HISTORY LIVED AND HISTORY WRITTEN:
GERMANY AND THE UNITED STATES,
1945/55-2015
GERALD FELDMAN MEMORIAL LECTURE, DELIVERED AT THE GERMAN HISTORICAL
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Gerald Feldman was a friend and a colleague, an early mentor. He graduated from Columbia two years before I graduated from Harvard. He was three years ahead of me in the Harvard graduate program, and we worked in related fields, in particular business-government relations in Weimar and the history of the German inflation, on which he wrote a magisterial book. He was generous with his advice and had a great, understated sense of humor. I learned a lot from him. We did not always agree — the painful debate over the sanctioning of David Abraham was a challenge, but we worked to overcome that breach. This speech honors Gerry’s massive scholarship and his friendship, but although we worked for a long time in similar fields, I am not going to talk about this common field of work. Neither am I going to cite in detail the significant and numerous contributions that have explored postwar Germany and the postwar United States. As readers will soon discern, this lecture is as much personal as it is scholarly.

Since the German Historical Institute has always and fruitfully encouraged the intersections of German and American history, and of German and American historians, I propose to discuss that partially shared history. I have chosen an ambivalent opening date: 1945/55. The first year, 1945, has an obvious significance. May 2015 marked 70 years since the second great German war ended in Europe. The significance of the second, 1955 — sixty years ago this summer — will become clear in a moment.

I.

Let us start, as we all do these days, with pictures, in this case a couple of evocative pictures from the early postwar period — not the iconic photo of Soviet soldiers waving the flag from the top of the gutted Reichstag, or the peace angel gesturing over destroyed Dresden. These were the classic scenes from the end of the European war seventy years ago this month — matched by the posed photo of Americans raising the flag
at Iwo Jima or ground zero at Hiroshima for the end of the Asian war. More relevant for my discussion today are the photos of Michelantonio Vaccaro, aka Tony Vaccaro, a GI with a camera who took thousands of pictures from the Normandy invasion through much of the American occupation. As of last year in any case, he was still alive at 93. I like the first photograph included here from 1948 (Figure 1): The circus has come to Frankfurt and trapeze artists and tightrope walkers are performing against the backdrop of the gutted Römer. It is a photograph of risk taking, not compelled as in wartime, but chosen as a skill and profession. Life and limb are wagered — Kids and adults are watching from the remnants of a building. Ruins remain, but life is no longer threatened on a daily basis (see second photograph, Figure 2). Human wreckage has remained as well — here an amputee makes a livelihood selling toiletries and cigarettes (see third photograph, Figure 3). The war is over.

To say the war had ended is not unproblematic. We historians look for continuities. Some have suggested that the years from 1943 to 1948 (from Stalingrad to currency reform) constitute an inherent unity marked by privation, mass migration, and ruins; historians of twentieth-century Germany have long since become skeptical of the concept of *Stunde Null*. But in the search for sophisticated periodization we should not forget what a liberation it is to have the relentless guns silenced and the bombing raids halted in a total war. There could be senseless, random violence — the composer Anton Webern shot by a GI on September 15, 1945; doubtless continued looting and rape — but no longer death delivered from the air, and no longer death from the Nazi thugs who were enforcing their cruel and sadistic discipline on exhausted soldiers or civilians trying to navigate between the lines. Instead, by 1948 Germans can enjoy the thrill of watching death-defying acrobatics (even with a net) as a recreation. Soon there will be war movies as directors and actors reshape and mediate our memories. We can watch the war as spectators.
Let me show another amateur photo (Figure 4), taken ten years after the war had ended, the summer of 1955 — my second opening date. A German family on a summer visit. An American high school student in an Argyle sweater, sixteen years old, and his German “brother” for the summer. Sixty years ago. Not just a student — but your lecturer as a high school junior, sent from a suburban Jewish family whose grandfathers had been born in Germany, but in which no German had been spoken for at least a generation. An American student who appreciated history — who had watched the early Hollywood war movie *Battleground* a couple of years before, who knew the fate of the Jews who had not left Germany — but who found a warm welcome in the Bonn family to which (entirely without any input of his own) he’d been assigned by the American Field Service.

That was sixty years ago this summer. There were still ruins, empty spaces in the cities, burnt out buildings — in Bonn, the shell of the lovely baroque Poppelsdorfer Schloss (see Figure 5) and the Königsmuseum; there were still amputees, men without legs propelling themselves on city streets in kiddy wagons, women dancing with each other at outside beer gardens because they wanted to dance and their earlier partners had never returned from Russia or northern France or Italy or any of the fronts to which National Socialist ambition supported by military prowess had sent them. The war was over in 1955, but its reminders were everywhere. But there was also a new Bundestag building, a restored Villa Hammerschmidt for the Federal President, the avuncular Theodor Heuss who offered punch and cigars to us American teenagers, unseasoned emissaries of Eisenhower’s America.

1945 and 1955 and 2015: I thought it would be appropriate therefore, to reflect on the history and experience in the interim decades for the two countries, Germany and the United States, and the six decades for the then high school student, who remained a student of
This summer country, learned its language, and returned repeatedly. Hence it is a reflection about history as lived — and in both countries. Not only as lived, but as written; because my own life — so sheltered in educational institutions, so removed from the marketplace of everything but ideas — has been a life of writing history, much of it on Germany, some (mostly in articles) on the United States. How did we historians, by extension analysts of politics and political philosophers, understand the history which we so recently came through and the new history that our countrymen were making?

II.

The main point that this lecture tonight aims to sustain is that, for all the differences between the German experience and the American one as of those initial and early postwar years — one nation in ruins and defeated, the other triumphant in war; one an occupied country, the stateless remnant of a failed dictatorship, odious in the eyes of the world; the other the global leader of the world’s democracies — the history of the two countries for the greater part of a century has followed a parallel evolution. This lecture is not about the obvious themes of foreign policy — the Cold War alliance and after — although these are important and indeed underpinned a lot of the postwar fraternity. It is not about how the United States brought democracy to Germany, nor even about how Germany finally joined “the West,” as synthesized recently in Heinrich August Winkler’s impressive narrative.¹

¹ Heinrich August Winkler, Der lange Weg nach Westen, 2 vols. (Munich, 2000).
The so-called West, in fact, has been a moving target, an evolving set of values that both societies have approached asymptotically. Both societies as they constructed history shared the experience of democratization, and as they reflected on their history, agreed on a narrative or history of democratization: America alongside Germany, Germany alongside America. The American narrative was the more ambitious, for we often claimed the democratic redemption of Germany as well as our own. This was not unjustified; the U.S. (with the cooperation of the British) set the ground rules for the resumption of a civic life in Western Germany. Lutz Niethammer has maintained that there was not even a German society, much less a nation, just a people of survivors, and that social structure was recreated under Allied supervision. This seems to me exaggerated but it points to a crucial fact. The postwar Germanies were contextual constructions, negotiated by Germans but within limits that their catastrophic defeat and the subsequent Cold War imposed. As a child of that era, I take pride in what the United States helped to midwife in the West. Perhaps the open-minded curiosity that we American students brought even helped a tiny bit in the process. Certainly the openness that German students found on our shores played a role. Still, the American narrative of democratization achieved was perhaps the more simplistic, since the democratic advances made at home were sometimes contradicted abroad. The narrative that most Americans avoided, with the exception of provocative dissident historians, was the imperial one. Only in the current century has empire been considered more than a temporary deviation from the American narrative. But a history innocent of imperial aggression was precisely the narrative that a divided Germany had to renounce.  

2 See Niethammer, “Schwierigkeiten beim Schreiben einer deutschen Nationalgeschichte nach dem zweiten Weltkrieg,” in the essays curated by Ulrich Herbert and Dirk van Laak as Deutschland danach: Postfaschistische Gesellschaft und nationales Gedächtnis (Bonn, 1999), 434–449. To my mind, Niethammer (with his long-standing associates) has been one of the most subtle interpreters of Germany’s postwar transformations of society, nation(s), and collective memory — critical throughout, but realistic and humane.
If, at least until recently, each country’s narrative was one of democratization, was the process itself one of democratization? In many senses, yes. Democracy returned to Germany, more robust and less tormented than during the Weimar Republic. Democracy expanded in the United States as racial segregation was slowly overcome and the suffrage enlarged to include minorities. But democracy is a complex term: as Tocqueville made clear, it is not merely about procedures for determining electoral preferences, nor even just about human rights, important as these dimensions are. Democracy, rightly understood in historical terms, includes components of inclusivity, egalitarianism, and solidarity — three qualities of collective national life that are related, but not identical. These have been more elusive ideals, and I will conclude by asking to what degree they have been advanced.

III.

Let us start where I started as an exchange student, with the mid and late 1950s. American and German historians of recent German history had clear questions but conflicting answers. Each country’s commentators started from the premise that the United States had proven itself a successful democracy while German politics had been deeply flawed. So profound a Zivilisationsbruch, as Dan Diner would later call it, required deep causes. American and German historians alike contributed to this narrative. A regime as monstrous as the Third Reich, supported by the enthusiasm of so many Germans, was the expression of deep long-term flaws. Of course, the alleged flaws differed according to ideological convictions. Liberals in both countries proposed that Germans had never been able to institute a robust liberal democracy. They blamed the military and authoritarian traditions of the Prussian path to unification; the neo-feudal aspirations of a politically immature bourgeoisie; the unbridgeable divide between the National Liberals who had accepted

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Figure 5. Ruins of the Poppelsdorfer Schloss in Bonn, October 6, 1947. Source: Stadtarchiv und Stadthistorische Bibliothek Bonn. Reproduced by permission.

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Bismarck’s high-handed politics as the price of unification and the allegedly doctrinaire “Progressives,” outlined by Friedrich Sell in 1953 as *Die Tragödie des deutschen Liberalismus*; more generally, some pointed to the flawed psychoanalytical development of German youth resulting from so many missing fathers, or the contradictions inherent in the so-called “German idea of freedom” as explained by Leonard Krieger or the destructive yearnings of the “Germanic ideology” set out by Fritz Stern (1961).4

The young student of the 1950s found that the conservative analyses of National Socialism enjoyed a greater prestige than they would later. When the venerable Gerhard Ritter contributed a massive essay on the roots of National Socialism to a UNESCO-sponsored volume on the subject that appeared in 1955, he saw Nazism as the final, brutal result of the mass democratic tendencies uncorked by the French Revolution.5 Even someone so critical of the new conservative movements in the United States as Hannah Arendt emphasized that totalitarianism grew out of the lack of genuine political authority.

Liberals were right, she argued, in discerning the receding of freedom; conservatives were correct in decrying the disappearance of authority. “Who would deny the serious threats to freedom from all sides since the beginning of the century, and the rise of all kinds of tyranny at least since the end of the first World War? Who can deny, on the other side, that disappearance of practically all traditionally established authorities has been one of the most spectacular characteristics of the modern world.” 6

But the conservative narratives in America were essentially the explanations offered by exiles from Germany. True, they were accompanied by a home-grown new conservatism that stressed Burkean traditionalism and was represented by Russell Kirk, as a generation later it would be defended by Hilton Kramer’s journal, *The New Criterion*. The new American Right, however, was an uglier phenomenon, even when it was supported by would-be intellectuals such as the young William Buckley.7 As Hannah Arendt understood it, this was not a true conservatism — today we would quickly identify it as a populism, although fifty years ago Populism (capital P) was still identified as an agrarian protest movement of the 1890s. Richard Hofstadter termed it “the pseudo-conservative revolt” in 1954.8 To be sure, McCarthyism, using the term loosely, burnt itself out in about a decade, but its lessons were contradictory. (As a high school student in suburban Scarsdale, the lecturer found that his socially privileged

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enclave did not remain untouched. A self-declared Committee of Ten went through the holdings of the public library, identifying subversive books — including Howard Fast’s novel, *Freedom Road* (1944), which early on shook up the received narrative of American Reconstruction as a corrupt, misguided effort at revenge and along with W.E.B. DuBois’s *Black Reconstruction* (1935) anticipated the positive assessment that John Hope Franklin would popularize a generation later.9 The Westchester Country American Legion publicly attacked my redoubtable high school history teacher, one Dorothy Connor, for allowing an anti-McCarthy LP spoof, “The Investigator,” smuggled in from Canada, to be played in the afternoon discussion club. (It is now available as an audio CD from The Smithsonian Institution!) Did these excesses that mauled American civic life for half a decade mean that the US system was basically so healthy that a demagogic anti-liberal politics could not durably gain traction — thus confirming the superiority of the American polity to the German political arena? Or did they mean that even so triumphant a democracy as the United States was also vulnerable to vicious demagogy?

In fact, the McCarthyite shadows that flitted over the face of American democracy in the high Cold War hardly shook Americans’ great confidence in the virtues of their democracy, which had allegedly never offered a fertile ground for extremism and which had a party system that supposedly functioned smoothly. And gradually the German narrative of National Socialism as an excess of democracy just became untenable. (If historians evoked the French Revolution as the source of totalitarianism by the 1960s, they referred to the origins of Stalinist totalitarian democracy.)10 But gradually, too, Americans gained more confidence in the German postwar political system. Up to mid-decade, US observers, like my professor of German history in 1958, had posed the question of whether postwar West German democracy might be a fair-weather product that could collapse if economic adversity or other sources of instability arose. James Bryant Conant, earlier Harvard’s president, recently High Commissioner, returned to lecture at Harvard and to reassure his audience (of which I was one) that we need not fret about a relapse into authoritarianism.11 Political scientists took note that extremist movements had declined — the only one that seemed alarming was French Poujadism.

By 1960 the anxious scrutiny of West German democracy seemed unnecessary: American undergraduates were being taught that politics had happily purged itself of ideological confrontations — both

at home and abroad. There need never be another great economic crisis since Keynesian demand management could always assure relatively full employment. There need never be a relapse into dictatorship since the grounds of consensus were so broad and American or Anglo-American party government had taken root in Germany (and Japan). The Communist world was still the great adversary, but it, too, might gradually shed its authoritarian practices. Khrushchev’s Soviet Union had abjured Stalinism: the great thaw had begun, a development that allowed my new wife and myself with two other school friends to tour easily by car in the summer of 1961. European Social Democrats had shed their Marxist baggage, as the German Social Democrats had done at their recent Bad Godesberg conference, as the British Labourites were urged to do by Tony Crosland, as the French Socialists of the Fifth Republic were apparently managing, and even as Italian Socialists and Christian Democrats edged toward collaboration.

IV.

For many observers these trends meant that the classical age of ideological confrontation — the heroic antagonism of Communism, liberal democracy and fascism — was ending. Daniel Bell famously wrote about the end of ideology and the exhaustion of political ideas at the end of the 1950s. The veteran of Weimar politics, Otto Kirchheimer and the Catholic observer, Waldemar Besson described the vanishing of SPD opposition at the end of the 1950s and early 1960s. But this was an incomplete analysis. With hindsight we can discern a different phenomenon — not the end of ideology, but its societal relocation. Between the late 1950s and the mid-1960s, the sources of dissidence and political energy were shifting, not withering. They were moving away from overt political party and parliamentary structures toward the profounder layers of civil society — its youth, its religious currents, its economic institutions and the media. The decisive agents of public actions would no longer be parliamentary bodies, but social protest movements. These civic mobilizations and even unorganized currents of opinion interfaced less with parties and the legislature than with the executive and the constitutional courts. Social movements, executive action, and judicial decision-making moved as in response to each other. Opposition parties might give up their claims to change the social world through legislation. The courts and the socially active public slowly took up the reformist vocation in their stead. This migration of civic dissent manifested itself with new

milestones that had little to do with electoral competition: the American Supreme Court declared school segregation by race unconstitutional in 1954 and a social movement to reclaim African-American rights gathered force from the beginning of the 1960s. The German Spiegel Affair unrolled in protests and ended with the Constitutional Court upholding the rights of the editors.

What provoked this shifting of ideological activism into extra-institutional channels? The question opens up the whole problem of explaining the turbulence of the 1960s that would culminate in 1968. My own preferred explanations draw on categories suggested among others by Albert Hirschman or Victor Turner, unorthodox theorists who sensed the great oscillations of social mood, between what Turner termed structured and liminal behavior, or what Hirschman identified as public and private aspirations. The fifteen years from World War II until the end of the 1960s was an era of disciplined reconstruction, an effort to establish new orthodoxies and re-establish old ones. The Cold War — following on the huge World War earlier — had summoned forth mobilization against an external enemy just as the Second World War had done. For twenty years at least, from the late 1930s to the late 1950s, Americans and Germans had both lived in the constant shadow of allegedly dangerous adversaries — first each other, and then, jointly, the menace of Soviet Communism. Likewise, the urgency of production for wartime and thereafter for economic reconstruction had also summoned discipline: the need for social savings and investment, the deferral of individual consumption. There were many analyses of the mentalities at stake: David Riesman’s brilliant efforts to reveal the anomie of postwar suburban America, William Whyte’s Organization Man, or Sloan Wilson’s Man in the Gray Flannel Suit; the so-called “silent generation” at the American university, or Herbert Schelsky’s Skeptical Generation — all diagnoses of the mid- and late 1950s. The students of the 1950s — it was a mentality already fraying by my years — were adults before their time; our society was one of deferred consumption; hyper maturity. American commentators rightly praise the “GI Bill of Rights” (1944) that opened up higher education to students seasoned by wartime service. But their seriousness may have come with a price. The great psycho-political effort to draw clear boundaries between ideological systems, to reconstruct traditional family stability after the turmoil of wartime and, in short, to emphasize the obligations toward the future, all characterized this extraordinary decade and a half of psychosocial mobilization — and it all tended to


give way, to re-validate the present as well as claim the future by the mid-1960s.

The Federal Republic and the United States went through this great transformation of mentalities approximately in sync. The great repressed issues of each society came to the surface. Both societies now gazed upon the present and the past in a more inclusive way, somewhat akin to the process in which France, Britain and the Netherlands gazed upon their colonial past as they were compelled to relinquish empire. West Germans had to scrutinize anew — no longer through Allied war crimes trials, but their own Auschwitz trials — their own acquiescence in murder. When as an adolescent student I had asked my German summer family in 1955 what they had known of the Holocaust, they said it had not been and was not to be discussed. The next generation no longer allowed that silence in the 1960s. What Americans had to gaze on was the role of race and slavery — and their massive involvements in the Third World against communism (focused in the Vietnam War).

As reflected in historiography — or was the new self-examination led by historiography? — the German focus shifted once again. The ambitious analyses of totalitarianism in the early 1950s had largely affirmed the kinship of Stalinism and Nazism, and sometimes proposed conservative analyses of so-called mass society. By the mid-1950s, the dominant analysis of National Socialism was already leaving behind such meta-concepts and analyzing the specifics of parliamentary failure. Karl Dietrich Bracher, the then 33-year-old political scientist, had published the outstanding analytically focused history of the collapse of Weimar — *Die Auflösung der Weimarer Republik* — in 1955 examining parties, institutions, and crises. By the 1960s, the care that Bracher brought to the analysis of Weimar’s dissolution now marked the scrutiny of the Nazi experience, with differing focuses, to be sure — the growing claim of the Holocaust as the central aspect, or the effort at some sort of interpretive reconquest (what Broszat clumsily called *Historisierung*), or detailed monographic reconstruction of institutions and mentality.17

In the United States, attention shifted to writing again the history of slavery and Reconstruction. The major studies of C. Vann Woodward, Eugene Genovese and Herbert Gutman — even the provocative thesis of Stanley M. Elkins18 that compared American slavery to the German concentration camps — accompanied the mobilization of American opinion that went from sit-ins to civil rights marches, the passage of


voting rights legislation, the bitter disputes over busing, the protests over “the war” — no longer “the war” that even my generation understood to be the Second World War, but the war in Vietnam. This war, in fact, was accompanied by and doubtless helped to encourage the other great historiographical revision of these years — the reinterpretation of Cold War origins. (One of the early essays, which I published in 1970, was a labored effort to sort out these controversies:\(^{19}\); were critics right in suggesting that the United States had provoked Stalin into clamping down dissent in Eastern Europe, whether through aggressive provocation or the deeper needs of American capitalism?) History departments, including my own, fought over these revisionist charges. When the historical pendulum swung again in the late 1980s, the revisionist scenario came to seem discredited — but the debate had been long and bitter. And by the time the issue re-emerged indirectly at the time of the Iraq War, one of the main critical theses, namely that the United States was in its own way an imperial power, no longer seemed so controversial.

V.

There is no time on this occasion to review in tandem the developments in lived history and written history as they unfolded across each decade. The societal fractures that opened at the end of the 1950s in Germany and America, as well as in the rest of Europe and parts of the Middle East and Asia, more generally reached a climax in the upheavals of 1968 and were prolonged through the 1970s. I do not wish to write an apologia for the self-indulgence and posturing, the authoritarianism, the excuses for violence that these movements contained. (I am not speaking of their counterparts behind the Iron Curtain, the “Prague Spring” above all, which were mobilizations for fundamental rights.) Paul Berman, focusing in particular on the evolution of Joschka Fischer, has sought (as I read him) to contextualize the militant and violent protests of 1968 retroactively as a sort of clumsy dress rehearsal for 1989.\(^{20}\) This seems forced to me; nonetheless, I would urge that the generational upheaval represented more than merely an adolescent “acting out”, as adult interpreters, even such liberals as Raymond Aron, suggested. They were part of a revolt against the two-decade discipline of wartime, Cold-War, and economic austerity — against the twenty-year privileging of the future over the present that extended roughly from 1938 to 1958. They shifted, as I said above, the locus of public activity from the constitutional frameworks that were reconstructed in Europe after 1945 to


\(^{20}\) Paul Berman, Power and the Idealists, or, The Passion of Joschka Fischer and its Aftermath (Brooklyn, NY, 2005).
the public square and the sites of protest, and the sources of legal decisions from the legislatures to courts. Society was brought back in.

At the same time these histories necessarily opened an age of subjectivities, a celebration of the supposedly emancipated self (think of Herbert Marcuse’s popular *One Dimensional Man* (1964). Assertions of so-called identity were trump and found their expression in protests, legalization, and self-celebration: whether feminism, with its insistence on reproductive rights, or gay rights, which also shifted the focus of historical examinations from institutions to mentalities. The new history of the working class — inspired by E.P. Thompson’s 1964 classic *Making of the English Working Class*; the history of slavery in the United States; the second or third generation of the history of National Socialism — all wrestled with issues of complicity and agency. In different ways the interpretations of Detlev Peukert and Hans Mommsen, the efforts to probe the Bavarian population under National Socialism, the new biographies of Hitler, and the charged debate over functionalism and intentionalism as keys to understanding the Final Solution shifted the weight of inquiry from structure to agency.21

Is it legitimate to understand such investigations as a counterpart to the institutional broadening of societal democratization? In his meditation on the postwar Germany that he has lived through, Konrad Jarausch has used the concept of “recivilizing” Germans, by which he means expanding their civic awareness, not improving their manners.22 Perhaps we might understand a process of societal liberalization. Americans had to undergo the same process in terms of overcoming old myths and racist thinking. For all the exceptions, for all the persistence of skins and authoritarians, the two societies had become more inclusive and encompassing.

VI.

Of course, history and historiography did not end with the 1960s and 1970s — an epoch in its own right now 40 to 50 years behind us. Neither did the new works cited overcome older paradigms of written history. The focus on formal institutions would continue; the effort to understand older-style movements, especially the working-class parties, continued. But underlying them was also the search to illuminate the non-state institutions that wielded the sources of power: banks and industries, foundations and universities, the elite agencies that conducted international relations. Indeed, the celebration of subjectivities came to an end in part through its very excesses. By


the 1980s, the pendulum swung again as the political forces representing discipline and confrontation — whether in domestic politics or international politics — recovered influence. The renewed Cold War that began at the end of the Carter and Schmidt administrations, with the controversy over intermediate range missiles, the Afghanistan invasion and the conflicts in Africa, the administrations of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, made many former 68ers see their past histories as mere foam and fluff. Power was back, indeed envisaged as more pervasive because it was less centralized: Gramsci superseded Marx, Foucault in effect challenged the premises of Habermas’s enlightenment.

How should we think about the decades that followed upon ‘68? In effect, the 1980s seemed to restore at first the discipline, confrontation, and primacy of organized party conflict that had last dominated political activity and organization in the fifties. But this was misleading. Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher and Helmut Kohl governed societies that had irrevocably and fundamentally become more inclusive. Civil rights, affirmative action, and gender reforms had taken place. On the other hand, the old legislative Left, based on a solid working class vote, no longer secured a voice in representation; indeed, its social base was dissolving as its industries closed down or migrated abroad. Thatcher and Reagan administered solid defeats to trade-union adversaries. Until 1987 or so the impact of Mikhail Gorbachev, the renewed Cold War, the suppression of Solidarity and the arrest of dissidents in the Soviet Union and the GDR seemed calculated to re-consolidate the older patterns of confrontational politics — whether the struggle over responding to Soviet intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Europe or the questioning of civilian applications of nuclear power.

Against this background the Historikerstreit of the late 1980s throws a revealing light. Strictly speaking, the Historikerstreit was not a controversy over facts but meanings. This, however, enhanced rather than diminished its importance, despite the dismissive stance that many critics held. The controversy demonstrated that the conservative revival of the 1980s could not be based on any sort of sentimental revival of a national German past. Indeed, the debate over the alleged “relativization” of the Holocaust compelled reaffirmation of the singular atrocities committed by the Third Reich and its auxiliaries. It testified to an ongoing process that was transforming the Holocaust into a signifier of European identity — almost a cultural patrimony. It suggested further the creation of a

memory culture — which helped to legitimate the revival of German nationhood a very few years later. (To my mind, the great historian of this memory culture was Tony Judt, whose book *Postwar* essentially reconstructed the narrative of the years from 1945 to 2005 as a struggle over which European memories would prevail.) There is a danger, however, with a memory culture. Nietzsche essentially warned against its paralytic effect in the second of his *Untimely Meditations, On the Use and Abuse of History*.

It was the events in Eastern Europe that propelled developments beyond the refugence of memory. Unexpectedly, the given structures of politics, in this case of Communist Eastern Europe, gave way to the demands of social movements to overthrow the regimes that had used spurious claims of the future as an excuse for maintaining repression. Even more than in 1968, the intervention of society as such was a source of sudden change. The protests that had led to the formation of Solidarity and resurfaced at the end of the 1980s then unfurled in Leipzig, East Berlin, Prague and elsewhere, and they were adult projects, not just student ones. This time they led historians and commentators to take note of civil society.

Consider the testimony of social history. German social history in the interwar period, written by Marxists, had focused on working-class movements. When written by the conservative academic establishment, it had concentrated on studies of *Volksgeschichte* — that is, of beleaguered German minorities surrounded by threatening Slavs. But in the 1990s and thereafter, “civil society” became the historical subject for German social historians. So, too, American interpreters of Eastern Europe were caught up in a veritable enchantment with the forces of civil society. But such optimistic readings — e.g. Francis Fukuyama’s “End of History” — did not prove durable. The quick end to the magical and luminal moments of transformation, depicted with such verve for instance by Timothy Garton Ash, or the hope that the Plastic People of the Universe or Pink Floyd might replace authoritarian statehood yielded to grubbier realities of resource seizure and party demagogy in Eastern Europe or at least to the workaday return of party politics, as in Poland, and most sadly to ethnic bloody-mindedness (the civil wars in the dissolving Yugoslavia).

What the 1990s and the years since, I believe, have taught — lessons reinforced outside of Europe by genocidal cruelty, naïve American plans of democratic intervention in the Middle East and the disappointments of the Arab Spring — is that society as such can indeed

intervene to shatter ossified political forms and petrified aspirations. But so-called civil society is not a sufficient institution for governance; it can degenerate into tribalism, communal conflict, and neocapitalist rent-seeking if not kleptocracy. Its associative bonds find it hard to withstand the corrosive impact of pervasive market forces. No surprise that Margaret Thatcher declared brutally that there is no such thing as society. Societies cannot durably live without constituted political and legal institutions that claim an assent wider than social movements. The wrapping of the Reichstag in 1995, to take a telling image, offered a magical moment of unconstrained fellowship. But as its creators recognized with unself-conscious inspiration, the Reichstag could not remain wrapped forever. Creative social thinkers, such as Albert Hirschman or, from the Catholic tradition, Victor Turner, whom I have cited above, recognized this dialectic. Civil society must struggle against given institutions, but its role cannot be to live without them but rather to construct new ones, hopefully more open, egalitarian, and inclusive.

VII.

To return to the beginnings of this lecture, Americans and Germans embarked on the repeated cycle of learning and reinstitutionalization together. Of course, Americans helped dislodge an atrocious and cruel regime that had somehow dazzled the Germans in the 1930s. But the history of the last seventy years has been one of remarkable parallels — of efforts to overcome past injustices, to open up civic participation and citizenship to those excluded, whether by virtue of race or political conviction, and of belief that liberal democracy is the best framework for achieving that good society.

Did written history keep up with lived history? Of course that is an impossible task, as history is retrospective. Historians are the ambulance chasers of catastrophe and the coroners of political collapse. But we can be more — we can aggregate events into patterns, we can articulate a vision of transformations that are still in process and in that way give grammar and syntax to voices of protest. Historians helped the process of democratic transformation in both Germany and America largely by analyzing how civic participation had earlier been distorted, how victims of history had been made victims. The angel of history, as Benjamin famously wrote, looks backward over the accumulating wreckage. But the historian must do more than the angel; she or he must count the victims, tell their story — and actually
must suggest why the historical chariot keeps driving forward. Historians largely agreed in legitimizing a narrative of democratization, of tracing forces for reform that had emerged to transcend and overcome structures of coercion, exclusion, violence and authoritarian abuses. In America they insisted that the slave South and continuing discrimination throughout the country was not just a blemish on our marvelous constitutional liberty; in Germany they came to agree that Nazism was not a small conspiracy foisted upon a helpless country.

Our societies — now sharing so much — are still beset by growing inequality, by the substitution of wealth for more naked forms of power, by problems of inclusion, as group identities often undermine the shared bonds of community. Parliamentary government seems more difficult than it was even a generation ago. History as lived has entered a more uncertain period in the last decade — religious zealotry, an economic system that in the short term can shrink opportunities for work even as it creates wealth, in some places the resort to the most brutal terror have thrown democratic reality into question and may compel a revision of the democratic narrative. As noted at the beginning, it is not clear that the securing of democratic procedures has been matched by the sense of solidarity and the possibility for participation that classical theory found implicit in democracy. Certainly one of the great postwar achievements of democracy — and one that Germany shared in leading — has been the European Union. But it, too, like all common enterprises in governance, requires efforts at solidarity. That is, it calls for contributions by those more fortunate to contribute to those less well endowed. Short-term market rationality alone was not sufficient to rebuild the German, the European, or the American political communities after the Great Depression, dictatorship, and world war. We historians must endeavor to point out the long-term imaginative efforts at institution-building as well as the short-sighted policies that brought disaster. At the least we can say that in this institute dedicated to German history in America, we can write many of the same postwar stories, many of which are hopeful stories. That was not always the case, and that is progress.
