view would suggest, given the fragmented histories of many European nation states, especially in Eastern and East-Central Europe, and one also wonders whether Britain, for example, is any less democratic than Germany, because there are fewer debates on national history and the historical consciousness is not as contested. Be that as it may, the section also contains very interesting essays analysing the speeches on history by German presidents, comparing the preambles of the old and new Basic Law with the EU draft constitutional treaty, tracing the weakness of democratic-republican traditions in nineteenth and twentieth century Germany, which made it possible for the political right to occupy the term 'republicans' in 1980s West Germany, and investigating the ways in which the military defeats at the end of the First and Second World Wars destabilised existing historical master narratives. I find myself in complete sympathy with Langewiesche's plea not to mythologise the EU along the lines of the nineteenth-century European nation states. Building a Europe without historical myths will hopefully avoid some of the political catastrophes and tragedies that marked the rise and triumph of European nationalism. One might still have to debate how exactly one can begin building solidarities below the level of identities based on historical myths, but such debates are perhaps more necessary than the simplistic falling back on the failed recipes of the past.

The final section of this book deals with university reform and the role of the humanities and of history in particular in the modern world. In terms of historical studies, Langewiesche is emphasising the importance of teaching methodology, analytical and problem-solving skills and 'scientific' thinking, in other words transferable skills which can be used in a variety of different job-related contexts. History, as humanities subjects more generally, he argues, make an important contribution to current processes of Europeanisation and globalisation because they teach students about transgressing borders and opening up towards other disciplines and subject areas.

Langewiesche describes the nineteenth and early twentieth century as the 'century of the German university' and argues that its success was rooted in its flexibility and its capacity for innovation. He sees the current reforms in higher education as being on a par with the reforms of the sector around 1800. It is precisely the importance of contemporary reforms which makes it so necessary, in Langewiesche's eyes, to engage with this reform process. He is critical of accompanying processes of centralisation of decision-making, the economisation of university life, and the bureaucratisation of *Wissenschaft*, whilst he recommends the reform of the German university career structure along British line. There is a certain melancholy underpinning his statement of fact that there is today no canon of *Bildung* in German society anymore. This makes it impossible to present universities as the places which would teach such *Bildung*. However, Langewiesche resents the move to transform universities into sites of vocational training preparing students for specific jobs in the marketplace. Instead he recommends 'scientific thinking' as a means to prepare people for a variety of different jobs.

There is perhaps some inevitable repetition of arguments in this collection of essays. Several arguments appear more than once, and Reinhard Koselleck appears as a kind of house-god of

Langewiesche with Koselleck's notion of three types of history writing (*Aufschreiben*, *Fortschreiben*, *Umschreiben*) being prominently repeated in different essays. Overall, however, this is an intellectually stimulating collection of essays which will make readers think about issues of history-writing, the relationship between history and politics and the role of the humanities within the twenty-first century university, and I assume that this is exactly what Dieter Langewiesche intended – to contribute to a pluralistic debate on history which he describes as a hallmark of a mature democratic society.

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