Germany's Other Modernity: Munich and the Making of Metropolis, 1895–1930

Leif Jerram's *Germany's Other Modernity: Munich and the Making of Metropolis, 1895–1930* is a rich and welcome contribution to the urban history of modern Germany, a field which has, for some time now, been dominated by studies on Berlin and Hamburg. Berlin has, as Jerram puts it with little exaggeration, acquired 'totemic status' (p. 13) in the writing on modernity in Germany, in particular in the Anglophone literature. Peter Fritzsche's *Reading Berlin 1900* and Peter Jelavich's *Berlin Cabaret* have been especially influential in this field. Hamburg, by contrast, has been the focus of a historiography emphasising the local context. Following the lead of Richard Evans, whose *Death in Hamburg* favoured a close investigation of social and political structures over the debate about modernity and tradition, an impressive range of studies (including, recently, Jennifer Jenkins's *Provincial Modernity* and Glenn Penny's *Objects of Culture*)have stressed the peculiarities of the Hanseatic city.(1) Set against this background, Jerram's book offers an important counter-balance. It has the potential to decentre the debate about German urban modernity, away from the usual suspects in northern Germany. Munich, he makes clear, presents a test case that questions some of the entrenched assumptions about how Germans thought of their cities in the late 19th and early 20th century.

Jerram's main argument concerns the character of modernity as expressed in and experienced through urban architecture. German culture, he argues, was much less anti-urban than previously assumed. Far from being anxious about the effects of new forms of urban development, local experts and politicians celebrated metropolitan life. Jerram emphasises the confidence and optimism of those responsible for town planning in Munich both before and after the First World War. He sees this as being in line with developments all over Europe and northern America. There was, in Jerram's view, little of a *Sonderweg* in the way in which the experts who were (mostly) in charge of town planning approached modernity. They thought of themselves as part of an international network of specialists with shared interests and ambitions. The answers they found in Munich to pressing social and economic questions were similar to the strategies adopted by their counterparts in cities such as Manchester and Chicago. Rather than anything peculiarly German, Bavarian or *Münchnerisch*, it is the 'Western' context that explains how this city developed in the late 19th and early 20th century.

There are significant sub-strands to this central argument in Jerram's book. Against some of the influential recent scholarship, he argues that the *Heimat* idea should not be read as an inherently nostalgic, backward-

oriented impulse. In Jerram's interpretation the idea, as used and appropriated by Munich's urban planners, was very much in tune with modernity. Their *Heimat* had little to do with Bavaria or the countryside. Rather, they exchanged 'a horizon of Alps for one of other cities' (p. 194). Jerram's analysis stands in marked contrast to Peter Blickle's *Heimat: a Critical Theory of the German Idea of Homeland*. Blickle sees *Heimat* more critically as:

> the idealization of the premodern within the modern; it unites geographic and imaginary conceptions of space; it is a provincializing, but disalienating, part of German bourgeois culture; it reflects modern German culture's spatialized interiority; it combines territorial claims with a fundamental ethical reassurance of innocence; and, to achieve this combination, it uses a patriarchal, gendered way of seeing the world.(2)

Although he does not refer to his work, Jerram's interpretation reads like a direct repudiation of Blickle. The *Heimat* idea, he argues, was by no means inherently nostalgic or reactionary or illiberal, rather it could take on radically different meanings. '*Heimat* vocabulary', Jerram writes, 'could serve any position – modernist, *avantgarde*, conservative, moderate' (p. 29).

Jerram also has intriguing things to say about the relationship between city and country. The metropolis, he argues, was much more confident and assertive than is traditionally assumed. Drawing on the metaphors used by urban planners at the time (and arguably running the risk of taking some of them too much at face value), Jerram suggests that theirs was a 'colonial mentality' (p. 68). Far from idealising the countryside (the source of much of Bavarian iconography), the technocrats at Munich's town hall aimed to expand the city's influence beyond its traditional boundaries: 'They pushed the city outwards, aggressively incorporating surrounding towns, pitching outposts into open countryside, replacing the conventional symbols of the bounded city – such as the toll-booth and the cemetery – with a new symbolism speaking of the dynamic city – such as schools, gasworks and industrial estates' (p. 194). This redrawing of the boundaries of the city, Jerram argues, showed the confidence and conviction of a technocratic class wedded to the modernisation project.

Perhaps the most original part of Jerram's argument concerns the interior of buildings such as schools, hospitals and social housing blocks. The way in which these were organised reflected the authorities' concern to mitigate those effects of 'modernity' that they thought of as negative. Repeatedly, they opted for solutions that resulted in substantially higher costs, but which they believed allowed those using these buildings to escape anonymity and develop their 'personality'. This moderating approach, Jerram asserts, was aimed at 'integrating the citizen into the process of modernisation' (p. 120). It is exactly this approach which he sees at the heart of 'Germany's other modernity': the way in which public buildings were conceptualised shows that there was 'no uncritical yearning for a past that never was, and nor was there a naïve fêting of future possibilities which could not be realised' (p. 125).

While thus contributing to key debates in the urban history of modern Germany, *Germany's Other Modernity* leaves open a number of questions. One of Jerram's stated aims is to put agency back into the study of urban planning: 'It is imperative to repersonalise these banal, everyday projects' (p. 86). This is a point well taken. Some of the recent writing on modern cities does seem to be more interested in 'the algorithm of modernisation' than in 'nameable, living, feeling human beings' (p. 86). Yet the book does not go very far to remedy this situation. We are given the names and opinions of urban planners in Munich, but very little in terms of their personal backgrounds, relationships or networks. Where did they study, who were they influenced by, who did they meet regularly with, what architectural schools did they favour, what were their political leanings and social backgrounds? The book offers surprisingly few answers to these questions.

Moreover, the focus on 'the specialists' suggests a certain bias against the local context. The technocrats in charge of urban planning at Munich's town hall were, Jerram argues, united by an industrial vision, one that favoured functionality and rationalisation over local traditions. Their main aim was to make Munich more

urban and less Bavarian. As part of an international network of town planners they were just as familiar with examples from all over Europe or northern America as they were with their local contexts. Persuasive as this is, the latter, the specific context of Munich, seems to be sadly underrepresented here. Naturally, these technocrats looked to other cities when formulating their ideas, but they had to work them out in this city, with its specific political, social, religious and not least monarchical contexts. Surely, it is in the tension between these two levels that the answers to many questions concerning the character of 'Germany's modernity' are to be found. One of the many intriguing examples in Jerram's book is the *Technisches Rathaus*, Munich's first 'skyscraper', a large administrative-technical complex constructed in the late 1920s. Jerram interprets this project as an example of the city embracing modernity, yet it seems to suggest a more muddled picture. The example is particularly interesting, because it is one of the few instances at which Jerram lets other actors speak, not only the technocrats and administrators, but also journalists and commentators and, indirectly, even the Wittelsbachers. Here we get a glimpse of the complex power structures that explain why key building projects such as this turned out the way they did. The experts' and administrators' vision of urban planning had to compete with a large number of political and cultural actors who had other interests and who did not necessarily subscribe to the rhetoric of modernisation.

The way in which the *Technisches Rathaus* was made sense of in the press and by selected individuals whose views found their way into the archives suggests that 'modern' and 'traditional' were not clear-cut oppositions, but rather co-existing elements in an urban environment that was the result of local negotiation. Important voices in public debate clearly assumed or accepted that there was a Munich style in which new buildings were harnessed to older architectural traditions. The *Münchner Neuste Nachrichten*, representing the city's establishment, wrote of the 'Munich spirit of building' (p. 97) that had not been violated by the new building. The National Socialist *Völkischer Beobachter* agreed, commenting that this was a 'tower block in the Munich style' (p. 97). Is there perhaps more to this local context than Jerram allows for? How do the technocrats and town planners, who see themselves as part of a transnational network of 'modernisers', convince their audiences that what they are doing is the exact opposite, namely local and *Münchnerisch*?

In another example Jerram quotes Karl Preis, a member of the city council and one of the key figures engaged in urban planning in the inter-war years. Preis was keenly aware of what was going on in other German as well as French, Italian and American cities. Yet he insisted that Munich should keep its 'distance from all experimentation' and that its town planners proceed 'with constant regard to local peculiarities' (p. 186). It would have been useful if Jerram had given more space to these local peculiarities. The focus on technocrats and administrators, important and understandable as it is, implies a tendency towards a quasi-universal or 'Western' explanation of how cities developed in the late 19th and early 20th century. Yet it seems doubtful that the case of Munich really demonstrates the universal character of urban modernity in this period. Rather, it seems to suggest that there was a continuous process in which the specific local context rubbed against the modernist vision of the city's administrators and planners.

None of this, however, should distract from the fact that this book offers an important contribution. It challenges those working on the urban history of Germany to shift their focus away from Berlin and Hamburg. It urges us to revisit key issues such as the (supposed) dichotomy between 'modern' and 'traditional', the relationship between city and countryside and the relevance of *Heimat* rhetoric for ideas of modernity. Most of all, it prompts us to rethink the balance between the specific local context on the one hand and the more universal frame of reference of a transnational urban modernity on the other.

Notes

1. Richard J. Evans, *Death in Hamburg: Society and Politics in the Cholera Years, 1830–1910* (Oxford, 1987); Jennifer Jenkins, *Provincial Modernity: Local Culture and Liberal Politics in Fin-de-Siècle Hamburg* (Ithaca, NY, 2003); H. Glenn Penny, *Objects of Culture: Ethnology and Ethnographic Museums in Imperial Germany* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2003); Mark A. Russell, *Beyond Tradition and Modernity: Aby Warburg and Art in Hamburg's Public Realm, 1896–1918* (Oxford and New York,

2007). See also Maiken Umbach, 'A tale of second cities: autonomy, culture and the law in Hamburg and Barcelona in the long nineteenth century', *American Historical Review*, 110 (2005), 659–92.Back to (1)

2. Peter Blickle, *Heimat: a Critical Theory of the German Idea of Homeland* (Rochester, NY, 2002), pp. 1–2.Back to (2)

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