

IN THIS ISSUE

Questions about the performance of democratic governance, about trust in democratic institutions and their representatives, about the system's inherent ability to self-correct and to respond to unforeseen situations are now once again being raised with particular urgency. ›Which copes better with the virus – totalitarian states or democracies?‹ was the question a reporting team from the weekly newspaper *DIE ZEIT* wanted to answer at the beginning of 2021, investigating the strategies and practices of pandemic control in Germany and China, the USA and Iran.¹ The answer certainly depends on how one weights different indicators and which time horizon one chooses for consideration. It also depends on the value one wishes to place on democratic procedures, especially in the face of acute decision-making pressure. Quite apart from the Covid pandemic, democratic systems, even those of the ›West‹ with a long tradition, are increasingly undergoing a crisis of legitimacy, are exposed to hostility, are disparaged or even violently opposed. Against this backdrop, the Gerda Henkel Foundation announced a ›Funding Programme Democracy‹ in 2019, and various Berlin research institutions opened the Cluster of Excellence ›Contestations of the Liberal Script‹ in 2020.²

Paul Nolte had to justify the necessity and the possible prospects of a global ›contemporary history of democracy‹ at some length in a 2013 essay.³ A lot has happened since then, not only in political and social science research, but also in historiography. Such studies are particularly insightful when they pick up on older models of ›contemporary history as democracy studies‹⁴ and attempt to build a bridge between political science and historical research. In this issue, for example, *Philipp Müller* asks in a more general sense about the ›ability to integrate social protest into parliamentary democracy‹ in the light of recent developments in Spanish democracy. The now common concept of populism is not sufficient to explain the erosion of the political system: ›Rather, the view that populism contributes to the decline of democracy is based on the preconditions of a phase of parliamentary party democracies, which no longer exist today.‹ With reference to the changed economic and media conditions of democratic governance since the 1980s, Müller highlights factors that are exemplified in the Spanish case, but are not limited to Spain.

1 Ulrich Bahnsen et al., *Wie alles begann*, in: *ZEIT*, 21 January 2021, pp. 15-17.

2 <<https://www.gerda-henkel-stiftung.de/en/democracy>>; <<https://www.scripts-berlin.eu>>. The Henkel Foundation supports projects including the research group led by Jürgen Martschukat ›Contested Democracy. Gender, race and sex in US-American contemporary history‹ at the University of Erfurt (from 2021).

3 Paul Nolte, *Jenseits des Westens? Überlegungen zu einer Zeitgeschichte der Demokratie*, in: *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 61 (2013), pp. 275-301.

4 Winfried Süß, *Zeitgeschichte als Demokratiewissenschaft. Karl Dietrich Bracher und das Ende der Weimarer Republik*, in: Jürgen Danyel/Jan-Holger Kirsch/Martin Sabrow (eds), *50 Klassiker der Zeitgeschichte*, Göttingen 2007, pp. 47-51.

Shortly before her death, the Hungarian philosopher Ágnes Heller (1929–2019) pointed out a central advantage of modern liberal democracies: ›One will never achieve the goal of a completely just society. However, there is a political system in which anyone can challenge the existing understanding of justice.‹⁵ Struggles over competing conceptions of justice and the changing attempts to bring about or at least promote justice run through the history of modernity and specifically through contemporary history. In this issue, *Benjamin Möckel* describes how utopias of ›fair trade‹ were given practical expression in the Federal Republic of Germany in the 1970s and 1980s, using the ›Third World Shops‹ as an example, while also including Great Britain by way of comparison. The gap between aspiration and reality, between noble goals and everyday toil, was often large, while turnover was small. Nevertheless, the early forms of ›fair trade‹ were historically significant and momentous insofar as questions were now increasingly being asked about the origin of food, clothing and other consumer products, as well as about the distribution of the proceeds.

While Möckel's article deals with ›Postcolonial Goods‹, *Andreas Eckert's* essay discusses more fundamentally what it can mean to write contemporary history ›post-colonially‹ if this is not to be merely a fashionable label. Eckert argues somewhat cautiously when he advocates ›carefully reconfiguring the order of contemporary historical knowledge‹. Opening up the hitherto dominant perspectives, he argues, also involves taking greater notice of voices of civil society activism and taking up their primarily political goals as inspiration for new research questions. The essay is intended to provide further impetus for these very fundamental debates. We would be pleased to receive manuscripts that empirically test the usefulness of postcolonial perspectives and interpretations for future issues of our journal. In the ›Sources‹ section of the current issue, *Immanuel R. Harisch* and *Eric Burton* write about collective diaries by FDJ (Free German Youth) ›friendship brigades‹ that were deployed in Cuba, Angola and elsewhere. This illustrates how the history of the GDR, with its decidedly ›anti-imperialist‹ self-image, can also be described and interpreted as part of a postcolonial constellation. Last but not least, it is revealing to note which aspects were left out of such documents.

The major discussion on postcolonialism, racism and ›postmigrant‹ perspectives has so far been less heated in Germany than in the US, but is noticeably gaining momentum in German-language historical scholarship and even more so in the politics of history. The renaming of Berlin's *Mohrenstraße* to *Anton-Wilhelm-Amo-Straße* (after an 18th-century philosopher and jurist who was born in West Africa and received his doctorate at the University of Wittenberg), which has been decided but not yet implemented, is only one of many examples of such disputes over interpretation. In general, the shaping of public space, such as the question of toppling and erecting monuments, is known to be an arena in which historians are involved as both actors and analysts. In this issue, *Stephan Scholz* looks at monuments that have been erected in German cities in recent years to draw attention to the movements of refugees,

5 Ágnes Heller, Keim Weg führt nach Utopia, in: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 19 August 2019, p. 15.

especially since 2015. Some of these are the original boats in which people fled across the Mediterranean and which have been installed as monuments in Germany on a temporary or permanent basis (the cover photo shows an example of one such temporary monument). Scholz is interested in the extent to which such forms of remembrance reflect a self-image of German society altered by experiences of migration, and he observes that some of the new monuments enter into a dialogue with earlier memorials commemorating the expulsion of Germans around 1945. Without equating these different pasts, this may give rise to multiperspectivity – which admittedly is also subject to assaillment and even assault.

In a well-received and nuanced essay from the summer of 2020 written in the context of the Covid pandemic, Stefanie Gänger and Jürgen Osterhammel suggested a ›pause for thought for global history‹, which, however, should not be understood as taking a break *from*, but rather *for* thinking. They advocate a ›critical history of ideas and imagination concerning concepts of globality‹.⁶ Twenty-five years ago, the American political scientist Samuel P. Huntington published his book *The Clash of Civilizations*, in which he presented a new interpretive framework after the end of the old global order of bloc confrontation. In his view, it was no longer political ideologies but rather cultural and religious identities that were decisive. This book is typical of a whole series of publications from the 1990s that may still seem quite close to many of us today, but which have at the same time become so ›historical‹ that a re-reading of ›concepts of globality‹ from that time is worthwhile. *Cora Schmidt-Ott* introduces Huntington's book in the ›Literature Revisited‹ section and makes it clear that it has also something to teach us about the social history and internal polarisation of the USA.

The aforementioned essay by Gänger and Osterhammel contains another observation that we explore in this issue: ›Basically, the question is how far one wants to go to meet the expectations of a non-specialist audience that expects facts and narratives, »lessons from history«, insights into the essence of millennia and always also predictions (it is no coincidence that Yuval Noah Harari, who is not very shy about the future, is the most famous historian on the planet).‹⁷ In his contribution, *Christian Geulen* explores Harari's popularity and that of ›Big History‹ in general – an interpretive framework in which contemporary history appears at most as a marginal note, but which can in turn be understood as a striking phenomenon of contemporary history, namely as a ›call for a new symbiosis between man and nature‹ (Geulen). For Harari, globalisation is inescapable, but he leaves it completely open as to how competing interests and cultural idiosyncrasies could be brought into balance globally. On this point he is in agreement with Huntington, and that should give pause for thought.

The demand for sensitivity to contemporary historical phenomena and terms must also apply to one's own editorial practice. An issue that has preoccupied many newspapers, broadcasters and not least the *Duden* editorial team for some time is the

6 Stefanie Gänger/Jürgen Osterhammel, Denkpause für Globalgeschichte, in: *Merkur* 74 (2020) issue 8, pp. 79-86, here p. 84.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 86.

question of gender-appropriate language in oral and written German. No one who uses language in a professional context can avoid taking a position on this question, and every response is in some way a statement (or at least can be perceived as such). As some readers may have noticed, we deliberately do not follow an entirely uniform line in this journal, as different variants (including the generic masculine) each have certain merits and limitations and there are different preferences among authors as well as readers. At present, no clearly dominant form has emerged in linguistic practice, and so a plurality of positions is also reflected in the German contributions we publish. A slight irritation, a little unwieldiness in the reading may well be productive. At the same time, the question of gendering can perhaps encourage us to pay closer attention to the historical constellations in which the different genders appeared as actors and the extent to which this is important in terms of content. The goal of gender-inclusive writing should therefore not result in historically incorrect statements for the sake of a particular linguistic convention; rather, its appropriateness must be examined in each case – in a way that is linguistically mindful, but also pragmatic. Whether the *Deutscher Historikertag* (Convention of German Historians), which for a long time aptly bore this title, will one day change its name – as the *Verband der Historiker und Historikerinnen Deutschlands* (Association of German Historians) did several years ago – remains to be seen.

Jan-Holger Kirsch for the editorial team