State development has long occupied a central place in German history for both native historians and outside commentators. Germany, or more usually and narrowly Prussia, supplies a seemingly endless source of examples to buttress various theories of state formation. These tend to highlight authoritarian elements and especially state supervision of society and daily life. Evidence comes from the efforts of rulers and their officials to regulate society, resolve its problems, and raise revenue by encouraging greater productivity. Such regulation was known by the fifteenth century as “policing” (Polizei) and was buttressed by Christian morality and the ideology of princes as benevolent fathers of their people. Cameralism emerged as a distinct strand within policing by the mid-seventeenth century. It took its name from the Kammer, or chamber in the princely palace where revenue officials debated measures to boost revenue after the Thirty Years War. Although it never lost it roots in morality, cameralism was increasingly characterized by its proponents’ claims to systematize administrative and fiscal practice according to new, rational scientific principles. The combination of administration, science, morality, and economy distinguished German cameralism from attempts elsewhere in early modern Europe to promote growth known as “mercantilism.” Such distinctions—which should not be overstated—have attracted scholarly interest for over a century. Much time has been spent trying to define cameralism, and to assess its role in developing the state and its impact on social behavior. The first of these issues is dispatched succinctly and convincingly by André Wakefield, who demonstrates that much of the confusion stems from attempts by later economists, sociologists, political scientists, and others to assert exclusive claims of cameralism as a precursor to their own discipline. Cameralists would not have recognized later disciplinary boundaries, and instead were happy to combine natural science, economic doctrine, political science, and technology in their search for administrative efficiency and career advancement.

Wakefield’s principal interest, however, is cameralism’s problematic relationship with German state development. His target is clear: Marc Raiff’s influential thesis of the “well-ordered police state,” first presented in 1975 and developed in book form eight years later.[1] Raiff argued that cameralist measures made a real impact, often developing a momentum of their own as officials continually expanded the range of government activity in their search for greater efficiency. Wakefield deliberately avoids engaging with Raiff’s discussion of developments in Russia and concentrates instead on the myriad German territories within the Holy Roman Empire.[2] His coverage is impressive, ranging from Prussia and Austria, through medium-sized territories like Saxony and Hanover, to micro-principalities like Gotha. Moreover, the arguments rest on detailed archival research, in addition to a good sample of the voluminous writings of the cameralists themselves.

The central argument is clear. Wakefield regards cameralism as a sham and cameralists as shameless self-promoters who deceived both princes and subjects.
“Cameralism was the public face of secret things... cameralists created the well-ordered police state through their ordinances, books and treatises” (p. 138). In doing so, they “served their own private interests, securing positions in territorial Kamern and German universities” (p. 138). Deceit dominated both their public and private lives. They served a state that disguised its rapacious exploitation of its subjects with a thin veneer of claims to promote the common good. Meanwhile, “in their secret lives they confronted a universe of failing mines and cheating officials, of recalcitrant nature and deceitful humanity” (p. 138). Such failures were, of course, glossed over in their self-serving publications intended to promote their ideas and thereby themselves.

Evidence for these claims comes from a series of case studies. An examination of Saxon, Hanoverian, and Habsburg records reveals that efforts to boost revenue through more efficient mining administration foundered on untrustworthy officials and chaotic management to the despair of those who pinned their careers on extravagant promises of reform. Similar efforts to stimulate Prussia’s iron industry and improve forestry also came to grief in the 1760s. The Hanoverian university of Göttingen and the Palatine cameral academy of Lautern, which usually appear in the literature as models of educational reform, were exposed as scams to attract “wealthy academic customers to backward little towns” (p. 143). Throughout, the cameralists appear as either hopelessly over-optimistic or downright deceitful. Johann Heinrich Gottlob Justi emerges as the principal villain of the book, successively duping Maria Theresa of Austria and Prussia’s Frederick the Great into offering him plum jobs. However, the cameralists’ employers seem equally unsympathetic. Hanoverian minister Gerlach Adolf von Münchhausen only brought Justi to Göttingen once his publications had made him sufficiently famous to add kudos to the fledgling university.

The examples are conveyed in a breezy style peppered with arresting phrases—the German territories appear as “the Galapagos Islands of state building” (p. 24). We also learn new details, especially regarding Justi’s activities as police commissioner in Göttingen from 1755 to 1757. The text is illuminated by a number of interesting contemporary illustrations, and by a translation of Friedrich Casimir Medicus’s unpublished proposal for a faculty of state administration at Ingolstadt University, which gives a good flavor of the numerous cameralist “projects.”

There are, unfortunately, some serious problems with all this. First, it is hardly new to point out that we should not take everything the cameralists wrote at face value. Wakefield admits that Mack Walker already did this in 1978 in response to Raeff’s original presentation of his arguments. Others have written substantial and important critiques of cameralism and its adverse impact on social and economic development, notably Hermann Rebel and Peter K. Taylor, whose works Wakefield does not reference. [3] While Wakefield is right to draw attention to the cameralists as individuals with their own agendas, this claim is also scarcely novel, as Pamela Smith has shown in her excellent biography of Johann Joachim Becher. [4] More critically, Wakefield discusses the cameralists largely in isolation from wider debates on German “absolutism” and the “public sphere.” It is certainly true that earlier historians too readily accepted the cameralists as “mirrors of the world, authors whose books reflected the practical experiences of state servants” (p. 21), and based their discussion on what cameralists wrote, rather than what their critics said, but it is doubtful that most working in the field today can be accused of these faults. Few, I think, really would “still habitually conflate [Veit Ludwig von] Seckendorff’s model police state with an actually existing principality” (p. 143). A wealth of literature on the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century critiques of princes, courts, and public officials already engages with the issues of secrecy, public opinion, and controversies about what constituted “good government.” [5]

These omissions are important, because their inclusion might have added to Wakefield’s discussion of the cameralists as salesmen for state building. He makes an important point in urging us to avoid teleologies of state formation and to look again at also-rans like the smaller German states. Cameralists sought (or claimed) a system of government without themselves having knowledge of political development’s actual future destination. Of course, many claimed to have the answers in order to advance their careers, but Wakefield’s cynicism grossly oversimplifies their relations with their princely masters, their colleagues, their subordinates, and the wider public. The publication of satirical writings criticizing cameralists as frauds is hardly unusual; similar critiques were presented of other professions—lawyers, for instance. Jewish financier Joseph Süß Oppenheimer appears twice as “a scapegoat of the Kammer” (pp. 1-2) and victim of “public retribution” (p. 143). The actual circumstances were far more complex. He was indeed a scapegoat, but not because his fiscal measures failed to deliver. Instead, he was executed in 1738 by a rival group of officials and their allies in the estates of the Duchy of Württemberg in order to deflect attention from their own ille-
gal seizure of power after the death of Duke Carl Alexander the year before. [6] He was not executed to make government look good, but rather to make a particular group within it look good and vindicate their version of what constituted “good government.”

And here we arrive at the heart of the problem. Cameralists were not all cynically peddling fashionable theories to get ahead. They were engaging in a much broader debate about the true nature of the world, people’s place within it, and their relation to God. It is impossible to detach words and motives as neatly as Wakefield seems to suggest. Cameralists convinced prospective employers not simply with tricks, but by using arguments that princes and even some subjects accepted as self-evident truths. The early modern German state was indeed cruel, and governed by a narrow, privileged elite that concealed its true intentions from its subjects. It was also staffed by men who were frequently dishonest to their employers and the subjects in their charge. But it was much more than a “ravenous fiscal-judicial chamber that devoured everything in its path” (p. 25). It survived and functioned without serious popular opposition because its rulers and servants were guided by their own sense of duty, honor, and morality. Their policies were never exclusively cynical devices to maintain themselves in power; nor did they merely respond to popular pressure; they also acted in certain ways because they thought it was the right thing to do.

Notes


[2]. Raeff’s arguments received considerable support from Claus Scharf’s impressive study of Catherine the Great’s links to Germany. Scharf demonstrates the significance of German cameralist writers in transmitting both administrative theory and practice, as well as Enlightenment thought to Russia: *Katharina II Deutschland und die Deutschen* (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 1995).


[5]. An important example, with extensive reference to the earlier literature in this field, is Andreas Gestrich, *Absolutismus und Öffentlichkeit: Politische Kommunikation in Deutschland zu Beginn des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1994).


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

https://networks.h-net.org/h-german


URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=26084

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