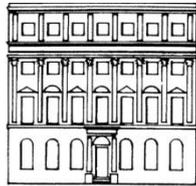


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*New Approaches to Political History: Writing British and
German Contemporary History.*

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New Approaches to Political History: Writing British and German Contemporary History, summer school organized by the German Historical Institute London and held at the GHIL, 7–12 Sept. 2009, with financial support from the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft.

‘For some time, historians in Britain and Germany have been thinking (often independently of each other) about how a “new” political history can be written. . . . So far there has been little exchange between British and German historians.’ This statement formed part of the invitation to the GHIL’s summer school, whose conveners, Martina Steber and Kerstin Brückweh (both London), wanted to set this exchange in motion and to concentrate the dialogue on German and British history since 1945.

Twenty-two German, British, and American doctoral and post-doctoral researchers reflected theoretically and methodologically on the topic while discussing their projects with the following experts: Callum Brown (Dundee), Frank Trentmann (London), Heinz-Gerhard Haupt (Florence and Bielefeld), Willibald Steinmetz (Bielefeld), Steven Fielding (Nottingham), Eckart Conze (Marburg), and Patricia Clavin (Oxford). The four sessions concentrated on the following themes: the significance of religion and emotion; the relationship between politics and society; state and parties; and connections between politics and globalization.

Two main ideas guided the papers and discussions: first, the boundaries of the political and political history; and secondly, consideration of the perspectives from which contemporary political history will be written in future. Each session started with a comment by one of the experts, who outlined the topic under discussion and pointed out the possible directions which research could take. The papers given by participants were commented on by another participant, and then discussed. Papers, commentaries, and discussion all dealt with the topic at a high level.

Opening proceedings, Andreas Gestrich, Director of the GHIL, welcomed a large number of guests to a podium discussion. Under the chairmanship of Stefan Berger (Manchester), Gareth Stedman Jones (Cambridge) and Willibald Steinmetz introduced the traditions of political history since 1945 in Britain and Germany respectively, presenting developments and historiographical trends. The first session, ‘Changing Focuses of Attention: Religion and Emotion’, dealt

with the relationship between religion and politics in a secularized society. In his controversial introductory comments, Callum Brown referred to secularization processes which, anchored in the cultural sphere, had occurred since the 1960s, and suggested that they were responsible for the loss of significance of religious arguments in the political discourse. Sebastian Tripp (Bochum), by contrast, assessed the political commitment among West German church groups to opposing the apartheid regime in the 1970s as a dialogue with the social function of religion at the time, and as a form of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the past) concerning the role of the Protestant churches in the Third Reich. Luke Fenwick (Oxford) emphasized the creative role of the churches in the Soviet occupation zone during the immediate post-war period, and explained the growing influence of socialism as arising out of the confrontation between the Communist Party and the Socialist Unity Party. Liza Filby (Warwick) also questioned Brown's paradigm of secularization. The Church of England, she argued, which took an increasingly political role during the 1980s and criticized Margaret Thatcher's social and economic agenda throughout, had to face the fact that the Conservative Party found renewed strength by appealing to Christian doctrines. The discussion referred to the different national concepts of statehood in relation to (institutionalized) religion.

The second part of this session was entitled 'Feelings and Politics in "Emotional Times"'. The introductory remarks by Birgit Aschmann (Kiel) were read out in the author's absence and emphasized the increasing value of genuinely interdisciplinary research on emotions for more than just contemporary historiography. Sabine Manke (Marburg) analysed letters from members of the public that reached Willy Brandt on the occasion of the parliamentary vote of no confidence in April 1972. Their sheer mass, she suggested, gave them the 'character of a plebiscite'. Letters to politicians, Manke argued, cast light on the complex relationship between rational and emotional aspects of politics. In her paper Judith Gurr (Freiburg) examined personal relationships between individual politicians and their impact on political acts, taking as examples the relationship between Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan on the one hand, and Tony Blair and Gordon Brown on the other. Emily Robinson (London) took as her subject the collective identities and subjective experiences of party memberships, looking in particular at the debates around the

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collapse of the British Communist Party and the breaking away of the Social Democratic Party from the Labour Party. The controversial panel discussion refused to see contemporary history as an especially 'emotional' time and suggested that all periods have to develop strategies in order to allow the transformation of emotion into political acts or relationships of loyalty, for example, to be demonstrated on the basis of the sources.

The second session was entitled 'Linked Spheres: Politics and Society'. The first part of this session dealt with categorizations of societies and their political significance. In their introductions, Heinz-Gerhard Haupt and Frank Trentmann commented on the interaction between political sphere and society. They referred, for example, to the impact of 'political visions' on political decision-making and pointed to the significance of non-institutionalized political actors and acts.

Martina Steber introduced the debate within the Christian Democratic Union and the Christian Socialist Union on co-determination in the 1960s and 1970s. She showed that in the course of this debate, the West German conservatives discussed different models of society and various forms of democratic constitution, and the place of politics in them. Christoph Neumaier (Mainz) was also interested in looking more closely at social categories and changes in values as the objects of politics. On the basis of social science statistics which, since the 1960s, have been used to demonstrate the 'death of the family', Neumaier enquired into the influence of family values on party politics and vice versa. A similarly structured research project on Britain was presented by April Gallwey (Warwick), who is investigating the 'discovery' of one-parent families by empirical social research. In her work, social science statistics are complemented by oral history interviews, which cast light on the experiences of single mothers in Britain in the 1960s and 1970s. The panel discussion concentrated on the methodological treatment of contemporary sociological models, some of which are simply adopted as categories of historical analysis without further reflection.

Frank Trentmann and Heinz-Gerhard Haupt opened the second part of this session, entitled 'Political Behaviour in the Consumer Society', by discussing the supposedly 'depoliticized' consumer society. Alexander Clarkson's (London) study, based on interviews, investigated the influence of urban subcultures on the political cul-

ture of West Germany during the Cold War, and its relationship to consumerism and property. Anne-Katrin Ebert (Vienna) also placed consumer behaviour at the centre of political discussion, and elucidated the concepts of sustainability and orientation towards the future in ways of living. The discussion asked when consumption becomes political, and among other things endorsed the acceptance of intellectual traditions and approaches drawn from the history of ideas.

The relationship between the state and political parties was the subject of the third session, entitled 'New Rules of the Political Game: State and Parties in Transition', which started by examining changes within party democracies. While Steven Fielding identified the history and function of the political parties as an important field of research in Britain, Willibald Steinmetz suggested that German researchers are less interested in party structures than in factors such as the behaviour of voters and leadership strategies. The influence of NGOs on political decision-making processes was a dominant theme in the papers given. David Richardson (Birmingham) focused on economic interest groups in Britain after 1945 and the contribution they made to the discussion of European integration. Shelley Rose (Binghamton, NY) cast light on the ambivalent relationship between members of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) and pacifist interest groups after the 'Kampf dem Atomtod' campaign of 1958. The idea of peace was also negotiated through transnational political contacts, and distanced itself from dominant opinion within the party. Peter Itzen (Freiburg) used the British debate around the reform of the divorce law in the 1960s to show how representatives of the Church and politicians reflected social changes in the demarcation between institutionalized religion and the state. The topics addressed in the discussion included the nexus between high or low politics and top-down relationships, and called for a historicization of these models and self-ascriptions.

The next group of papers was given under the heading 'The State in International Context'. Steven Fielding established that few British historians would include Europe, the European Community, or the European Union in political history narratives. Willibald Steinmetz, observing that the papers presented here were about organizations rather than the state, pointed out that in Germany in particular, there is a tendency to relativize the state in historiography. Thomas Zim-

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mer (Freiburg) spoke on the founding of the World Health Organization (WHO) in the context of British experiences during the Second World War. Health policy discussions, especially concerning the National Health Service, influenced international developments around the establishment of the WHO. Jacob Krumrey (Florence) looked at forms of political representation. Understanding politics as the locus of symbolic action makes it possible to examine perceptions and expectation on the one hand, and statements and representations on the other. Krumrey investigated these in the context of the early diplomacy of the European Community. Christoph Schneider (Freiburg) tested methodological approaches to the 1970s as the crisis years of European integration. These, he argued, are to be found in the cultural history of politics, that is, in the interplay between national and supranational actors, and in the integration of transnational interest groups into historical analysis. The panel discussion emphasized the significance of the state for contemporary political history. A call was made for a dynamic understanding of statehood in order to permit a definition of the degree to which nation-states in Europe have been subjected to change.

The fourth session, finally, looked at 'Politics in a Globalized World: Security and Transnationalization'. The first part brought together contributions on issues of force, threat, and security. Eckart Conze claimed that what shaped the period after 1945 was the 'search for security'. Patricia Clavin pointed out that this must be understood not only as protection against the force of weapons, but also as a need for economic security. Matthew Grant (Sheffield) presented the volunteer Civil Defence Corps, founded in Britain in 1949. Its notion of the nation standing together against the nuclear threat influenced, among other things, the political debate on questions of security. Daniel Gerster (Florence) looked at the ambivalent attitude of West German Catholics to war and violence in the 1960s and 1970s, focusing on religious semantics in this context. Taking the East Pakistan conflict as an example, Florian Hannig (Freiburg) drew attention to the growing significance of small pressure groups which influenced international conflicts from a humanitarian point of view and thus changed institutionalized international politics.

The second part of this session brought together papers on transnational political contexts. Patricia Clavin asked whether 'global moments' exist, and established that transnational perspectives pro-

duce new chronologies. She suggested withdrawing from the European perspective and integrating smaller states more strongly into historiography. Thereupon Eckart Conze proposed reflecting on 'transnational moments', investigating the state and statehood more closely, and in this context defining the relationship between transnationalism and (de)nationalization. In addition, he suggested, political actors and their motives should be taken more seriously. Starting from the assumption that in the 1970s the Western European states pursued a largely uniform policy of regulating immigration, Marcel Berlinghoff (Heidelberg) investigated the patterns of national migration policy and transnational influence on them. Stephen J. Scala (Maryland, USA) analysed the German Democratic Republic's (GDR) foreign policy expertise. Influenced by work from the West, politicians denied the fundamental antagonism between capitalism and socialism, and came to see the GDR as a 'normal' foreign policy actor. This attitude finally manoeuvred them into a position of political isolation. Reinhild Kreis (Munich) looked at the significance of American Houses in West Germany. Established as diplomatic instruments of a 'soft power strategy', they allowed the presentation of, for example, forms of US self-representation in West Germany and the sometimes conflict-ridden German appropriation of American ideas and offers. The discussion turned to the significance of supranationality as a characteristic of contemporary history, called for stronger comparative views, and emphasized the role of experts.

The concluding discussion, moderated by Kerstin Brückweh and Martina Steber, presented four characteristic features of the new historiographical approaches to political history. First, the political has become recognizably more dynamic to the extent that the borders of clearly established conceptual fields and areas of research, such as statehood, the nation-state, and international relations, have been extended by the inclusion of other perspectives and new actors such as NGOs. Second, political history has become much more varied as a result of interrelations between various approaches to political history. Third, several perspectives can usefully be integrated in investigating a single topic. And fourth, the papers presented reflected a non-dogmatic approach to political history.

The comparison between Britain and Germany in particular showed the different significance of national histories (embodied in the terms 'empire' and 'Holocaust', for example) for their respective

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historiographies which cannot be overlooked by a political history that takes transnational developments seriously. Rather, it is one of the tasks of contemporary history to define the reciprocal relationship between national and transnational factors. Presenting their research projects, making comments, and contributing to discussions, all participants displayed a willingness to come to terms with these demands and to apply the insights gained in their future work on political history.

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