

Chapter 2

The Impossible Vanishing Point

Societal Differentiation in Imperial Germany



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In the third volume of his *History of German Society*, Hans-Ulrich Wehler painted a broad and powerful picture of the political reform blockages in Germany from 1870–1914 and of the authoritarian remodeling of the political system of Imperial Germany. The military’s special constitutional position, the absence of a genuine parliamentarization although parliament increasingly had more duties, the formally non-political, in fact however conservative-authoritative “government through the civil service,” and the “radicalization” of a new “Reich nationalism”—these are just a few examples of Germany’s negative record in regard to political reform from 1870–1914.¹ It is possible to criticize Wehler’s insistence on the thesis of a German *Sonderweg* on grounds of formal logic, because National Socialism can be considered only partially a *Sonderweg* if one accepts, following a point convincingly argued by key experts, that fascism was a generic, European phenomenon in the interwar period.² But even then, the importance of his argument on the political reform blockade cannot be denied. In spite of the many revisions historians have made in the last two decades to the older views of the socio-historical causes for the *Sonderweg*, the power of the enemies of reform remains a central aspect of the political history of Imperial Germany.³

It is questionable, however, if this blockade in the political system can be taken as the yardstick for an overall assessment of the history of German society during these years. Wehler assigns politics a central role in German society. According to his interpretation, politics, together with the classes which supported this politics, was ‘largely responsible’ for the *Sonderweg*, for the inability of German society to deal successfully with the social crisis produced by modernization. One cannot find a more explicit way of formulating Wehler’s advocated primacy of politics in society than this.⁴ One can, however, point out, arguing against this verdict, that

the history of society since 1800, and especially in the late nineteenth century, won considerable stimulus from the progress of social differentiation.

The key message of this chapter is that the accelerating process of social differentiation during the final decades of the nineteenth century makes it impossible to see society in Imperial Germany as a compact, container-like entity. Thus, the deformation of one part of society cannot fairly be attributed to society as a whole and cannot determine the historical judgement on an entire era. Functional differentiation itself, that is, the development of fields or sub-systems of society which are independent against each other, is an important criterion for the process of modernization. It encapsulates modernity because it unleashes functionally specialized social practices and fields and leads thus to an increase in the amount of complexity society can allow for. If functional differentiation advances to a topic that contemporaries reflect upon, and through this is itself labeled and described as an important signature of a society's modernity, then differentiation is simultaneously a marker of modernity. Or, in other words: functional differentiation is both a structural "reality" of modern society and a form to describe these realities within society, a self-description of society.⁵

In a conventional sense, functional differentiation can be understood as the dissolution of the old, polyfunctional social configurations which defined the social history of the early modern period. The early modern church with its special privileges within society and for the aristocracy, the nobility which was understood and which saw itself as the ruling estate (*Herrschaftsstand*), the guilds of the artisans and merchants—all these configurations which merged political, economic and cultural functions made way for an institutional arrangement in which these functions were differentiated into different institutions. This development can be described as an empowerment of the state, which monopolized both political power and the enforcement of law through the police. At the same time, however, the state lost power because it gave up some of the economic and cultural competences it had maintained throughout the early modern period.⁶ Such an understanding of functional differentiation, in which complex wholes break down into different parts, is called "decomposition" in the tradition of sociological theory, employing the biological analogy of cell division.⁷ As an alternative to this approach, we can employ an understanding of functional differentiation that sociologists tend to call the "emergence" of differentiation. Why emergence? Because according to this theory, differentiation is a process where new forms of accessing and looking at the social world emerged and differentiated themselves. Incidentally, they developed their own structures inside society. Or, in other words: functional sub-systems of society are not the result of a division of larger entities, but develop when a specific code of communication does emerge and can be stabilized. This emergence of functions followed as "world views were cultivated, turned into partial entities and finally rendered in terms of absolutes," producing self-referential social forms in the process.⁸ Hence, this form of differentiation also implies an "interruption of interdependence," because developments in one field or sub-system of society no longer automatically or

completely affect other fields.⁹ In modern society, for example, religious developments do not necessarily affect science or the arts, whereas science and art without religious underpinnings were largely inconceivable during the medieval and early modern period.

Based on these reflections on different sociological theories of functional differentiation, I will now try to highlight the fact that various processes of emergent differentiation occurred in Imperial Germany. One example is the vast increase in the number of daily newspapers, moving Germany literally to the “age of the mass press.” This development can best be described by examining the rapid, quantitative increase in circulation, and through the inner diversification of this market; there were no less than 4,200 daily papers in 1914. Concerning the political tendencies, it is noticeable that in their public significance and in their reception the liberal press from the houses Ullstein and Mosse pushed the conservative daily papers to the “second rank.” In the political pecking order, however, according to Wehler, the liberal newspapers stayed in a position of “political powerlessness.”¹⁰ It is questionable whether such a verdict, focusing on the political impact of the liberal press, adequately and sufficiently apprehends the genuine socio-historical relevance of the daily press, especially if we look at this development from the viewpoint of a theory of social differentiation and see the emergence of new codes of communication as one key criteria for modernization.

From this perspective, it can be seen that the mass media emerged as a differentiated sub-system of society in Wilhelmine Germany. To be sure, the press as an institutional complex which compiles, selects, and spreads the news in its printed form has a history that goes back to the early modern era. In Germany it was, however, only in the last decades of the nineteenth century that the press developed its specific mode of selecting and circulating information which turned the daily press as a mass medium into a coherent self-referential social system. Only now did the daily press, like every other differentiated sub-system of society, become a duplicate of the social world while it elaborated upon it, but from a certain perspective. In this case the perspective was that of information—the distinction or code that informs the workings of the mass media is that the information in the news was already basically old, non-news at its very moment of distribution, having to make space for new news.¹¹ The specific temporality and sociability of a world that was constituted through mass media was not unique to, but definitely most clearly tangible in, the urban world of the big city metropolis, which the daily press both reflected and simultaneously reconstructed in its own context.

Berlin, the city that at the end of Imperial Germany had the largest concentration of daily newspapers in Europe, can be understood as a metonymy for information in printed form, for the “word city” that developed and decayed once again every day. This “word city” not only complemented the “real” city that was made of bricks and mortar; it also superimposed itself increasingly over the latter and represented it. The fleeting nature and urgency of the visual staging of metropolitan

life pulsed in its own differentiated temporal structure. This was the rhythm of the “extra” issues, which were printed and circulated several times a day—at midday, in the evening, and again at night. A crucial example of this trend was the *BZ am Mittag* that Ullstein published from 1904 on. This newspaper relied solely on telephone reports. These newspapers with their “extra” editions, in their search for the latest news and sensations, did not allow for a single, “authoritative” reading and reception of the news; and precisely this openness to a multiplicity of readings constituted the social modernity of the mass media as an emergent reality. The “word city” in the Berlin daily press thus developed a life of its own, so that that the press advanced to an important reference point for the experiences and descriptions of modernity in the eyes of the contemporary observer.¹² In the plenitude of its reports and other textual genres, the Berlin daily press confirmed one thing—the big city, in which multiple social processes occur simultaneously, is itself an important example and site of functional differentiation.

The emergent differentiation of a functional sub-system of society and its specific perspective on the social “world” is not only reflected, it is simultaneously advanced by its internal differentiation.¹³ The duplication or in fact multiplication of perspectives and observer positions in modern society implies that every perspective will develop zones of contact with other perspectives. This becomes especially clear in the modern daily press of the Wilhelmine Empire, in which, among other things, the internal differentiation of the papers into sections and departments increased. It was the culture section, the pages devoted to the economy, local news and articles about sports that gained in available space and importance, not politics.¹⁴ This new, spectacle-driven style of reporting in the Berlin newspapers focused on theatrical effects and episodes. It thus also indicated a disruption in interdependence with other sub-systems as the news coverage increasingly made it difficult to attribute newsworthy events to a clear-cut political interpretation. A good example for this trend is the famous “episode in Köpenick” (*Köpenickiade*) of the cobbler Wilhelm Voigt. In October 1906, Voigt took command of a platoon of soldiers wearing a captain’s uniform he had assembled from various secondhand shops. With the help of “his” troops, he was able to seize control of the town hall in Köpenick, a suburb of Berlin, to detain the mayor and get access to four thousand marks from the public purse. In the critical historiography on Imperial Germany, this episode has been interpreted as evidence of a widespread social militarism and its authoritarian values. From the perspective of the contemporary metropolitan press, however, it was first and foremost one theatrical buffoonery among many others, one that provided a welcome occasion for laughter and ridicule. Only for this reason could the *Köpenickiade* even hope to receive some attention from the metropolitan public, whose attention span was limited.¹⁵

The development of a social field that was based on the circulation of the most “recent” information—as in the urban mass media—was only one example of the emergent functional differentiation in Imperial Germany. Another prominent example was sports. The gradual extension of leisure time made possible the

emergence of a life beyond the world of work. This allowed in particular the new bourgeois middle class of salaried employees to exert themselves, searching for ways to systematically fill the new budget of free time. To be sure, as with the mass media, emergent differentiation was preceded by and could partly built on older traditions, in this case those of “gymnastic exercises” (*Leibesübungen*). These had been practiced, for example, in the gymnastics clubs of the German Gymnastics Association (*Deutsche Turnerschaft*), which had been an important part of the nationalist movement since the early nineteenth century. Against this backdrop, however, modern sport brought a defining new element. Modern sport was focused completely on “performance and competition” and this vastly accentuated the “measurement of performance and time” as the central perspective of organized sports.¹⁶ Winning or losing, based on performance, is the code of sports as a self-referential sub-system of modern society. The members of the German Gymnastic Association could at first not find much value in this code of winning and losing. The gymnasts were still primarily interested in the disciplining of their bodies for the larger, national “body politic.”

A similar reluctance to adopt the code of competitive sports was displayed by the Social-Democratic workers’ sports movement, which was an important part of the socialist milieu and hence more interested in cultivating the tightly-knit forms of sociability which sustained this milieu. For this reason, working-class sports associations tended to “emphasize less competitive physical activities such as gymnastics, cycling, hiking and swimming.” Only in the 1920s did working-class athletes decide to support team sports and thus also the principles of competition.¹⁷ Even then critics remained. In 1919, Heinrich Ströbel, at this time a member of the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD), published a utopian vision of “future society.” In this future utopia, he reckoned, hiking would be the most popular or perhaps even only sport, replacing the current “passion for one-sided stupid muscle sports and the even more stupid rubberneck passion of the masses” who attended sports events only as spectators.¹⁸ Ströbel apparently not only resented the performance criteria of modern sports. He also wanted to revert the concomitant drive towards a differentiation between (in the terminology of Talcott Parsons) “performance roles” (physicians, journalists, athletes) and “audience roles” (patients, newspaper readers, spectators), which is a side-effect of the emergence of differentiated sub-systems of society. The emergent differentiation of sport as a sub-system was, as these examples indicate, not yet fully completed by the end of Imperial Germany.

Football (soccer, for the American reader) can serve as a good example of the setbacks and advances that accompanied the emergent differentiation of sports based on the principle of competition. Imported in the 1880s from England, football became steadily more popular in Germany, especially among students and salaried employees. However, popular enthusiasm for the German football league, founded in 1903, remained limited until the league embraced a competition in which the winner was determined by its standing in the league table. This enabled comparisons between the teams and established a clear standard for the evaluation

of performance. In a long-term perspective, the establishment of the German Football Association (Deutscher Fussball Bund, DFB) in 1900 marked an important caesura in the differentiation and concomitant stabilization of the code winning/losing. This marked the shift from a 'sociable game' that was based on the sociability of the middle classes to a 'game of society', tending to be more socially inclusive because it was oriented solely on the performance of the players. In line with this development, the sport developed its own criteria for what constituted a fluent, professional style of football, and the competition for victory was increasingly cultivated as an end in itself.¹⁹ In the perspective of a history of society, this emergence of football as a competitive sport was far more important than the militarization of the game which can also be observed before 1914.

The emergence of the printed, daily mass media and of competitive sports as self-referential sub-systems of society are two important examples of the ways in which functional differentiation shaped the trajectory of modernization in Imperial Germany. The key point is that the typical form of modernization was not the decomposition of poly-functional and hierarchically structured institutions, but rather the emergence and stabilization of new, specific forms of addressing the social world with codes such as information/non-information or winning/losing. It can be added in passing that the emergence of a scientized health system and the subsequent medicalization of health problems, which occurred during the final decades of the nineteenth century, could also be analysed in such a perspective.²⁰ The development of the media society and of the meritocratic, achievement- and profit-oriented sports system were part of the political reality of Imperial Germany and were in many ways influenced by politics. At the same time it becomes apparent that both systems cultivated their own social reality, and that in the formation and structure of this social reality, the values and the rationality criteria of the monarchical authoritarian state played a subordinate role at best. Emergent differentiation shows itself here in the form of a new, self-referential programming of the system's perspectives, which had already been independent for quite some time in institutional terms, as newspaper companies and sports associations.

Seen in this perspective, differentiation also involves a reprogramming of the codes of sub-systems which did already exist. An intriguing example of this can be seen in the arts, with its heart set on beauty. Of the arts, especially painting is relevant here, because the respecification of the ways in which the arts refer to "reality" can be shown most vividly in painting. The arts had already broken off and defined themselves as a differentiated field of society in the early nineteenth century. This field displayed its independence in the institutionalization of appropriate social forms for the presentation, assessment, and selling of artworks and through the possibility of articulating artistic individuality through changing art movements. The development of an audience that discussed and appreciated works of art, or of "audience roles," complemented this process. The further advancement of differentiation then showed itself in the specific way in which the arts reformulated the functional problem they address, i.e., the transformation of

sensual perception into societal communication.²¹ Towards the end of the century, the painters of “Berlin impressionism,” among them Max Liebermann, Lovis Corinth, and Max Slevogt, broke away and made themselves independent of the reception of French impressionism, which up till then had dominated the conventional currents of idealism and realism in painting.

Although one can notice a curious restraint in the range of subjects the Berlin Impressionists tended to choose (in which scenes from daily life, like children, gardens, and streets took the place of allegorical and mythological subjects), there is at the same time an intensification of feeling and a modification of the perception of color and form.²² The impressionists of the Berlin secession no longer conceived of their paintings as a depiction of the world around them, but concentrated on perception itself, on the “process of subjective seeing” that was supposed to be expressed through the “intrinsic dynamics” of the colors in the paintings. The next important step was taken by the German “artistic revolution” of expressionism. In expressionism, the formative elements of paintings—color, the form of shapes—were seen as an “autonomous structure.” The development of this new, autochthonous visual vocabulary was related to the radicalization of the problem of depicting reality through images in the age of photography. Expressionism responded, therefore, to the recognizable “questionability of the world” through the “setting of signs, of meaningful images [Sinn-Bildern] with their own logic.”²³ The goal of this art form was, as the painter Franz Marc formulated it, to “create symbols for their time ... behind which the technical creator disappears.”²⁴

Expressionism thus distanced itself radically from an artistic strategy that relies on a mimesis of the objective “reality.” Its experimental visual vocabulary is only one important example, though a very important one in the German context, in regard to the groundbreaking transformation of the transcendental categories of space and time in the decades before World War I. Some historians might be inclined to see the arts as a rather marginal or unimportant sub-system in the framework of modern society. But even they cannot fail to acknowledge the invalidation of traditional hierarchies, which was triggered by these new artistic strategies, as a socio-historical phenomenon *sui generis*. This development in the arts formulated the artistic world view (and through this also the possibility of a reference to reality) in a new, radical, subjectivist form.²⁵ It was therefore with good reason that Thomas Nipperdey coined the seemingly tautological formulation that art in the German Empire was “first and foremost art,” expressing the new intensity of emergent differentiation it had arrived at.²⁶ In 1917, the sociologist Max Weber highlighted—in a similar fashion and clearly alluding to the artistic avant-garde in Imperial Germany—the differentiation of art vis-à-vis the Christian religion: “Art now constitutes itself as a cosmos of always consciously apprehended autonomous values [Eigenwerte]. Art has taken over the function, regardless of how it is interpreted, of inner-worldly redemption.”²⁷

We can see similar developments in other societal fields, for instance in the social sciences. One example is the famous value judgment controversy (*Werturteilsstreit*) that from 1905 on took place annually at the convention of the

Association for Social Politics (*Verein für Socialpolitik*). This debate came to a climax in a committee meeting of the association in 1913, in which reports on this subject matter by all of the well-known opponents were presented.²⁸ Max Weber, a key protagonist of this debate, was keen to stress the specific and autonomous nature of scientific communication about the “world,” in accordance with his approach to define sociology as a *Wirklichkeitswissenschaft*, a science that should focus on the realities of social life. He formulated this approach not in spite of but rather because he wanted science to serve as a reflection of “one’s own ultimate values.” Weber saw, however, only too clearly that the universal validity of political value judgments was illusory. Here he differed from Gustav Schmoller and his students, who tried to base the need to develop the welfare state on their own political values. Any such claim to present universal values based on scientific investigation was, Weber knew, bound to fail in the modern, pluralized and differentiated society of Imperial Germany.²⁹ This controversy again highlights the further differentiation of the ways in which communication could refer to social reality, in this case through the accentuation of the difference between an academic “relation to values” and politically charged “value judgements.”

Max Weber is important for an understanding of the societal history of Imperial Germany not only as evidence for the fact that the difference between scientific methodology and morality was prominently discussed in the scholarly community. His work also lays bare the extent to which analytical observations of the process of functional differentiation were part and parcel of a discourse about modernity. Emergent functional differentiation was, as mentioned above, not only a structural “reality” in turn-of-the-century society. It was also a self-description of society, a form in which the structures of society could be described, not least as an alternative to other descriptions such as, for instance, “class society.” Apart from Weber, a few other prominent examples can be mentioned here briefly. Ernst Troeltsch, for example, Weber’s “expert friend” (*Fachmenschenfreund*) and the most prominent Protestant theologian in Germany in the years before World War I, developed the program of a “European cultural synthesis” precisely against a perceived background of cultural and normative pluralism, a pluralism which had developed through the differentiation of social spheres, each with their “own rationality.”³⁰ The reformulation of Christian tradition in “Cultural Protestantism,” a project initiated and represented by Troeltsch, tried to preserve “religious autonomy” at a time when modern science and modern art had made a belief obsolete which tried to integrate society on normative religious grounds and thus wanted to reverse the advance of functional differentiation.³¹ Protestantism for Troeltsch was supposed to become a religion that proved itself compatible with a functionally differentiated modernity—in contrast to the hopes of conservative Lutherans who strived for a religiously colored “culture of unity.”³² After assessing the state of affairs, it seemed to him that this could only be achieved through more individualized forms of piety. Through a more individualized piety, Protestantism would manifest itself as a “religiosity that is in its essence related” to modernity because it gave room to the trend towards functional differentiation.³³

Individualization is also the header for the theoretical observations developed by Georg Simmel in his book "On Social Differentiation," which was published in 1892 as a central element of his overall oeuvre. Under the heading "intersection between social circles," he discussed what is nowadays analysed by sociologists with the concept of the "social role"; the fact that the individual cannot truly fully develop his or her personality anywhere in modern society because he or she is forced to switch constantly between a multitude of social contexts and act, for instance, both as a customer, citizen, father, and religious believer.³⁴ Simmel understood differentiation as a variable that develops in correlation with other factors, most crucially a money-based economy.³⁵ The individual had therefore to "perceive in himself a number of demands which cannot be accomplished," that arose more and more through the "growth of the social macrocosm." Or, in other words: the ongoing differentiation made it increasingly difficult to be, at the same time, an informed customer in the economy, an active citizen in politics, a caring father and a pious believer. Simmel interpreted the increase in the number of "problematic natures in modern times" as a consequence of the concomitant fragmentation of individuals.³⁶ It seems difficult at times to contextualize Simmel's sociological theory properly, and his concepts often seem to lack historical specificity. There can be no doubt, however, with regard to his theories on individualization and differentiation, that Simmel wrote as an observer of contemporary German society. This is underscored by Simmel's specific interest in urbanism, if we consider that differentiation processes were especially tangible in the rapid urbanization of Wilhelmine Germany.³⁷ The idea of a "labyrinth" as the key metaphor for the diversity of social contexts in modern society, a diversity which cannot any longer be controlled by any hierarchy or authority, was recognizably based on the manifold forms of social life in the big cities.³⁸ In terms of an intellectual history of sociological theory, it should also be noted that Simmel developed many of his most important ideas on functional differentiation in a critical discussion of Wilhelm Dilthey's ideas, including the very concept of an "intersection between social circles."³⁹ Dilthey can therefore certainly be included among the group of reputable and relevant intellectual observers of Imperial Germany who described modern society as increasingly shaped by functional differentiation.⁴⁰

At the end of these brief reflections, which conclusions can be drawn about the nature of Imperial Germany as a historical epoch when we take processes of functional differentiation into account? It should be clear by now that it is insufficient to put an authoritarian political system center stage when we write the history of Imperial Germany. This argument is, to repeat the point, not meant to deny that the political system in Imperial Germany was in fact authoritarian, and that fundamental reform blockages could not be lifted until the revolution in November 1918 pushed them aside, together with the monarchical system. But any historical assessment of Imperial Germany that is primarily focused on the lack of reform in the political system just takes a particularly visible part of society as a representative for the whole. To take politics as a benchmark for an assessment of Imperial Germany more generally does not duly acknowledge the multiplicity

of perspectives which are necessary to describe modern society. The same is, by the way, true for the attempt to describe Imperial Germany and the whole nineteenth century as a “second confessional age.”⁴¹ Such an argument is helpful if it serves to strengthen our understanding of the importance of religion and of confessional opposites for German history after the *Kulturkampf*. But as a term to describe a whole era, “second confessional age” is flawed because *no* historical account can properly describe turn-of-the-century society when it posits that one field of society is central or more relevant than others.⁴²

It is impossible, in other words, to write the history of late-nineteenth-century Germany in a vanishing point perspective where the lines of all societal fields meet. Such a vanishing point is impossible to describe. One might think that such an argument could be described as “postmodern.” But that would be wrong. Postmodernism as a form of observing modern society is best described by its key thesis, the end of metanarratives such as progress, democratization, etc. But if the farewell to metanarratives is to be taken seriously, it should include postmodernism itself, and then contradicts itself. With good reasons the sociologist Niklas Luhmann has thus formulated: “If it is true, it is false.”⁴³ In accordance with Luhmann I would insist that the multiplicity of contexts and codes in society is a distinctively modern, and not a postmodern phenomenon.

For these reasons I would like to suggest that Imperial Germany is best understood as an age of “polycontextuality.” The philosopher Gotthard Günther has used this term to describe a situation in which a multitude of observer positions exist, various angles of observation which cannot be subsumed under each other or be brought into a hierarchical order. In a polycontextual environment, every event falls into the reference of different perspectives or contextures.⁴⁴ According to Günther, a contexture is a social domain where a distinction is used and the “*tertium non datur*” applies. Sports, for example, was the domain where winning/losing was the key distinction, whereas other distinctions did not really matter, so “no third position was given.” In the same way, the *Wilhelmine* daily press distinguished between (relevant) information and (obsolete, because already reported) non-information. Catholic and Protestants strove to explain plausibly and to inculcate the distinction immanent/transcendent, so important for religious communication, in a way that was appropriate for contemporary society. But while all these sub-systems cultivated their own contextural distinctions, they all could also observe events in other sub-systems, and it was not possible to establish any superior vantage point for all observations in society.

Imperial Germany can be described as an age of polycontextuality because new perspectives on the world of meaningful social communication emerged, amongst others, the media, sports, the arts, and the value-free sciences. This description of this era also seems appropriate in the context of the sociological discourses in Germany at the turn of the century, which attempted with singular intensity, in a comparative perspective, to observe and analyze, with seismographic accuracy, the polycontextural differentiation of modern society. And any historical analysis of a certain period should not only consider social structures, but also the

self-descriptions of a society.⁴⁵ Or, in other words, and formulated in a personalized manner: a history of Imperial Germany in which Max Weber figures only as a political commentator, but not as an analytical observer of contemporary society, is at best a partial history of society.

We must admit, however, that our description of Imperial Germany as an age of polycontexturality has to be taken with a pinch of salt. This is due, firstly, to the well-established conventions which historians follow when they write general histories. In spite of decade-long efforts to underpin historical research with theoretical insights from sociology and other disciplines, there are still clear limits to the use of more complex concepts in historical narratives. No publisher would like to publish a book titled "Imperial Germany as an Age of Polycontexturality," not only because it would not sell, but also because general histories still tend to serve a moral purpose and are certainly not the genre where irony and *Verfremdung* (alienation) are used to generate insight.⁴⁶

Second, open questions remain when we consider the delineation of the period between 1871 and 1918. One has to keep in mind that "Imperial Germany" as a headline term already privileges the political perspective. In comparison with the first half of the nineteenth century, it is justified to emphasize polycontexturality as the signature of German history in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, more broadly understood. In the first half of the nineteenth century, differentiation took place primarily through decomposition, whereas after 1870 we can observe ever more emergent processes and a greater dynamic of differentiation. This assessment remains true even if we consider the fact that sub-systems such as law and religion had, of course, already differentiated themselves long before the end of the nineteenth century. It should also be repeated that Wilhelmine Germany was characterized by intensive theoretical reflections on the multitude of observer positions in society, more than any previous period. Our description of an "age of polycontexturality" is much more problematic when we consider the end of Imperial Germany, as there is a noticeable continuity to the Weimar Republic with its unbroken dynamic of differentiation, which also shaped the self-descriptions of 1920s German society.⁴⁷ Thirdly, as a cipher for Imperial Germany "polycontexturality" has its limitations, because the very term itself denies the idea that historians can find one defining term that encapsulates a whole historical era. Unlike what is suggested by the historicist principle of individuality, historians cannot describe what an epoch "actually" was. The reconstruction of functional differences cannot, in contrast, provide anything other than a "different" view on the subject.

It is important, and so the argument of this essay, that politics is no longer privileged as the central analytical perspective for a historiographical assessment of Imperial Germany. Instead of privileging one perspective or sub-system of society, functional differentiation and the concomitant disruption of interdependence between sub-systems have to be considered as signatures of modern society. Such an approach then also has to go beyond the distinction of politics, economics, and culture, which is widely used in many textbook accounts.

Indeed, the dynamic of differentiation in the late nineteenth century can no longer be adequately understood with these categories. An interpretation which highlights the political costs of authoritarian reform blockades emphatically strikes an important point, but fails to account for the society of Wilhelmine Germany as a whole, which can only be understood in its differentiation. A history of society which describes the modernization around 1900 cannot be written without an adequate understanding of the complexities of the processes of differentiation.⁴⁸ It is exactly such an interpretation that is able, in spite of political reform blockages, to stress the modernity of German society around the turn of the century. Only after these facts have been analyzed that the question of the interdependency between the different “powers” (*Potenzen*) or societal fields in the history of Germany 1870–1914 can be considered once again.⁴⁹ Our focus on the modern aspects of functional differentiation, to be sure, is not the same as the notion of a pluralized “civil society” based on citizenship and voluntary associations.⁵⁰ While functional sub-systems can be charged politically both in liberal and authoritarian terms, the overall result of functional differentiation was fragmentation rather than a coherent civil society.

For any historical interpretation of modernization processes it seems advisable to dismiss the normative point which posits a general positive interdependency between the development of modern industrial capitalism and the implementation of a democratic constitutional state. Our emphasis on the polycontextuality of Imperial Germany suggests a different reading. It was the clearly pronounced dynamics of functional differentiation which created increasing resonance for a longing for community in Wilhelmine society. According to this view, only a community was able to provide proximity, safety, and unity to the individuals. These hopes have to be situated in a functionally differentiated society, where individuals are rather “dividuals”—that is, they were included into very different functional contexts and were here only addressed with regard to different aspects of their person. They were thus not addressed as a whole person, but only as a divided person, a “dividual.”⁵¹ For these reasons, it is not by chance that the idea of a “people’s community” found widespread approval not only in the authoritarian, anti-democratic circles of late Imperial Germany. Also Liberals, Social Democrats and Catholics, who surely supported a political reform and the introduction of full parliamentary government, were fascinated by a concept of community which promised to compensate or even eradicate the negative side-effects of functional differentiation and thus of a society many Germans after 1900 perceived as shattered and fragmented. It is hence not by chance that the very term *Volksgemeinschaft* (people’s community) gained widespread currency during World War I, when both the war effort and the fragmentation of a differentiated society made the search for more tangible forms of belonging and togetherness paramount.⁵² Also, seen in this perspective, the political history of the cultural rejection of modernity since 1890 cannot be appropriately interpreted without considering the polycontextuality of society in Imperial Germany.

Translated by Jeffrey Verhey

Notes

1. H.-U. Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, vol. 3: 1848/49–1914 (Munich, 1995), 1288, 1291. I would like to thank Helmut W. Smith and the editors of this volume for their critical feedback on a first draft of this article. The Department of History at the University of Sheffield contributed towards the translation of this piece, a support that is gratefully acknowledged.
2. R.O. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (London, 2005).
3. On historiography see T. Kühne, 1998. 'Das Deutsche Kaiserreich 1871–1918 und seine politische Kultur: Demokratisierung, Segmentierung, Militarisierung', *Neue Politische Literatur* (NPL) 43, 206–63; M. Jefferies, *Contesting the German Empire, 1871–1918*, (Oxford, 2008). On the European context see B. Ziemann and T. Mergel, 'Introduction', in idem (eds.), *European Political History 1870–1913* (Aldershot, 2007) XI–XXVI.
4. Wehler, *Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, 1294f.
5. See N. Luhmann, *Observations on Modernity* (Stanford, 1998).
6. J. Breuilly, 'Modernisation as Social Evolution: The German Case, c.1800–1880', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 15 (2005), 121.
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