

Technology and the Culture of Modernity in Britain and Germany, 1890–1945. By *Bernhard Rieger*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. x + 319 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, illustrations, photographs. Cloth, \$90.00. ISBN: 0-521-84528-9.

Reviewed by Michael Thad Allen

Studies of modernity are inherently comparative, for they rest on the assumption that modernity is something all countries—at least industrial countries—share. Few ever critically examine this tacit assumption by actually engaging in the arduous work of comparative history. Thus Bernhard Rieger's book is an original and welcome contribution.

By selecting Great Britain and Germany, Rieger demonstrates a knack for choosing subjects wisely. First, “modernization” theories of one sort or another have figured prominently in British and German history of the past half-century. The reasons for this are surprisingly similar. Toward the end of the twentieth century, the two countries vied with each other to become known as the homeland of the industrial revolution. Britain had indisputably led the first industrial revolution in the eighteenth century, a revolution of textile machinery, coal, iron, and steel; Germany led (in Europe at least) the second in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a revolution of synthetic organic chemistry and electric and mechanical engineering. Both nations therefore seemed to be wellsprings of modernity. Other nations emulated them as models and, more concretely, imported their industrial and consumer commodities.

Yet, after World War II, influential historians commonly assumed that each had more or less fallen from modernity's true path. Anachronistic aristocratic values had led Great Britain into “industrial decline.” Much more disastrously, Germany had provoked a terrible war and perpetrated the Holocaust. National Socialism—aided by reactionary aristocrats—had derailed the nation in an “antimodern” paroxysm of violence.

Rieger thus compares Great Britain and Germany from 1890 to 1945, the era when each seemed a robust world leader in technology and organization and a model for modern political order. By contrast, after 1945 the projection of modernity became a field of contest almost exclusively dominated by the Soviet Union and the United States. By the time historians and social scientists developed analyses of modernization in the latter half of the twentieth century, neither Germany nor Great Britain counted any longer as a world power.

Rieger has been forced by necessity to select topics parsimoniously. Here he exercises his knack for inspired choices. He has settled on three technologies—film, aircraft, and ocean

liners—that were central to debates about the culture of modernity in the first half of the twentieth century.

Modernity might be loosely defined as the progressive extension, even the obliteration, of all limitations of time and space imposed upon human existence by nature. Thus systems of communication and transportation—which extend human interaction over vast distances and time—have always been at the forefront of popular discussions of modernity. This is as true in today’s free-wheeling debates about postmodernity, or the “risk society,” as it was a hundred years ago.

Rieger points out that debates in Germany or Great Britain always carried with them an undercurrent of tribulation. Technologies that eroded the boundaries of space and time seemed to herald the advent of a new age, but they also threatened new dangers. Each nation vied with the other to produce the fastest ships, the highest-flying planes, or the most popular films. No success came unaccompanied by anxieties of decline. Airplanes kept awake at night those souls who fretted over national security. Disasters like the sinking of the *Titanic* underscored the vulnerability of modern travel. Spasms of dyspepsia overtook moralizing intellectuals who encountered steamy sex scenes in early cinema. (Rieger notes that this reached a “climax in Germany immediately after the Great War,” and one only hopes he is punning [p. 87].)

This undercurrent of fret and worry was the other side of robust enthusiasm for modernity in each country. Modern technologies became the subject of what Rieger calls “social fantasies.” They were good to think about. Intellectuals seeking the key to their nation’s future tended to contemplate these technologies. Rieger’s unique contribution is to identify the dynamic link between pessimism and optimism in all visions of modernity. The British supported technological advancement, because it would ensure the status quo of imperial dominance and head off decline and disintegration. Germans tended to support it for the opposite reason: they hoped it would allow Germany to disrupt the status quo and achieve its own “place in the sun.”

A measure of both irrational exuberance and near hysterical anxiety seems always to accompany new technologies that disrupt our conceptions of time and space. Rieger identifies this tension as a source of dynamism. Both the British and the Germans never hesitated to express their fear, but they tended to define it as a subject for further innovation. Modernity’s critique reinforced support for industrial development and encouraged a tolerance for risk.

This short review cannot do justice to Rieger’s many themes and impressive engagement of scholarship. While dedicating one chapter each to the cultural history of film, air travel, and luxury ocean liners, additional chapters compare nationalism, consumption, gender, advertising, and the nature of mass culture.

As any good book must do, he also piques curiosity about other questions. Most pertinent to this journal is the matter of how firms responded to the tandem reactions of excitement and trepidation stimulated by the modernity debate. However much the public wished to see machines as the “measure of man” and as symbols of national prowess, the responsibility for producing these machines fell largely to firms. And firms had to do this for profit, not for national prestige. They could not live by signifiers alone. Nevertheless, there can be little doubt that managers eagerly participated in nationalism. They were also anxious about “mass culture,” even as they created and marketed it. How Rieger’s cultural history might look in a social history of management or a business history of the firm is an open question well worth further investigation.

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