

Book Review

Eric Kurlander.

The Price of Exclusion: Race, Nationalism and the Decline of German Liberalism 1898-1933.
New York: Berghahn Books, 2006.

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

On those occasions when members of our species quietly contemplate what it is to be human, no small number of depressing themes emerge. Since our expulsion from Eden, sometimes connected with “loss of innocence,” sometimes with “original sin,” but better understood anthropologically as the evolution of a culture capable of moral judgements and of inventing concepts of “good” and “evil,” we have had lots to think about. Any religion worth its salt can quickly dredge up a list of “dos” and “don’ts” (mostly don’ts), and any individual or group with a claim to a memory of more than a few minutes can probably come up with some thought, word or deed that merits a moment of shame.

In the larger scheme, however, the capacity for humanity to perform truly hideous, self-destructive, psychopathic, sociopathic and generally toxic acts is immense and, I sometimes think, restricted only by the limits of our technological capacities. Today, in addition to common cruelties and instances of gratuitous violence, selfishness and malicious stupidity, humanity has achieved the ability to use nuclear weapons to blast ourselves out of existence or, only slightly less dramatically, to pollute the air, land and sea to the point where ecological degradation may render extinct the bulk of plant and animal life. Apocalyptic thinking, once the domain of religion alone, is now a matter of conscious choice and purpose.

Between our personal peccadilloes and our global assaults against each other and the planet lie such retrospectively irrational episodes as our various twentieth-century genocides. And, of course, the most infamous of those is the Holocaust – the systematic attempt to eliminate people of the Jewish faith (and others) in the closing years of World War II.

Particularly in contemporary Germany, but in much of the rest of the world as well, people from school children to ancient scholars puzzle over the existential question: “How could they do it?”

Some have partial answers. Hannah Arendt famously referred to the “banality of evil.” Stanley Milgram performed famous experiments that strongly hinted that “they” (the Germans) are not of much special interest, for he demonstrated quite clearly that anyone (you, me, the person sitting across from us on the subway or passing us on the highway) could do it as easily. “It,” of course, is the act of killing another human being for no reason other than that someone in apparent authority told us to. Add some categorical hatred for religion, national origin, social class, perceived genetic flaws, gender or gender orientation and the mere banality of evil increases in kind, if not in quantity. For a while, it became fashionable for people to talk about humanity as inherently aggressive, as naked apes (which some thought might be an insult to the other apes).

The question of the Holocaust, of genocide or mass destruction of the human and non-human world is more than idle speculation, the stuff of introductory philosophy seminars or meditations in churches, synagogues, mosques and temples. The answer, elusive and ambiguous as it may be, could be of immediate practical value if we are to survive the twenty-first century, especially in light of the rough start which it and we have had.

To answer a question, however, it must be framed in a way that a meaningful answer can be given. It does little good to express our worries overly grandly (which is often the same as oversimplistically). Questions like “Why is there evil?” or “How did such otherwise sensitive and intelligent people from the land of Goethe and Beethoven do such monstrous things?” do not yield answers that can have practical effects. They cannot tell us how to detect a shift toward collective insanity or what interventions might slow the course.

By lowering our sights a little, however, we may find a more concrete diagnosis leading to a plausible therapy. First, however, we need to take a clinical history. The symptoms of the Nazi pathology can be discerned not so much in an account of the rise of the National Socialist ideology, but in the failures of what may be construed as a sort of political immune system. Viruses are ever present. Keynes’ famous “madmen in authority” are always eagerly awaiting the opportunity to guide us toward some particular hell. Generally speaking, however, our social institutions are not amenable to capture by the worst of us. Stable democratic polities are able to isolate, marginalize or eliminate them. What then failed, so that this virulent disease went aggressive? What was wrong with Germany that could be brought under control only at the cost of tens of millions of lives and a good part of humanity’s self-image as a rational, compassionate animal?

Two issues immediately arise, and both are explicitly political: one is the ideology of liberalism; the other is the governmental arrangement known as democracy. Both were elements in (and consequences of) the European Enlightenment. Both were present in Germany at the turn of the previous century. Both failed to stop the horror.

In *The Price of Exclusion*, Eric Kurlander explores the circumstances that led to the successful rise of Adolph Hitler. To date, most explanations of the process have focused on the political culture of Germany in which the old aristocratic Junker class had not gone quietly into its own good night, and the tender tendrils of liberalism were not yet strong enough to stand the fierce nationalistic forces unleashed in the wake of World War I. Much blame is placed at the feet of the Allied negotiators, who insisted upon the humiliation of the German state as they took their revenge in the Treaty of Versailles. In addition, some portion of culpability is assigned to the radical left – mainly Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Liebknecht and the Spartacists. It is often held that in a Germany torn between the extreme left and the extreme right, the centre could not and did not hold. It should be remembered, however, that the main leaders of the left had already been killed on 15 January, 1919, fourteen years before Hitler’s ascendancy and early in the year that more than half of the German voters cast their ballots for “liberal” political parties.

More concretely, attention is paid to the economic devastation that accompanied national humiliation. Unemployment and hyperinflation, so the story goes, demanded a scapegoat; and Jews, communists or, better, communist-Jews (real or imagined) fitted the bill. Circumstances and events, we are told, combined to doom liberalism, a belief in democracy and human rights and provoke what Kurlander calls Germany's "abject capitulation to a racialist (*völkisch*) worldview." It is a little too easy.

Eric Kurlander places ideas ahead of circumstances and events. He takes *Blut und Boden* seriously. He is prepared for *Sturm und Drang*. He can sense young university students awaiting the "Black Forest philosopher" Martin Heidegger, now dallying with his Jewish student Hannah Arendt. He locates the failure of liberalism in its ineffective articulation of its commitment to universal values, and the compromises it made early on with nationalist liberals. An ideology divided against itself – part committed to universal values in accord with individual human rights, and part devoted to individual liberty within an ideology of *völkisch*-nationalism – was foredoomed.

Kurlander takes us through three different politico-geographic regions in Germany. He assesses the nature and durability of liberalism in Schleswig-Holstein (where the pressure of the depression combined with the particularistic nationalist liberalism of the German Democratic Party and led to the perception that liberal free-market economics were obsolete, so that even "progressives" drifted (or sometimes stampeded) to the Nazis. He explains in some detail the debates within liberalism within the parties in which, incidentally, the universalists commonly prevailed but at the cost of losing voters. He also explores policy issues from German colonialism to immigration in an effort to establish a position on ideological cohesion and divergence within liberal politics. If there is a failure to take social history sufficiently seriously or construct a composite analysis of political institutions, interests and their pertinent influences and effects, Kurlander does a much better job in his attention to language and rhetoric.

Much of the book focuses on the symbolic domain. Kurlander studies utterances – mostly on pieces of paper from newspapers to private letters. He wants to know what went wrong with the thinking of the slim liberal majority so that they turned tail and, in surprising numbers, voted for the Nazis in 1932. He finds part of the answer in the well-publicized rift between the universalist and the nationalist factions of liberalism. Especially in the wake of World War I and the mortifying peace treaty, *völkisch* liberals openly declared primary support for the "patriotic principles that undergirded 'bourgeois liberalism' in the first place." Nationalism, they insisted, "must remain completely indifferent to democratic reforms, especially when such reforms meant the unquestioning acceptance of 'Western values.'"

It is here that I must provisionally part company with Kurlander. It is not that I question his meticulously presented account of the ideological disputes that he describes and analyzes so well, nor the regional differences that add substantively to his overall theme; rather, it is a tendency to treat ideas apart from the socio-economic interests that they represent and justify. It is a valid exercise to juxtapose different versions of liberal ideology and to detail the origin and the evolution of the factional disputes that arise. It is also a valuable historical project to link these differences to particular individuals and groups who fought for control over liberal

political parties and for support from a volatile electorate. It is, however, the inclination to present these disputes about ideas in a context that does not give full weight to the socio-economic (and, yes, the social class) interests which promoted and sought to gain from them.

Similar differences might be said to have existed in disputes between mercantile and industrial capitalists in post-confederation Canada or between “democratic republicans” and “federalists” in the post-revolutionary United States; such divisions cannot adequately be understood in the absence of a full account of the relationship of these ideas to the material circumstances that generated them.

Kurlander, of course, has a fully coherent justification for his approach. Focusing his attention for a time on the schism between *völkisch* and universalist liberals in Silesia, he says that *völkisch*-particularist xenophobic neuroses developing within Silesian liberalism cannot be explained by political economy alone. The concept of *volks-gemeinschaft* [people’s community] did incorporate the vision of a classless society, but a classless society based on German ethnic identity.” He is right to say that tribalism, nationalism and racism can appeal to both the right and the left of the political spectrum. He is also right to say that virulent forms of political ideology cannot be reduced to simple deterministic formulae. Ideas influence social relations, to be sure; but, social relations form the basis for ideas. More importantly, when political beliefs are seen as projections of psychological or mental states and collections of political ideas are classified as mental disorders or, worse, mental illnesses, then we are on very thin epistemological ice indeed.

A little over half-way through his book, Kurlander writes eloquently of the tragic collapse of liberalism in Germany during the early interwar period. He describes the situation in Silesia as being one in which “the ideological divide between Silesia’s left liberals, more universalist than most, and the Silesian middle-classes, as *völkisch* as any in Germany, was too great to bridge by a naïve return to free-market doctrine [one of the prime tenets of German – and almost any other *bourgeois* liberal philosophy].” This may be an accurate description of the situation, but I would have found the poignancy of the last desperate attempts to “bridge” the gap more forceful if it had been explained in terms of the underlying socio-economic factors. Nonetheless, when Kurlander repeats the calls for the liberal proto-Nazis to “look within themselves and recall whatever it means to be a liberal” and comments only that “no one was listening,” the lesson is stark.

For anyone who is uninterested in German or even European history, or is indifferent to political theory and political science, Kurlander’s narrative is still worth reading. It may not satisfy everyone’s appetite for an explanation rooted in political economy, though it may be convincing to those who consider that the Nazis and a goodly portion of the German population were literally “crazy.” On the other hand, it should make a connection to the tendency toward authoritarianism – with or without ethnic, religious or racial – attributes. It might even get people to ponder the words of the popular war-time Canadian cabinet minister C. G. “Chubby” Power, upon learning that his own Liberal Party had invoked the *War Measures Act* in a ham-fisted attempt to squash “Communist subversives” in the early days of the “Cold War.”

Said Power:

“If this is to be the funeral of Liberalism, I do not wish to be even an honorary pallbearer ... Some of those very people who applaud today what is going on might find that they cheered today but wept tomorrow ... I freely admit in the popular mind the government is doing the right thing. I do not controvert or deny that. I only regret.”

Well, Canadian liberalism survived the *War Measures Act* in 1946, and it did so again in 1970. More recently, Western governments have enacted anti-terrorism legislation with various levels of draconian repression of civil liberties, and it is possible that liberalism will survive all of them. After all, German liberalism has been restored in a deeper and more vigorous form than was present in the Weimar Republic.

In all these cases, however, it is important to look beneath the rhetorical surface and see what material interests were at stake. Kurlander has done an excellent job of mapping the surface. It is an excellent start.

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