

COMMENT ON JAMES SHEEHAN'S LECTURE

*Comment delivered at the Twenty-First Annual Lecture of the GHI,
November 15, 2007*

Cornelia Rauh-Kühne

Leibniz University, Hannover

I have to confess that the reference to the future in Professor Sheehan's title initially worried me. It is, after all, a part of the intellectual equipment I acquired at the University of Tübingen working with Dieter Langewiesche, whom Professor Sheehan quoted at the beginning of his lecture, to be skeptical about the utility of our discipline in making predictions about the future.

My skepticism about the predictability of structural political change has been reinforced by my experience as an eyewitness to the political upheaval of 1989 in Eastern Europe, which came as a total surprise to scholars and everyone else. We all know that before 1989, not a single reputable historian considered the unification of the two German states possible, despite the readily evident signs of political decay in the Eastern bloc. I will only mention in passing that scholars in related, policy-oriented disciplines like political science did not do much better.¹

I was thus very relieved when I heard Professor Sheehan's explanation and realized that he clearly rejects the idea that historians should be expected to offer predictions about the future. As a preeminent authority on the history of nineteenth-century Germany, he has explained to us the changes in conceptions of the state and in ideas about the state's duties in the course of the modern era. On account of those changes, a normative perspective that takes the state-building processes of the nineteenth century, which were nation-state-building processes, as its point of orientation—a perspective that is common in many contemporary discussions of Europe—is inappropriate. The European Union is something new on the historical stage, a new model of political organization. This new supra-national institution came into existence in the context of the Cold War, as Professor Sheehan clearly showed, but not as the result of warfare, which had played a constitutive role in the state-building processes of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.² Because war often served as the midwife at the births of nation states, history has little useful advice to offer about Europe's transformation of the state in the future.

The vision of a "United States of Europe" must be realized by some entirely different means than those used in nation-building in the past or otherwise the core element in the idea of Europe—the promise of peace—

will be rendered null. I therefore agree with James Sheehan that this vision does not seem very likely in light of historical experience.

I also share his doubts about the second vision of the future, the vision of the gradual transformation of the old nation-states into post-sovereign states. The recent past provides little evidence to support that vision. In the Federal Republic of Germany, the state's social welfare services and its claim to regulatory authority have not diminished in the half century since the signing of the Rome treaties. The welfare state and redistributive policies have expanded since then, and will probably become more important in the future as the result of demographic change—and not only in Germany.³ Think, for example, of education and health care or of consumer protection: The sovereign state is not in retreat—it's on the advance. Of course, it is true that the EU now sets the framework for national guidelines in many areas. That is most clearly evident in economic and trade policy, but even in education, the EU's authority is increasing. The increase in the EU's importance has not, however, been accompanied by a retreat on the part of the sovereign states. For that reason, Sheehan's vision number three is much more plausible, namely, "that states will continue to pursue that self-interest . . . much as they have in the past."

The political philosopher Hermann Lübbe recently called attention to the fact that even in the area of policy on Europe, the prevailing currents of public opinion remained tied up with views on national matters, which are shaped by national political parties and which gain currency in national political systems. Consequently, even the preconditions for a European identity are lacking.⁴ That does not worry many pro-European intellectuals, such as Ralf Dahrendorf, who consider that appropriate, given the EU's limited range of responsibilities and its supranational structure.⁵ Others complain about the lack of a European identity, mainly teachers and politicians, but also some scholars. Their expectations are directed above all toward schools and the historical profession, which they suggest should create and propagate a European memory. The putative lessons of the nineteenth century are supposed to serve anew in this way as a guide for the European future.

When the plans for a European constitution collapsed in December 2003, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* published an article with the programmatic title "Europäismus"—"Europeanism."⁶ The author was the political scientist Jerzy Macków, who teaches international relations at the University of Regensburg. Macków called upon pro-European elites to do to their nations—he literally used the German word "antun"—"what the nationalists in the nineteenth century did in regard to their peoples." Namely, through nationalism, they spread appealing depictions of their countries' histories and cultures at the same time that they

fostered the desire for political sovereignty. The task for Europeanism, as Macków sees it, is to counter the nationalisms that still exist in Europe. He stresses, of course, that this “counter-ideology” is to be carefully controlled so that the mistakes of nationalism are not repeated. The nationalisms of the nineteenth century were movements deliberately organized by intellectual elites. Today, Macków argues, we are to take a lesson from them in order to put an end to national identities by establishing a European identity. The main point seems to be that the Europeans should learn to understand European history. Macków is not alone in making this argument: Many supporters of Europe share this view. It is we historians who are expected to help Europe find a European memory. I cannot hide my skepticism about such suggestions. It would be one thing if we were supposed to create a Europe like the one envisioned by the Swiss writer Walter Muschg, namely “a community of memory and experience, with the defining trait that the memories be those that fundamentally divided us before they united us, and that the experiences are of seemingly irresolvable differences.”⁷ Histories of Europe along these lines have already been written: Mark Mazower’s *The Dark Continent* is one example.⁸

No one can seriously expect historians to emulate the professional national apologists of the nineteenth century today in the name of Europe. Back then, historians played an active role in the state-building processes of the sovereign states, and it was an extremely problematic role because it contributed to the construction of ideologies. They presented long lines of continuity in the history of their peoples and their countries so that it appeared their development was moving with teleological necessity toward the establishment of an independent state.⁹

As a historian or politically interested citizen, one might be firmly persuaded by the idea of Europe and welcome this historically unprecedented experiment in supranational conflict containment with great anticipation. We historians cannot, however, revert to the nationalist naïveté of our professional forebears. No one would believe us!

The recommendation from so many supporters of Europe that we take the supposedly successful nationalists of the nineteenth century as models to imitate in creating an identity for citizens of Europe strikes me as very unrealistic and, indeed, even paradoxical. The founding fathers of the European Union wanted it to accomplish one thing above all: to hinder nationalism from causing yet another disaster in Europe. They recognized that the supposedly controllable and admirable elite nationalism of the mid-nineteenth century had quickly turned into the ideology of integration that led to nation-building by war. To quote Dieter Langewiesche once again: “War was the creator not only of nation-states but also of national identity.” Let me add that wars against internal as

well as external enemies could serve that purpose. Langewiesche comprehensively refutes the arguments put forward by various historians that it is possible to separate the popular mobilization and process of integration achieved by nationalism from the darker aspects of aggressive nationalism. "Nationalism," Langewiesche observes, "unleashes both participation and aggression."¹⁰ The idea that it lies within the power of today's champions of Europeanism to control what comes of that concept—that they decide whether Europe rests on a peaceful vision of community or on aggressive collective self-satisfaction—that idea rests on a naive belief that history repeats itself. That idea trivializes the destructive capacity that nationalism displayed over the past two centuries as an almost omnipotent secular "system of belief." And last but not least, that idea is an example of ahistorical thinking. It is by no means clear whether forms of political organization in the twenty-first century can and must be legitimized in the same way they were in the early and peak phases of nationalism. At that time, according to Ernest Gellner's anthropological explanation, it was a question of adapting society to the conditions of modernity. Since then, modernity has taken on a different character as a result of the processes of social differentiation and individualization, and it is now undergoing a global transformation.¹¹ Which forms of political organization and which mechanisms of social-psychological integration will accompany that transformation is open to debate. For example, Hermann Lübke, who has been cited here several times already, contends that identity as it is now understood, identity defined by shared origins, will no longer be a key element in defining membership in the social and political communities of the future.¹² It's too early to tell—especially for me as a historian—whether that prediction will turn out to be right. Only one thing seems to be certain: Professor Sheehan's observation about the transformation of state institutions also holds true for their legitimation to the citizenry: Looking back to previous centuries can help us avoid misinterpreting the process of European unification. It is not a guide for coping with the future.

Notes

¹ Klaus Schroeder and Jochen Staadt, "Der diskrete Charme des Status quo: DDR-Forschung in der Ära der Entspannungspolitik," *Leviathan* (1993): 24–63.

² Dieter Langewiesche, "'Nation', 'Nationalismus', 'Nationalstaat' in der europäischen Geschichte seit dem Mittelalter—Versuch einer Bilanz," in: Langewiesche, *Nation, Nationalismus, Nationalstaat in Deutschland und Europa* (Munich, 2000), 26f.

³ Gerhard A. Ritter, *Der Preis der deutschen Einheit: Die Wiedervereinigung und die Krise des Sozialstaats* (Munich, 2006).

⁴ Hermann Lübke, "Politische Organisation in der zivilisatorischen Evolution," in *Die Einheit des Staates: Symposium aus Anlass der Vollendung des 60. Lebensjahres von Josef Isensee*, ed. Otto Depenheuer (Heidelberg, 1998), 26.

- ⁵ Ralf Dahrendorff, "Deutsche Illusionen. Die Macht des Nationalstaates und die Grenze der europäischen Idee," *Die Zeit*, January 21, 2005.
- ⁶ Jerzy Macków, "Europäismus," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, December 17, 2003.
- ⁷ Walter Muschg, "Kerneuropa: Gedanken zur europäischen Identität," *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, May 31, 2003.
- ⁸ Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century*, (London, 1998).
- ⁹ Compare Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities : Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised and expanded ed. (London and New York, 1991), 197–206.
- ¹⁰ Langewiesche, "Nationalismus im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert: zwischen Partizipation und Aggression," in *Nation, Nationalismus, Nationalstaat*, 54.
- ¹¹ Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford and Cambridge, 1992), 88ff.
- ¹² Lübke, "Politische Organisation."