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FORUM: INTELLECTUAL HISTORY IN AND OF THE FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY*

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What can one say about the state of the art in the Federal Republic? A number of aspects are discernible, not only in the practices and various traditions of intellectual history there, but also in its politics: the stark dichotomy between Marxists and anti-Marxists; the ever-present metahistorical question of which (sub)discipline, field, or method would set the political agenda; and the position of Jewish émigrés. These issues raise still more basic ones: how to understand the Nazi experience, which remained living memory for most West Germans; how to confront the gradually congealing image of the Holocaust in private and public life; and the related matters of German intellectual traditions and the new order’s foundations. Had the Nazi experience discredited those traditions and had the personal and institutional continuities from the Nazi to Federal Republican polities delegitimated the latter? These were questions with which intellectuals wrestled while they wrangled about historical method. In this introduction, I give a brief overview of these and other innovations in the field, before highlighting some of its characteristics today.

INTRODUCTION

In 1971, the German historian Theodor Schieder wrote an article for West Germany’s premier history journal, the Historische Zeitschrift, on the state of “political history of ideas” (politische Ideengeschichte) in the Federal Republic. His reflections on the fate of a book series that published translations of the “classics of politics”—e.g. by Thomas More, Niccolò Machiavelli, and Thomas Hobbes—was the starting point for a general, if brief, survey of the field. In the 1920s, Friedrich Meinecke and Hermann Oncken began the series that Otto Heinrich von der Gablentz, Siegfried Landshut, and Dolf Sternberger revived after the war, but how dramatically the conditions for the project had changed in the

* My thanks are extended to Sean Forner, Christina von Hodenberg, Stefan-Ludwig Hoffman, Daniel Morat, Marcus Payk, and Natasha Wheatley for helpful comments on previous drafts, though this is not to suggest that they agree with all my assessments.
ensuing decades, he observed. Whereas the founders could count on the “lively interest” of a broad public beyond professional historians, their successors now encountered “an often thoughtless hereticization” (Verketzerung) by those who interpreted political theory “in the main or exclusively in terms of social history”. In the postwar constellation, not historians but political scientists, like the new series editors—now in newly established departments of their own—conducted the political history of ideas.1

Political science could easily replace history in this regard, speculated Schieder, because of its theoretical orientation, whereas history always pretended to be a “reality discipline” (Wirklichkeitswissenschaft). It was all the more important, then, to refute the criticism that Meinecke’s history of ideas (Geistesgeschichte) was removed from social reality by recalling that he had challenged the positivism of mainstream historians who rejected the import of ideas outright. Besides, the history of ideas was never intended as an end in itself but to thematize particular topics for general historiography. “One read [Meinecke’s] Machiavellianism: The Doctrine of Raison d’Etat and its Place in Modern History for orientation about historical problems rather than to prepare for a political science exam”.2

More importantly, Schieder continued, for Meinecke and his school the history of ideas was also a vehicle to critically grasp the new political reality of the Weimar Republic, which they supported as “republicans of reason” (Vernunftrepublikaner), rather than to escape it. “Many of them needed to leave Germany in 1933”, he added, and by “‘the cunning of reason’ they contributed to the establishment of the history of political ideas in the USA”.3 There the Journal of the History of Ideas and the field of “intellectual history” presented a synthesis of the traditional political history of ideas and the intellectual orientations of social groups, institutions, and scholarly disciplines. This welcome development was all but ignored in West Germany, he lamented, where the Meineckean legacy was “almost entirely uprooted” and the history of political ideas was seen as “totally obsolete” by the hegemonic positivism of the social sciences. Only his opponents, the Marxists, he remarked ironically, were interested in the history of doctrines and ideologies.4

What can one say about the state of the art in the Federal Republic some forty years after Schieder’s bleak assessment? A number of aspects are discernible, not only in the practices and various traditions of intellectual history there, but also

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2 Ibid., 616.
3 He used the terms “political history of ideas” and “history of political ideas” interchangeably.
4 Schieder, “Politische Ideengeschichte”, 618.
in the positionality he occupied and articulated, namely the stark dichotomy between Marxists and anti-Marxists; the ever-present metahistorical question of which (sub)discipline, field, or method would set the political agenda; and the oblique reference to the contribution of Jews—those who “needed to leave Germany in 1933”—like Landshut, who returned. These issues raise still more basic ones: how to understand the Nazi experience, which remained living memory for most West Germans; how to confront the gradually congealing image of the Holocaust in private and public life; and the related matters of German intellectual traditions and the new order’s foundations. Had the Nazi experience discredited those traditions and had the personal and institutional continuities from the Nazi to Federal Republican polities delegitimated the latter? These were questions with which intellectuals wrestled while they wrangled about historical method.

Certainly, Schieder would have been surprised by the impressive range of work and reflection in the field today, supported as it is, since 2007, by a dedicated journal, the Zeitschrift für Ideengeschichte, and many recent handbooks and anthologies. Even by the time he died, in 1984, he had witnessed the consolidation of “conceptual history” (Begriffsgeschichte), though not yet the registration in West Germany of anglophone developments like the “Cambridge School” or the influence of Foucault. I proceed as follows: first, I give a brief overview of these and other innovations in the field, before highlighting some of its characteristics today.

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Schieder did not mention the metahistorical significance of intellectual history as a practice in West Germany, an omission symptomatic of his desire to remind the burgeoning social history about the “enormous significance of the individual personality as the creator of ideas and ideologies.” The tremendous prestige of intellectual history, at least in the sense of recovering “classic” wisdom, from the immediate postwar years until approximately 1960, was based on a number of factors: the Cold War that was in part a battle of ideas; the prominence of émigré/survivor proponents of totalitarianism theory—Hannah Arendt, Karl Popper, Jacob Talmon, Sigmund Neumann, and Carl Joachim Friedrich; the establishment of political science as an explicitly democratic discipline with the task of re-educating West German elites (this was before the age of the mass university); and the search for the intellectual origins of Nazism. Neo-Aristotelianism, in particular, represented by figures like Sternberger and the young Wilhelm Hennis, could reconnect Germany to wider European intellectual and political traditions. This was “practical philosophy”, intellectual history with political intent, namely to justify the new liberal political order against totalitarianism, a transatlantic project in which émigrés like Eric Voegelin and Leo Strauss also participated.

Different questions were raised in the 1960s by a new generation of graduates and students who flowed into the expanding university system. Rejecting the totalitarianism theory wielded by liberal and conservative elites whose democratic credentials they questioned, these younger Germans were interested in understanding structural inequalities and social change, even transformation, rather than consolidation, for which intellectual history could not account. Meinecke’s approach had made the “state” and “nation” its objects of inquiry; now “society” was the organizing paradigm for knowledge. Attempts by older scholars like Hans-Joachim Schoeps to rescue the field by proposing a Geistesgeschichte

7 Schieder, “Politische Ideengeschichte”, 618.
of the *Zeitgeist* fell on deaf ears.\textsuperscript{10} The Nazi catastrophe had cast doubt on the efficacy of *Geist* (spirit) and the meaningfulness of the historical process. Of course, this was an international phenomenon. Similar generational patterns of conflict played out throughout the Western academy with the collapse of faith in national traditions and increased interest in experience from below.\textsuperscript{11}

This was the state of play when Schieder intervened in 1971. The history of political thought could continue in departments of political science, as it does today, where it is usually coupled with political theory; these departmental subsections bear titles like *Politische Theorie und Ideengeschichte* and *Politische Ideengeschichte und Theorien der Politik*.\textsuperscript{12} Some of the Federal Republic’s most accomplished intellectual historians conduct their work there, like Alfons Söllner, who has excavated the country’s “archaeology of democracy”, especially the contributions of the exiles, and Harald Bluhm and Michael Th. Greven.\textsuperscript{13} It is no accident that the first and most intensive West German discussions of the “Cambridge school” appeared in political-science journals.\textsuperscript{14} At the same time,

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\textsuperscript{12} These titles are taken from the Universities of Hamburg (www.wiso.uni-hamburg.de/institute/ipw/wir-ueber-uns/teilbereich-politische-theorie-und-ideengeschichte) and Hannover (www.ipw.uni-hannover.de/pol_geschichte_theorien.html) respectively, but are broadly representative.


Jurisprudential scholars influenced by Carl Schmitt also wrote about the history of political and legal thought.  

Historians, though, regarded such attention to the great thinkers as abstract Gipfelwanderung (hiking from one mountain peak to another). As we shall see, an intellectual history that would appeal to German historians had to answer questions that Schieder, whose own student Hans-Ulrich Wehler became a leading proponent of social history, held to be intrinsic to any viable research program: “The basic scholarly question would always be whether and to what extent doctrines and ideologies can be related to political or social change. But the reverse question about the effect [Wirkungen] of ideologies on political or social reality is no less interesting; indeed, in view of a largely ideologized world, it is almost more fascinating.” As we shall see below, these questions have been answered by the current crop of German intellectual historians by writing less about the history of ideas than about the history of intellectuals.

When he wrote this article in 1971, Schieder would have been aware that his colleagues, Werner Conze and Otto Brunner, along with Reinhart Koselleck, then a forty-eight-year-old historian (young by German standards), were about to publish the first volume of their legendary Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe (historical foundational concepts), which inaugurated the particularly German field of Begriffsgeschichte (conceptual history). In view of the many commentaries on Begriffsgeschichte in German and English, I shall do no more than briefly highlight the main points. Koselleck, influenced by Hans-Georg Gadamer and Carl Schmitt, and his collaborators were preoccupied with the transition to modernity in Central Europe. They identified the century after 1750 as the “saddle age” (Sattelzeit) of this transformation, which they argued was registered


16 Schieder and others of his generation supported Nazi demographic plans for its conquest of Europe. Cf. Ingo Haar, Historiker im Nationalsozialismus: Deutsche Geschichtswissenschaft und der “Volkstumskampf” im Osten (Göttingen, 2000); Winfried Schulze and Otto Gerhard Oexle, eds., Deutsche Historiker im Nationalsozialismus (Frankfurt, 1999).


and stimulated by new concepts and meanings as the linguistically mediated “spaces of experience” and “horizons of expectation” diverged in unprecedented ways. Rather than study individual thinkers or traditions, then, they focused on specific concepts, like “estate” (Stand) and “revolution”, as captured in all levels of reflection, from contemporary dictionaries to philosophical works. At the same time, Koselleck himself published programmatic articles seeking to accommodate social history and conceptual change by showing that one cannot be understood without the other, as well as outlining a historical anthropology of the basic structures of historical experience (Historik), like the distinction between master and servant, friend and enemy, and generational change.20

Koselleck’s theoretical approach came after his early critical study of the Enlightenment, Critique and Crisis (1959), and his habilitation (1965) on the signal reforms of the Prussian state in the age of revolution, which linked intellectual currents with social groups and institutional development.21 Although it could not be said that he formed a tight-knit school, as did his rival social historians, his approach gained widespread attention and influenced a generation of German postgraduates at the University of Bielefeld, where he taught.22 As a metatheory, however, Begriffsgeschichte did not dominate the German historical terrain, possibly because, as Martin van Gelderen has noted, it downplays human agency by ignoring the instrumental communicative strategies of actors in particular situations.23 The now familiar rivalry between social history and orthodox

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Historicism characterized the 1970s and 1980s until the challenge of cultural history and what was even termed “the new intellectual history” in the 1990s.

As might be expected, it was the political scientists who noticed the intense debates about political thought in the anglophone world, no doubt aided by the fact that political theory and the history of political ideas transcend the nation state frame. What is more, scholars in departments of political science in England had founded the journal History of Political Thought, showing that the German landscape was hardly unique. Just as there were no chairs for intellectual history in German history departments, neither were there in England—except for Sussex and Cambridge. In Cambridge, the New Zealander J. G. A. Pocock had posited “political languages” as the unit of analysis, while Quentin Skinner followed social history’s critique of disembodied history of ideas by insisting that political thought be rooted firmly in local contexts, by which he meant, relying on speech-act theory, the illocutionary effect of specific statements. Reconstructing the question-and-answer nexus of particular texts was the key to unlocking their historical meaning.24

Although the Cambridge approach excited some attention in Germany—again, mainly among political scientists—it did not catch on either.25 It invested historical actors with agency, but did not sufficiently tie them to social and cultural developments for German tastes, let alone explain why societies and cultures as a whole change. Moreover, its application to the early modern Atlantic world made it less attractive to those many students wanting to write about the twentieth century. Recourse to the repertoire of political languages and speech-act theory would have to be eclectic.26 Here was a missed opportunity

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25 See note 14 above.
for historians working in the German language to become more self-aware about their tendency to ascribe ontological status to ideas and thereby fall into essentialist traps uncovered by Skinner over forty years ago. Symptomatic was Axel Schildt’s statement about conservatism that “it is not possible to foresee in which organization and ideological forms conservatism will develop (itself)”, as if defenders of feudalism and anticommunist technocrats were members of the same intellectual tradition.\footnote{Axel Schildt, Konservatismus in Deutschland: Von den Anfängen im 18. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart (Munich, 1998), 252.}

By the mid-1990s, senior historians felt that German historiography should respond to these international developments by devoting serious reflection to a methodologically defensible intellectual history.\footnote{Frank-Lothar Kroll, ed., Neue Wege in der Ideengeschichte (Paderborn, 1996).} That was the intention behind the large project, financed by the German Research Council (DFG), called Ideas as a Social Formation Force in Modern Europe: Approaches to a New “Intellectual History” (Ideen als gesellschaftliche Gestaltungskraft im Europa der Neuzeit: Ansätze zu einer neuen “Geistesgeschichte”), which ran from 1997 to 2003 and has produced a steady stream of monographs. Lutz Raphael led the undertaking, which had trouble distinguishing itself from cultural history, such were the variety of studied topics: discourses, styles of thought, systems of communication and distribution, everyday knowledge, systems of social order, interpretive systems, even the “meaning of meaning”.\footnote{Lutz Raphael and Heinz E. Tenorth, eds., Ideen als gesellschaftliche Gestaltungskraft im Europa der Neuzeit: Beiträge für eine erneuerte Geistesgeschichte (Munich, 2006).} Sensibly, Raphael declined to lay down a “royal road” that conclusively reconciled social and intellectual history, content that studying any of these objects was now legitimate, and that Germans could join the international discussion about ideas and method.\footnote{However, see the criticism in Alexander Gallus, “‘Intellectual History’ mit Intellektuellen und ohne sie”, Historische Zeitschrift 288 (2009), 139–50.}

In the main, the new interest in intellectual history in the 1990s and 2000s was inspired by indigenous sources. But why this interest at all? Such a question is impossible to answer definitively, but one may speculate that relevant factors were the passing of time and generational change. By 1998, the Federal Republic had existed for half a century and begun to develop traditions of its own. Its foundations were still contested, though less bitterly than in decades before; certainly, the Nazi past was as ubiquitous as ever in public discussion. The “45er” generation of intellectuals born in the 1920s was retiring and their younger rivals, the “68ers”, were at the height of their careers. Who was to take credit for the success story of Germany’s political and cultural rehabilitation? As usual,
And, as usual, the legitimacy and effects of the student movement and new left of the 1960s and 1970s was as central a bone of contention as the legitimacy of the country’s foundation in 1949, issues that manifested themselves in heated debates about the role and status of intellectuals. Space limitations prohibit a detailed analysis of this intellectual civil war, but I return to it briefly below.

Younger historians could find plenty of inspiration in Continental traditions that accommodated the questions posed by Schieder. Karl Mannheim’s sociology of knowledge drew attention to intellectuals as a social group whose networks and function were as interesting as their writing: intellectual history as the history of intellectuals. A “pure discourse of intellectual history approach is insufficient”, declared two authors. Instead, “communicative networks” should be reconstructed because intellectuals often did not possess a uniform or integrated ideology. A variation on this theme was to focus on the “transfer” of intellectual ideas through particular networks. Intellectuals could also be “bearers” of discourses that they used to position themselves in power constellations, an

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With similar effect, the notion of the “thought collective” (Denkkollektiv) and “thought style” (Denkstil) of the Polish Jewish scientist Ludwik Fleck was mentioned occasionally to highlight how individual researchers are conditioned by particular interpretive or epistemic communities to produce knowledge within specific paradigms of which they are barely conscious. Not for nothing was Fleck’s work an inspiration for Thomas Kuhn, also with a scientific background, in his pathbreaking book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions.*

**INTELLECTUAL HISTORY IN AND OF THE FEDERAL REPUBLIC TODAY**

By the later 1990s and 2000s, doctoral students born in the 1970s had begun to reconstruct the Federal Republic’s intellectual traditions. The telos was no longer 1933 but 1949 and beyond. In doing so, intellectual biography or group biography was a necessary vehicle, an unthinkable dissertation project for historians in the 1970s and 1980s. Important figures like Hans Rothfels and Helmut Plessner have now been treated, and the contributors to this issue of *Modern Intellectual History*, Sean Forner, Daniel Morat, and Marcus Payk, have written studies on the intellectual history of the early West German state. Methodologically, they are at the forefront of the development among younger historians to replace

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the Meineckean political history of ideas with the history of intellectuals; rather than study ideas as such, they reconstruct their production, dissemination, and appropriation by intellectuals—an approach that distinguishes them from many North American counterparts who also write in the traditions of critical theory and the history of ideas, often combining the two.\(^{39}\)

As a consequence of their historicist remoteness from the objects of inquiry, this generation of German historians has been able to distance itself from the cultural civil war waged between “45ers” and the “68ers” by writing balanced, i.e. nonpartisan, analyses addressed to an international audience. Unfortunately, this imperative has proven more difficult for some political scientists, who believe that they must use intellectual history for the “analysis and evaluation of current debates and conflicts” in Germany alone, a sort of disciplinary licence to blend scholarship with politics.\(^{40}\) Because of the controversy they have provoked, recent interventions by Jens Hacke require some attention. He has made it his task to restage the battles of previous decades by writing somewhat cloyingly hagiographic accounts of his favored tradition, the liberal conservative Hegelianism of Joachim Ritter and his students, especially Hermann Lübbe, and disparaging ones of their opponents, the critical theory of Jürgen Habermas and his colleagues.\(^{41}\) The conflict between these and other “schools” (for want of a better word) was real and it is important to reconstruct it historically. It is another matter to write with a drawn sword or as a hanging judge. The polemical temptation is not checked by the culture of academic publication in Germany where so much necessarily appears in conference volumes and journals that do not conduct anonymous peer review. As a result, too often the simplistic narrative strategies and sloganeering of political journalism—e.g. the picture of the beleaguered West German state that was inexplicably “rejected” by “the left”, “the intellectuals” and the Meinungsführer (“opinion directors”) in thrall to a


\(^{40}\) Münkler, “Politische Ideengeschichte”, 109. The political scientists’ ambivalence about the radical historicism of this anglophone approach was based on their disciplinary proclivity to apply the concepts they studied, and not just to reconstruct their meaning for long-dead contemporaries—an ambivalence shared by some British colleagues, one might add: Iain Hampsher-Monk, “Speech Acts, Languages or Conceptual History”, in Iain Hampsher-Monk, Karin Tilmans, and Frank van Vree, eds., History of Concepts: Comparative Perspectives (Amsterdam, 1998), 37–50.

self-hating “negative nationalism” and in favor of “revolution”—make their way without nuancing into print.42

Hacke’s project, expressed in many essays and a monograph on the liberal conservatives of the Ritter school, is to rescue the Federal Republic from the spiritual undermining of “the left” by reminding Germans of their positive traditions. Influenced by Arnold Gehlen, his concern is that the functionalism of the German economy cannot hold the country together if the system does not work as Germans are accustomed to. The emotional bonds of patriotism must compensate for the orientation and solidarity that technocratic capitalism cannot provide.43 The problem is that Germans’ shaky collective identity, especially its missing emotional (i.e. irrational) dimension, has been eroded by decades of incessant talk about the Nazi past and prohibition of natural “we-feelings” (Wir-Gefühle).44 If only “the left” can be stopped, then Federal Republican traditions can infuse Germans with the patriotic fervor he admires in Israel and the USA. Hacke seems typical of “integrative republicans” who decry the “redemptive republicanism” of “Non-German Germans” as further corroding the supposedly little national tradition remaining in Germany; here he articulates a long-held resentment against the “moralism” of intellectuals expressed earlier by Carl Schmitt and Gehlen (Moral und Hypermoral). Echoes of the early postwar fear that the new Republic could collapse like its Weimar predecessor seem to be lurking unnecessarily in the background.45

I do not propose to raise all the obvious problems with this project, which would take us too far from our subject. From a disciplinary perspective, however,

42 Jens Hacke, Philosphie der Bürgerlichkeit: Die liberalkonservative Begründung der Bundesrepublik (Göttingen, 2006), 9. In a similar prosecutorial and defensive vein, Riccardo Bavaj, Von links gegen Weimar: Linkes antiparlamentarisches Denken in der Weimarer Republik (Bonn, 2005), and his many essays on the Federal Republic; and Stephan Schlak, Wilhelm Hennis: Szenen einer Ideengeschichte der Bundesrepublik (Munich, 2008).
some comments are in order. How can a satisfactory account of West Germany’s liberalization be written without reference to the actual liberals, like the émigré political scientist Ernst Fraenkel, who was the target of the conservative jurist acolytes of Carl Schmitt whom Hacke admires? Where is the contribution of the Jewish émigrés, whether liberal or Marxist, like the Frankfurt school? Hacke’s conception of the “German nation” writes them out of the postwar story, as it does the millions of subsequent immigrants. They simply do not figure in his image of who Germans are, the actual problems they face, and what the country’s future might resemble. He is interested solely in nonrational mechanisms of integrating (nonimmigrant) Germans rather than in the mechanisms of exclusion that code immigrants as non-German in perpetuity and inhibit their integration. Such blindness seems intrinsic to national political rather than scholarly agendas.

Happily, space exists in the German academy for a pluralist conception of its intellectual traditions. The contribution of German Jews, especially in terms of critical theory, is honored in departments of sociology, philosophy, and literature, whose various journals represent the functional equivalent of New German Critique in North America. Dan Diner supervised theses on German Jewish intellectual history at the University of Essen before becoming director of the new Simon Dubnow Institute of Jewish History and Culture in Leipzig, which nurtures that subfield by hosting doctoral and postdoctoral researchers from around the world. And now with the Zeitschrift für Ideengeschichte a dedicated organ exists for all the approaches that Germans gather under intellectual history: Ideengeschichte, Intellektuellen-Geschichte, Geistesgeschichte.

48 See Rita Chin, The Guest Worker Question in Postwar Germany (Cambridge, 2007).
49 Thomas Meyer, Ernst Cassirer (Hamburg, 2006); Detlev Claussen, Adorno: One Last Genius (Cambridge, MA, 2008). When American intellectual historians visit Germany it is no accident that they spend more time with sociologists and philosophers than with historians.
and *Begriffsgeschichte*. Like the *Journal of the History of Ideas* and the newer *Modern Intellectual History*, it is a genuinely interdisciplinary endeavor, publishing contributions from all humanistic disciplines. Now that intellectual history is again being conducted by historians as well, without having to place the name of the field in embarrassing quotation marks, its prospects in Germany look bright.51

The three articles that appear in this issue of *Modern Intellectual History* pertain to the early Federal Republic of Germany in the characteristic approach of the new German historiography: by writing the history of intellectuals, not only the history of ideas. As might be expected, intellectuals’ abiding concern after 1945 was how to respond to the immediate past, and of course that is very much the case. But, as current research is showing, processes of remembering, identifying, and reckoning did not necessarily address Nazism and the Holocaust directly; “the past” was mediated and refracted into myriad political questions that bore indirectly on the past, like cultivating student elites who would resist totalitarianism or fascism, depending on one’s view of what had caused Weimar’s collapse and Nazism’s rise. Thus scholars’ attention has been drawn to debates over the new order’s legitimacy, recoverable or contaminated traditions, continuity or rupture in individual and group trajectories, and how the experience of Nazism recast old political convictions, also about intellectuals’ appropriate roles in and stances toward politics. The authors here historicize early postwar intellectual life by laying bare the survival techniques, adaptation, and application of conservative, liberal, and socialist visions of Germany under conditions of occupation and incipient independence. With increasing distance from Germany’s cultural civil war, they construct a historiography of international significance.

51 See the forum on “The Intellectual History of the Federal Republic”, *German History* 27 (2009), 244–58.