
Reviewed by Belinda Davis

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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 rationalization 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 un-
stable 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 in-
dustrialists 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 en-
fi
ciency, Social Democrats
heralded the coming of socialism through ratio-
nalization (begun in the form of decreased work
time), more "healthfully" enacted work, and high-
er wages.

Ultimately, the German Institute for Technical
Labor Training (DINTA), which was independent
from industry but which in the end served its vi-
sion of rationalization, helped give primacy to in-
dustry's vision. DINTA sent its engineers to ratio-
nalize (in ominous terms) by "creat[ing] a new
worker" (179), practicing "psychotechnics," "hu-
man 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 con-
cerns 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 rational-
ization to examine their implications for con-
sumption 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 ra-
tionalization; and it was this agreement which el-
levated the process to such importance. Yet dis-
parate ideas on what rationalization actually
meant created insuperable societal divisions -- di-
visions which aided the National Socialist cause.
Moreover, the ultimate triumph of DINTA's view
of rationalization meshed all too well with Na-
tional 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 re-
nege on former agreements with labor. The De-
pression 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 achieve-
ments may have helped workers to distance them-
selves 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 "Ameri-
canism" ultimately created a society ripe for Nazi-
ification.

Thus Nolan demonstrates that an examina-
tion of the adoption and adaption of rationaliza-
tion, as a major component in Germany's complex
relationship with modernity, is central to an un-
derstanding 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 orga-
nized with a clarity and precision (as well as a
healthy dose of humor) which makes it accessible
for classroom use as well.
If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
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