

*Contributi/7*

## ***On the Political Rewriting of the Past***

### **The *aporiae* of the Bielefeld School**

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In the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Bielefeld School of social history, headed by Hans-Ulrich Wehler and Jürgen Kocka, rose to prominence. It had contrasting concerns: the focus on structures and processes of development sidelined intentional action and coexisted with a political rewriting of the past that indicted the interests and decisions of dominant elites in Germany from 1870 to 1933. History was viewed, oddly enough, as retrospective politics. This article analyses the main *aporiae* implied by both the School's programme and its scholarly output. How did a structuralist historiography contrive backward-looking political denunciations? Is our time entitled to judge and accuse the past? Notwithstanding the weight of structures and processes, were there real alternatives for the historical agents? Did systemic causality grant elbowroom to intentional action? What chances were then missed and why? Overall, the surmise that there were always choices clashes with received narratives of inevitability.

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In the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a German historiographic approach attained ascendancy. It chiefly focused on structures and processes of development, in lieu of the customary primacy given to intentional action. At the same time, a political revision of the past was envisaged. History was viewed as retrospective politics, which involved the vindication of its moral and didactic function.

This current is well known as 'the Bielefeld School of social history' and its most famous members have been Hans-Ulrich Wehler and Jürgen Kocka, defenders of the innovative project they labelled 'historical social science' or *historische Sozialwissenschaft*. Most importantly, the Bielefeld School had contrasting concerns. On the one hand, these historians appealed to systemic causality, with a manifest disregard for intentional conduct; on the other, they decried the interests and projects held by influent groups and questioned the decisions they took. Specifically, the historians of the Bielefeld School denounced the defensive struggle set up by the old political, economic, and military elites in Germany from 1870 to 1933 with the chief aim of maintaining their privileged

status. Briefly, they defended a political history cast in terms of a structural approach.

Their resolve to rewrite the past, replacing intentional action by structures and processes of development brought to light by extrinsic theories, co-existed, oddly enough, with a penchant for retrospective political indictments from present-time viewpoints. We shall address this quandary while bringing into play the overarching query: Is the historian legitimated to be both the judge of the past and its public prosecutor?

## 1. Exogenous theories provide deep-level historical explanations

The three main characteristics of this innovative historiographical approach are: the reliance on exogenous theories; an unusual ontological commitment; and the stress on structures and processes along with a relative unconcern for intentions and actions.

a) The historians of the Bielefeld School rely on the instrumental and explicit application of externally originated or exogenous theories and models. One of their basic claims is that the past can, and must, be decoded from present-time theoretical viewpoints. If the past often seems able to explain the present, in its turn the past can be explained with the resources generated by present-time theories<sup>1</sup> and models.

This historiographical programme is best defined by its dismissals. In the first place, it opposes the historicists' self-confinement in context-bound values and criteria and fights their 'epistemic fear' of historiographical anachronism. (The explicit application of exogenous, 'imported' or 'borrowed' theories, as we will see below, comes ever closer to knowing the past as it was, not as their actors believed it to be.) In addition, the Bielefeld School combats the time-honoured habit of hiding the historian's guiding concerns or 'epistemic interests' and defends their unrestricted display. It endorses a perspectivism of sorts: the past possesses a reality of its own upon which the 'instrumental' use of theories acts as a searchlight. The illumination thus obtained, however, is always piecemeal and tentative. The extrinsic theories are perception-enhancing devices, which never fully disclose the way 'things actually were' in the past.

b) The Bielefeld School favours a weak ontological commitment. These scholars maintain that the historical reality itself furnishes a fuzzy ground for the applied theories. Yet they deny that society provides an *ens realissimum*-like

<sup>1</sup> The historians of the Bielefeld School are lucid on this issue: «Theories are explicit and consistent conceptual systems that cannot be derived from the historical sources themselves but that can help us in identifying, unlocking (*erschließen*) and explaining historical phenomena». J. Kocka, *Einleitende Fragestellungen*, in *Gegenstandsbezogene Theorien in der Geschichtswissenschaft*, «Geschichte und Gesellschaft», Sonderheft III, 1977, p. 10.

support to their explanatory endeavours. They also oppose the constructivist claim that social reality is a formless chaos, receiving structure and meaning from the pattern-bestowing perspective of the historian. On the contrary, in their view historical reality possesses 'soft' *sui generis* structures that the historian must uncover. While this historiography depends on 'imported' theories, Wehler names 'relative constructivism' its realist outlook<sup>2</sup>.

c) The historians of the Bielefeld School underscore structures and processes and not infrequently side-line perceptions, intentions, and actions. They reject the idiographic (i.e. focused on individuals and events) and hermeneutic (centred on the understanding of meaning) slant of the established historiography. Their fierce anti-historicism compels them to shift the historiographic stress on supra-individual structures and long-term processes of development. Conversely, they often spurn individuals, intentions, and actions, and distrust the lived dimension of meaning and experience.

This anti-agency orientation of the Bielefeld School has been stressed by Wehler: «The motives of the actors cannot be made out only through their own concepts, or the action of the agents through their avowed motives, or the historical processes through intentional moves»<sup>3</sup>. These insufficiencies justify the resort to exogenous theories: «To elucidate both the antecedent conditions and the unintended consequences of action, which do not need to manifest themselves in concepts, motives and performances, externally-originated hypotheses are necessary»<sup>4</sup>. Such absolutist guidelines contrast with the more concessive view defended by Kocka:

The historical process is not identical with the experiences, intentions, motives, and actions of men [*sic!*], but also includes structures and processes which influence those experiences, intentions, motives, and actions without being fully present within them<sup>5</sup>.

To sum up: instead of directly addressing motives, perceptions and experiences, this revisionist programme focuses on their conditions and consequences, which explains its concern for structures and processes of development. It tends to put aside the 'subjective dimension' and is not interested in reconstructing symbolic forms and interpreting cultural practices. The Bielefeld School contends that the explicit application of extrinsic theories leads to innovative hypothesis and eases the identification of problems. A theory-

<sup>2</sup> H.-U. Wehler, *Umbruch und Kontinuität*, Munich 2000, p. 320.

<sup>3</sup> H.-U. Wehler, *Anwendung von Theorie in der Geschichtswissenschaft*, in *Theorie und Erzählung in der Geschichte*, J. Kocka and Th. Nipperdey (eds.), Munich 1979, p. 28.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> J. Kocka, *Theory and Social History: Recent Developments in West Germany*, «Social Research», XLVII, 1980, p. 456.

supported approach, in sum, furnishes explanations at a deeper level than those attained without the aid of theories.

## 2. Can the past be politically indicted? Is the historian a retrospective ‘know-it-all’?

At first glance, the Bielefeld School’s stress on structures and processes scarcely leaves room for intentional action. Its ‘macro’ approach does not allow much leeway for the scrutiny of subjective meaning. Indicting past attitudes and decisions, therefore, outwardly seems incongruous<sup>6</sup>. It could even be surmised that the primacy given to structures and processes ‘exculpates’ in advance all historical actors.

By dint of this revisionist historiography, agency fades away amid structural constraints. Actions are epiphenomenal shadows and events are effects from structures, which evolve by their reciprocal, adaptive interaction. This contempt for contingency, incidentally, has been widely remarked. Ute Daniel, for instance, in her commentary of Wehler’s *German Empire*-book: «to the exculpating approach that does not exclude accident when accounting for the ‘German catastrophe’, Wehler opposes a version of the German historical continuity which is just a short way away (*nicht mehr weit entfernt ist*) from the claim of historical necessity»<sup>7</sup>.

The theory-driven historiography defended by the Bielefeld School leaves scarce margin for autonomous factors (those of political character are no exception) because all involved features (motives, intentions, side effects) are deemed interdependent. Causal explanations, in short, are replaced by functional ones, reliant on structural processes that work underneath actions and events. The historical actors are often converted into obedient carriers of a social role or dutifully performing occupants of a social position.

Yet a perplexing aporia comes into view, for in actual practice the historians of the Bielefeld School judge and indict past decisions and actions, intentions, and experiences. In fact, they propose a (mostly political) rewriting of the past and thus set up a ‘normative bent’ in historiography.

These historians, as pointed out above, consider that structures and processes are the proper object for historiography. Sometimes, however, their focus unexpectedly shifts on political decisions taken in past times and whose deeper meaning has been disclosed by present-day theories. Accordingly, the

<sup>6</sup>This incongruity is underscored by Wehler’s avowal of the necessarily truncated character of all historiographic endeavours: «In the human disciplines, knowledge remains partial, bound to precise epistemic intentions or cultural ideas of value (Weber), and prone to change again when these ideas change». Cf. H.-U. Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte I, Studienausgabe*, Munich 2008, p. 7. This admission is scarcely consistent with Wehler’s absolutist indictments of past decisions and events. If historians embrace Weberian constructivism, selecting the queried material according to their own standpoint, how can they accuse anyone belonging to the past they ‘construct’?

<sup>7</sup>U. Daniel, *Kompendium Kulturgeschichte*, Frankfurt/M. 2006, p. 422.

acting persons recover the convened leading role they seemed to have lost. The belief in the openness of history, i.e., that there were many futures attached to each past, becomes possible again. Thus, even within a restrictive structural framework, the responsibility of both individual and collective actors for the decisions they took in the past appears beyond discussion. This is the crucial paradox: the historians of the Bielefeld School profess a stern structuralism, but they often pour invective on the very past they survey with alleged ‘scientific’ detachment. They stand out in taking this past to court, where it becomes accused, indicted, judged, and condemned. As Thomas Nipperdey puts it, «In the Bielefeld School’s eyes, the historian is both the prosecutor and the judge in both the trial of the past and the resulting verdict»<sup>8</sup>.

The politically prescriptive aspects of the Bielefeld School entail what can be named its ‘normative bias’ and contrive its main aporia. Briefly stated, the historian is promoted to the role of «retrospective know-it-all (*Besserwisser*)»<sup>9</sup>. Such ennoblement affects the historiographical practice because it brings into view «the close dovetailing (*Verzahnung*) of the methodological-theoretical and political standpoints»<sup>10</sup>. The puzzling standpoint of the School, however, is best expressed by the following paradox. On the one hand, its account of the historical events in Germany prior to 1933 has been determinist and de-personalized. The path leading to Hitler’s access to power has been depicted as a one-way road, lacking side streets and opportunities for turning around. On the other hand, Bismarck’s responsibility in starting this process has been oddly highlighted. According to a persistent thesis, his one-time pre-eminence was a decisive cause of the ill-fated course taken by German history. (The tendency to incriminate the past, incidentally, is pervasive in present-day German historiography. While Wehler focuses on the traditional elites, other authors indict bourgeois or even links-slanted historical forces, for instance the liberal bourgeoisie in 1848-1849 or the social-democrats in 1918-1919, accusing them of having ‘betrayed’ their respective revolution).

The fiercest charges against the aporiae entailed by the School’s programme have been brought by scholars with a neo-historicist mindset. (In this respect, it should be recalled that ‘historicism’ means the practice of understanding the past in its own terms instead of imposing on it a trans-historical standard drawn from neighbouring disciplines, or considering it teleologically in view of its consequences for the future). Admittedly, a theory-oriented historiography with revisionist entailments is not compatible with the historicist imperative of understanding every past episode solely by means of its own valuations. Hence the neo-historicist counterargument: Does it make sense for an historian to

<sup>8</sup> Th. Nipperdey, *Gesellschaft, Kultur, Theorie*, Göttingen 1976, p. 388.

<sup>9</sup> J. Kocka, *Sozialgeschichte zwischen Strukturgeschichte und Erfahrungsgeschichte*, in *Sozialgeschichte in Deutschland. Entwicklungen und Perspektiven I*, W. Schieder and V. Sellin (eds.), Göttingen 1986, p. 29.

<sup>10</sup> F. Becker, *Koselleck und Wehler in Bielefeld*, in *Was war Bielefeld?*, S. Asal and S. Schlak (eds.), Göttingen 2019, p. 105.

apply norms that do not belong to the specific historical epoch under scrutiny, thus sidelining the actual self-perception of past actors?

The historian Thomas Nipperdey, already mentioned, focused his neo-historicist misgivings on Wehler's early work and accused him of reductionism. In his view, when Wehler becomes «simultaneously prosecutor and judge» and «puts the German Empire in the dock (*Anklagebank*)», in fact he is setting up «a trial against the great-grandfathers (*Urgrossväter*)»<sup>11</sup>. Paul Nolte has acutely glossed these invectives: «In Nipperdey's eyes, Wehler represented the historiographical trend that gauges the past with the measuring rod of the present time and then brandmarks it as scanty»<sup>12</sup>. Against Wehler, in sum, «Nipperdey claimed that the past must be understood according to its own logic by reconstructing the resultant horizons, [so that] objectivity remains a 'regulative idea', a Sisyphean target»<sup>13</sup>.

Nipperdey's fierce criticisms of Wehler's standpoint, however, could not be easily directed to Kocka's stance. In fact, Kocka de-dramatizes the Bielefeldian approach and points the way to the counterarguments that will be discussed below:

The inquiry about the way persons influence history and how this differs from the effect of structures is only *a particular case* of the difficult task (quite unsolvable and so tiresome for the historians) of ascribing the corresponding weight to the diverse causes of a phenomenon and thus achieving a thorough causal imputation<sup>14</sup>.

Still, the strains highlighted by Nipperdey can be surmounted only by addressing this wide-embracing question: Is our present-time (or any time subsequent to the incriminated episode) entitled to valuing, judging, and accusing the past? According to Nipperdey, at any rate, in John Breuilly's pithy report,

the first duty of the historian is *not* to write about the past in terms of its failure to turn into the present which the historian would have liked to have seen it become. Instead, the historian should respect the 'otherness' of the past and restore, in the portrayal of that past, its own sense of an open future<sup>15</sup>.

These injunctions entail the need to face head-on a crucial issue: Why did things not develop otherwise? What opportunities were then neglected and why? Which leads us to the quandary's core: Can the historian accuse someone who acted under constraint, albeit not conscious of his or her servitude?

<sup>11</sup> Th. Nipperdey, *Gesellschaft, Kultur, Theorie*, cit., pp. 388-389.

<sup>12</sup> P. Nolte, *Lebens Werk. Thomas Nipperdeys Deutsche Geschichte*, Munich 2018, p. 197.

<sup>13</sup> P. Nolte, *Nachwort* to: Th. Nipperdey, *Kann Geschichte objektiv sein?*, Munich 2013, p. 319.

<sup>14</sup> J. Kocka, *Struktur und Persönlichkeit als methodologisches Problem*, in *Die Bielefelder Sozialgeschichte*, B. Hitzer and T. Welskopp (eds.), Bielefeld 2010, p. 180. Stress in the original.

<sup>15</sup> J. Breuilly, *Telling it as it was? Thomas Nipperdey's History of 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Germany*, «History», LXXX, 1995, p. 60.

### 3. Wehler's rewriting of the past: actions and events

Despite his commitment to structures and processes, Wehler's central concern is the relative autonomy of political history: «Wehler interprets politics as a manipulative business»<sup>16</sup>. His approach blends a stress on historical continuities («the persistence (*Zählebigkeit*) of traditions»<sup>17</sup>) with the rejection of «the sharp separation of genesis and validity as a way to an objective representation»<sup>18</sup>, deemed a neo-conservative whim. Politics pervades Wehler's thought with such intensity that K.-G. Faber's severe judgment on his historiographical approach is hard to challenge: «Seeing a continuity of errors or even a fatal development in deep strata of the socio-political world amounts to doing retrospective politics»<sup>19</sup>. He indulges in «countless political value-judgements» so «massive and direct» that they often adopt «the character of a pamphlet»<sup>20</sup>. In the words of Arndt Hoffmann, «historiographic accounts always function argumentatively in Wehler»<sup>21</sup>. His backward-looking indictments, both in the *German Empire*-book and the *German Social History* wield the intensity depicted by Jonathan Sperber:

Wehler seems to be attempting to carry out on paper the revolution which never occurred in history. Privilege, oppression, and their latter-day academic defenders come under withering attack. Wehler retrospectively hangs the aristocracy from the lamppost<sup>22</sup>.

Yet Wehler's accusatory practice is best brought to light by a sample of his retrospective political indictments. On the possibilities of modernization that were at reach during the Second German Empire, the 'conservative egoism' notwithstanding:

The power elites tenaciously defended their privileged bastion. [...] A supple capacity for learning, or even the readiness to learn anything, war them foreign. They practiced instead a mere 'pathological learning' which consisted in the insight-less and obdurate affirmation of their *status quo*<sup>23</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> H.-G. Zmarzlik, *Das Kaiserreich in neuer Sicht?*, «Historische Zeitschrift», CCXXII, 1976, p. 108.

<sup>17</sup> H.-U. Wehler, *Geschichtswissenschaft heute*, in *Stichworte zur Geistigen Situation der Zeit II*, J. Habermas (ed.), Frankfurt/M. 1979, p. 709.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 749.

<sup>19</sup> K.-G. Faber, *Geschichtswissenschaft als retrospektive Politik?*, «Geschichte und Gesellschaft», VI, 1980, p. 579.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 575. Not only is Wehler's historiography «retrospective politics», but also, according to K.-G. Faber, «a kind of 'a-historical historiography' that reads the past backwards». *Ibid.*, p. 579.

<sup>21</sup> A. Hoffmann, *Zufall und Kontingenz in der Geschichtstheorie*, Frankfurt/M. 2005, p. 354. Even more concisely: «History is always argument in Wehler» (*Ibid.*)

<sup>22</sup> J. Sperber, *Master Narratives of Nineteenth-Century German History*, «Central European History», XXIV, 1991, p. 79.

<sup>23</sup> H.-U. Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte IV 1914-1949, Studienausgabe*, Munich 2008, p. 200.

In short, «strategies, measures, and processes of pathological and ingenuous learning were interwoven»<sup>24</sup>. On the naturalness of the struggle: «The bastion of conservative and aristocratic privileges did not need to be defended [in the last months of the First World War] because it was tacitly presupposed as the *nervus rerum* of the debate»<sup>25</sup>.

On the defensive attempt by the German power elites to preserve their privileged positions: «The pre-industrial elites defended their inherited positions of domination against the upsurge (*Ansturm*) of new forces. Eventually the obtained successes generated ever more dangerous tensions and built up a fatal legacy»<sup>26</sup>. And: «The traditional ruling elite of the landowning aristocracy [...] defended its social and political privileges as vehemently and effectively as it did its economic interests»<sup>27</sup>. Or else, on the elites' feeling that they were being trapped:

Major and dangerous developments seemed to multiply in the pre-war years, giving rise among the ruling elites to a sense of being forced into a corner. The result was that they were increasingly prepared to fight tooth and nail in defence of their position<sup>28</sup>. And in more general terms: «Ruling elites who find themselves in a defensive position with their backs to the wall become very much inclined to taking considerable risks to hold on to their position of dominance»<sup>29</sup>.

Finally, on the origins of the First World War:

The representatives of the German power elites knew that their decisions overstepped the margin between the risk of war and war itself. [...] Their illusions of world power and their social-imperialist reckonings of legitimization prevailed upon the preservation of peace. [...] A sharper perception of realities and a far-looking appraisal of interests could have brought a radical change of course, but they were not on hand because for a long time they had been hindered by a success story<sup>30</sup>.

These retrospective indictments share a characteristic that deserves to be highlighted. For instance, when Wehler bluntly expresses in the *German Empire*-book his deep wish «to explain the disastrous (*verhängnisvoll*) path taken by German history»<sup>31</sup>, he is making a negative judgement on the defensive struggle of the German power elites to maintain and legitimate their prevailing political position. Yet ‘judging the past’ seems at first sight a weird practice because the

<sup>24</sup> H.-U. Wehler, *Das Deutsche Kaiserreich 1871-1918*, Göttingen 1973, p. 237. Id., *The German Empire 1871-1918*, transl. by K. Traynor, Providence/Oxford 1985, p. 244.

<sup>25</sup> H.-U. Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte IV 1914-1949*, cit., p. 172.

<sup>26</sup> H.-U. Wehler, *Kaiserreich*, cit., p. 14. Belongs to the *Introduction* not included in the English translation.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23. H.-U. Wehler, *German Empire*, cit., pp. 13-14.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 197 and 198, respectively. This text re-appears verbatim in H.-U. Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte III 1848-1914, Studienausgabe*, Munich 2008, p. 1168.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> H.-U. Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte IV 1914-1949*, cit., p. 205.

<sup>31</sup> H.-U. Wehler, *Kaiserreich*, cit., p. 11. Belongs to the *Introduction* not included in the English translation.

past is unchangeable by definition<sup>32</sup> and the sole judgment available to the historians is the impressionist verdict that opposes the historical phenomena they like to the ones they loathe.

However, Wehler does not merely judge the past piecemeal, appealing to his personal scale of values. On the contrary, he summons a ‘counter-model’ that serves him to judge the German past because, so Wehler believes, it indicates the ‘normal path’ that German history should have taken and which would have prevented the catastrophe of the Nazi dictatorship. He sorts past events (especially in the *German Empire*-book) according to their agreement with this all-embracing counter-model. If ill matched, they automatically become a target for criticism.

The chosen counter-model is modernization. Wehler defines it by the characteristic array of West European and Nord-American peculiarities pointed out by the received ‘modernization theory’: political regulation, industrial growth, economy, and culture reached in these countries a dynamic state of reciprocal integration. The German trajectory, precisely, deviated from this path, whose prescriptive entailments have given rise to the expression ‘German exceptionalism’. In comparison with the healthier development of most Western countries, Germany followed an unusually defective track, caused by the absence of the sobering experience that a triumphant bourgeois revolution would have brought. The old-style, pre-industrial mindsets of the established elites embraced outdated political interests that prevented a self-ruled modernization.

Most importantly, the Bielefeld School linked the theory of modernization to a negative view of the ‘special path’ or *Sonderweg* taken by German history. It should not be forgotten that before 1945 most German historians defended a *positive* version of the ‘special path’ thesis. In their view, the observed peculiarities were caused (and thus became justified) by the atypical situation of Germany from a geographical, confessional, and even historical viewpoint. By contrast, the Bielefeld School’s interpretation of the ‘German special path’ holds that, in John Breuilly’s words, «the direction taken by the development of German society was both peculiar and fateful». It happened, in sum, that «pre-modern cultural residues and a manipulative and authoritarian politics, together with the power wielded by modern industry, trade, army and bureaucracy, brought disastrous consequences for Europe»<sup>33</sup>. To conclude, Western modernization was the positive, normative model, from which the ‘German special path’ drastically deviated. This emancipatory aura gradually gained strength. If at first the reference to modernization had purely analytical aims, it steadily became a sort

<sup>32</sup> *Can yesterday improve?* [sic], however, is the title of a book by Jörn Rüsen that defends the magnifying-glass-like power of historiography. Thanks to the historian’s gaze, «what actually happened provides a sort of additional knowledge because it can display more facts than those of which the people involved were conscious». Cf. J. Rüsen, *Kann gestern besser werden?*, Berlin 2003, p. 26.

<sup>33</sup> J. Breuilly, *Auf dem Weg zur deutschen Gesellschaft?*, «Geschichte und Gesellschaft», XXIII, 1997, p. 164.

of rallying cry, of both political and scholarly character, against conservatism and relativism. (The difficulties attached to the ‘German special path’ thesis, and its eventual loss of credibility, will be discussed in section 5).

The *German Empire*-book provides a long-range structural explanation for the ‘German catastrophe’ and declares that the roots of the ‘German special path’ are its guiding concern. «How did it come about?» is the unvarying query of the book. In contrast with the future *German Social History*, however, which envisages the Weberian ‘objective possibilities’ attached to each historical episode (as will appear below), here the un-realized alternatives are not taken into account: Hitler was the unavoidable consequence of the Second German Empire. Conversely, the process of modernization in leading Western countries is displayed as a counter-model endowed with a bitingly critical function.

#### 4. Kocka’s rewriting of the past: experience, intentions, and memory

Kocka’s revisionism addresses strata of the historical reality deeper than those envisaged by Wehler’s criticisms. His rewriting proposals involve experience, intentions, and memory, and lay the foundation for Wehler’s indictments, directed to the more intricate reality of actions, decisions, and events. In Kocka’s peculiar take, action connotes contingency and defies regularity, even though he leaves no doubt about the upper hand kept by the structures. The acting individual is viewed as a sort of anomaly that veils the deeper rule, which must be brought to light by the historian.

In their first stage, Kocka’s rewriting proposals deal with the recovering or reconstruction of experience. There he stresses «the relative impotence of the individuals as regards the reality surrounding them»<sup>34</sup>. This helplessness is discussed by Kocka in his analysis of early German structural historiography, developed by Werner Conze in the 1950s and bent on «drawing the appropriate conclusions from a certitude which had been gaining weight in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries: circumstances are all-powerful»<sup>35</sup>. Kocka spells out this all-pervading dearth:

The intentions of human acts often do not correspond to their outcome; the individual free-play of action, allowed by economy processes, social movements or political institutions, is strictly limited; history never coincides with the reciprocal intentions of the actors<sup>36</sup>.

According to Kocka, indeed, «history consists not only in assortments of actions and experiences but also in arrays of effects and functions that impose themselves against the efforts of the individuals, without necessarily being noticed by them»<sup>37</sup>. Not surprisingly, he advocates blending the history of memory and experience with that of evolving structures and processes. Yet the

<sup>34</sup> J. Kocka, *Sozialgeschichte*, cit., p. 71.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 70-71.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

decisive insight of Kocka, on which his revisionist programme focuses, is that «much has happened that was not experienced by anybody, or in any case was experienced in a distorted way (*vieles geschah, was nicht oder nur verzerrt erfahren wurde*)»<sup>38</sup>.

Kocka insists in taking into account the power of structures: «Understanding what held together past realities and gave dynamism to them, demands the scrutiny of structural differences because the reconstruction of acts, experiences and ideas is by no means sufficient»<sup>39</sup>. Yet he does not despair of finding a proper balance between these opposed standpoints. His conclusion, therefore, should not come as a surprise: «The subjective or ‘inner’ face of past reality must be cross-examined because the history of perceptions and experiences is precisely what was neglected by the early structural historiography»<sup>40</sup>.

A further step in Kocka’s rewriting proposals promotes the methodical revision or replacement of experience, which is in fact a consequence of the foregoing discussion. In Kocka’s view, attempting to recover or re-enact meanings and experiences is an inadequate endeavour. «The historiographical focus on the perceptions and experiences of average people should not be accepted without reservations. History does not coincide with what people perceived and experienced»<sup>41</sup>. This defeatist insight is Kocka’s central persuasion. He considers a dismal undertaking any historiographical confinement to memory-bound subjective events that inevitably would neglect the symbolic networks that articulate them:

The simple reconstruction of experience is insufficient for grasping the total meaning of cultural phenomena. It is incompletely present in experience and possibly in a distorted form. Thus, a whole network must be properly decoded (*entschlüsselt*) which can never be wholly made out in experience<sup>42</sup>.

Yet Kocka is decided not to side-line the social roots of individual experience. He believes that (as Chris Lorenz puts it) «society registers better (*stellt besser in Rechnung*) than culture the phenomena of which contemporaries are *not* conscious»<sup>43</sup> because experience can never totally embrace its cultural preconditions. He balances this clear-headed verdict with the following insight, quite perplexing for the historian: «the presence of structures and processes in experience is distorted or even nonexistent, and inversely experience is never

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* Kocka’s proposals for the correction, revision, or amendment of experience have dire historiographic consequences, for they imply that memory, in fact, has to be told of its actual contents. His methodological guidelines point to a historiography understood as criticism of memory.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>43</sup> Ch. Lorenz, *Wozu noch Theorie der Geschichte?*, in *Wozu Geschichte(n)?*, A. Sommer *et al.* (eds.), Wiesbaden 2004, p. 14. Italics in original.

altogether determined by structures and processes»<sup>44</sup>. This is why merely reconstructive programmes, according to Kocka, are a dangerous venture: «By its own means, the hermeneutic, understanding-directed recovering of past perceptions and experiences does not give access to a reflective and all-comprehending reconstruction of history»<sup>45</sup>. Hence, Kocka's startling question: Is experience corrigible?

Perceptions and experiences could even be 'false' (*Wahrnehmungen und Erfahrungen konnten auch falsch sein*). [...] The historiographical approach is fair enough and close to the historical truth when it succeeds in apprehending the actual circumstances of the people under study (besides focusing on their experiences and attitudes), which they may have only partially understood, or even not at all<sup>46</sup>.

In this approach, Kocka reveals a chief aspect of Max Weber's influence on the Bielefeld School, namely the anti-historicist, constructivist, willingly anachronistic and heterological doctrine of the 'imputed objective meaning'. According to Weber, although human action is never immediately meaningful, if rationally interpreted it can be understood and therefore explained. This 'rational interpretation' takes the place left by the chimera of an immediate understanding and consists in the ideal-typical construction of the probable conduct of the agents in case they had acted rationally. Weber disparages given immediacy and directly accessible «lived experience»<sup>47</sup> or *Erlebnis*:

The indistinct vagueness of 'having an immediate experience' must be broken, in order that even the first beginnings of a real 'understanding' of *ourselves* can be made. When it is said that every 'immediate experience' is the most certain of all certainty, this of course applies to the fact *that* we have that immediate experience. But the actual *content* of our immediate experience can only be grasped [...] when the stage of 'having an immediate experience' as such has been left behind, and the content of the 'immediate experience' is made the 'object' of judgments that, for their part, are no longer 'immediately experienced' with indistinct vagueness, but can be acknowledged as 'valid'<sup>48</sup>.

In Weber's view, objectivised understanding is a disciplined procedure, fated to play the game of rationalization. Even 'lived experience' demands abstraction in order to be known. Understanding, therefore, is put to the service of explanation, i.e. it is subordinated to causal imputation because it consists in the interpretive reconstruction of rational motives. It opposes any

<sup>44</sup> J. Kocka, *Sozialgeschichte*, cit., p. 76.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>47</sup> What counts for Weber is not a lived, unique, and direct experience, immediately possessed and felt, but a reflexive and coherent experience, schooled in fantasy and abstraction but nurtured by general rules.

<sup>48</sup> M. Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*, ed. by J. Winckelmann, Tübingen 1988, p. 104. Id., *Collected Methodological Writings*, ed. by H. H. Bruun and S. Whimster, transl. by H. H. Bruun, London 2013, p. 67 (Weber's stresses).

soft introspective procedure because the initial interpretation of the subjective motivations is integrated back into an objective explanation.

This Weberian breakthrough throws light on Kocka's tenet that there can be false experiences. A 'constructivist memory' appears thus possible, which would be the contrary of the reproductive or restorative memory expressed by the metaphor of the palimpsest. It would replace the lived and directly remembered experience (i.e. the experience that can be rescued or reconstructed), by the paradoxical experience that took place without the knowledge of the pertinent individual. This extreme proposal, of course, implies that the historical actors were unconsciously self-betraying dupes. Since their experience was poor and mistaken, it is also corrigible throughout. In sum, according to Kocka 'experience' is externally amendable through the light-beam supplied by exogenous theories. Only they can retrospectively disclose the 'true' intentions of past agents and their 'actual' involvement with their world.

## 5. The shortcomings of modernization theory and functional justification

The political rewriting of the past defended by the historians of the Bielefeld School has been exposed to criticisms which, in their turn, have set off renewed attempts to buttress their revisionist claims concerning past deeds, intentions and experience. There have been controversies on three issues. The Bielefeld School's aporiae have had to confront neo-historicist disparagements; its appeal to a modernization theory as the counter-image of the 'German special path' has become gradually discredited; and the functionalist justification of the School's main theses has steadily evidenced grave failings.

The Bielefeld School's programme encourages a two-pronged scrutiny of both the contemporary account of past realities (in fact, an insincere nod to neo-historicism) and our own, present-time-related perception of them:

A key academic tradition was nevertheless preserved when structural history began to prevail: the hermeneutic reconstruction of past intentions, actions, and experiences. In fact, structuralist histories used to be the exception. But the hermeneutic questioning became progressively complemented and improved by the inquiry on the conditions and consequences of intentions, actions and experiences, of which the people who acted and felt in past times could not be aware because they were out of their reach<sup>49</sup>.

It was a two-sided agenda which nevertheless concealed a justification of anti-historicism: «The historian must tackle these two tasks [i.e. finding the terms that guided the past actors and disclosing an objective historical meaning via our present-time viewpoint] *and not only the first one, a historicist*

<sup>49</sup> J. Kocka, *Historische Sozialwissenschaft zu Anfang des 21. Jahrhunderts*, in *Arbeiten an der Geschichte*, Göttingen 2011, p. 83.

*illusion notwithstanding*»<sup>50</sup>. Just the opposite happened, for only the second task succeeded. The programmatic eclecticism of the School was reduced to the willed anachronism described by Thomas Haussmann: «What matters is not the way reality appeared to people who lived in the past, but *everything that can be found out about the reality of foregoing times*»<sup>51</sup>.

Despite an occasional bow to the historicist tradition, a robust anti-historicism hovers above the Bielefeld School's mindset. Wehler, for instance, gives utmost importance to «the meaning that historical actions acquire when viewed from present-time theoretical standpoints»<sup>52</sup>, a claim that expresses the need for exogenous sources of intelligibility. Small wonder, then, if structures and processes of development prevail upon intentional motives for action, though the question remains whether this deeper 'reality of foregoing times' includes intentions, decisions, and experiences. If this were the case, the indictments against past historical episodes would be justified.

The anti-historicism of the Bielefeld historians explains their fierce opposition to what they called «the neo-historicist illusion». This invective alluded to «the pre-Kantian and pre-Weberian *fata morgana*» which consists in «approaching historical phenomena without pre-conceptions, without clearly stating the guiding concerns of the historian»<sup>53</sup>. Regarding historiographical practice, however, 'anti-historicism' meant for the School the rejection of old-style political history and its two attached opacities:

a) Traditional historiographies are unavoidably partial. While the School's explicit theoretical orientation takes this drawback for granted (historians have always to select their sources, yet to a greater degree if they use theories taken from neighbouring disciplines), the question remains of why some theories appear more appropriate than others. The ensuing difficulty demands a balanced approach: «Several theories can be legitimately applied to a given historical object, which yet would not allow any conceptualization. But it grants a limited scope (*Spielraum*) wherein different theories can be summoned without risk of deceit or inaccuracy»<sup>54</sup>. This uncertainty is aggravated by the fact that «adequate criteria for favouring a theory over another cannot be proved or deduced, though only they could avoid the charge of decisionism»<sup>55</sup>.

<sup>50</sup> H.-U. Wehler, *Kaiserreich*, cit., p. 12. Belongs to the *Introduction* not included in the English translation. My stress (JMB)

<sup>51</sup> Th. Haussmann, *Erklären und Verstehen: Zur Theorie und Pragmatik der Geschichtswissenschaft*, Frankfurt/M. 1991, p. 252. My stress (JMB). Haussmann adds: «Understanding is of no use for this task, which can only be solved by summoning present-day theoretical standpoints» (*Ibid.*)

<sup>52</sup> H.-U. Wehler, *Kaiserreich*, cit., p. 12. Belongs to the *Introduction* not included in the English translation.

<sup>53</sup> H.-U. Wehler, *Aus der Geschichte lernen*, Munich 1988, pp. 140 and 142.

<sup>54</sup> J. Kocka, *Einleitende Fragestellungen*, cit., p. 10.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

b) Old-style historians never state their guiding concerns. Arguing against this cause of ambiguity, the historians of the Bielefeld School advocate the explicit disclosure of historiographic pre-conceptions. Likewise, the criteria used for selecting the sources must be brought to light. In fact, though, in the work of these historians an outstanding ‘guiding concern’ becomes spelled out: How did the ‘German special path’ or *Sonderweg* come about?

The revisionist claims of the Bielefeld School concerning the ‘German special path’ deserve to be looked at closely. We should not forget that these historians judge unsatisfactory, in Jürgen Habermas’ words, «the hermeneutic understanding of meaning, because the historical context is not exhausted by the mutual intentions of human beings (*der historische Zusammenhang geht nicht in dem auf, was die Menschen wechselseitig intendieren*)»<sup>56</sup>. Therefore, they devalue action and agency and highlight structures and processes. Yet here appears the difficulty. Is it legitimate that they foster a ‘retrospective politics’ and indict the power elites and dominating groups responsible for the ‘German special path’, now converted in a political counter-model? Is it reasonable that, as a result, the decisions taken by ruling strata, alongside with the tradition of wrongdoing that has been their obvious outcome, receive a deluge of charges and imprecations?

In Wehler’s later output, however, the ‘German special path’ comes up enfeebled. John Breuilly has described this decline along with the growing presence of unexpected factors that were functionally interpretable:

In *German Social History* (notably in the third volume) the classical interpretation of the German ‘special path’ appears amended and even partially abandoned. [...] Yet the weakening of some of its aspects is balanced by the introduction of new viewpoints, i.e. the growth of a nationalism converted into a political religion, or the careless and irrational decision-making when the German political structures fluctuated between polycracy and un-coordinated drifting along (*dahintreiben*)<sup>57</sup>.

The supporters of the modernization theory (Wehler and Kocka among them), upon which the ‘special path’-thesis depended, did not pay enough attention to the following issues. The processes of modernization (the circumstance that they were profoundly diverse justifies the plural) in no way occurred simultaneously; phenomena of inner differentiation affected the German ruling classes in the period under scrutiny, for the established order was not monolithic, nor was it immune to the social and political consequences of its own defensive stance; modernity was at bottom ambivalent (for instance, it has been proved that the development and influence of the bourgeoisie in Germany

<sup>56</sup>J. Habermas, *Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften*, Frankfurt/M. 1967, p. 116. Id., *On the Logic of the Social Sciences*, transl. by S. W. Nicholson and J. A. Stark, Cambridge (Mass.) 1988, p. 35. Habermas clarifies thereafter the grounds of his aperçu: «Motivated actions are embedded in a quasi-natural (*naturwüchsig*) context that is mediated by subjectively intended meaning, but not created by it» (*Ibid.*).

<sup>57</sup>J. Breuilly, *Auf dem Weg zur deutschen Gesellschaft?*, cit., p. 165.

did not differ from that of comparable social strata in Western countries); the relative stability of the German empire propitiated some remarkable social-progressive achievements; several possible courses for the political life in Germany were then outlined that differed from the ‘German special path’ but were not taken up in subsequent times.

The primacy given to a normative process of modernization, besides, meant that the Bielefeld School had to rely on functional accounts. In other words, explaining how and why history has proceeded forward in ways of which the people involved could not be conscious was left to the idea of function. The historical events, in short, were functional solutions given to structural problems. Promoted to a sort of litmus test, they assigned intentional overtones to the structures themselves.

A sort of ‘functional necessity’ was then brought to light, which according to Wehler was precisely what the German elites had failed to acknowledge. Functional accounts, however, side-line the relative self-sufficiency of historical processes and wipe out the agents’ virtual freedom of choice. Wehler, at any rate, partially disclaims in *German Social History* the functionalism attached to modernization theory. The pursuit of realist alternatives<sup>58</sup> attains in this work the hegemony reached by functionalism in his earlier output, a change of course pointed out by his neo-historicist adversary:

If the *German Empire*-book was a programmatic sketch, full of functionalist blunders, the *German Social History* distinguishes at length and accurately between conditions and consequences and avoids mixing up intentions and outcomes (though the role of intentions is rather subordinate). [...] Wehler’s use of counterfactual questionings brings to light alternatives and options that were available at the time<sup>59</sup>.

In short, the functionalism of the earlier work, ancillary to modernization theory (which was also the main support of the “special path” approach), is now swapped for a Weberian focus on objective (even if unrealized) possibilities. Let us see this sea change in detail.

## 6. The legitimacy of the heterological discourse

In view of the chain of difficulties pointed out above, how could Wehler and Kocka persist in their attachment to a structuralist and process-bound historiography, yet drenched with revisionist indictments of past decisions and actions? As we just saw, Wehler eventually realized the frailty of the Bielefeld School’s prior arguments (modernization theory and functionalism) when

<sup>58</sup> H.-U. Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte II 1815-1845/49, Studienausgabe*, Munich 2008, p. 878, n. 9 contains a lengthy repudiation of «older theories of modernization» that linked the growth of democracy with industrialization.

<sup>59</sup> Th. Nipperdey, *Wehlers Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, «Geschichte und Gesellschaft», XIV, 1988, p. 405.

attempting to justify its retrospective denunciations. As a result, he directed his attention to Max Weber's doctrine of 'objective possibility' when working in *German Social History*. This was not an exceptional occurrence because Weber's impact in the Bielefeld School's mindset<sup>60</sup> had in fact three aspects:

a) The heritage of Weber's objectively imputed consciousness (which goes beyond Kocka's proposals for the amendment of experience, already discussed) retrospectively justifies the School's 'presentism'. This standpoint is expressed by Wehler in the *German Empire*-book when he stresses the need of asking «not only for the meaning which oriented the historical actors among the experiences that were possible in their time, but also the meaning their historical action acquires when viewed from present-time theoretical standpoints»<sup>61</sup>. In Wehler's view, this request «critically dissipates the fog of inherited legends, dissolves hackneyed confusions, [and] sharply highlights the upshots of carried-out decisions (or the social cost of having eschewed others)»<sup>62</sup>. Interestingly, it closely follows Weber's objectivating<sup>63</sup> guidelines: human action can be accounted for only if it is virtually transposed into its rational equivalent, which means in fact that no one is fully conscious of his or her actual motives. Weber deemed irrational the established views on understanding, and this anti-hermeneutic mistrust is echoed by the historians of the Bielefeld School. They look for an anti-historicist 'understanding' which, paradoxically, would begin by disregarding the very experiences had by the people whom they attempt to understand. Again, they walk in Weber's steps, for he opposed the 'objective motivation' of an action to the lived (re)enacting of its subjective motives.

b) Weber's 'objective possibility' or *objektive Möglichkeit* (Wehler's last resort when modernization and functionalism came out disappointing) is a procedure for uncovering realist but unrealized alternatives to past situations. It aims at disclosing the opportunities that lie buried in history because they were

<sup>60</sup> Wehler and Kocka invoke in fact a 'halved' or *halbierter* Weber. Of the two faces of Weber's oeuvre (one related to society, economy, authority, dominance and politics, the other linked to action theory, the construction of meaning, the 'conceptions of the world' and their determining effects), they address only one of them. Yet the talk of 'a halved Weber' is awkward because, as action theorist, Weber held the revisionist claim later adopted by the Bielefeld School: the objective motivation of the agents can only be attained by way of their objectively imputed consciousness.

<sup>61</sup> H.-U. Wehler, *Kaiserreich*, cit., p. 12. Belongs to the *Introduction* not included in the English translation.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> Weber's objectively imputed consciousness is a forerunner of György Lukács' «imputed (*zugerechnet*) class consciousness», the key concept of his *History and Class Consciousness* of 1923. It is a 'consciousness' paradoxically not actually and immediately 'experiencible' and thus merely possible, not an empirically factual consciousness. Lukács' insight, besides being ancillary to Weber's, is grounded on the hypothesis of a proletarian consciousness having the 'objective possibility' of breaking through the veil of reification. Lukács was aware that full class-consciousness was an exceptional event that can emerge only in a deep crisis, so that it must be ascribed to the working class.

not achieved. It is related to the Weberian ‘adequate causation’, at first sight annuls the exculpation of past agents, and echoes the virtualized view adopted by some historians, Tim Mason among them: «the significance of what actually happened can only be determined against the background of what the evidence shows might have happened or almost happened»<sup>64</sup>. It is worthwhile to consider Weber’s specific take on that notion:

If a historical fact had been removed from the complex of relevant contributory factors, or if it had been modified in a certain way, could events then, according to general rules of experience, have taken a course that, in those respects which are crucial for our interest, would somehow have been different<sup>65</sup>?

Positioned in Weber’s wake, Wehler is adamant about the necessary realism when disclosing alternatives to past states of affairs. Any alleged objective (though unrealized) possibility must confront the suspicion of illusionism and arbitrariness. He discusses this constraint regarding the advent of National-Socialism in Germany:

This query must follow Weber’s so-called ‘theory of objective possibilities’. At the outset it asks for all opportunities of action and decision that were available at a given historical moment and thereafter tries to find out why all these options (with the exception of the winning one) were defeated and so went down in historical memory as obstructed, buried, or even forgotten alternatives<sup>66</sup>.

Such an exploration is necessary, according to Wehler, «if from the beginning we do not want to fall prey to the historical events that emerged victorious in history, thus ratifying that their success was inevitable»<sup>67</sup>. Accordingly, the quest for “objective yet un-realized possibilities” is ubiquitous in *German Social History*<sup>68</sup>. Wehler insists in asking for «alternatives with realist prospects», that is, «competing options which belong to the buried (*verschüttet*) possibilities of the German history»<sup>69</sup>. Instances: Were there realist alternatives to the foundation of the German Empire in 1867/1871?<sup>70</sup> *Id.* to the institution of the Republic of Weimar in 1919?<sup>71</sup> *Id.* to the advent of the National-Socialist regime in 1933?<sup>72</sup>

<sup>64</sup> In a debate on R. Overy, *Germany, 'Domestic Crisis' and War in 1939*, «Past and Present», CXXII, 1989.

<sup>65</sup> M. Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*, cit., p. 283. *Id.*, *Collected Methodological Writings*, cit., p. 179. (Weber’s stresses)

<sup>66</sup> H.-U. Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte IV*, cit., pp. 585-586.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 585.

<sup>68</sup> Again, Nipperdey is a lucid analyst of the historian’s need to summon un-realized possibilities: «There is historiographical advancement only when it can be pointed out what chances and possibilities were available as alternative. Only on this account can we speak about something resembling ‘guilt’ (*Schuld*)». Cf. Th. Nipperdey, *Gesellschaft, Kultur, Theorie*, cit., pp. 265.

<sup>69</sup> H.-U. Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte III 1848-1914, Studienausgabe*, Munich 2008, p. 331.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> H.-U. Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte IV*, cit., p. 205.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 585.

c) Weber's 'charisma' is a spare explanatory resource. Wehler takes this notion from Weber and uses it to overcome the occasional ineffectiveness of the structuralist procedures. He pragmatically applies the theories needed by each specific historical phenomenon, and so he discards socio-economic explanations (suddenly turned out ineffectual) when attempting to account for the National-Socialist dictatorship in the fourth volume of the *German Social History*. Instead, Hitler's undisputed 'charisma' becomes there the main clarifying device.

Coming back to the Bielefeld School's difficulties, we may conclude that some crucial questions have not been thoroughly addressed: Were the alternatives of action for the indicted historical agents, the weight of structures and processes notwithstanding? Is it necessary to confront the possibilities and dangers set by an 'alternative history', that is, the 'history that could have been'? In other words: What elbowroom was allowed by a given situation, what opportunities were then missed and why? Did structures and processes, by dint of their possible ill-fit and overlapping, grant a margin of manoeuvre for intentional actions and rational decisions? If so, did these interstices give rise to a sort of 'paradoxical agency'? What alternatives were at hand, in each concrete situation, for the historical actors?

These queries boil down to deciding whether appropriate narratives of inevitability could prevail over the certitude that there were always choices. Bluntly put: is the 'culture of denunciation' fostered by the Bielefeld School actually «unfair vis-à-vis our grandfathers», as the neo-historicists pretend? Above these issues hovers the general problem posed by the legitimacy of the heterological discourse, which insists on accounting for past times exclusively in terms of our present views, disregarding context and relying on sheer anachronistic transplantation. Principally, it denounces the hollowness and the mendacity of the revised past<sup>73</sup>. The confidence in exogenous theories displayed by the Bielefeld School, precisely, is an outstanding instance of heterological discourse.

Now is time to take stock. The addressed problems amount to whether a subjective remainder persists unaffected by structures, and this remnant can be the focus of historiographical inquiry. Kocka deals with this issue by explaining why the Bielefeld School's structuralist programme is compatible with a politically inculpatory rewriting of the past:

It is not possible to seamlessly deduce a given event, way of acting or even a person from structures that explain their necessary character because they went before

<sup>73</sup>The heterological discourse avoids linking history with collective remembrance. Memory has often worked interwoven with forgetfulness, yet what has been left out has usually prevailed. As the Jewish historian Yosef Yerushalmi has pointed out: «Is it possible that the antonym of 'forgetfulness' is not 'remembrance' but 'justice'?». Cf. Y. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, Washington 1982. The rational understanding of the perpetrators' motives should not obliterate the memory of the victims.

or sustain them right now. Often remains a residue that does not necessarily result from previously disclosed structures<sup>74</sup>.

Yet Kocka admits as well that the problem has not been thereby solved. The reminder undeniably exists, but it confronts the historian with a menacing epistemic void:

This residue resists every structural approach, but it would be absurd to make it the starting point (or the chief aim) of an inquiry, unless we wish to free the historian from the task of explaining. When a structural explanation has become unattainable, withdrawing to what is just individual amounts to admitting defeat<sup>75</sup>.

A revelatory remark by Wehler provides the necessary bridge connecting imposed historical inevitability with intentional action, strategic necessity with accountable agency, or as Kocka puts it, the inescapable character of the structures with the subjective «residue» that resists structural approaches:

N.B. for 'neo-traditionalists': [the applied theories] might not be corroborated by contemporary 'direct' sources. Nevertheless, they can be inferred from the rationale of what lay in the interests of the ruling groups and which was incorporated into patterns of political behaviour. They can establish themselves over the heads of those involved, as a response to a challenge, but can after the fact still be interpreted as akin to deliberate actions, because they were strategic necessities (*sind dennoch im Nachhinein in der Form strategische Bedürfnisse wie intentionales Handeln interpretierbar*)<sup>76</sup>.

The extrinsic interests imposed themselves, therefore, «over the heads of those involved», but since they were strategic necessities they can also be decoded, «after the fact», as analogous to subjective intentional actions. This keystone locks both sides of the dilemma into position. Bringing into close relationship external necessity and spontaneous agency is the first step into a dualist approach (structures exhibit an intentional character and vice versa, not unlike the way wave and particle theories complement each other in modern physics) that would overcome the chief quandary confronted by the School. Either structural necessity shapes all historical processes (those contrived by the dominant classes being no exception), and therefore no action or event of the past is open to criticism. Or the German dominating elites, through blindness, inaction, or incompetence, failed to build up the right strategies and take the appropriate measures, which rules out an exclusively structural approach and justifies the School's retrospective political indictments.

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<sup>74</sup> J. Kocka, *Struktur und Persönlichkeit*, cit., pp. 180-181.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> H.-U. Wehler, *Kaiserreich*, cit., p. 247, note 25. Id., *German Empire*, cit., p. 255, note 25 (translation amended).