En Route to a Post-Industrial Society? Western German Contemporary History Writing on the 1970s and 1980s

DIETMAR SÜSS

Hans Günter Hockerts, ed., *Geschichte der Sozialpolitik in Deutschland seit 1945*, Vol. 5: *1966–1974* (Baden-Baden: Bundesrepublik Deutschland/Nomos-Verlag, (with CD-ROM) 2007), 1,133 pp. (hb), €169.00, ISBN 3789073210.

Martin H. Geyer, ed., *Geschichte der Sozialpolitik in Deutschland seit 1945*, Vol. 6: *1974–1982* (Baden-Baden: Bundesrepublik Deutschland: Neue Herausforderungen, wachsende Unsicherheit, Nomos-Verlag, 2008), 1,085 pp. (with CD-ROM), €169.00 (hb), ISBN 3789073237.

Andreas Wirsching, *Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland: Abschied vom Provisiorium: Geschichte der Bundesrepublik 1982–1989/09* (Munich: DVA, 2006), 847 pp., €49.90 ISBN 3421067376.

Konrad Jarausch, ed., *Das Ende der Zuversicht? Die siebziger Jahre als Geschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Rupprecht, 2008), 362 pp., €29.90, ISBN 352536153X.

Thomas Hertfelder and Andreas Rödder, eds., *Modell Deutschland. Erfolgsgeschichte oder Illusion?* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Rupprecht, 2007), 208 pp., €19.90 (pb), ISBN 3525360231.

Anselm Doering-Manteuffel, and Lutz Raphael, *Nach dem Boom: Perspektiven auf die Zeitgeschichte seit 1970* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Rupprecht, 2008) 140 pp., €15.90, ISBN 3525300131.

German contemporary historiography is rapidly catching up with the period *Nach dem Boom* – 'after the boom' – in the 1970s and 1980s. During the last few years not even the traditional closure of the archives has deterred historians from investigating

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the end of the Social-Liberal Era and the beginning of the 'geistig-moralische Wende [spiritual-moral turnaround]' under Helmut Kohl of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU). Quite similar terminology tends to dominate the categorical naming of this epochal signature, and not just in Germany: there was talk about the transition to a post-industrial society (Daniel Bell), of the 'crisis of work-driven society', the change of lifestyles and values, the end of the Fordian Age or the beginning of a 'risk society' (Ulrich Beck). How had western Germany or western Europe been changed by almost thirty years of economic growth? How had the balance between state, capital and work shifted? Which new insecurities had appeared and which old insecurities returned? Finally, what remained of the model of an 'organised' Rhenian capitalism, which was strongly shaped by the idea of social partnership? Economists, sociologists and political scientist have continuously observed west German society and sought, from at least the 1970s, to define the nature of this new, 'post-materialist' society, which they themselves described, prophesied and interpreted. So far historians have had a difficult time in developing independent terms and categories, in describing the process of change and therefore have mostly echoed the political caesuras: from the end of the Brandt reform period in 1974 via the 'crisis manager' Schmidt to the beginning of the 'Kohl era' and his 'spiritual-moral turnaround' in 1982. With the victory of the Red–Green coalition under Gerhard Schröder of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), this period has itself become history and an object of historical inquiry. The search for the straight 'long road west' (Heinrich August Winkler), the culmination and necessary conclusion of which seemed to be the reunification of both German states, is also among the dominating axes of interpretation, as is the narrative of the West German 'success story': the clearing of the dead hand of the National Socialist past, the transformation of the once authority-orientated Germany into a democratic civil society and the creation of prosperity and security, in short, a story of 'all's well that ends well'.

Such descriptions are obviously well suited to the anniversary delirium which shape historical-political debates in Germany in 2009. But are they sufficient to understand the structural upheaval which changed the Federal Republic as well as Britain, France and the United States – at different tempos – from the 1970s? The book by the two historians Anselm Doering-Manteuffel and Lutz Raphael is conceived as a first attempt to size up this field of contemporary history 'after the boom'. The charm of their perspective lies precisely in their sober and sharp analysis, which embeds the history of the Federal Republic in the secular tendencies of the modern industrial societies of western Europe. They assume that Germany, as well as its west European neighbours, went through a 'structural upheaval' and a social change of 'revolutionary quality' in all social spheres after the 1973 oil crisis and the end of the economic boom during the mid-1970s – with effects that have lasted until the present day. When thirty years of economic boom ended in the middle of Helmut Schmidt's chancellorship, the moment also signified the end of an industrial model of organisation. Fordism had dominated the world after 1945. Its foundation was standardised mass production, the supposition of steadily rising mass demand and growing wages, which ensured that rises in income and company profits kept

pace with each other (at least in part). It was this far-reaching compromise of capital, the state and labour which laid the foundations for the success of the West German welfare state and turned the post-war period into a 'golden age'.

However, in the middle of the 1970s a third industrial revolution began which ultimately shattered the Eastern bloc and eroded the foundations of the liberal consensus in western Europe. Whole industries collapsed, the mining, steel and textile industries entered a crisis, and the spectre of mass unemployment returned to haunt German society. Suddenly there was talk about the 'end of work' in Germany. This deep shock to the global economic and financial systems was accompanied by the appearance of new protagonists, first and foremost new competitors from Asia, pushing into the market. Simultaneously, the ascendancy of neo-liberalism began in Britain, promising to revamp the ailing economies of the world and restructure the 'over-regulated' welfare states.

Doering-Manteuffel and Raphael rightly advocate a form of contemporary history that does not stop at the limits of period or disciplines, but draws strongly on stimuli from the problems of the present. They take seriously a suggestion made by Hans-Günter Hockerts a few years ago to open up German contemporary historiography, for a long time somewhat old-fashioned, to new questions of the present: the change of industrial and work culture, the changes in the sphere of consumption, the formation of a knowledge- and information-based society, as well as the history of the body and gender history – topics which so far have played hardly any role in German research. Most of all they focus their attention on the 'scientification of the social', the importance of analytic instruments of the social sciences for the measurement of social realities and their influence on the shaping of politics and society. This 'second look' at the instruments of the social sciences seems especially promising in the context of the interpretation of concepts such as 'reflexive modernity' or 'risk society' as part of contemporary perceptions during the 1980s – a phenomenon that is probably also true for the Europe-wide controversy about the 'third way' and the dissolution of left–right antagonism during the 1980s and 1990s.

Doering-Manteuffel and Raphael present an excellent synthesis and programmatic manifesto which will certainly generate critical debate. This, indeed, is precisely what makes it so much worth reading. Their book is especially important because their approach opens up to a form of social history which asks for the examination of new and old inequalities, under classes, class structures and the practice of rule in industrial concerns. All of these were paid scant regard by German contemporary historians in the wake of the overpowering 'success story' of German reunification.

'After the boom' marks not only a conceptual, but also a methodological change in the whole of German contemporary historiography. Other publications, for example the anthology edited by Konrad Jarausch – *Das Ende der Zuversicht?* (The end of confidence?) – show a heightened interest in topics of economic, consumption and state-run social security history, which also strongly emphasise the caesura in 1973–4. The ambivalences of the period, which cannot simply be described as the 'social democratic decade' (Bernd Faulenbach), become clear here. Frank Bösch acutely points out how such labels can be misleading and points to the example of the

history of the CDU during the 1970s and early 1980s. Under the leadership of the 'young Turk' Helmut Kohl, the Christian Democratic Union used their period in opposition on the federal level to refurbish their policies and organisation. In particular, secretaries-general Kurt Biedenkopf and Heiner Geissler changed the tone of the political debate and promoted the modernisation and opening up of the CDU – and in the process rediscovered (among other things) the 'social conscience' of the Christian Democrats.

Additionally, the concept of the 'new social question' provided the CDU with a semantic lever which not only could be used to de-legitimise the social-liberal reform policies, but also demonstrated competence in a field hitherto considered favourable to their political opponents. The term also helped drive a wedge between the SPD and the trade unions, in showing both up for the lack of support they showed for the weakest in society. Bösch rightly calls the politicisation of poverty in a spirit of Catholic welfare a 'stroke of genius' which caused quite a few headaches to Social Democratic intellectuals. It is, in this regard, a pity that Marcel Boldorf only marginally touches on these narratives, semantic shifts and political implications in his contribution about the 'new poverty', which concentrates exclusively on the social statistical side of the debate. This means that he misses central axes of conflict, which are fundamental for any understanding of the period 'after the boom'.

Extensive works on the history of the large 'catch-all' parties during the 1970s and 1980s is still lacking; the history of individual policy fields is also only beginning. Yet the majority of the contributors to Jarausch's collection seem tacitly to subscribe to a common view about how history should be written. While for a long time the narrative predominated in historical writing – which understood the history of the Federal Republic as a history of the settling of older problems, especially the legacy of National Socialism (with talk about 'turnaround', 'arrival in the West', 'change' and 'Westernisation'), most accounts now openly or implicitly align themselves with a concept of contemporary history which understands the discipline as also or even principally, a prehistory to the present. The 'history of the aftermath of National Socialism' no longer takes centre stage. Rather the goal of contemporary history is to uncover the historical roots of current problems: the history of mass unemployment, the 'crisis' of the welfare state, the formation of a knowledge- and information-based society, as well as the repercussions of digital capitalism.

Ralph Jessen explicitly takes up this historiographical change and – following Charles Mayer – argues that the 1970s were the period when the post-war era of German history finally ended. Generational change, the breakthrough in mass consumption, the extension of civil society networks and organisations are rightly listed as evidence in support of his thesis. Yet this interpretation implies that it was only in the 1970s that the Federal Republic reached a degree of maturity achieved earlier by other democratic societies. This proposition is, at least, contentious, as not all the problems arising from the Second World War (mostly in the fields of foreign and Germany-related policy) could be said to have been solved by that time. His, and others', reference to the caesura of 1973–4 is more convincing. It is now widely recognised as a watershed for the social and economic history of the Federal

Republic. Also convincing is Jessen's argument that politics had to deal with a number of problems during the 1970s which had initially been seen as solutions to the basic problems of the new state – first and foremost in social security and pensions policy. Quite thought-provoking is the suggestion of some authors that the 1970s should be characterised as a broken period of transition, during which new, self-created problems were superimposed on residual issues dating from the immediate post-war period, creating a new mix which would be hard for the 'model Germany' to stomach.

Thomas Hertfelder and Andreas Rödder's edited volume *Modell Deutschland: Erfolgsgeschichte oder Illusion?* (Model Germany: success story or illusion?) shows how widespread the concept of 'contemporary history as the pre-history of the present' has become. The catchphrase '*Modell Deutschland*' was originally coined by the SPD under Helmut Schmidt in the 1976 election campaign, to capture the SPD's focus on 'middle of the road politics', the reconciliation of management and trade unions, a specifically German way of implementing the welfare state, as well as Schmidt's strength in leadership – a 'model' which *Time Magazine* reverentially described in June 1979 as a German mixture of 'pride and prosperity' and which stood as an apparent alternative to the neo-liberal governments of Margaret Thatcher in Britain and Ronald Reagan in the United States. Yet since the turn of the millennium, Germany is increasingly being seen as a new 'sick man of Europe', an ailing giant and crisis-ridden nation incapable of reform and the abrogation of self-inflicted blockades, especially those generated by German federalism. This public debate over the transformation of Europe's 'model state' to its 'problem child' serves as the starting point for the editors' exploration of the origins of the current crisis rhetoric. Where does this German desire for and fascination with 'the crisis' come from? What nurtured the unease with the institutions of the new Berlin Republic and where do its historical roots lie? The volume covers a broad range, analysing current political debates about federalism and the constitution of the state, European integration, and social, educational and foreign policy, as well as policy relating to the German question, in the context of their historical origins. Thomas Hertfelder appeals for a telling of the history of the Federal Republic of Germany that does not exclusively deal with the background of instabilities and national catastrophes of the first half of the twentieth century, as this obscures the structural breaks since the 1970s and only partially captures the entirety of the ambivalences and contradictions in post-war history. The 'success story', the thesis of a 'fundamental liberalisation' and also the new national narrative, with reunification as its ultimate vanishing point, each has its blind spots – which the authors attempts to point out. In his contribution, Gerhard Ritter convincingly investigates function and structural problems of German federalism, the renaissance of which after 1945 was mostly due to the totalitarian experience of National Socialism. All in all, his appraisal is ambivalent. In the early years of the Federal Republic, federalism made the integration of new political agents possible; it offered a chance to many young politicians to develop and take responsibility, first in the states, then in Bonn. Particularly during the years of reunification, it provided a platform for the mobilisation of regional interests and perspectives, which

prevented an overly strong centralisation of politics. All this made it one of the key components of the 'model Germany', which nevertheless changed its functions and began to detach itself from its original intentions during the 1970s and 1980s: The Bundestag and the state parliaments lost power, and an ever increasing number of laws required the agreement of the Bundesrat – marking the beginning, as Ritter sees it, of a creeping erosion of parliamentary authority. At the end of this development is the unintended politicisation of the Bundesrat which has become one of the core problems of federalism – and as such needs urgent reform. Mark Spoerer's attack on the sanctification of the term *Soziale Marktwirtschaft* (social market economy) is both successful and provocative. While the term is generally connected with the German *Wirtschaftswunder* economic model, it was originally more of a stopgap and became an increasingly empty phrase during the 1960s and 1970s, subsuming very diverse conceptions about the appropriate control mechanisms of economic and fiscal policy. Especially during the Kohl era, it became clear how formative this formula was for the self-image of the Federal Republic: *Soziale Marktwirtschaft* turned into a regulative bulwark against British and US neo-liberalism, shoring up Germany's imperilled economic *and* value systems. Even though the topics covered in Hertfelder and Rödder's volume are somewhat more traditional in their scope, all the contributions are of a high standard and are consistently refreshing to read.

A quite different construction and empirical weight distinguishes the two hefty volumes edited by Hans Günter Hockerts and Martin Geyer in the *Geschichte der Sozialpolitik in Deutschland seit 1945* (History of social politics in Germany since 1945) series, which covers the period of the grand and social–liberal coalitions. The editors and contributors have delivered what others often only promise: they have successfully put together an empirically consolidated analysis of the history of social policy, which is more than a simple account of a single field of politics. Ultimately both volumes – and especially the source-saturated introductions and summaries – are probably the best overall syntheses of their period and can, without reservation, be considered standard works. Hockerts investigates the history of the Grand Coalition and the first two Brandt/Scheel cabinets. He demonstrates acutely that a 'Grand Coalition' did not necessarily imply deadlock, as it was able to drive forward the modernisation of central fields of policy. Both he and the other contributors reject the widely held assumption that the Republic had only been 're-founded' and given stable foundations under the federal chancellor and Nobel peace laureate Willy Brandt. There is ample evidence to suggest that the essential impulses towards the modernisation of West German post-war society were already evident during the 1960s and the years of the Grand Coalition: the announcement of *Demokratie wagen* (daring more democracy) of the Brandt/Scheel government, while it should not be underestimated, is ultimately principally important in providing an atmospheric change in political culture.

A total of seventeen essays discuss diverse fields of social policy: labour law and protection, family and immigration policy, education and health, housing and dealing with the after-effects of the war. The contributions on 'rehabilitation and help for the disabled' are particularly instructive, as they show how a field of policy was adjusted over the course of the 1960s and 1970s with the social shift in values and

reform policy going hand in hand. While the period exhibited the leitmotiv of a 'manifold dawn', Martin Geyer characterises the Federal Republic under Schmidt as one in which 'insecurity' became a 'normality'. Instead of the motto of 'expansion', that had typified the years before the oil price shock, 'consolidation' now became the dominant rhetorical term for political decision-makers. More emphatically than others, Geyer sees 1977 as the period's decisive 'year of change'. His arguments are strong: as of 1976–7 it was clear to all political and economic observers that the West German economy had departed from the well-trodden path of growth, based on the success of the post-war period. Unemployment rose despite relatively high economic growth, while on the international scene, Bonn's European and US partners pressed it to stimulate economic growth. Since this time the debate about the regulatory 'model Germany', which once promised such enticing security, has not stopped. Economists no longer liked to talk about 'state-driven global regulation', but instead called for 'supply-side economic policies'. Talk about the stabilising effect of welfare state benefits became ever rarer, while discussion of its alleged dangers and the problems resulting from corporatism's institutional structure became ever more common. The clamour for an economic-liberal change of course grew louder, and not only in the CDU, while talk of the 'excesses' of the welfare state also became internalised within the FDP. Finally, in 1977 Ralf Dahrendorf provocatively announced the end of the social democratic consensus and sparked a political debate which continued until the Kohl era, over whether the welfare state could be 'modified' or 'reformed' – not merely in Germany, but across western Europe.

In a way, both volumes lay the trail that Andreas Wirsching picks up in his large overview of the history of the Federal Republic from the beginning of the Kohl government until reunification in 1990. His book is the sixth in the series 'Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (History of the Federal Republic of Germany)', the first five of which were published between 1981 and 1987 and is, for the present, concluded with his work. For good reasons Wirsching has decided to write the history of the first years of the Kohl era from 'the perspective of the old Federal Republic', even if his own location is that of the 'new' Federal Republic. To put it differently: he is writing the history of the West German 'stopgap' and thereby overrides interpretations which primarily see German post-war history as a history of the 'double Germany' or of system competition. This is, at any rate, a prudential decision, not least as Wirsching consciously resists an *ex post facto* interpretation of German post-war history in which everything seems to converge on reunification. Let us be clear: during the 1980s reunification was not on the political agenda for the majority of West Germans or the leading politicians of all major parties, including Helmut Kohl, and Wirsching is well advised to refrain from retrospectively levelling this sensed implicitness regarding the division of Germany.

Wirsching has drawn on numerous, hitherto inaccessible, source collections, especially those of political parties, and for this reason his chapter about the *Wende* [turnaround] in 1982–3 and the problems of the party and government systems during the 1980s is among the most successful and fascinating parts of his book. His description begins with the agony of the social–liberal coalition and describes

the socio-political conflicts (often pretexts) which ultimately led to its break-up. Wirsching carefully leads the reader through the political history and sensitively delves to the bottom of internal disputes within the political parties, which increasingly paralysed the SPD and ultimately contributed to the success of the Greens. His account is balanced in the best sense of the word – especially in comparison with the preceding volumes in the series. Additionally he integrates analytical passages and methodological reflections into his narrative, pointing out functional deficits and structural problems of West German post-war democracy by reference to different social science models. One of his main arguments is that the paralysis of the political process and a certain measure of incapability in the policy-making process is connected to the increase in the number of different protagonists and powers of veto which blocked political life rather than enabling it: this is one of the reasons why he is not entirely negative about Kohl's style of government, the *Aussitzen* (sitting it out). It is not necessary to share this interpretation (with its pessimistic overtones) to acknowledge that Wirsching is far more methodologically and theoretically reflective than other scholars who have treated the subject. His ideas are presented so lucidly that they are can scarcely be ignored, even by his critics.

This is also true of his history of 'lost chances' which dominates the middle section of his book, that in turn dwells on the economic structural change and its repercussions. At the centre is the beginning of mass unemployment, the conflicts over economic and budgetary policy as well as regulatory and fiscal politics. Wirsching argues that too often emphasis was placed on continuity and that frequently the many veto players made what he views as necessary changes of course impossible. He convincingly recounts the many debates about tax cuts and subsidies; he also investigates with precision the changes in the job market and in social policy. His sober and clear analysis of the changing values shows the shifts that took place in the central axes of society: new family and gender-specific models were beginning to establish themselves, curricula vitae became destandardised, milieus dissolved. This meant new risks, the loss of traditional securities and an ever more brittle sense of progress, which gripped not only the Greens, but also many Social Democrats and sections of the church-going public. Probably one of the most exiting questions for future historians of the 1980s is how the period generated fear in the new social movements and changed old ones such as the labour movement under the conditions of industrial structural change.

Wirsching devotes another extensive chapter to the 'culture' of the 1980s. It is quite hard to say what the 'culture' of the times was. Punk or pop? Mass culture or theatre? Underground or opera? It would have been possible to emphasise different things, but it is at any rate important to point out that – parallel to the depressive keynotes of the 'post-boom era' – there were also new, more optimistic voices, especially arising out of the triumphant success of the new media and communication technologies, the character of alienation of which is hotly debated by social scientists. A competent investigation into the history of foreign and Germany-related policy up to reunification forms the end of his book.

Undoubtedly Wirsching has published an impressive and important book which will advance the slow process of 'historicising' the end of the old Federal Republic. However, it is equally clear that the debate is only just beginning, and key questions remain to be answered. How deficient had political control mechanisms really become, in Germany and elsewhere across Europe? What regulatory models and scenarios of the future shaped the political process? How did power shift between capital, state and labour? Instead of highlighting the problems, is it not possible to emphasise the advantages of conflict reduction through the welfare state solving social problems – especially in international comparison? How exactly did living conditions and milieus change and what did 'individualisation' precisely mean? Was the 'crisis of work-driven society' a German phenomenon and how did labour relationships and forms of production change? The historicisation of the late Federal Republic will examine these questions in the next few years – and will increasingly look towards other European countries to investigate how they dealt with these problems, which collectively marked the beginning of the third industrial revolution and created novel forms of inequality and insecurity. Ultimately little will remain of a contemporary history from a national perspective which measures itself according to the currently prevalent success or reunification categories.