

German History and World History ca. 1800

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This is perhaps an awkward venue for me to give this paper, for in it I will argue that historians of the so-called *Sattelzeit* around 1800 should consider dissociating themselves from the very project of German Studies. My reasons are partly autobiographical. I was steeped in critical theory in a doctoral program that, in terms of its curriculum and institutional organization, left no category uninterrogated except “modern Germany” itself. I subsequently landed a job in a field listed as “Old Regime Europe.” This rubric reflects the discipline’s conventional wisdom that the end of the eighteenth century is so fundamental a watershed that departments should rarely entrust any one person to straddle both sides of it. I soon found myself teaching a freshman survey course, world history from 1500 to 1800, in which I had no formal training. Teaching world history was my road to Damascus, for reasons which will become apparent. But the subjects in which my interest was suddenly kindled—like the Bengal Renaissance, Chinese consumer culture, and Ottoman administration—require, for original research, linguistic and methodological skills that, for now at least, I lack the time or resources to acquire. So in this paper I would like to explore what an historian with expertise in German Europe ca. 1800 can do to contribute to a subfield, world history, whose agenda (to my mind) ought to chart a course for the discipline as a whole.

Doing this requires revisiting the term *Sattelzeit*. There are at least three ways to understand this hopelessly awkward period designation in terms of the sociology of the German historical profession. The first conceives it as a period where early modernists, working forward from Luther to trace the Reformation’s impact, run headlong into

modernists, working backward from Hitler to uncover the Third Reich's antecedents. The second sees it in European, not narrowly German, terms, as the point at which French Revolutionary and later Napoleonic armies steamrolled a comparatively hidebound central Europe, provoking German states into, at best, defensive modernization and, at worst, truculent reaction. The third takes a global perspective, affirming the decades around 1800 as a tipping point for Europe's worldwide hegemony but arguing that this can only be explained by comparison with other parts of the world also engulfed in dynamic change. I would like to ask how events in the German-speaking world at roughly this time can be conceptualized in these intellectually liberating terms.

My point of departure is Kenneth Pomeranz's justly acclaimed *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy*. Pomeranz's aim is to account for the simultaneity of China's economic decline and Europe's industrial ascendancy in the centuries surrounding roughly 1800. His answer, in a nutshell, is that Europe possessed colonies and coal, which together provided the natural resources to circumvent ecological bottlenecks shared across Eurasia, and at the same time posed practical and logistical problems inducing inventors, entrepreneurs, policymakers, and consumers to create new institutions that sustained industrial takeoff. At first Pomeranz's very project struck me as a depressing retread of various neo-Weberian theses on the rise of the West. But it is not; and with it come exciting new ways to periodize world history and to construct focused, responsible world-historical comparisons.

First, in terms of periodization, the death of the Qianlong Emperor in 1799 is arguably as important a world-historical milestone as the infamous Bastille prison riot

that erupted on 14 July 1789 on the other side of Eurasia. At late as this point, fully three centuries after Columbus opened up the New World, China, not Europe, was still the world's economic powerhouse. What Pomeranz calls the "Great Divergence" has as much to do with China's plateau and decline as with Europe's alleged economic alchemy. Circa 2000, the momentary gap opened up by contingent advantages like coal and colonies is indeed beginning to close again with the rise of east Asian economies. Post-dating Europe's ascendancy to the short two centuries since 1800, instead of a *longue durée* issuing out of the sixteenth century, or the twelfth, or the first, or (God forbid) ancient Greece, makes it possible to frame specific, honed comparisons aimed not at uncovering broad civilizational differences but at isolating particular institutional breakthroughs and logistical/ecological bottlenecks.

Second, in terms of comparative method, Pomeranz enjoins us to match like with like, and in particular to dispense with the nation-state or national culture as our standard unit of analysis. Economic historians have for far too long compared England with China to find the latter backward, whereas to compare England with the Yangzi delta (or the Kanto plain in Japan), or to incorporate, say, the Ukraine alongside England in a pan-China comparison with all of Europe evens the playing field considerably. All this encourages Europeanists to think, on the one hand, transnationally, and on the other, regionally and subregionally.

Pomeranz's methods can also be extended from the industrializing economy to other sectors—the bureaucratic state, the patriarchal family, and literacy in classical languages—and to other parts of the globe, besides China, also sharing these characteristics, notably India and Islam and perhaps Japan and Russia, *i.e.* what for 1800

we could only slightly anachronistically describe as the developed world. With respect to the German *Sattelzeit* this encourages us to think about which characteristics of the German linguistic region might have contributed to Pomeranz's Great Divergence, and what analogous non-European regions with nearly so great a potential might be adduced as comparisons.

My own plea is that the study of universal, compulsory, vernacular education be given far more attention as Germany's contribution to world history during this period. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, particularly but by no means exclusively in Prussia, and well ahead of western Europeans, Germans constructed the world's very first comprehensive, integrated systems of state-sponsored primary, secondary, and tertiary schooling. Other educational systems of course exist, and some sprang up independently, but in many parts of the world, including the United States, students still begin and end their formal education in German institutions: the kindergarten and the research university, which gave us the Ph.D.

So seminal and fundamental a development has yet to find its proper historiographical frame, however. Those working forward from Luther see Prussian education as the secular culmination of Protestantism's injunction to read the Bible and spread literacy (a move soon enough imitated by German Catholics).¹ Those working backward from Hitler see universal education as the seedbed of German national identity under the guidance of an apolitical mandarin that disastrously capitulated in its self-appointed mission to define the cultural nation in humane—or more precisely,

¹ Two classics: Anthony LaVopa, *Grace, Talent, and Merit: Poor Students, Clerical Careers, and Professional Ideology in Eighteenth-Century Germany* (Cambridge, 1988); and James van Horn Melton, *Absolutism and the Eighteenth-Century Origins of Compulsory Schooling in Prussia and Austria* (Cambridge, 1988).

neohumanist—terms.² Those working eastward from France and England, finally, see it as yet another form of defensive, conservative, illiberal modernization—and indeed, compulsory schooling is to this day arguably the greatest violation of *laissez-faire* liberalism modern societies now unthinkingly accept.³ Even at the level of global comparison, German education is often given remarkably short shrift. It is indeed staggering that in Peter Stearns’ recent survey of modern education, *Schools and Students in Industrial Society*, the essentially functionalist explanation that industrial societies and nation-states need schools to churn out productive citizens allows him to focus almost entirely on France, the U.S., and Japan, mentioning Germany on a mere five mutually isolated pages.

My own modest contribution to a revised world-historical appreciation of German education comes as part of a forthcoming book on institutions of knowledge in the West since Alexandria, which incorporates comparisons with Chinese, Sanskritic, and Islamic knowledge systems. A chapter on the history of the European academic disciplines traces their inception to a classic Smithian division of labor in the German market for tertiary education. I begin conventionally enough, with the eighteenth-century seminar/seminary at the Francke Foundations in Halle, following the seminar’s migration to Göttingen, back to Halle, onward to Berlin, and across Germany and over the Atlantic. This

² For higher education: Fritz Ringer, *The Decline of the German Mandarins: The German Academic Community, 1890-1933* (Cambridge, MA, 1969); Konrad Jarausch, *Students, Society, and Politics in Imperial Germany: The Rise of Academic Illiberalism* (Princeton, 1982).

³ At best, authors in this vein dispense with normative political judgments, but still adopt a modernization paradigm with well-documented affinities to the more overt *Sonderweg* historiography. Such historians (dominant in Germany) commonly deploy structural-functionalist explanations of Germany’s reaction to social-political collapse during the *Sattelzeit*. See Detlef Müller, *Sozialstruktur und Schulsystem: Aspekte zum Strukturwandel des Schulwesens im 19. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen, 1977); Frank-Michael Kuhlemann, *Modernisierung und Disziplinierung: Sozialgeschichte des preussischen Volksschulwesens 1794-1872* (Göttingen, 1992); Ulrich Herrmann, *Aufklärung und Erziehung: Studien zur Funktion der Erziehung im Konstitutionsprozeß der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft im 18. und frühen 19. Jahrhundert* (Weinheim, 1993). Relatedly, from a sophisticated Marxist perspective, see Helmut König, *Zur Geschichte der Nationalerziehung in Deutschland im letzten Drittel des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin, 1960).

institutional evolution was accompanied by the intellectual growth of Biblical and then classical philology (for whose history I am enormously indebted to my panel colleague Jonathan Sheehan). With Humboldt's educational reforms ca. 1810 the key puzzle becomes explaining why, in the face of French military, engineering, and organizational prowess, German states propagated *this* model in the neohumanist *Gymnasium*, deciding to drill their own in dead classical languages rather than in more modern, utilitarian fields.

To contextualize the state's interest in philologists, I draw the relevant Pomeranian comparison: to another, very different land subjected to western European imperialism and in which classical learning also yielded, under pressure, to vernacular education. I speak of British Bengal, where the architects of modern imperialism beginning with Warren Hastings and Richard Wellesley hired droves of native *pandits* precisely for their philological expertise in Sanskrit. The Europeans' original aim was to acquire knowledge of Hindu law, the *dharmasastra*, to enhance their effectiveness as judges in routine colonial civil court cases. The effort had unintended consequences, however, among the Bengali *pandits* themselves. These "pundits" presided over the world's oldest and most comprehensive system of specialized academic disciplines, the *sastras*, whose best-known exemplar in the West is the *Kamasutra*, a systematized theory of sexual love. Seizing a novel opportunity to publish afforded by Baptist missionaries, *pandits* revisited and reinterpreted these Sanskrit scriptures to mount reformist arguments against widow immolation (*sati*) and for cross-caste marriage, against polytheistic idolatry and for a unitarian deistic Hinduism, and, finally, to articulate a novel sense of Bengali literary identity and Indian nationhood and propagate it in primary and secondary

schools. The vitality of Sanskrit philology in its encounter with British power and print culture mediated the pandits' graduation into public intellectuals, in short.

Precisely this comparison allows one to understand a hitherto inadequately explained development back in Germany: how drilling *Gymnasium* students in the depressingly pedantic methods of classical philology could call forth, in succeeding generations, the most productive and specialized system of academic disciplines ever created in Europe, one that still drives the mission of the research university globally. In a word, Greek was dead; Sanskrit was not. *Pandits* refurbished a living Sanskrit knowledge system for a Bengali public sphere and, later, the Indian nation. By contrast, *Gymnasium* graduates reared on Greek had to branch out at new research universities. Mass education provided training for the mind previously unavailable to middle-class strivers in the European Republic of Letters and instead growing out of the sectarian culture of evangelical Pietism. But having repurposed the practices of disciplined close reading from the living Bible to the dead Homer, German academics seeking employment in a tight labor market had no choice but to apply philologically-inspired methods to the entirely new specialized disciplines around which the research university coalesced: history, literature, folklore, philosophy, law, theology, and others. Prussia's program of national educational renewal thus had its own unintended consequences: it turned the all-encompassing Humboldtian ideal of *Bildung* into the fractured pursuit of increasingly arcane *Wissenschaften*. German professors followed a trajectory precisely the opposite of Bengali *pandits*: the latter, with specialized expertise in *sastras*, embraced the opportunity to generalize, to publish reform tracts, literary works, and popular schoolbooks in the Bengali vernacular.

However jarring, the controlled juxtaposition of colonial Bengal and Napoleonic Germany can, I hope, be at least as productive as methods developed in postcolonial studies that often induce us to treat such comparisons with kid gloves. An exacting institutional focus, comparing the fate of *sastras* in one region to the philology of classical texts in the other, can yield insights that mutually illuminate two very different academic cultures. This is crucially important for a field that, despite the penetrating researches of Anthony La Vopa, James Melton, R. Steven Turner, and William Clark, among others, can in some hands become the driest kind of institutional history.

Besides calling for more research to enliven the study of German education, I would like to mention, in closing, a few other research topics that emerge from a conception of the *Sattelzeit* oriented toward world-historical comparison, world-historical impact, and the world-historical embeddedness of events transpiring in the German-speaking world. In the decades around 1800, freemasonry began to spread outward from England and its colonies in becoming a truly global cultural phenomenon with deep roots in places as far apart as Mexico, Turkey, and China. It was Germans and French who developed the three traditional English degrees into the numerous higher degrees bedeviling the feverish imagination of present-day conspiracy theorists, and Germans in particular drew new connections to Renaissance Hermeticism, Paracelsianism, and other esoteric currents that soon reverberated throughout the international masonic brotherhood. Mozart's masonic Hermeticism is of course well known, and Glenn A. Magee has written a fascinating book on Hegel's roots in the Hermetic tradition. There is a lot more to be done on the social and cultural history of masonic and affiliated

movements, though Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann's forthcoming book will surely help remedy this deficit.

Classical music is another product of the German *Sattelzeit* whose global adoption in, most notably, East Asia, awaits more work and whose roots in German social and cultural history has only begun to receive its due at the hands of David Gramit, Celia Applegate, Michael Steinberg, and others.

The German diaspora is a remarkably underresearched and underconceptualized subject of study. Between the 1970s-and 1980s-era studies by Mack Walker and Bernard Bailyn on German emigrants to North America and the recent work of Lora Wildenthal and others on imperialism in Africa during the *Kaiserreich* there are huge gaps to be filled in, particularly by engaging the work of Latin Americanists on places of high German impact, like Argentina.

Finally, there are incredibly fruitful comparisons within continental Europe—both with Napoleonic Italy and Spain, and with the polities and peoples of east central Europe as well. Inasmuch as the Great Divergence is a European-wide phenomenon, if profoundly uneven across the continent, transnational European comparisons emphatically serve the broader agenda of a global perspective.

I would like to conclude, then, with a plea for a new term to encapsulate this period. The term *Sattelzeit* is unintelligible even to many Germanists. A rubric I often use, the “Revolutionary-Napoleonic epoch,” retains a problematic emphasis on France. The Great Divergence is too inspecific. What alternatives are there, then?