

Our Friend ‘The Enemy’: Elite Education in Britain and Germany Before World War 1

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In *Our Friend ‘The Enemy’* Thomas Weber attacks both the *Sonderweg*-interpretation of the German *Kaiserreich* and theories of British exceptionalism before 1914. Focussing on Oxford and Heidelberg students and academics he argues that most of the differences that have been attributed to late 19th century Germany and Britain have been constructed by historians from a post-Second World War perspective. In stressing that German society before the First World War was in many aspects more similar to its Western neighbours than the proponents of the *Sonderweg* acknowledged, Weber agrees with a growing body of comparative studies on this period. *Our Friend ‘The Enemy’* however, takes the argument one step further. Weber claims not only that realities were more complex in Britain and Germany than traditional research had it, but that life on both sides of the channel ‘was slowly but steadily moving in the right direction’ (p. 223). The outbreak of war in 1914 thus according to Weber had rather less to do with a culture of aggressive nationalism and militarism than with ‘catastrophic miscalculations by national decision makers’ (p. 135).

How does he proceed to prove these revisionist contentions? Weber analyses in five chapters nationalism with special attention to German-British relations, militarism, student sexuality, the emancipation of women, and anti-Semitism. An introductory chapter is dedicated to justifying his selection of these particular institutions for comparison. To this aim the author presents several arguments regarding the age of both universities, their position as truly ‘national’ institutions with students from all over the country, their ‘prominence’ in British and German academia and the relative attractiveness of both places for ‘elitist’ students. His choice is convincing and both his observations on the relationship of each university with the state and his arguments against the concept of ‘feudalisation’ are compelling and successfully refute influential beliefs about the nature of the respective university systems. Yet he unnecessarily exaggerates the similarity of Oxford and Heidelberg in some aspects. The character of Oxford and Cambridge as institutions of the social elite had no equivalent in the multipolar German university system of the 19th century, even if Heidelberg had a few more wealthy students than some other universities. In addition, German students generally attended more than one university during their university career and thus did not identify with any one institution as much as Oxford or Cambridge students did. Comparing any two universities thus presents difficulties, a fact that surely should not deter scholars from comparative studies. One way to deal with this asymmetry is to compare Oxbridge undergraduates with fraternity students: while the sons of the social elite in Britain went to Oxbridge, they could be found in all German universities where they tended to be

members of student fraternities. Although Weber acknowledges this fact he however decides against such a layout, preferring to look at two universities as a whole. Based on the fact that in Heidelberg fraternities comprised less than half of the student body, Weber sees them as 'a self-selected minority' (p. 33) and not, as other scholars including myself have argued, as important opinion leaders in student culture.

The book's general line of argument is based on the assumption that, in spite of a growing number of critics, the central idea of the *Sonderweg*, namely the picture of a generally positive evolution of British society standing in contrast to a negative development of the *Kaiserreich* before 1914, is still highly influential. Although it is admittedly still easy to find this interpretation in general literature on the *Kaiserreich*, it may be asked if the author does not overstate the remaining influence of what he calls 'traditional research' and underestimate or downplay the impact of newer, critical studies. In his first chapter Weber sets out to deconstruct the idea that in the decade before 1914 Anglo-German rivalry and enmity were rising, arguing instead that social elites in both countries were 'much less hostile to each other than previously thought' (p. 96). Contacts between scholars and students in both places, Anglo-German societies working for a better understanding of both peoples and multiple examples of Anglo-German friendship and cooperation show that enmity towards their European neighbour was not prevalent in both universities. Not wholly satisfying is the exclusive focus of this chapter on Anglo-German relations: as it was France that was by many seen as the 'hereditary enemy' of Germany in the late 19th century some discussion of how prevalent anti-French sentiment was in pre-war Heidelberg would have been useful. In addition, it seems questionable to go so far as to say that anti-German and anti-British statements by Oxonians and Heidelbergers were triggered by the need to 'appease nationalistic pressure groups' while they 'at heart believed in the necessity and desirability of an Anglo-German rapprochement' (p. 95). This wording adumbrates a purely functional embrace of nationalism by academics which Weber's sources hardly corroborate, particularly because many academics and students themselves were members of these nationalistic pressure groups.

In his next chapter Weber agrees with much recent research in arguing that militarism before 1914 was not a German speciality. He however does not stop here but then proceeds to prove that militarism cannot be seen as one of the central forces leading to the outbreak of war in 1914, that it 'only' explains the students' willingness to volunteer in 1914. Weber first shows that the fencing culture of the German fraternities and Oxbridge's rowing cannot be taken as proof of a very German militarism as opposed to a supposedly 'civilized' British elite (1), as has been done by Norbert Elias and others. Despite their different symbolism, both rowing and fencing were seen by their contemporary proponents as a way of 'making men' and indeed 'fostered virtues potentially important for militaristic societies' (p. 111). While this is convincing, Weber then tends to downplay the implications of this culture of militarised masculinity and denies a growth of student militarism in the decade before the war. Yet, in Germany, the importance and intensity of the fencing cult was growing strongly after 1900 – a fact that Weber does not take into account because he refrains from devoting a more detailed analysis to fraternity culture. In addition, many contemporary personal accounts written in the decade before 1914 give evidence of an increased role in student life of all things military.

Regarding Britain, Weber's emphasis that both University Volunteer Corps and the career of an officer had already been attractive the late 19th century (p. 132) is a good point against the still common assumption that the British army was unpopular during most of the 19th century. Yet his argument is again less persuasive where he seeks to provide evidence against the growth of militarism in Oxford before the Great War. Thus he states that the quota of students participating in voluntary military training in the last years before 1914 (25%) was 'only by degrees' (p. 125) higher than during the Boer War. Put the other way round, this meant that volunteer numbers were now even higher in peacetime than they had been during the Boer War. These developments are rather difficult to reconcile with his claim that in Oxford and Heidelberg things were 'slowly but steadily moving in the right direction'. Weber repeatedly emphasises that student militarism cannot be explained 'solely in terms of a response to a German threat' (p. 125) – indeed few recent works advance such a monocausal explanation. But the interesting question is less if students were preparing for 'any specific war' (p. 122), which they hardly were, but whether and if so in which ways Oxford college life furthered an identification with soldierly ideals and conveyed a positive image of war – a question that would have deserved more space in Weber's book. As it stands, his argument that militarism

cannot be counted among the prominent factors explaining Europe's way into the First World War still remains to be proven.

In the next two chapters Weber explores issues of student sexuality and the position of female students. Gender relations and cultures of sexuality indeed differed in many ways. While the chastity of female students in both places was strictly guarded, Weber shows that the separation of the sexes was much less rigid in Heidelberg. Everyday contacts here were more common and friendship between male and female students was possible. In both places students had sexual contacts with lower class girls and prostitutes, but in Oxford they had to take much greater care to hide such activities because of a very strict attitude of the authorities. Weber agrees with existing literature that Oxford had a strong culture of homoerotic bonding but warns against overestimating the extent of homosexual relationships. Even though this is an interesting perspective, evidence for sexual practices is generally difficult to get by and thus his point may not convince every reader. Weber's discussion of sexual culture identifies the problems and contradictions in George Mosse's generalising argument on the close linkage between nationalism and the boundaries of 'respectable sexuality' in Wilhelmine Germany. Regarding relationships between men and women however it needs to be stressed that Oxford was hardly representative of Britain generally – in London as well in the provincial and Scottish universities male and female students lived in much closer contact than in Oxbridge.

Weber then proceeds to the field of women's emancipation in British and German academia, arguing first that in both countries universities had 'moved toward greater equality' (p. 165) by 1914 and second that the position of women in German universities was generally better than has often been claimed. The first point is well proven, even if Weber's metaphorical contention that thus the glass for women was 'in fact' half full, not half empty – that in other words these advances should be seen as a success story rather than as a story of frustrations – is a value judgment that may not be shared by every reader. Critical of gender history, Weber refrains from discussing how the students' concepts of masculinity evolved after the advent of women. In collecting evidence for the relatively successful advance of women in Heidelberg Weber makes many useful observations and rightly discards one-sided interpretations of women's repression in Germany.

Not all of his arguments in this chapter however are equally persuasive. Firstly, the current state of research presents a picture more differentiated than that 'of a backward Germany versus a progressive Britain' (p. 164). As Weber himself notices, literature on the advance of women in British universities generally sees this process as slow, difficult and of a piecemeal character. Secondly, his contention that German universities generally had by 1914 become 'more equal' than Oxford is problematic. In Britain women had made inroads into the universities already in the 19th century, but were denied full equality in Oxford and Cambridge until well after the First and the Second World War respectively. The German universities opened their doors to women only between 1904 and 1909, but then gave them full equality (if obviously only in a judicial sense). The female students of Heidelberg in 1914 were thus, as Weber successfully shows, in many ways freer and had more opportunities than their sisters in Oxford. But did Oxford really compare unfavourably 'with the most restrictive German university' (p. 174)? In 1914 the German universities had on average 6.7% female students and thus less than Oxford's roughly 10% and far less than the average British university. Weber attempts to relativize these numbers by referring to the German *Hörerinnen*, of which great numbers could be found in any German university. *Hörerinnen* however were mostly mature women, often wives of professors and other notables who just wanted to attend some lectures. Barred from sitting exams, their studies could not lead to a career. Oxbridge's women colleges in contrast offered young women a complete course of studies including exams which, although not crowned by a university degree, opened careers in teaching and other fields. Regarding the complex situation in both countries it may thus be asked if a comparison always has to look for an answer to the question of more or less 'liberality', quicker or slower 'emancipation' and where the glass was fuller.

In his final chapter Weber focuses on anti-Semitism and racism, arguing provocatively that the universities in the epoch before 1914 were 'a world with ever widening opportunities for Jews and foreigners in both Britain and Germany' (p. 184). In this vein he shows that a growing number of Jewish scholars became professors in German universities in the decades before 1914. While it is worthwhile to point out that Jewish

scholars *could* make a career in Imperial Germany's universities, Weber's decision to compare numbers of Jewish academics successfully pursuing an academic career in Britain and Germany however is less illuminative: due to the very different size and structure of the Jewish community in Germany and Britain the fact that 'the national average of Jewish professors at English universities was ... smaller than that at German universities' (p. 195) does not say much about the impact of structural anti-Semitism in both countries. Nor does comparing the number of Jewish professors/fellows in Oxford and Heidelberg.

Regarding students it is difficult to see how Weber's claim to a positive trend towards tolerance can be reconciled with the fact that from the 1880s onwards the vast majority of German student fraternities started to exclude Jews, often even on the basis of a racial definition of Jewishness. A growing *volkish* nationalism paired with anti-Semitism was by no means restricted to the Society of German Students but intruded into the whole spectrum of student organisations. Weber mentions all these developments but does not believe that they present enough evidence for the existence of a generational conflict between a younger, more radical generation and their elders. This may be due to the conception of his book, which looks not only at Heidelberg students and Heidelberg professors, but also gives much attention to general developments in Britain and Germany. Weber's arguments rely heavily on individual memories, published sources and quantitative evidence. While he is thus able to paint a very broad picture, he cannot take a close look at debates and decision processes within the student communities. In these it becomes very obvious that the younger generation, particularly those studying after 1900, was in many ways more radical and more anti-Semitic than those who had studied in the 1870s and 1880s. Initiatives to exclude Jews were almost invariably started by students and often opposed by the *Alte Herren*, the old boys of the fraternities. Numerous personal accounts show that the atmosphere at German universities was for Jewish students in the decade before 1914 difficult – to say the least. Thus a Jewish student paper wrote in 1902: 'Jewish students! Some of you know, and some will get to know that hatred and animosity surrounds Jews in the universities. Because you are Jews, you are excluded from society, because you are Jews, enmity and wrath hit you wherever you go'.⁽²⁾

Regarding Britain and Oxford in particular Weber shows convincingly that anti-Semitism among academics was more pervasive than often portrayed. His argument that British Jewish academics were likely to idealise conditions in pre-war Britain from a post-Holocaust perspective is conclusive. He quotes cases in which anti-Semitism worked against Jewish candidates in fellowship elections. Oxford was obviously 'an uncongenial place for Jews' (p. 202), although it might be argued that this was largely due to its impregnation with Anglican traditions, which made it uncongenial not only for Jews but also for Catholics. And there is still a significant difference between the comment of a British student quoted by Weber: 'I have met [anti-Semitic feeling] at Oxford, and some friends tell me it exists also at Cambridge' (p. 201) and the above-quoted perception of the state of things by German Jewish students. Regarding anti-Semitism, therefore, I find neither his claim towards overarching similarities nor indeed the idea of progress towards more tolerance convincing.

Weber finally stresses that racial mechanisms of exclusion operated on both sides of the channel: in Oxford they were often directed against Indian students. Oxford colleges restricted the entry of Indians fearing that greater number of Indians would be 'blackening' the colleges' reputation. Belief in the superiority of the British race over its colonial dependents was still prevalent among students, and thus Indian students tended to be excluded from social events and were generally not allowed to participate in the Officers' Training Corps. Taking a somewhat ambivalent position, the author points out that these discriminating strategies resembled those which were experienced by Jewish students at German universities, but at the same time rejects interpretations that see racism and xenophobia as majority phenomena.

While many of Weber's points are well argued, his more radically revisionist contentions in my eyes remain unconvincing. *Our Friend 'The Enemy'* nevertheless is a well-written and highly readable book full of interesting arguments which are based on wide reading and always presented with skilled rhetoric. It offers revealing insights into German and British academia before 1914 and delivers another death blow to the idea of an illiberal German or liberal British special path to modernity.

Notes

1. He in this point agrees with my own research on the topic, see e.g. Sonja Levsen, 'Männlichkeit als Studienziel. Männlichkeitskonstruktionen englischer und deutscher Studenten vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg', *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, 51, 2 (2003), 109–30 and my later book *Elite, Männlichkeit und Krieg. Tübinger und Cambridger Studenten, 1900–1929* (Göttingen, 2006). We both came independently and parallelly to the same conclusion, but firmly disagree on the implications of this observation as well as on the general tendencies of student culture before 1914. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. *Der Jüdische Student*, 1, 7/8 (Oct/Nov 1902), 1. For this state of things see also the recent study: Miriam Rürup, *Ehrensache. Jüdische Studentenverbindungen an deutschen Universitäten, 1886–1937* (Göttingen, 2008). [Back to \(2\)](#)

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