COMMENT ON MARGIT SZÖLLÖSI-JANZE’S “THE NATURAL SCIENCES AND DEMOCRATIC PRACTICES”

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Professor Szöllösi-Janze’s lecture is a marvelous one to respond to. Her address lets us reflect on how a cohort of German academics (scientists, in this case) struggled in a critical moment with their relation to a democratic system of governance. Their cohort was lacking, of course, either the personal historical experience or the ideological commitment that would give them the confidence that the democratic process was viable from the start: confidence that democracy was adequate to the structural demands placed on it; that it deserved the trust that has to come in advance of accomplishments; that it might indeed waver, even go astray, but eventually would right its course. The problem they faced is a compelling one. In its own ways, at least on the last of these counts, it speaks to present experience. Even in long-established democracies, historical experience of the form’s viability must be repeatedly renewed if the confidence of spokesmen and stakeholders is not to decay. The problem may be posed especially sharply for democratic systems in which academic elites, if these are to serve as pillars of the political order, face the reality of chasms of political opinion separating them from large sections of the voting public.

The commitment of academic elites to democracy is a problem that we must investigate in the specificity of a concrete historical context. In this case, the context is the fledgling Weimar Republic. And for the context chosen here, the strategy selected by Professor Szöllösi-Janze is to examine leading figures on the German scientific scene. This approach has a particular cogency. For much recent research in the history of science in this period, and inescapably in the Third Reich, has highlighted how German scientific statesmen steered the scientific community into collaboration with an expressly anti-democratic regime.1 Rather than assuming some natural affinity between science and democracy, as was part of conventional wisdom in other parts of the world, in Germany the presumption has been that natural scientists in Weimar were at best indifferent to the democratic system. An indifferent democrat, however, is no democrat at all.

Professor Szöllösi-Janze approaches her task through three individuals. For historians of the scientific enterprise in the Weimar

1 An introduction may be found in Margit Szöllösi-Janze, ed., Science in the Third Reich (Oxford, 2001).
Republic, Planck, Einstein, and Haber have long served as something akin to stick figures: Planck, the apolitical moderate; Einstein, the good democrat; Haber, the servant of power. Each has stood in for a version of scientists’ political involvement that has been constructed—it seems in historiographical retrospect—more with simplifying abstractions than with on-the-ground empirical detail. In her lecture, Professor Szöllösi-Janze has given us spot-on portraits of their considerably more complicated sensibilities; and the complications she highlights have more than merely biographical benefit. With the kind of research that Szöllösi-Janze has drawn on—and that she has herself done so exemplarily with Haber—we are starting to get beyond the stereotypes. Instead, we have far more challenging figures to deal with, figures who in their irreducible individuality break down simple analytical schemata. As unrepresentative as they may still have been, these individuals reveal a richer set of real historical options.

One reason Szöllösi-Janze’s figures deliver this insight is that all were elite actors with unusual opportunities for influence. When an Einstein, a Planck, or a Haber traveled abroad as a representative of German science, when he made a move in the chess game of “academic internal affairs,” however he intervened, his choices might in fact make a difference (or so we assume). For each man was situated in webs of expectation and power that lent consequence to his actions. And political actions matter here—as much as, or more than, political beliefs or political talk. As Einstein said in a different context: If you want to understand scientists, don’t listen to their words; fix your attention on their deeds. Einstein, of course, was talking about scientific practice, which, unlike politics, is presumably nondiscursive. His point is well taken, all the same.

Professor Szöllösi-Janze illustrates how these three figures leveraged cultural-political expectations and positions of institutional power. And the episodes she highlights are particularly useful because they point up disjunctions between doing and saying, actions and talk. Planck’s case is especially well illuminated by this choice. For a long time, Planck’s avoidance of overt political speechifying let us misrecognize him as more politically moderate than he in fact was. But the strategy of looking to actions is also a good one for Einstein and Haber, both of whom have more complicated palettes of actions than their public statements might lead us to believe. As historians of the scientific community begin to give less priority to
language, however abstractly quotable, and more to the realities of situated action, we are gaining a far more differentiated understanding of the political options chosen by scientists in Weimar.

There are many questions that Szöllösi-Janze’s examples raise. I shall pose three of them here. As anchored as these questions all are in these cases of scientists, they are hardly specific to science. Rather, they help illuminate more general questions about the relations of elite academic actors to Weimar democracy at large. First, what understanding of democracy are we taking as our reference point and measuring our actors in relation to? “Democracy” is a protean thing; at least, it was back in the day. Let me list a few possible meanings, all of which may very well have preoccupied our actors at the same time. Democracy as an abstract political recipe—meaning, perhaps, universal suffrage plus respect for civil rights plus rule of law? Democracy defined structurally, as in the example of a democratic parliamentary system with its particular relation between the head of government and the parties represented in parliament? Democracy as Weimar’s specific instantiation thereof, marked by its strong party structure and intense polarization of the public sphere? Democracy even as some kind of democratic sensibility, embodied, for instance, in actions like not writing off the electorate as an unthinking irrational mass?

My observation is this: When we talk about scientists’ (or others’) democratic practices, it is crucial to pick out the reference point. Joining a political party, or making public displays of political opinion, or accepting the legitimacy of majority opinion or the outcome of parliamentary maneuvering whatever it may be—these actions at issue in Szöllösi-Janze’s account may be essentially democratic in certain understandings of democracy. In other understandings, they may be utterly marginal. Since our three figures split on some of these counts, we can get some analytical help in characterizing their differences by breaking the “democracy” notion apart. And where they end up agreeing—for at the end of the day, all three do look instinctively elitist—we get a possibly clearer sense of where their cohort’s troubles with Weimar democracy may lie.

Second, Szöllösi-Janze’s cases are dissected using the language of stabilization—the stabilization of Weimar democracy, of course. Stabilization is an extraordinarily powerful metaphor (one borrowed, to some extent, from the natural sciences, we may note). It
is powerful in part because it so distinctively captures the concerns of the actors of the day. At the same time, at least as those actors used it, stabilization directs our gaze in a particular direction. It asks us to focus on the overall course and behavior of the system. As for the system’s internal processes, stabilization directs our attention to them only insofar as they keep the system at hand from going off course or breaking apart. Weimar democracy could be stabilized by means that had no particular democratic valence. Further, it is worth making some distinctions. There are actions that might stabilize Weimar democracy in its practical realization—for instance, wooing understanding for its actions on the international scene, or campaigning for support for its policies at home. These are arguably quite different from behavior that itself models democratic process. Such might include respect for expression of divergent political opinions, or (with some allowance for skepticism in the case of Haber, who seems to have been most invested in the separation of powers) transparency and accountability in the organizations of science. 2 For someone like Planck, stabilizing Weimar democracy amounted just to stabilizing the current form of the German state. It had no relation to democratic process at all. The question is whether the stabilization of Weimar democracy, in the sense of keeping it from external debacles or internal breakdown, had any hope of succeeding in the absence of a procedural commitment, on the part of elites or others, to democratic norms.

This brings me to my final question, one that Professor Szöllösi-Janze quite reasonably did not pose but that is provocative to try to work out of her material. Planck, Einstein, and Haber may have believed they were helping secure the Weimar Republic. Did their actions, or those of others like them, in fact contribute to that goal? Did their legitimization efforts in cultural foreign policy really make a difference? Their public statements on behalf of the forces that held the Weimar center together? Their sporadic modeling of democratic process, even? Certainly, they may have talked about securing the Republic. They may have even intended it, acted on it. But did it matter?

Talk of just how much they mattered, of course, has been well noted by historians. It is cogent and quotable, as Planck and others spoke of science as the last means of German self-assertion on the international scene. But outside the community of academics with their self-important rhetoric, outside friends in the Prussian

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Cultural Ministry and the Foreign Office and some of the parties—outside these groups, already committed to staging the scientists’ importance—did their engagements really contribute to any effective defense of the system? I frame the question in part out of skepticism about our actors’ self-understandings as powerful elites, in part as a historical exercise about the Weimar Republic. How can we work out in what way academics made a difference, if they did? As interesting as it may be, that is a larger challenge than the history of science, at least, in the Weimar Republic has yet taken up. It highlights the relation of self-perceived elites, scientific or otherwise, to the course of democracy at large.

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