

Wolbring, Barbara: *Trümmerfeld der bürgerlichen Welt. Universität in den gesellschaftlichen Reformdiskursen der westlichen Besatzungszonen (1945–1949)*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2014. ISBN: 978-3-525-36014-9; 488 S.

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Many European universities had suffered severely during the Second World War, materially and intellectually. In most countries, however, teaching and research recommenced just after the end of the war. Walter Rüegg, the dean of Europe's university historians, characterized this rapid resurgence after 1945 as „one of the most astonishing post-war achievements“. At the same time (2011), he noticed that „this phenomenon has only been partially studied“.¹

In the case of Germany, this is not entirely true. The years of occupation were an eventful period in the history of its universities and quite a few studies have been devoted to the emergence of a new academic landscape in the aftermath of the war. Some of them have dealt with academic denazification processes and the educational policies of the occupation powers; others have scrutinized continuity and discontinuity within particular disciplines, both with structural and biographical approaches. In addition, a number of monographs on individual German universities have been published in the last decade.

In her solid study, Barbara Wolbring nevertheless breaks new ground. The book, a revision of her 2011 habilitation thesis from the Goethe University in Frankfurt am Main, is a thorough investigation of the public debates concerning the university in the western occupation zones between 1945 and 1949. Wolbring's point of departure is the general hypothesis, drawn from earlier research, that this was a time that must be conceived as an era of unfinished reform: attempts at innovation, on the part of both the occupying forces and internal interests, only skimmed the surface. The German university's shape and mission remained essentially intact.

Wolbring takes issue with this assumption and declares that the years 1945–1949

were a significant epoch with broad and intense intellectual debates about the very concept of the university. To some extent, these reflections were part of the profound self-examination about German history that took place after National Socialism. What might seem to have been a limited debate about the university in fact embraced larger questions of Germany's future. The university was still what she calls a „Zentralort nationaler Identifikation“ (central place of national identification), especially for the educated middle class that dominated public life. Moreover, Wolbring claims that already in the years before the foundation of the Federal Republic many of the essential objectives, positions and patterns of argumentation were conceived, which for long time would shape the West German debate about the university (p. 16). An overarching thesis in her book is thus that the university reform in the Federal Republic began in the immediate postwar era, even though many of the real changes occurred much later.

The author grounds her analyses on a good command of previous research and on a wide range of sources: articles in newspapers and journals; books and pamphlets; and various documents from public and university archives. In the introductory chapter, she touches on methodological issues and states that she will conduct a discourse analysis. What she has written is, however, primarily a study of arguments and contentions, not of discursive practices or unarticulated cultural patterns. In general, Wolbring could have developed her theoretical and methodical framework much more.

The study comprises four empirical chapters. In the first one, Wolbring concentrates on the debate about the students and to what extent they had been shaped by the experiences of National Socialism. Many feared that the members of the young generation had been seriously damaged by Nazi indoctrination and could never be transformed into democratic citizens. Chapter two is devoted to the university as an institution of the *Bürgertum* and how this idea was challenged in the wake of the war. The following chap-

¹ Walter Rüegg, *A History of the University in Europe: Universities since 1945*, vol. IV, Cambridge 2011, p. 75.

ter investigates the concept of *Bildung*: Was the traditional, neo-Humanistic notion a remedy or was it antiquated and in some respects dangerous? The final chapter is an in-depth analysis of the so-called Brill case in Frankfurt 1947–1950, a struggle between the minister of education Erwin Stein and the university which illustrates the constraints and possibilities of academic autonomy at this time.

Particularly in the second and third chapter, Wolbring convincingly shows how varied the discussion about the university was in those early postwar years. She effectively repudiates simple notions of a period of academic restoration. It is true that many of the leading professors and rectors embraced the classic German university tradition and saw it as a cure after the disastrous Nazi interventions. But when she also includes the voices of politicians, remigrants and left-wing intellectuals, the impression grows more multifaceted.

Unfortunately, Wolbring's geographical scope could have been broader. She focuses exclusively on the three western zones and barely mentions the development in the eastern zone, let alone undertakes a systematic comparison with the Sovietization processes that fundamentally altered the universities in for example East Berlin, Leipzig and Halle. It would also have been of great interest to connect Germany with academic discourses in other European countries. Not only German professors and students had to cope with the past in 1945.

A graver remark concerns Wolbring's central thesis. At the outset she argues that many of the fundamental patterns and principles of the university reform of the Federal Republic were formed during the first postwar years. However, she does not prove that this was the case. In fact, she halts in the late 1940s and does not take advantage of other studies which have dealt with later periods, for instance Olaf Bartz' „Wissenschaftsrat und Hochschulplanung“ or Anne Rohstock's „Von der 'Ordinarienuniversität' zur 'Revolutionszentrale'“.² She thereby overlooks an excellent opportunity to compare her results and, more crucially, test her main thesis. An analysis of the protagonists in the reform debate during the first half of the 1960s – be it Hel-

mut Schelsky, Ralf Dahrendorf or the socialist students who wrote „Hochschule in der Demokratie“ (1965) – would probably show that they were caught in other discourses than their predecessors fifteen years earlier.

Despite these critical remarks, Barbara Wolbring has made an important contribution to modern university history. The study will undoubtedly be a point of reference in the scholarly discussion about German academic ideals and intellectual trajectories after the Second World War.

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²Olaf Bartz, Wissenschaftsrat und Hochschulplanung. Leitbildwandel und Planungsprozesse in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland zwischen 1957 und 1975, Cologne 2005; Anne Rohstock, Von der „Ordinarienuniversität“ zur „Revolutionszentrale“? Hochschulreform und Hochschulrevolte in Bayern und Hessen, 1957–1976, Munich 2010 (reviewed by Moritz Mälzer, in: H-Soz-u-Kult, 11.11.2010: <<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/rezensionen/2010-4-105>> [13.2.2014]).