There is a new cosmopolitanism in the air. The old concept has not only been rediscovered but reinvented for the global age. Many writers now maintain that cosmopolitanism is no longer a dream but has become social reality, and that it is increasing the nation-state that is a figment of our imagination. This intellectual stance has begun to shape the writing of history, and this book is a monumental attempt to employ it to rewrite the history of Germany.

For the authors, cosmopolitan history is the history of multiplicities. And their attempt to write a cosmopolitan history of twentieth-century Germany is above all an attempt to escape the central dichotomy that has until now defined that history and its historiography. Since there are few nations whose recent history seems at first (and even second) glance so ineradicably marked by nationalism, Germany appears to offer a perfect limit case for this approach. One might say, if you can do it here, you can do it anywhere. If the history of Germany can successfully and fruitfully be cosmopolitanized, then so can the history of any country.

Conversely, Germany may be exactly the bridge too far that shows the limits of this approach. The new cosmopolitan perspective is, in its own way, just as normative as the national one. Nationalists create absolutes out of relatives; cosmopolitans seek to relativize all absolutes. And in the case of German history, there seem at first sight to be some absolutes and uniquenesses that suffer from being relativized, and that lose some of their truth in the process.

As a summation of the last few decades of historical research on Germany, this book is an unqualified success. Both authors are scholars of the first rank, and the footnotes alone are worth the price of admission. But as an attempt to synthesize these new counter-narratives into a theoretical counter-framework, I think the book has to be accounted a noble failure, one that has much to teach us about this new approach. It turns out there are some confusions in its basic postulates that need to be resolved.

To start with, does it make sense to talk about writing a cosmopolitan history of Germany? ‘The German problem is no more’, so the
authors. They try to find answers to their own questions about how the ‘children of the rubble’ have turned into successful members of a civil society. The book Shattered Past explores this tension between the experience of the second half of the twentieth century and the memory of the first half. It moves between the experiences of destruction on the one hand and of the ‘good life’ on the other. German history has no choice but to move between these poles. The book investigates various historical master-narratives and methodologies and tries to come to terms with the variations of political and social histories, explaining at the same time why postmodern theory does not have a foothold in German historiography (it seems impossible to talk about the dangers of the tradition of the Enlightenment in the wake of German history itself), but had an impact when looking at ‘representations’ and ‘symbolic power’.

Does not that force you by definition to take the national point of view, to structure history around the outlines of a nation-state? (Or, in this case, two nation-states.) By taking the viewpoint of its excluded, you may be writing it from inside out. By taking a comparative perspective, you may be looking at it from the outside in. But neither comparative nor multi-cultural history in itself transcends the national framework. They simply give it an inside and outside and display it from many angles. The authors suggest seven major themes for the deciphering of the German past: war, genocide and extermination; dictatorship and democracy; Germany in Europe or Europe in Germany; mobility and migration; national identities; gender history; and consumption.

In this sense the authors try to redefine and reinvent the Humanities for a global world. This is a double challenge: first to discover and criticize how history is still a prisoner of the nation-state and gives birth to a historically mistaken national imagination; and secondly, to redefine trans-nationally the basic theoretical concepts and units of empirical research like politics, society, identity, state, history, class, law, democracy, community, solidarity, justice, mobility, military, household etc. in a cosmopolitan perspective. This calls for a paradigm shift. And the authors attempt nothing less. Thus in the first part of the book, they analyse critically the master narratives of the historical profession, like the master paradigm of them all, the national one. They illustrate its rise and fall, offer alternatives (like the cultural turn), and provide a very good map for anyone interest-
ed in the subject. In subsequent chapters, they take on the collapse of the national master-narrative and look at ‘counter-narratives’: Marxism and its intellectual decline accompanied by the decline of the GDR. In their search for alternatives, they ponder familiar terrain with their demand for a closer scrutiny of minorities of language, religion, and race. At the same time they seem to be rather unhappy with the flourishing of German Jewish history, which they see as the result of ‘philopietist philanthropy and post-Holocaust guilt’. Given their rather open and cosmopolitan ponderings, this seems more than an unconscious slip. Thus they never consider the possibility that Jewish history or the history of various Jewries could provide just that desired exploding of the nation-state paradigm. Looking at the trans-national, trans-territorial, urbane, mobile, and textual character of Jewish life-worlds could provide that new historical paradigm with some empirical specificity, as was suggested in a recent book by Dan Diner.¹ A pondering of this Jewish perspective would give much more strength to their chapter on ‘Modernization and German Exceptionalism’. The authors reject a teleological fixation on 1933, believing that it ‘produces a misleading picture of developmental linearity’, suggesting instead the appreciation of other trajectories such as labour struggles, periodic religious revivals, consumption, and other social processes.

Next is the question of the central dichotomy of modern German history, the one the authors explicitly want most to overcome, the division between the Nazi period and everything that came after. If we grant for argument’s sake that we could transcend the perspective of the nation-state, the question then becomes: could we explain this once we got there? Normally Germany is regarded as having suffered nationalism to the nth degree. How can this be explained outside the perspective of the nation-state? And if the Germany of today is very different from the Germany of before—something the authors emphasize—then how can one escape the schema of before and after?

The authors’ solution to both these problems is certainly elegant enough. The Holocaust and the rise of the Nazis have frequently been explained in terms of Germany’s exceptional national development. The authors seek to turn this on its head. They take the Holocaust out of the framework of the German nation and reset it

into the context of modernity. By this means, Germany ceases to be the exception to the standard path of European national development and becomes instead the exemplification of a common modernity. The Second World War was not a disaster suffered by Germany alone. It was a disaster suffered by all of Europe, and one which was prepared by all of Europe in the war before. Germany was simply its epicentre, as it was the epicentre of accelerating industrial development and efficiency and the stress they placed on society. As for the ‘After period’, it was also not simply the aftermath for Germany, but a new phase for all of Europe. It was the beginning of the European Union, which marked the start of a new phase in modernity, a cosmopolitan rather than a nation-state modernity. And once again, they would argue, Germany was at its centre. It was ahead of the others in its incorporation into transnational organizations. It was the most committed to building an international law to replace the law of the jungle that had previously regulated the interaction between states. And it was the most eager of nations to submit to this new and transformative second-order social contract.

By these means, the before and after of the Nazi period become absorbed into the before and after of the Second World War, which is the before and after of an inflection point in modernity. And then this inflection point is shaded and graded until it becomes more of a continuous process, since, if Europe and the world are heading towards a cosmopolitan future, it was not something that happened all at once. Different levels of society started changing at different times and in different rhythms. True inflection points exist only on graphs. The idea is an abstraction and a symbol for a much broader process of continuous change.

So what is wrong with this picture? Well, to start with, fascism can only exemplify modernity if Germany exemplifies modernity. But is that true? The conventional picture has been that Germany and Italy and Japan were all exceptions to the normal path of modern development, and all deviated in similar ways. They all developed late, both as nations and as national economies. The conventional wisdom has been that this accelerated development caused more stresses than if it had happened more slowly; national pride was aggrieved by what was perceived as a disadvantaged position about to be set in stone; and democratic institutions and political culture never had time to set in the national character before they were washed away in
a flood of nationalism. That is, of course, a huge simplification of an enormous debate. But the fact remains that Germany is not generally considered the rule of modernity, but rather its exception.

So how can the authors invert all of that and make Germany modernity’s focal point? This argument is more implicit than explicit, and so far as I can tell, it derives from a back formation of their cosmopolitan perspective. Like many proponents of the new cosmopolitan perspective, the authors conceive of modernity as falling roughly into two phases. First is a nation-centred stage that began with the French Revolution. And second is a cosmopolitan stage, the arcs of which begin at many different times after the Second World War. On this view, these various trends have recently begun to converge on to a visibly different path of economic and cultural development, where the nation-state is beginning to recede behind the increasing transnational reality of our social, economic, and cultural life.

If one accepts this rough division of modernity into nation-state-centred phase and non-nation-state-centred phase, it seems to go without saying that the exemplars of the first stage must be the countries that are the most nationalist. Once the nation-state has been identified as the central defining feature of the first modernity, it simply does not compute that the most nationalist countries on the historical stage—the most ethnically defined, the most willing to sacrifice for national greatness—should both be exceptions. They must be the rule because they define the rule.

This, however, brings out a deep problem with this entire way of thinking. There is much to be said for the idea that when thinkers, actors, and almost everyone in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries used the word ‘society’, what they really meant was ‘the nation-state’, and usually the one they were living in at the time. I personally agree strongly with the authors in thinking that to return to the more concrete idea of the nation-state deepens our understanding of modernity and modern thought.

But to deepen is one thing, and to turn inside out is another. If we identify the most nationalist states as the most modern, then not only do the exceptions become the rule, but the rules become the exception. Under this view, the two countries generally considered to exemplify modernity are transformed into weird outliers. Because it is an immigrant nation, the USA has had one of the least ethnic con-
ceptions of its national identity. And Britain on the eve of the Second World War was the world’s largest empire. It consisted (as it still does today) of multiple nationalities, even on its home islands. Looked at closely, neither can be said to exemplify the ethnically homogenous nation-state. Does that mean they are the ones that least exemplified modernity?

Something clearly seems wrong here. I am not saying that you cannot understand the world in these terms. But you cannot call what you are describing ‘modernity’. This is not deepening a framework, this is turning it inside out and calling black white. There may be intellectual results that might justify constructing such a model, but it would have to be called something else. I think what has happened here is that the authors have made a fruitful mistake. They have pushed an idea further than anyone else has before, and they have discovered its inherent limitations as it turns into its opposite. This is the sort of result that sends one back to an inspection of basic principles. The idea of dividing modernity into nation-state-centred and non-nation-state-centred phases may still be a good one. I personally think it is. But the relation between the two sets of principles clearly needs a great deal more work.

Admittedly, this is a very abstract level at which to engage with a book of history. But I think it is the only level at which one can clearly ask the question: ‘Can modernity explain the Holocaust?’ and give a clear answer: no. The Holocaust was the exception to modernity, not the rule, and it can only be satisfactorily explained by the exceptionality of Germany. One might well object that this makes one of the central events of the twentieth century into an exception, and I would agree. But I do not think this is a problem that has to be solved so much as faced up to. I am in complete agreement with the authors that one of the main problems with the received framework of modernity is its implicit evolutionary determinism, and that this is something we have to overcome. And I think the best way to overcome it is to realize just how huge was the role that contingency and conjuncture played in determining the course of recent world history—that it was short-lived exceptions, not dominant historical trends, which redrew the map of the world in ways we are still living out today.

This, then, brings us to the present and future of Germany, and to the authors’ picture of Germany as an exemplification of the cosmo-
cosmopolitan state. As with all future-orientated perspectives, only time can tell, of course. But the recent debate over Iraq before and after the war in 2003, raises some doubts, at least in my mind, as to whether Germany’s readiness to submit to cosmopolitanism was not also an exception rather than a rule, and that we are now seeing the first glimmerings of its reversal—of the re-emergence of Germany’s ‘normal’ national assertiveness.

It may well be that the entire history of Germany from the Second World War to recently was an exception, the exception called the Cold War. It may perhaps appear in retrospect to be an exceptional state—a long historical conjuncture—in which Germany was the exceptional country, cut in half by the borders of two contiguous military empires. And like all empires, these structures were inherently cosmopolitan in their structures, no matter how nationalist they were in their feelings, so that Germany, at the focal point of this world, appeared almost the anti-state. But with the end of that world, and the end of that division, it is destined to grow back into ‘normality’—a normality that for Germany would be greatest exception of all.

The good thing about the highly abstract nature of the framework of this book is that overthrowing it does not remove much of the book’s very real value. For anyone who wants the most up-to-the minute and high-powered précis of German historiography, this is the book to read. Feminism, cultural history, the enormous effort of rethinking the parallel histories of the two adjacent states back into a contemporaneous unity—it is all there. This is a book that has something to teach everyone who studies Germany history. And it is a book that will make you think.

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