DER ENGLISCHE SONDERWEG

Von Norman Stone

The German disaster of the twentieth century was such that any serious observer asked after its causes. In the England (and Scotland) of Prince Albert, there was a great deal of interest in, and admiration of, Germany, at any rate of Protestant Germany. The novelist George Eliot knew her Hegel, and you cannot really appreciate Thomas Carlyle unless your German is quite good. Gladstone, even when Prime Minister, wrote learned reviews of works of German biblical scholarship. The great historians Macaulay and Acton were always writing about Germany, and in the cabinet that went to war in 1914, there were three ministers who had spent time at German universities. The British contribution to the study of modern Germany is a distinguished one, and I take considerable pride in having myself insisted to David Blackbourn, Harold James, Niall Ferguson and Richard Overy when they were young students of mine that they should take up Germany. David Blackbourn went on to write a very good book called *Der deutsche Sonderweg.*

Previous writers had looked mainly at the Protestant side of the *Sonderweg* — Prussia and her peculiar form of liberalism, or anti-liberalism; the failure of the revolution of 1848; the imperialist inaugural lecture of Max Weber; the failure of Weimar, at the behest of interest-groups, etc. Blackbourn's greatest strength was to investigate a Catholic side, and he had studied the electoral affairs of Württemberg in the later nineteenth century. Why did the political Catholic party not join in with liberals and the Left — a coalition which did appear in 1917, but only briefly? That coalition would have been the equivalent of Gladstone's formation in Great Britain, where Catholics were generally inclined to vote Liberal (quite apart from the Irish side). German Catholics generally preferred an alliance with the Right, even though these were overwhelmingly Protestant and usually very anti-Catholic. It was the "blue-black bloc", of Junkers, heavy industry and Catholics. So the essence of the *Sonderweg* is the missing Gladstone. In Germany to quote Burke, they did not compromise, reconcile or balance.

With the remarkable success of the *Bundesrepublik* after 1949, perspectives changed. Educated Germany was much more consciously 'European' and her history has a great deal more in common with continental European history in general than might have been supposed in the late nineteenth-

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century era of Wilhelmine triumphalism. By contrast, Great Britain turned out not to be a model at all. On the contrary, sensible people looked at Germany and wondered: how it was done — the education, the federal system, the informed press, the properly-run trade unions. There is probably a good book to be written, as to how German examples influenced the Blair government. On the Right, the United States tended to be the model, and greatly influenced the Thatcher government. However, in whichever direction you inclined, it was in reaction to the evident failures of the British model. The Seventies were a bad time, and friends of the country (Helmut Schmidt, for one) shook their heads. One of the students at this conference told me, in the nicest possible way, when we were talking about this that she had had a friend at Edinburgh at that time; the friend, again in the most decent way, had said she was shocked at the levels of poverty. What had gone wrong? This relates to another, more topical, question. In the Eighties, matters improved, for the most part, but we are still left with a Great Britain (perhaps more accurately an England — the Scots are different) which has endless problems, great and small, with the idea of Europe. Some of it is instinctive, to do with what George Orwell called the England that repels the tourists and keeps out the invaders. Some of it is about very real matters — the common currency, for instance, or subsidies for agriculture. But we now encounter what might be described as *der englische Sonderweg,* and it is to this that I wish to address my remarks.

From the standpoint of a continental historian, as Otto Hintze rightly saw, English history consists of living fossils, coelacanths from the depths of the Middle Ages. A good part of it is merely picturesque: rituals surrounding the monarchy, for instance. Some of it concerns ancient institutions, and accounts for the difficulty the English face in harmonizing, say, education with European norms. The Colleges of Oxford and Cambridge flourished, whereas their equivalents at the Sorbonne or Louvain became just residence halls and finally collapsed. The Colleges exist to teach undergraduates, and the apparatus of graduate schools, with all-powerful professors, is completely alien. In the 1850's Prince Albert wanted to modernize Oxford along German lines, and appointed a Regius Professor of History, one Vaughan, who was a liberal Anglican, favourable towards the admission of non Anglicans. No-one came to his lectures, and he was not seen again. The University's rattletrap machinery ground, the Prime Minister was complained to and the Prime Minister wrote to Vaughan, who had become a Journalist in the editorial department of *The Times.* Why had Professor Vaughan abandoned his duties? Professor Vaughan replied with lamentation: the salary did not cover the expense of travel to the University or of entertaining his colleagues; no-one came to his lectures; he had only a miserable little room in a College that did not want him; *The Times* (though

he did not say as much) paid a great deal better. Then, as now: Professor Geoffrey Barraclough, one of the best British historians of Germany, did much the same as Vaughan, a century later.

But the mediaeval survivals in England have far greater effect than this. Some are of the greatest importance and have a great deal to do with the difficulty that the British encounter over the ever-increasing union promised under the Treaty of Rome. Property is our best starting-point. It is a very long story, and the survival of feudal arrangements has been quite striking. If you bought a house in 1860, the lawyers solemnly exchanged little bags of soil. Serfdom of a sort — a labour-rent — persisted until 1935, and was thus abolished almost two centuries after slavery had been declared illegal in England, and seventy years after the abolition of serfdom in Russia. The present-day statistic is that roughly three-quarters of the English Population own their own homes. This is in sharp contrast to practice in most continental countries (except those with a substantial farming dimension). The houses are usually bought with a mortgage. This state of affairs was greatly encouraged by Margaret Thatcher in the 1980's, when publicly-owned housing was sold off to the sitting tenants, often for a small fraction of its worth. The effect was to create a good part of the working-class with a stake in property: it was a means of defeating the then-threatening trade unions. In the 1980's, asset-prices were driven up, and property now accounts for a much greater share of investment than would be true almost anywhere in continental Europe. Interest-rates are correspondingly higher. The law relating to Property is substantially different — the concept of 'freehold' seems to be almost untranslatable *(nue propriété* does exist in French, but since Balzac's day has not had the same importance as in England; even in Scotland the concept ('feu') only relates to a general responsibility for repairs). The consequences of this for any harmonization or convergence of the economies are plain. I am not defeating the English system: it has very obvious drawbacks. In Margaret Thatcher's time, when there were millions of unemployed people in the north, and millions of vacancies in the south, the northerners in subsidized public housing were unable to move, because housing-costs in the south were far beyond what they could afford. The rise in property-prices in the south created a substantial new class of rich or even very rich people (it was said at the time that the new Definition of a millionaire was someone who had a house in Fulham, a not very grand part of London, without a second mortgage).

How do we account for this? The origins of the system lie far back in English history. Obviously, there was no great revolutionary breach or caesura: you could not write, "Am Anfang war Napoleon". But in the eighteenth century, continental countries had had the Enlightenment, whereas England did not, at least not at the level of government. Monarchy,

Established Church (a sort of pre-Counter-Reformation Catholicism, in effect) and unreformed Parliament continued, without much institutional change. Of course, enlightenment happened, but the initiative for it were local, often dependent upon another unique English creation, the Whig aristocracy. Marsh-draining, the spread of education, abolition of torture, the cessation of witch-burning all happened from below: the State did not become enlightened, because it did not need to be. None of this was quite the same in Scotland, incidentally. Scotland was a much poorer country, and the state had to do things, hence the phenomenon of the Scottish Enlightenment, when bright young continentals, Tocqueville and Constant, for instance, automatically made for university studies at Edinburgh, because there they would, they knew, be taught something serious by serious men. To this day, public concerns are more expeditiously discharged than in England.

Besides, in a sense England did not need the Enlightenment because it had already undergone what was known in East Germany in the old days as *die frühbürgerliche Revolution*. The great historian Sir Geoffrey Elton was of German origin — his father had been professor of classics at Berlin — and then moved to the German University of Prague; the family moved to England when the boy was twelve. Geoffrey Elton mainly concerned himself with the Tudor period, especially Henry VIII's reign, and especially with the dissolution of the monasteries. That involved about a third of the land, and it was as Elton said, 'the Tudor Revolution in government' — a new kind of civil service, a new class of beneficiaries, a new kind of church, and a new kind of welfare-system — because something had to be done to replace the charitable functions of the ruined monasteries. As a defence of private property, in 1616, the English produced a novel legal instrument, trust law. It is an interesting case of the English habit of using words to mean their opposite (the same is done famously with schools which are called 'public' and are in reality extremely private). Property would be passed to trustees, from whom it could not be confiscated; and the land registry was made secret (as it was until 1990), inaccessible without the landowner's permission. It was a sort of offshore device, and it continues to flourish. One result was that the state simply could not interfere with private property as it did as a matter of course, on the continent and also in Scotland. This accounts for the strange shape of English roads, winding all over the place to take account of property-boundaries.

The 'early-bourgeois revolution' in England was not really bourgeois at all, and its general effect was to give the aristocracy a power that its equivalents on the continent did not have. Until the First World War, the House of Commons was predominantly aristocratic. Institutions which had been designed originally to supply the Crown with servants from lower classes

that would be loyal to it were taken over, and became preserves of the aristocracy — the 'public' schools, most obviously, but also Oxford and Cambridge Colleges which, in the eighteenth century, notoriously became playgrounds for sprigs of the nobility (the word 'snob' is plausible said to come from the s.nob. which was written in College registers to record men who were not (sine) noble). England did not get a formal Enlightenment because it was not necessary. It remained, in form, the last of the *anciens régimes*. If it needed the fruits of a formal Enlightenment, it could use the Dutch, in the later seventeenth century, and the Scots in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: these had the training and acumen to set up the banks, the industries, the updating of law, the education. The grandfather of the great Gladstone was a Scotsman who made his money from the slave trade, in Liverpool; the grandson, educated at Eton and Christ Church, Oxford, was then, perhaps with Woodrow Wilson, the best-known of the world's liberals.

For a generation or so after the Slump of the 1930's, British historians were inclined to look into the Civil War, and to agree that, then, some sort of bourgeois revolution had taken place. This is no longer much said. Instead, they look back, towards the Tudors, and back still into the Middle Ages, to find what was unique to English history. The anthropologist Alan Macfarlane made his reputation with demonstrations that whatever you think of as 'English' can be traced back even to Anglo-Saxon times, when women might manage property, eldest sons inherited the bulk of it, legal ownership was enshrined, and a single legal system, of which the Crown was the apex, prevailed. Whether this is right or wrong, it at least sets some interesting questions as to the English Middle Ages, or rather, it brings us back to the great historians of the pro-Marxist era.

The importance of agriculture cannot be overstated. What made England and Scotland stand out from the rest of modern Europe was that the rural or village share of the population was so small — eight per cent in 1900, three per cent by 1940. It was feudalism, without peasants. The contrast with Germany — still forty per cent rural or village in 1914 — let alone with France (sixty per cent) is very striking. Even with British Ireland, there was a vast contrast. In the twentieth century, small farmers or peasants, or the village-small town people who supplied them or lived off them, were, in politics and economic affairs, a very wild card indeed. Protestant farmers supplied the Nazis without about half of their voters; if Rend Sédillot is right, the revolutionary land settlement in France froze the country in a sort of permanent *carmagnole*, Balzac's 'Robespierre with twenty million heads', which allowed England, and then Germany, to overtake a France that had long been economically dominant — apart from anything else, it seems to have frozen the French population, whereas elsewhere there was

a great demographic boom. In England and (most of) Scotland, relatively few people on the land meant low food prices, a very large constituency for free trade, a well-preserved countryside, and, in the great Depression of the 1930's, a relatively easy recovery. It is the single greatest phenomenon of English history, maybe explicable in terms of the survival of Roman Law, or, if Emmanuel Todd *(L'invention de l'Europe)* is right, the peculiar nature of the English family, in which paternalism, communalism, were far less marked than elsewhere. From the absence of small, penniless noblemen to tight wars of religion, through the existence of Whigs to prevent the Establishment of Enlightened Despotism to present-day problems with the Common Agricultural Policy, there is a linking theme. For generations, Germans (and not they alone: Russians looked at English agriculture with admiring bewilderment) wondered what differentiated them from the English whom, in so many respects, they resembled. But this is not really the right question. Prussia was a north-European enlightened country, and Germany in general had developed as part of a European whole. The wrong turnings taken in German history do of course deserve explanation, but we should not ascribe them necessarily to some *Sonderweg*. That was English.