

Award of the History Prizes ‘Duke d’Arenberg’

Palais des Académies, 19th of September 2008

Dr. Thomas Weber

‘Our Friend “the Enemy”’: Elite Education in Britain and Germany before World War I’

Professor Brelot, je vous remercie sincèrement pour vos propos bienveillants sur mon ouvrage.

Je voudrais également adresser mes remerciements les plus respectueux au prince Léopold d’Arenberg, prince Henri d’Arenberg, aux autres membres de la famille ducale et aux membres du jury pour m’avoir attribué le prix d’histoire et de culture générale de cette année.

A.C. Sayce, Oxford’s professor of Assyriology, lashed out at Germany in December 1914, declaring that the Germans were “still what they were fifteen centuries ago, the barbarians who raided our ancestors and destroyed the civilization of the Roman Empire.”

His message was clear: Germans and Britons had always been different and it was because of that difference that the world was at war. Historians have long tended to agree, seeing that difference as the origin of the two world wars. Only after 1945, they tell us, was there Europeanization, as Europe had learned the lessons of the rivalries of the age of imperialism and the two world wars.

When I started researching my book, I wanted to take stock of this view and see what is left of the claimed differences that I laid out a moment ago. I decided that I would look at the two places where the future political and administrative elites of Britain and Germany were educated. The rationale of this was that if differences were visible anywhere, they should be visible there.

I knew from Barbara Tuchman’s *The Proud Tower*, her magisterial tapestry-like portrait of prewar Europe, that German students in pre-First World War Oxford had, when drunk, supposedly shot deer at Magdalen College deer park and threatened their Oxford peers “with invasion and castigation at the hands of the German Army.” But somehow this story as well as the scores of books that have insisted on the existence of fundamental differences between Germany and the West did not have the ring of truth.

Yet the deeper I dug, the more surprised I became. Almost all differences disappeared, once I rigorously had applied the same approach to both cases. If for instance, we look in both qualitative and quantitative terms for cases of philo-Semitism and anti-Semitism at both places alike, we soon realize that there is very little to choose between the German and the British case.

It is not as if no differences between Oxford and Heidelberg students had existed. For example, there were cases in which Oxford students ran away when women entered the lecture room. This would have certainly not have happened at Heidelberg. But the point here is that if we look at the big picture – if we measure militarism, nationalism, anti-Semitism, liberalization, attitudes towards women’s emancipation or Anglo-German relations, the two cases were almost identical.

Other historians have recently come to similar results. However, they have tended to say that, yes, Britain and Germany were similar in that they were both equally dark. They have painted a picture of a deeply flawed world that was in deep crisis and that was about to collapse. In short, their message is that the outbreak of the First World War and the collapse of early-20th century Europe was more or less inevitable.

It is this view that I challenge in my book. My argument is that national and militarist identities went hand in hand with European, transnational ones. Yes, of course, there was a lot of opposition to change and to liberalism, equality and liberty, but the point here is that opponents were fighting a losing battle. Reform almost always triumphed over stasis. In short, I argue that pre-war Europe was more stable than commonly argued.

You might, of course, ask why do we care about Oxford and Heidelberg and the stability of Europe on the eve of the First World War? Well, anyone who has walked the cobblestone lanes of Oxford and Heidelberg knows what magic places these two places are. And I do hope that readers of my book will find some of this magic and some enjoyment whilst reading the book. An altogether different question is if all this has anything to tell us for today? Well, this really is the same as to ask why does history matter.

The obvious answer is that history allows us to see who we are. And it is not too difficult that in transatlantic relations, as well as in any matters, it helps to know who we are if we are dealing with each other. Indeed in military invasions and nation-building projects such as in Iraq, this becomes a matter of life and death.

Yet I do think that looking at Europe on the eve of World War I has us more to offer than this. After the end of the Cold War, there had been high hopes for a world that would function very much like an extended version of the European Union. However, the world outside the EU, looks more and more like the world before 1914 to me:

The recent conflict over Georgia reminded me eerily of great power conflicts in the long 19th century. Moreover, if we look at Russia, China, the Arab world, sub-Saharan Africa, we see everywhere a conflict between two versions of modernization: one authoritarian and one liberal. It is the tension between the European-American and the Singapore model of modernization, if you will. Those tensions are not dissimilar to the ones which had existed within Europe in the decades before the First World War. So if we want to figure out into which directions these countries are moving, and how the West can influence developments in the rest of the world towards more liberalism and equality, looking at the world before 1914 has a lot to offer!

I did, by the way, realize, as I was preparing for today, that I am more connected to the Arenbergs than through the generous award of today's prize. It was one of Duke Jean-Engelbert's predecessors who conferred the title of 'town' to Breckerfeld, the place I grew up, in 1396. Moreover, the father-in-law of Duke Jean-Engelbert was the supreme commander of the First World War military unit about which I currently write my new book: the 16th Bavarian Reserve Infantry Regiment, in which Hitler fought in the Great War.

Ich habe meine Dankesworte heute Abend mit einem Dank an die Jury und die Arenbergfamilie begonnen. Ich möchte Sie schliessen mit einem Dank an diejenigen ohne die dieses Buch niemals geschrieben worden wäre und denen ich alles verdanke: Zualerst möchte ich meinem Eltern, meiner Schwester, meinem Schwager und einige meiner Freunde, die alle heute Abend hier sind, danken.

I'd also like to thank my beloved wife Sarah and her family, who are in Toronto as we speak, and last but certainly not least Professor Niall Ferguson, my doctoral supervisor and mentor whose continued inspirational support made this book possible.

Thank you!