

HELMUT SCHMIDT PRIZE

A PLEA FOR A RAPPROCHEMENT BETWEEN HISTORY AND ECONOMIC HISTORY

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It is a very great honor for me to have been given the Helmut Schmidt Prize of the ZEIT Foundation and the German Historical Institute here in Washington. I thank you for coming to this event that is, of course, very special to me.

But there are also some very special thanks that I would like to say, first and foremost to the ZEIT Foundation and the GHI for selecting me. There is also Christof Mauch, who has turned this institute into a unique place of research and discussion for historians and scholars from other disciplines on both sides of the Atlantic. On at least three occasions I have had the pleasure of working with him in the organization of conferences, two of which resulted in publications. I think all who have known him are very sad that he is leaving Washington, and I am sure that you will join me in wishing him and his family all the best for their future in Munich.

Third, I would like to thank Gerry Feldman for agreeing to speak on this occasion. He is a historian who has always upheld the highest standards of scholarship and has made most distinguished contributions to the field of German economic and business history. It is a sign of his magnanimity that he was prepared to give the very generous *Laudatio* that you have just heard.

Last but by no means least, I would like to thank Marion, my wife, for also being my intellectual partner and best critic for some thirty-eight years. And while I have long seen my own work as a bridge between different societies, I feel that she has done much more as an academic publisher for the proliferation of research and ideas across the Atlantic and around the world than I have.

I have been asked to speak for some twenty minutes, and while there are many things on my mind that I would like to talk about, I shall

confine myself to two issues: first, to a few minor, but to my mind almost uncanny, connections between me and DIE ZEIT as well as the man in whose name this prize was endowed. I say this because I would like to assure you that I did not pull any strings to be able to stand in front of you this afternoon. Indeed, self-promotion has always been something I have felt uncomfortable with, shaped as I am by having spent almost half my life in Britain as well as Hamburg, still the most English of cities in Germany. Instead, my concern has been to support the next generation of scholars who are having a much harder time establishing themselves in these difficult times than those of my own cohort. Second, I would like to make a few remarks about the state of economic and business history and the relations of these genres to the rest of the historical profession in the modern period.

As to my first point, I spent my teenage years in Hamburg and, being a consciously political person, I regularly read DIE ZEIT. I continued this habit in London, where I wrote my doctoral dissertation in the 1960s. Living in a damp bed-sitter, I got my weekly copy from a newspaper man near Barons Court underground station. And when I asked him if the new DIE ZEIT had arrived, he first looked at me somewhat puzzled and then smiled: "Ah, you mean DEI ZIET," which he pronounced "DI ZEET."

Many years later, after I had finished my study on "The Americanization of West German Industry," I met Joachim Friedrich, whose father Otto, the well-known industrialist, had passed away before I had a chance to interview him for my book.

Achim and I became friends, and we agreed to write a biography of his father, the brother of the famous Harvard political scientist Carl Joachim. Although in the end I did most of the writing, Achim was my invaluable critic who corrected many errors of fact, if not of judgment. He told me about aspects of the history of that extraordinary Friedrich family that I could never have retrieved from the sources.

And since he had once worked on Helmut Schmidt's staff in the 1970s, it was he who persuaded the latter to write the preface to this biography in which he spoke very warmly of his close relationship with his fellow Hamburgian Otto Friedrich. My only regret is that this book came out before biography became as fashionable again as it is today. It contains many telling insights into German business history and transatlantic relations, but few people read it at the time, and it is now out of print.

There is yet another curious connection that arose when I was asked if I would consider writing a biography of Shepard Stone, the first director of the Berlin Aspen Institute and a friend of Marion Dönhoff, the legendary editor of DIE ZEIT. The end product, "America and the Intel-

lectual Cold Wars in Europe,” is not a biography. Rather, I saw Stone as a key mediator in a world of academic and cultural networks in the decades before his time at Aspen Berlin, supporting a transatlantic dialogue with the millions of dollars that the Ford Foundation invested in the two Cold Wars—one in the East and the other one in Western Europe—that the Americans waged after 1945. I wish Shep Stone were still around to have a word with Karen Hughes here in Washington about how to project “soft power” into foreign societies.

However, you did not come here to be treated to dozens of Hamburgian anecdotes or to a very secret plan for a book that I have been ruminating on for several years about the Hanseatic world of politics, commerce, and culture. It will be on Hamburg’s contribution, and on that of DIE ZEIT in particular, to the reconstruction and recasting of West Germany’s economy and society after 1945. Helmut Schmidt will inevitably play an important role in it.

So, let me move on to my second and more fundamental point. There are two buzzwords that circulate in the social sciences and humanities today, i.e., that scholarship must become more transnational and interdisciplinary. I confess to being skeptical about those grand proclamations to promote interdisciplinarity. To my mind, it cannot be practiced unless you have an advanced degree in the two disciplines that you propose to connect. Merely scouring another field from your home base for a seemingly useful concept is not enough.

However, historians may not have to reach out all that far. In fact, at a time when historical knowledge is undergoing an explosive growth, it seems to me to be more urgent and promising to start by (re)connecting divergent genres of historical writing, such as, for example, economic history with what is traditionally called *allgemeine Geschichte*, general history. There are, it is true, enormous institutional barriers to a closer link between the two. In this respect, we are sadly still suffering from the sins of our great-grandfathers in the nineteenth century.

Then the dominant approach was to write political, diplomatic, constitutional, and “great man” history. Starting with Ranke, professional historians looked at the peaks of Europe’s nation-states. They were not interested in the “valleys” where societies underwent the most dramatic processes of industrialization, urbanization, demographic change, and other developments at the level of the economic and socio-cultural infrastructures. Those who believed that the Rankeans were blind to these aspects of history either established their own departments or joined the budding economics faculties.

It was a development that was particularly marked in Britain, the “first industrial nation,” where the “redbrick” universities in the North became the home of economic history, while Oxbridge vigorously de-

fended the orthodoxies of political, constitutional, and diplomatic history. The continental European universities underwent a similar development. In Germany most economic historians became part of the *volks- und betriebswirtschaftliche Abteilungen*. Although in the United States the picture evolved in more complex ways, most economic historians were appointed to economics departments. At Brown, my former academic home, we had one economic historian who left for UCLA because she felt rather lonely among her twenty-five colleagues who were not terribly interested in her research. At Columbia we have no economic historian in a department of forty. I am listed as a social historian, and my colleagues would be completely surprised if they knew about this ceremony today.

The problem became exacerbated in the United States by the fact that business history came to be taught in business schools, whose case-study approach inevitably impacted the way business history was done, while separating the genre from their economic history colleagues in the economics departments. Although *Volkswirtschaft* and *Betriebswirtschaft* by and large remained under the same roof in Germany, if at times uneasily so, the advent of independent management schools, adopting the Harvard Business School model, has not facilitated contacts between business and economic history, and this applies even more so between those two genres and their relations to the separate history department at the same institution.

The consequences of departmentalism have been enormous and in recent decades have led to a further distancing of economic history from general history. Why? Economic historians have been under great pressure to be quantitative, statistical, "scientific," and mathematical like their economics colleagues, even to the extent that if they were not, they would be threatened with academic extinction. Not falling into line methodologically increased the danger that the next vacancy in the department would go to an economist.

I find this pressure to conform and to work within the received canon regrettable. To be sure, it is important to have a firm grasp of the quantitative aspects of history. Still, many interesting questions are of a qualitative kind; they cannot be cast into a mathematical model but are intangible and require different tools of analysis. Let me put it even more bluntly: I consider the dominance of a certain and exclusivist type of economics in many economics departments with their influence on the practice of economic history unfortunate. To be considered for an academic job you have to have published in certain journals. Where the quantitative citation index becomes the main gauge, the contribution that Gerald Feldman's *The Great Disorder* made to economic history requires different criteria of assessment. A discipline that presents itself as self-confidently as economics does today and that has little tolerance of the

unorthodox will sooner or later become impoverished. Quite a number of years ago, I pricked up my ears when an economist told me that some of his colleagues had become interested in the “imperfections” of the market—that wonderful phenomenon that supposedly regulates a globalized world. My first reaction was that, if you are interested in “imperfections,” maybe you are also interested in the intangibles of the human world. It is not my impression that the discipline has taken this up in any tangible way. Similarly, behavioral economics, which, I am told by experts, held some promise, has not really made much of an impact on the field. Nor has institutional economics gained wider recognition.

While economics and economic history have moved in a mathematical direction, general history has taken the opposite path, as it has become less and less interested in numbers and socio-economic structures. First it turned toward a social history from the bottom up, challenging the orthodoxies of both Rankeanism and structuralism. In the 1980s and 1990s it made yet another turn into cultural history, and with the subsequent rise of the history of memory, trauma, and religious belief, the underlying assumption of the practitioners of these approaches was that consciousness determined being.

Let me be absolutely clear that I very much welcomed the diversification of history when *Alltagsgeschichte* and socio-cultural history first came along. It has made historiography richer, more colorful, and more rewarding. Today we can teach aspects of the past about which virtually no scholarship was available thirty years ago. But just as economics and economic history have, in my opinion, gone too far into a purely quantitative direction, the history pendulum has swung too far the other way. Just look at the programs of the annual meetings of the American Historical Association during the past few years. Scrutiny of current dissertation projects in the German field will confirm Jay Winter’s recent claim that “culture” and “memory” have become the dominant paradigms, projects that have emerged from the kind of graduate training now offered by major history departments in this country.

Another recent example in this instance comes from the Federal Republic: A conference was held in Berlin last month to celebrate Hans-Ulrich Wehler’s seventy-fifth birthday and to look at recent historiography on pre-1914 Germany. Some thirty papers were presented. Most of them dealt with the culture of the Kaiserreich, with German nationalism, and with violence and memory relating to the German colonial empire and the two world wars. At the very end, there was one lonely paper that might be classified as one that at least tried to broach problems of political economy in transnational perspective.

The first point I am therefore trying to make is that, for the reasons just discussed, economic and business history have drifted far from gen-

eral history. They do not have much to say to each other. There is yet another problem that impedes dialogue: All too many British and American economists and economic historians do not read other languages and are therefore liable to miss quite a lot of interesting scholarship that is being produced elsewhere. A sense that their work alone is “world-class” reinforces a superiority complex that impedes mutual learning.

The response to the claim to be superior has not been slow in coming and has affected research positions taken up by European scholars. In the German case, some economic historians have insisted in their work that, whatever the weight of American hegemony after 1945, national path dependencies continued to be more important. Werner Abelshauser is probably the most prominent exponent of this view, with his argument that the West Germans pulled themselves up by their own bootstraps from the material devastations of World War II. According to him, the Marshall Plan was really quite marginal to West German reconstruction. Christoph Buchheim, marshaling plenty of statistics, has also played down the American contribution to the revival of the German economy. What may come into play here is another factor, i.e., the postwar echoes of the profession’s former Germanocentrism and its flipside, i.e., a long-standing intellectual and academic anti-Americanism.

Researching a contribution to a volume marking the one-hundredth anniversary of the *Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* (VSWG) made the persistence of this Germanocentrism abundantly clear to me. Going through the pre-1914 volumes, I found a truly remarkable cosmopolitanism pervading this famous journal, even to the extent that it published articles in German, Italian, English, and French. After 1914, it became more and more nationalist and ultimately National Socialist. It took the journal until the 1980s to recover its pre-1914 internationalist spirit. Still, more than a few German economic and business historians have found it difficult to accept the pervasive presence of the American economic system in postwar Europe. They have remained skeptical that a process of “Americanization” set in from the turn of the century through the interwar period and then, at an accelerated pace, after 1945.

The critics of “Americanization” as an approach to understanding socio-economic transformations have persistently misunderstood the meaning of this concept. It has never been argued by its protagonists that the United States barged like a steamroller into postwar Germany and Western Europe, flattening everything indigenous around it. “Americanization” was, from the start, concerned with studying the encounter between two or more different industrial systems and cultures. There was hence never any question that there was also resistance and not mere naïve or enthusiastic copying. The end result was a blending of the two traditions, and its shades depended on the degree to which American

ideas and practices succeeded in penetrating the indigenous society and economy. Nor was it ever claimed that socio-economic change happened overnight. On the contrary, a generational model was explicitly used to explain gradual change over time.

It has taken the emergence of a new generation of economic and business historians in Germany to give this argument greater acceptance. It has opened the door for a more sophisticated analysis of the interaction between two industrial systems and cultures in which after 1945 the one clearly occupied the hegemonic position, thus facilitating comparative analysis of an asymmetrical German-American relationship.

Today there are a number of colleagues in Germany who are interested in these problems. They have further expanded the field by not merely looking at production and production regimes, but also at marketing and consumption. With this approach came an interest in non-quantifiable elements, such as culturally ingrained behaviors, practical experiences, and perceptions of reality. It has not always been easy to get these questions more widely accepted, as the Bochum group of economic and business historians will testify. Still, as far as the Federal Republic is concerned, I do see some rays of hope that the two genres are becoming more open to new methods. They are no longer exclusively devoted to quantification. They ask qualitative questions. This means that all I am pleading for is a plurality of approaches, since any genre of historical writing that is dominated by an orthodoxy is bound to grow stale and ossified.

I am less optimistic that history departments will, in the near future, rediscover the economy as a worthwhile subject of research. The resistance to examining the material base of a society continues to be great. Even if postmodernism has not swept the board, the interest in the subjective predominates. The world is seen as fragmented, de-centered, indeterminate, and contingent. The buzz words are discourse and agency, whether individual or communitarian, not structure and infrastructure.

What are the implications of all this? To repeat, I do not advocate a secession of economic history from economics departments or business history from business schools. There are too many obstacles to this. Nor do I propose that "general" history departments go back to the orthodoxies of the early postwar period. But since its practitioners are in the overwhelming majority, it would be a great step forward if they would begin to reach out to their economic and business history colleagues and admit that it is not only perceptions of the world and memory that count; that consciousness is also determined by the economic conditions under which all human beings live—conditions that are all too often not of their own making. Ultimately, I am therefore really an advocate of quite modest change on both sides of the aisle. The maintenance of fortresses has to

stop and with it the condescension of one sub-discipline of history toward another.

Thank you again for giving me this wonderful prize. Thank you for the kind words that you have found. Although I have just argued that too much memory may not be good for our discipline, just as too much mathematical modeling and number-crunching is not, I shall always remember this afternoon spent in a setting that has done so much under its director and his predecessors to bring historians and other scholars together in a lively, cooperative, and productive exchange of important ideas.

I very much hope that the GHI Washington will continue to thrive for many decades to come. And the same applies, of course, to “DEI ZIET.”