Why is there no comprehensive education in Germany?  
A historical explanation

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This article investigates why there is no comprehensive education in Germany in contrast to most other European countries where comprehensive education in various forms was introduced, especially after the Second World War. The article will proceed by assessing established assumptions of this German peculiarity and put forward a new comparative theory of why Germany maintained a selective, tripartite system.

Keywords: comprehensive; comparative; historical; secondary education

Introduction

Germany is one of a small number of German-speaking countries (and countries proximate to Germany), including Austria, Switzerland and Holland, that, in stark contrast to most other European countries, has not introduced comprehensive education. In the wake of the Second World War immense effort was made outside Germany to replace the old, divided secondary school systems with comprehensive systems. Increased attention to the obstacles that these divided school systems caused for the enhancement of social equality in the society resulted in efforts at integrating these systems, especially the lower secondary phase, into common schools in order to include (almost) all students regardless of social class background. Contrary to this development, the selective, tripartite system, comprising the Gymnasium, Realschule and Hauptschule, was maintained throughout most of Germany.

Why Germany failed to integrate its tripartite school system on comprehensive lines is a question that educational historians both inside and outside Germany have grappled with for some time. One explanation that has been suggested implies that this is due to the survival of the classically oriented secondary school, the Gymnasium. The Gymnasium was successfully protected by the powerful educated elite, the Bildungsbürgertum, from being encroached upon by the masses and hence prevented from being integrated with other school types.1 Another explanation stresses the popularity of the

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secondary technical school, the Realschule, which was attended primarily by children from the industrial bourgeoisie and the upper strata of the skilled working class. The strong link between the secondary technical school, vocational training programmes and the labour market formed an independent ‘system’ with its own distinct educational tradition that seemed impossible to merge with the Gymnasium tradition.\(^2\) Also the debilitating nature of the federal system of the postwar period has been suggested as a reason why comprehensive education did not take root in Germany.\(^3\) Other suggestions have also been put forward, such as the negative association with the socialist polytechnic school system of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) that prompted West Germany to hold on to its own conservative tradition; and the role of parental choice and religious controversies.\(^4\) However, it is the three first-mentioned explanations that have been most frequently referred to in the historiography of German education as main factors causing the tripartite system to persist.

Even though these explanations have contributed considerably to the understanding of this German peculiarity, they tend to be nationally oriented in scope since comparative analysis has largely been excluded. When a comparative approach occasionally has been adopted, it has been applied in a rather ad hoc fashion, thus failing to provide a systematic analysis.\(^5\) The explanations have not been made subject to systematic testing on contrasting countries in order to pin down comparatively the most valid contributory factors of the absence of comprehensive education in Germany. The aim of this article is therefore to discuss problems of the above-mentioned explanations by suggesting factors which are tested on countries that have successfully introduced comprehensive education, as for example in England, France and the Scandinavian countries, that can contribute toward a comparative explanation of this German peculiarity. In particular, Scandinavia is drawn on as Denmark, Norway and Sweden were most successful in Europe in introducing comprehensive education. This approach to comparative research is derived from the comparative social sciences, whose overall aim it is to develop causal explanations of large-scale social outcomes.\(^6\)


\(^{4}\)Hahn, *Education and Society in Germany*.


whereas Germany maintained its education system more or less as it was laid out in the last part of the nineteenth century. Initiatives were taken indeed to reorganise the latter system comprehensively, but these failed almost completely. Major social upheavals that transformed German society, such as the transfer from the Empire to the Republic, National Socialism or the Unification of Germany, seem hardly to have had any impact on the structural development of the education system.\(^7\)

The tripartite school system that was consolidated towards the end of the nineteenth century comprised the elitist, classical Gymnasium, with historical roots in the Middle Ages, and two secondary technical schools, the Realschule and the Oberrealschule respectively. The latter two schools offered, in contrast to the Gymnasium, a modern curriculum primarily for the children of the nascent industrial bourgeoisie and upper strata of the skilled working class, but the Realschule was more advanced in its academic requirements than the Oberrealschule. Both state and private preparatory schools fed into these three secondary schools, whereas the state elementary schools were separated from the secondary schools by enrolling children from the lower classes for rudimentary learning.

This divided, class-based education system, which was by no means unusual in nineteenth-century Europe, was carried forward to the Weimar Republic. The only achievement during the interwar period in regard to the structural development of the education system was the making of the state elementary school as foundation of the secondary schools. Even though the preparatory schools were gradually phased out, they still existed well into the 1930s and thus upheld the divided school system. During the period of restoration in the wake of the Second World War, the Weimar tripartite education system was reinstituted throughout the newly constructed Länder. In the 1960s and 1970s, at the very height of the introduction of comprehensive education elsewhere in Europe, political attempts were made in Germany too so as to integrate the tripartite school system – but with hardly any success. The only accomplishment in this respect was the introduction of the so-called Orientierungsstufe which was a kind of ‘orientation stage’ at grades five and six in order to postpone selection of students for a couple of years. Also the so-called Gesamtschulen were introduced as an attempt to create comprehensive education, but these schools did not function as the word indicates (common school), but as a fourth option alongside the three secondary schools. After the unification of Germany in 1990, the former GDR Länder abandoned their comprehensive polytechnic education system in favour of the former Western German divided system. In spite of variations in the school system between the Länder, the system is throughout most of Germany a selective, tripartite system where children are allocated to schools on the basis of academic ability. In recent years an intense debate, mainly propelled by the PISA results concerning the academic and social effects of the divided system, has taken place, but the selective, tripartite system still survives.

The Gymnasium tradition

In the historiography of German education, one of the most important explanations for the persistence of the tripartite school system is linked to the historical role of the

The Gymnasium did not become part of a comprehensive school system, as it was argued, because it was able to maintain itself as a separate, elitist school. The Gymnasium was successfully defended by the politically well-connected, educated elite, the Bildungsbürgertum, who claimed its superiority of learning for the privileged few. Had the elite been willing to relax the classical curriculum in favour of modern subjects with a view to enrolling students from the lower strata of society, an important step would have been taken toward creating a comprehensive school system. However, even though classical learning was toned down to some degree towards the end of the nineteenth century, it was not, nevertheless, sufficient to make the Gymnasium the main school for secondary education. On the contrary, the educated elite continued to lobby successfully for the pivotal role of classical learning in the Gymnasium, which should be taught to a select group of pupils at the youngest age possible. Thus the majority of pupils were excluded from the Gymnasium. When the need for secondary education was felt by the nascent industrial bourgeoisie, it was provided in separate secondary technical schools with a modern curriculum.

This argument for the exclusive role of the Gymnasium is compelling, especially when seen in the light of the powerful role that the educated elite were able to obtain in the German society. The intense monarchical state building, and the strong bureaucratisation of the German states, especially in Prussia, had sustained a substantial educated elite, consisting of, among others, officials, priests, university professors and secondary school teachers. These played an immensely influential role in the political mobilisation of Germany in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The educated elite were united by their classical ideal of Bildung, which entailed humanistic character building rather than instrumental ideas of learning for economic life, and a political agenda, which was formed in vehement opposition to the German 1848 revolution, the Franco-Prussian war of 1871, French-inspired socialism and British economic liberalism, known as ‘Manchesterism’. By renouncing anything modern or of foreign origin, they formed a bulwark against modernisation of the society, including the principle of democracy. The educated elite revived this reactionary attitude with even greater passion in the Weimar republic. The loss of the old Empire symbolised by the Hohenzollern monarchy, to which they felt they belonged, made them extremely hostile towards the new republic as a democratic constitution when a system of political parties was introduced. They saw this social transformation, according to Ringer, as a way in which ‘the masses intended to capture their institutions of higher learning, to disrupt their internal organization, to tear down their standards of excellence, to make them instruments of social leveling, and to force them to abandon their own learned traditions in favor of a narrowly practical type of modern education’. It was this conservative outlook that made the educated elite extremely reluctant to democratise the Gymnasium. Their attempt at making the principle of Bildung the core of education prevented them from viewing the secondary school as a part of the wider society and thus as a vehicle for democratisation. The educated elite were able

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9Ringer, The Decline of the German Mandarins; Hahn, Education and Society in Germany.

10Ringer, The Decline of the German Mandarins, 80.
to oppose, through their power – which was expressed in its association with conservative-dominated governments and the state administration – any democratic reform of education even during the short-lived social democratic coalition governments in the interwar period. As a result of its reactionary attitude, Ringer continues, ‘there was no really thorough re-codification of German educational legislation during the Weimar Republic’.11

During the postwar period, the conservative power of the elite was still manifest and it ensured that the education system was re-established according to the system of the Weimar Republic. A movement of social democrats, reform educationists and teachers advocating for comprehensive education emerged, but even though the movement gained some momentum in the German society it was not sufficient to break the monopoly of conservative power in education. On the contrary, in fact, the secondary school re-emerged with an even stronger focus on the classical subjects. It was, according to Hahn, even ‘more concerned with the pursuit of its “humanist” tradition than with democratic values, thereby favoring the traditional Bildungsbürgertum, whilst parents, frequently under the influence of the churches, were intent on the restoration of an anti-democratic, conservative system which had previously hindered progress under the Weimar republic’.12

However, this class-based explanation runs into problems when, for example, the case of the English upper class is taken into account. This class, like its counterpart in Germany, was very powerful socially and politically, and was able to sustain its power throughout the nineteenth century, culminating in the mid-Victorian period from 1850 to 1868, even as the greatest noble power in Europe.13 Also they were capable of maintaining the secondary schools, both the private public schools and grammar schools, as elite institutions; yet comprehensive education was eventually introduced in England anyway. The French, Italian and Swedish elites, for example, were also able to protect their secondary schools from the masses, but still comprehensive education in various forms was introduced, as in England. Sweden is a particularly good example of this. Having had a politically rather powerful bourgeoisie in the late nineteenth century and, though in decline, during the interwar period, the secondary school was thus maintained in its original form, safeguarded from radical influences. However, this school became gradually included in a nationwide comprehensive education system, which today is one of the most radical systems in Europe. Even though the German educated elite certainly constitutes a necessary factor in a comparative explanation of the persistence of German tripartite school system, it cannot, nevertheless, be regarded as a sufficient factor since the countries mentioned could also muster powerful elites, but had their divided education systems reorganised on comprehensive lines anyway.

The Realschule tradition

Another explanation for why comprehensive education was not established in Germany is related to the role of the secondary technical school. The comparative

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11Ibid, 71.
12Hahn, *Education and Society in Germany*, 93.
educationalists Hubert Ertl and David Phillips\textsuperscript{14} have argued that it was the very success of the Realschule that prevented politicians from integrating the Gymnasium and the Realschule together into a comprehensive system. It is true that the Realschule became very popular from the end of the nineteenth century as it fulfilled an increasing demand to educate young people for vocational occupations. The industrialisation process had produced a growing class of industrialists, manufacturers and entrepreneurs, who increasingly found the classical education provided in the Gymnasium irrelevant for their children’s occupational future. As Ertl and Phillips posit, the Realschule was maintained because it had, to a certain extent, a compensatory effect concerning the social selectivity of the divided system. Only a smaller upper class used the Gymnasium while the growing middle class found the Realschule with its modern curriculum a better alternative.\textsuperscript{15} Moreover, as it was successful in absorbing new generations of students from the 1960s, the Realschule became even more of an obstacle in making it part of a comprehensive system. The two experts on comprehensive education, Caroline Benn and Clyde Chitty, assert that comprehensive education did not take root in West Germany because ‘popular opposition to the divided system of “high road and low road” did not materialize as it did elsewhere [and] because Germany’s vocational and technical education offered a rigorous and well developed alternative path to advancement’.\textsuperscript{16}

This explanation is certainly compelling too; however, because of their lack of a comparative focus, Benn and Chitty, as well as Ertl and Phillips, ignore the fact that secondary technical schools were also popular in countries outside Germany, which, interestingly, managed to introduce comprehensive education regardless of this. In the Scandinavian countries, for example, secondary technical schools were, as in Germany, established primarily in the late nineteenth century and became very popular too for the growing industrial bourgeoisie who saw this school as better suited to their educational needs than the education the classical secondary school could provide. In spite of their growing popularity, the secondary technical schools were abolished during the 1960s and 1970s anyway in order to reorganise the school systems entirely on the basis of the comprehensive education principle. This development thus fundamentally challenges the argument put forward by the above-mentioned scholars.

The federal system

The debilitating nature of the federal system has also been suggested as a reason why comprehensive education could not be established in Germany. The federal system was organised by the Western Allies after the Second World War in order to prevent a re-emergence of a powerful German state. The Basic Law, which was approved by the Land parliaments in 1949, instituted an extensive federal structure based on a strict separation of powers. Each Land thus assumed exclusive jurisdiction over policy areas, including education, and functioned autonomously through its own financial means. Education was placed under the control of the Länder by the Allies to avoid the reappearance of totalitarian nationalism by promoting re-education of the

\textsuperscript{14}Ertl and Phillips, ‘The Enduring Nature of the Tripartite System’.

\textsuperscript{15}Ibid, 399.

Germans. According to Hahn, this federal nature of education ‘suggests that its constitutional framework was more of a bane than a blessing, in that it was instrumental in hindering the impetus towards reform and that the individual committees charged with co-coordinating or modernizing the system have been – variously – unsuccessful in the implementation of fundamental reforms’. Likewise, Ertl and Phillips have pointed to the federal system as a cause of the absence of comprehensive education. They state that the establishment of the Standing Conference of Education Ministers (Kultusministerkonferenz), KMK, whose task it was to coordinate education policy between the individual Länder, has resulted in a complex decision-making process which tends to underpin the status quo.

It is certainly true that the federal system with its various layers of legislation and bureaucracy – dubbed the durchorganisierte Gesellschaft – delays and complicates the decision-making process, which results in difficulties in reaching consensus on a new school structure. However, as Erk has demonstrated in his study on German federalism and its implications for education, federalism, in fact, gradually assumed unitary characteristics, which challenges the argument regarding the debilitating nature of federalism in education. Many public policies were centralised despite exclusive provincial jurisdiction by an interlocking system of functional federalism based on cooperation between levels of governments and ad hoc committees. Cooperation among the Länder eventually led to the involvement of federal government in education, which transformed sub-state educational policy into a national one culminating with the establishment of a federal Ministry of Education in 1969. This trend toward centralisation even led some observers to suggest Germany as a ‘unitary federal state’. Educational decentralisation was ultimately replaced by a nationwide educational system, which gradually developed through either collective Länder collaboration or Bund-Länder cooperation. According to Erk, the ‘cooperation and coordination carried out through KMK has allowed a level of standardization in education policy often associated with unitary political systems’.

Ertl and Phillips and Hahn seem therefore in the light of Erk’s conclusions to underestimate the fact that the unifying process also tended to reduce the federal conflicts rather than just enhancing them. Moreover, in their quest to establish federalism as a key factor, Ertl and Philips in particular underplay considerably the political conflicts within various decision-making bodies, including that of KMK, as a possible contributory cause. As will be argued below, it was political conflicts rather than federalism that account for the absence of comprehensive education in Germany. Political actors as well as educators and academics were on the whole supportive of the nationalisation of education policy, but they differed immensely over the content. Representatives of the CDU, for example, advocated for the tripartite education system that students should be selected to on the basis of grades, while the SPD objected to it and wished instead to create non-selective secondary education.

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18 Hahn, Education and Society in Germany, 117.
21 Ibid, 299–313.
22 K. Hesse, Der unitarische Bundesstaat (Karlsruhe: C.F. Müller, 1962).
A further challenge to Ertl and Phillips’s argument is that an explanation can hardly be found in factors that simply happen to appear at the same time as the greatest obstacles to introducing comprehensive education in Germany occurred. Rather, interrelated historical factors prior to this that prepared or laid out the path for the particular organisation of the German education system seem a more profound way of developing an explanation. In order to search for such historical factors it is essential to look at factors that have been suggested as accountable for the successful introduction of comprehensive education in countries outside Germany. Providing that these factors are absent or weak in the German case, it is possible to develop a comparative explanation of why comprehensive education was not able to develop in Germany.

Political liberalism

Scandinavia, where comprehensive education was introduced with particular success, therefore presents an excellent case to investigate. And since comprehensive education here began to develop in the latter part of the nineteenth century – at a much earlier time than elsewhere in Europe – it should be all the more interesting to see why this was the case. Comprehensive education in Denmark, Norway and Sweden gradually emerged after the successful breaking down of the parallel system of education. This occurred through the introduction of a middle school – in Norway in 1869, Denmark in 1903 and Sweden in 1905 – that would link the elementary and what was now the upper secondary school in a ladder system of education. In order to create this ladder system the lower part of the nine-year secondary school was simply abolished or transformed into middle schools. This could be achieved without much difficulty since the educated elite had renounced the predominant role of the classical languages in the lower part of the secondary school as well as embracing the idea that education should also include social considerations. The next step in the development of comprehensive education was, surprisingly, the abolition of the middle school, which occurred mainly during the interwar period. Even though the middle school became rather popular as it allowed students with academic abilities, regardless of social background, to pursue secondary education, it had to give way to a seven-year comprehensive school that would be common for all. During the 1960 and 1970s, the seven-year elementary school was extended to nine years in order to prolong the duration of common schooling. Subsequently, both setting and streaming within the nine-year comprehensive school was abolished in favour of mixed-ability classes. As of today, Denmark, Norway and Sweden have what can best be described as an unselective, all-through system of education from grade one to grade nine/ten with common classes with a minimum of ability groupings.24

In contrast to Scandinavia, the German tripartite system of education was not made subject to reform that would seek integration during the nineteenth century; on the contrary, it was firmly consolidated. In 1900 a school act thus made the three secondary schools on a par with each other, giving equal access to higher education. Middle schools were indeed established, but they did not function as a bridge between the elementary school and secondary school as they did in Scandinavia. Instead they were a type of higher elementary school that catered for those parents who wished their children to obtain an education beyond what the elementary schools could provide.

Common to the Scandinavian countries was that the middle school, which was inevitable in the development of a comprehensive school system, was introduced by similar political parties: the Liberal Party. The liberal parties, which were rooted in rural farmers’ movements, were established around the 1870s as a counter-balance to the Conservatives – the party that supported and nourished the parallel system of education. The liberal parties became sufficiently powerful throughout Scandinavia to obtain governmental power at the turn of the twentieth century, and, imbued with social pathos, they used their acquired power to introduce the middle school to break down the parallel system of education with a view to creating ‘social mixing’, or, with a modern word, social cohesion.

In contrast to Scandinavia, the liberal parties in Germany failed almost completely in terms of establishing a stable form of parliamentary government until the 1950s. It therefore seems essential to explore this striking contrast in liberal power between Scandinavia and Germany in order to establish whether this fact can contribute towards the comparative explanation. For most of the period, the German liberal parties were only able to muster weak electoral support. They had occasional successful periods, one of which was in 1848 when the elections to the Frankfurt Constitutional Assembly and to parliaments in several German states revealed substantial popular support. Another period was from 1858 to 1863, when the Liberals possessed around two-thirds of the seats in the Prussian parliament. For the rest of the nineteenth century the liberal electoral support was much weaker. From 1867 to 1876 Liberals occupied just about half of the seats in the German parliament; from 1877 to 1890 Liberals would gain just a little over a third of the vote in elections to parliament. In the subsequent elections until 1912 Liberals would win less than 29 per cent of the vote.

There is a good reason to believe that had the German liberal parties achieved a similar level of power to their Scandinavian counterparts, they would also have sought integration of the school system. The ideology of early German liberalism was similar to that of Scandinavian liberalism in that it could basically be characterised as ‘social-liberal’. The type of aristocratic liberalism that played an essential role in Britain epitomised by the Whigs was hardly of any importance in Germany or in Scandinavia. Instead political liberalism developed as movements of opposition to the old, feudal society and the class-based society of industrial capitalism. The German Liberals, who were not followers of Adam Smith, regarded the capitalistic society, which was clearly evident in England and rising in Germany, as a threat to their utopia of society. They rejected firmly English ‘Manchester liberalism’ as their variety of political liberalism was not tied to economic theories. It was, as Langewiesche has demonstrated, only after the turn of the twentieth century that terms such as ‘liberal’ and ‘economic liberalism’ were linked together in German liberal ideology. The utopia that the early Liberals aspired to was the so-called klasselose Bürgergesellschaft (classless society of citizens) in which a secure livelihood could unfold without extreme differences in wealth. State intervention was therefore not rejected, as it was firmly by British Liberals, but envisioned to ensure a tolerable civil society. In order to balance

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26 Gould, The Origins of Liberal Dominance, 22.

27 Langewiesche, Liberalism in Germany, 19.
out the disparity between capital and labour, one German Liberal claimed in the 1850s, tax reform was needed to eliminate unacceptable differences in property ownership and unburden the poorer social classes. The state should play a role in providing education above all for the lower social classes and in pursuing an active social policy. Such a statement would have been difficult to find within mainstream British liberalism, which advocated placing the responsibility of education for the poor in the hands of private, voluntary bodies and the churches. The starting point for the German Liberals seems therefore quite similar to that of the Scandinavian parties, but the ability of the German Liberals to gain a political foothold was made dependent on historical circumstances that were in stark contrast to those prevailing in Scandinavia.

The failure to muster sufficiently large mass support deprived German Liberals of successes similar to those achieved by the Scandinavians. The Scandinavian Liberals were able to gain mass support from the rural farmers who formed the backbone of the social structure, but in Germany the Liberals were only able to achieve support from the urban, protestant middle class. The urban bourgeoisie in Scandinavia had in fact much more in common with Continental and British Liberals than did the farmer Liberals. It is, however, unique that the Scandinavian liberal parties were able to win support primarily from rural farmers and not the urban middle class as was most common elsewhere in Europe. The mass support the parties received from the farmers ensured them considerable power, but the different levels of power they obtained can be explained by their ability to maintain rural support. The Liberal parties were able to gain their strongest foothold in Denmark and were weakest in Norway and, especially, in Sweden, where the party in fact had hardly any significance during the late nineteenth century and was soon bypassed by the Social Democrats. The reason liberalism as a political movement was weaker in Norway and Sweden than in Denmark was mainly because it was marked by stronger conflicts – especially between urban and rural interests – which made it very difficult to function as a united political force. By contrast, the Danish liberal movement was based on a rather homogenous mass of the rural middle class that made it possible to sustain stronger political influence.

In Germany, the farmers were making themselves available to both the Liberals and the Conservatives, but a firm alliance between the Liberals and the farmers did not materialise. Instead the farmers, in contrast to Scandinavia, backed up the Conservatives. In fact, the Danish farmers had unsuccessfully sought the assistance of the Conservatives during the 1830s and early 1840s; instead they received support from the National Liberals, with whom they established a political alliance. A similar alliance was not established in Germany. Conversely, farmers were successful in gaining the support of the Conservatives, who in turn received farmers’ support because they were able to implement the Liberals’ own political programme of agrarian capitalism. Measures for commuting manorial dues, abolishing feudal privileges, eliminating tax exemptions, terminating uncompensated servile obligations and abolishing private jurisdiction were thus effectively enacted by Conservative governments in the various German states. The consequence of this was that the liberal ties to the peasants were broken down.29

28Ibid.
In the era of Empire, during which Germany was unified, universal suffrage was in place and mass political mobilisation began to develop, the Liberals faced many obstacles including competing political parties and the creation of a mass electoral base. They were not really threatened by the lower classes inasmuch as they voted for either the Socialists or the Catholics. The socialist share of the votes remained modest (3.1 per cent). If incipient socialism had been the only threat to the Liberals, parliamentary sovereignty would not have been incompatible with Bismarck’s antisocialist laws. Rather, universal suffrage was incompatible with liberal dominance because religious and regional cleavages, most important among the middle classes, prevented Liberals from establishing an adequate mass base.30

After unification in 1871, the German Liberals faced even more severe problems in creating a mass electoral base. With universal suffrage already in place, the lack of political support from the massed ranks of the rural farmers inevitably posed a serious problem. The essential dilemma for the Liberals had arisen from the old religious conflicts between Catholics and anticlerical Protestants, which was now enhanced by the inclusion of the Catholic Länder in the South in the newly unified Germany. The 1870s and 1880s saw a great surge in support for the Catholics who, in 1871, established their own party. The Catholic party’s vote had devastating consequences for the Liberals, who received support almost exclusively from the Protestant middle class. At the critical time when German politics entered a period of mass mobilisation, they were unable to expand their electoral base. The deepening of religious conflicts and the formation of the Catholic Centre Party contributed to the durability of the authoritarian regime and the continuing inability of the Liberals to gain a firm political foothold. The problem for the Liberals was that they increasingly won support almost exclusively from the Protestant middle class. However, considering that the predominantly Catholic states of the South and West were also the most tolerant and, in many ways, the most progressive, the potential for an alliance with the Liberals was apparent. In principle, it might have been possible that an alliance of Liberals and Catholics could develop. But the state-led attack, advocated by the Liberals, on the privilege of the Catholic Church, also called Kulturkampf, made this impossible. The Liberals sought through this campaign both to consolidate unification and to weaken their primary organised enemies. However, Kulturkampf, as Blackbourn puts it, ‘left a political legacy that was opposite of what Liberals wanted … it helped to consolidate political Catholicism’.31

The loss of Catholic votes had devastating consequences for the possibility of the Liberals extending their mass base at just that critical time when German politics entered a period of mass mobilisation. It was thus inevitable that the Liberals, the National Liberals and the Progressives, once the largest parties in the Reichstag, were of only marginal importance after 1881. According to Luebbert,32 it is possible that the German Liberals would have failed to establish their dominance even if they had been able to avoid the pitfalls of nationalist and religious conflicts. It is quite possible in accounting for the Liberals’ failure, as he continues to argue, to adduce other explanations, such as the powerful role of the Junkers, the skill of Bismarck at ‘playing’ on

30Luebbert, Liberalism, Fascism, or Social Democracy, 87.
32Luebbert, Liberalism, Fascism, or Social Democracy.
the conflicts within the Liberals for his own benefit, and the prestige of the monarchy, all of which have added to the understanding of the course of political liberalism. However, the experiences of other European societies suggest that the balance of probabilities would have been very much more in the Liberals’ favour if they had been able to tie the Catholic and Protestant *Mittelstände* together in a coalition.\(^33\) The only way for Liberals all over Europe to gain power in the late nineteenth century was through mass support. Without it, they were never able to succeed, and with it, they could even encounter and overcome obstacles. Moreover, liberalism’s fragmentation into many political parties also weakened its ability to assert itself in parliament and against the leadership of the Reich, but it was in particular lack of the ability to form alliances with other parties that debilitated political liberalism.

An absence of national unification would have produced more homogenous societies. The Prussian middle classes and the Prussian liberal community were distinctly more coherent than the German middle classes and liberal community. If Germany had remained divided, Liberals in Prussia would have been much more likely to impose their hegemony on Prussia. The same can be said of Liberals in other German states. Sweden and Denmark had longer national histories and higher levels of political integration than did Germany, yet Liberals in Sweden and Denmark suffered from the sort of debilitating inherited divisions that crippled Liberals in Germany. Ultimately, the way in which the cleavage became politically important is the issue. That is to say, according to Luebbert,\(^34\) whether they mainly divided the middle classes from within or divided them from the Conservatives. When the latter was the case, the cleavage actually served to reinforce the relationship between the middle classes and aided the liberal movement and hegemony. The preindustrial cleavages divided liberal communities and the middle classes and debilitated Liberals in their pursuit of parliamentary sovereignty and an adequate mass base. They thereby undermined the liberal quest for dominance.\(^35\)

The inherent weakness of liberalism no doubt had its effects on educational reform in Germany. It may have undermined the possibilities for progressive reform, although it remains an open question as to what extent the Liberal Party would have pursued more egalitarian reforms even if it had the necessary political power. In any event, it is certain that the absence of political liberalism allowed conservative politics to dominate. The Conservative Party and the Catholic Party dominated politics throughout the last part of the nineteenth century and, supported by the reactionary *Bildungsbürgertum*, were able to act as an ultraconservative bulwark against any democratic reform of education. In Prussia, four ministers of Education, Heinrich von Mühler, Adalbert Falk, Robert von Puttkamer and Gustav von Gossler, and two directors of the department of secondary education, Ludwig Wiese and Hermann Bonitz, did not pursue any major restructuring of the secondary school system. The most important events were the Prussian school conference of 1873 and the introduction of a new curriculum in 1882. The conference of 1873 was one of a series convened by Falk to assist in the preparation of a comprehensive education law, but the law was never passed. The regulations of 1882 did treat all secondary schools as part of a single system for the first time, but they neither changed the *Gymnasium* curriculum significantly nor made any

\(^{33}\) Ibid, 90.

\(^{34}\) Ibid.

\(^{35}\) Ibid, 108.
revision in the system of privilege. Hence, the Gymnasium was kept apart from other forms of secondary education and maintained as a bastion of the educated elite.

**Social democracy**

In contrast to Germany, the Scandinavian countries embarked on the further development of comprehensive education immediately after the end of the First World War. Whereas the German selective, tripartite secondary school system was carried forward into the Weimar republic, in Scandinavia political efforts were directed at abolishing the remnants of selection in the ladder system of education. Even though the middle school became very popular it was, nevertheless, raised as a concern that only academically gifted children were allowed access to this school, while the rest went into the last two top classes of the elementary school (grades six and seven). The two grades that ran in parallel to each other – the bottom classes in the middle school and the top classes in elementary school – were seen as an obstacle to improving the quality of the elementary school as well as enhancing social equality in society. This resulted in the abolishment of the middle school, which paved the way for the seven-year comprehensive school (with streaming in the top two classes), which was later extended to nine years (with mixed-ability classes). The middle school was abolished in Norway in 1920, in Sweden in 1927 and in Denmark in 1958.

One important factor that made this development possible was the political influence of social democracy. Political mobilisation of social democracy was highly successful in all of the Scandinavian countries during the interwar period. The social democratic parties took over the role from the Liberals as the ‘progressive’ parties and radicalised their school policy by seeking extensive comprehensivisation of the school system. However, it is rather peculiar that the pre-industrial rural societies of Scandinavia would produce such similar and influential social democratic parties. An important reason for this, the Danish sociologist Esping-Andersen argues, lay in political liberalism itself. The very success of the social democratic parties was their ability to weld alliances with the rural Liberal parties – for example fighting together for parliamentary sovereignty and universal suffrage – which allowed them to gain a political foothold. Had the parties relied only on support from the emerging working class, they would not have been able to obtain the mass support necessary for power as the size of the working class was relative small. This alliance with the rural Liberals, more than anything else, can explain the successful mobilisation of the social

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democrats and it was made possible because the farmers, whose political mobilisation had come early, were steeped in social-liberal values, and because the Social Democrats rejected radical socialism in favour of pursuing pragmatically political aims within the framework of democracy. In terms of education, the fundamental political beliefs of the parties were not so far apart as to render cooperation impossible. Consensus-seeking politics led to coalitions that were as broadly based across the Left and the Right as possible. It is very hard to find a piece of legislation during this period that was not a product of this unique political tradition of inclusive agreements.39

In Germany, social democracy was, in spite of a promising start, not able to dominate politics like its Scandinavian counterparts. The Social Democratic Party was founded in Gotha in 1875 by merging two earlier social democratic parties (ADAV and SDAP), and in 1890 it came to be known as the Socialdemokratische Partei Deutscherland (SPD). It was the first social democratic party in Europe to be established and served as a source of inspiration for social democratic parties throughout Europe. It was also the most dynamic force in domestic political life during the period between the Franco-Prussian war of 1870 and the First World War.40 It thus seemed probable that the SPD, with almost the full backing of the working class, would dominate the electoral landscape of the great European industrial power in the twentieth century. But this was not to be the case.

The party faced massive internal as well as external obstacles that caused it almost to disintegrate. The political mobilisation of social democracy was deeply affected by Bismarck’s suppression of socialists and trade unionists during his era as Chancellor of the second Reich from 1871 to 1890. With the passage of the Socialist Laws in 1878, measures were designed to eliminate what Bismarck believed to be a serious threat to the unity of the Reich. Its press, extra-parliamentary organisation and associated trade unions were thus forbidden, though the Social Democratic Party was allowed to stand for Reichstag elections. The Social Democratic Party thus continued to grow in parliament, but the party and its labour organisations were in fact not able to resume fully until it was legalised again in 1890. Instead of crushing the Social Democrats completely, as Bismarck had hoped, the limited concessions permitted them to overcome their period of exile and to realise the importance of organisation for the survival of its cause. During the 1880s the party had developed its covert organisation into a powerful political force able to garner around 20% of the votes.

Bismarck’s repression through the Socialist Laws and the intense dissatisfaction with Prussia’s three-class voting system, which discriminated against the socialists in the distribution of seats, forged a radicalisation of the Social Democratic Party. Drawing heavily on Bebel and Kautsky’s ideology, the party replaced the principle of Socialism with Marxism.41 The principle of Marxism thus became official in the SPD’s Erfurt programme of 1891, which made the programme even more radical than the previous Gotha programme of 1875. The SPD was by now an ostensibly revolutionary mass party with a programme based firmly on Marxist principles, which aimed

39Wiborg, Education and Social Integration.
41Hodge, The Trammels of Tradition, 6
at a democratic republic in the place of the Wilhelmine constitution and the abolition of capitalism through socialisation of Germany’s major industries.

Despite its successful organisation and the intention of turning Imperial Germany into a democracy, the SPD faced serious hindrances that it struggled to overcome. The antidemocratic constitution of the country and the coercive powers of the Prussian state placed profound limitations on the party’s ability to promote political reform with a view to adding more substantive elements of parliamentary government to the symbolic concessions of the elections. Equally, the party leadership’s lack of appreciation for how vital the institutions of Liberal-Democratic government were in carrying out its political agendas limited the party’s possible advancement. In fact, the party’s leadership went so far as to declare that there existed in bourgeois democracy nothing of inherent value to the industrial working class. Mistrust of the Liberal-Democratic government caused by this radical Marxist ideology seriously hampered the integration of the SPD into the political system of the Second Reich.42

Entering the interwar period the SPD maintained the tradition of Marxist ideology and saw its electoral strength grow, reaching 37.9 per cent of the votes in 1919. However, the party did not succeed on its own in forming a government, but became part of the so-called Weimar Coalition that led several short-lived interwar cabinets. Thus the political integration achieved by the SPD was far from what the Scandinavian Social Democratic parties were able to obtain. As stated earlier, political integration in Scandinavia was essentially made possible for two reasons: first, the Scandinavian parties remained moderate and renounced radical ideology as the basis of their politics; and second, they forged an alliance with the farmers. The SPD, in sharp contrast to its Scandinavian counterpart, maintained a radical Marxist ideology and rejected the initiation of an alliance with the farmers.

Seen in contrast to social democracy in Scandinavia, the SPD’s rejection of an alliance with the farmers thus is a crucial issue in understanding their failure to integrate politically. The party expressed a strong antipathy toward welding political alliances with the farmers in particular, especially in the years between 1923 and 1929. This drastically reduced the party’s chances to exert a major influence on politics during the only period of relative stability in the republic’s short history. The SPD never again secured a share of the votes as high as that secured in the 1919 election (37.9 per cent).43 The party did not realise the potential of gaining political strength by extending its mass base to include the farmers. The rejection of an alliance with the farmers was, surprisingly, supported by Friedrich Engels, to whom the small-scale farmers represented a retrograde class and a natural enemy of all socialism. The possibility of SPD agitation in the countryside that would have brought them a crucial measure of electoral support was simply missed. In addition, agrarian interest lobbies, such as the Bund der Landwirte, who were, since the 1890s, communicating a strong anti-labour and antisocialist message to the rural populace, also dampened the farmers’ interest in an alliance with labour.

Few political parties have failed so completely in the achievement of their ‘manifest destiny’ as the Social Democrats of the Weimar Republic. Having finally secured the establishment of parliamentary democracy after 55 years of unparalleled mass agitation and electoral progress, the most dynamic political force of the Second Reich mishandled the consolidation of the first German republic. In spite of opposition from

43Hodge, *The Trammels of Tradition*, 58.
coalition parties, the Catholic Centre Party and the Liberals, the SDP did initiate in 1920 a reform of the school system. This required that public as well as private preparatory schools for the secondary school be abolished in order to make the four-year elementary school the foundation of the secondary school system. Achievement of this goal was protracted as the preparatory schools fought for their existence and could only be phased out gradually. The broad coalition government may have been sufficiently strong to carry out further reforms of education, but the coalition parties’ education policies were so far removed from each other that it was almost impossible to make compromises. Hence, the divided secondary education system remained unaltered throughout the interwar period.

In stark contrast to the Scandinavian social democratic parties, the German SPD did not enter postwar politics with any great power. On the contrary, it was beaten so severely during three elections by Konrad Adenauer’s newly formed Christian Democratic Union (CDU) that by 1957 the chances of electoral victory were remote. The defeat of the Conservatives was in part a result of the Cold War division of the country through which territories in Saxony and Prussia, where the SPD had a traditional stronghold, were lost.

However, the primary explanation for the Party’s defeat is that the SPD was rooted in the past. The SPD did not emerge from the war as a new, ideologically reformed party, but was still rooted in the traditional version of Marxist ideology and, as a matter of course, failed to sustain large-scale, stable electoral support among the middle class. This is in stark contrast to Scandinavia where the social democratic parties were able to gain support from the middle class, especially that section of the class that was employed in the fast-growing public sector. The Scandinavian Social Democratic parties differed in their capacity to forge this new wage-earner alliance. The Norwegian party and especially the Swedish party were more successful than their Danish counterparts, for whom alliances with the Liberals continued to play a more central role. The Social Democratic parties in Norway and Sweden were much more independent of the support from Liberal parties and were therefore able to pass their own major reforms during the 1940s and 1950s. In contrast to the SPD, the Conservative Party, the CDU, was able to break with the past and became a broad-based, non-confessional, popular party of the Centre Right, intent upon ensuring individual rights in a social-market economy. As such, they attracted immense middle-class support and were able to become a potent force in German politics. It was not until the appearance of Willy Brandt that the SPD embarked on a renewal of the party’s ideology, ultimately resulting in the SPD-led governments of the 1960s and 1970s. However, the success of revisionism did not guarantee that the party would continue to stay in government. Since then, with the exception of the Schröder government in the 1990s, politics in Germany has been dominated mainly by the Conservatives. The absence of a powerful social democracy in Germany, at both the Federal and Länder levels, provides the key to understanding why the tripartite system was never reorganised on comprehensive lines. During the height of social democratic power, plans were indeed launched to integrate the three different secondary schools into a single common school. However, because of intense conservative resistance, these efforts failed completely. Social Democratic Land governments in North Rhine Westphalia, Hamburg and Hesse introduced the Gesamtschule as an additional school, but Christian Democrats, who commanded a majority in the Bundesrat throughout most of the postwar period, were in a position to block important reforms. Hence, the selective secondary tripartite system prevails to this day in Germany.
Conclusion
When seen in contrast to the Scandinavian experience, where political liberalism played an essential role in promoting early comprehensive education, it is interesting to note that political liberalism in Germany floundered. This striking contrast between Scandinavia and Germany seems therefore essential in explaining why a first attempt to break down the German tripartite system was not taken at the end of the nineteenth century. The weakness of political liberalism gave way to the dominance of conservative politics that ensured this system would persist. In Scandinavia, political liberalism was able to make a foothold strong enough to crush the conservatives and in this capacity the liberal parties reorganised the school system on egalitarian lines that later enabled the social democratic parties to continue where the liberals had left off.

The success of political liberalism in pursuing early comprehensive education, however, does not, in fact, rely entirely on the strength of its political power. Scandinavia was not unique in having relatively powerful liberal parties towards the end of the nineteenth century, as also Holland, Belgium and in particular Britain, for example, could muster even more powerful liberal parties. But the Scandinavian ones stand out since, in contrast to the aforementioned countries, they were already capable of reorganising the school systems on comprehensive lines at the turn of the twentieth century. This success does not, therefore, depend mainly on the strength of liberalism as an electoral force, but rather on the nature of its class base and on the character of its particular ideology, both of which differed significantly from liberalism elsewhere.

The Scandinavian Liberal parties were defined not by the urban middle class as they tended to be in other countries, but almost entirely by the peasantry. Unlike the abjectly subordinated peasantry in Germany, which usually acted politically as a conservative and reactionary force, the independent small and medium farmer class in Scandinavia sought above all to reject the dominance of the urban bourgeoisie and to improve its own social, cultural and political standing. In respect of education, the farmers argued against the elitist system of the bourgeoisie in order to induce democratic measures that would enhance ‘social mixing’ in society. They strove to break down the parallel system of education, and the middle school was to be the means to achieve this end. The urban bourgeoisie had, in fact, much more in common with the continental Liberals than the farmers Liberals, who were shaped more by social-liberal values. This also explains why social democracy could grow so powerful in Scandinavia.

After the Second World War, social democratic parties remained dominant in Scandinavia and were much more powerful than their counterparts in Germany. The power of the social democratic parties was still largely made possible by their alliance with the Liberals. It was this renewed alliance with the farmers more than anything else that gave Scandinavian social democracy a degree of power unmatched elsewhere. This accrued social democratic power permitted the development of the radical comprehensive school system we know today. Moreover, when the worker–farmer alliance had begun to wane as a result of a decline in the population of farmers, the social democratic parties maintained their power because they were successful in forging a new alliance with the emerging white-collar middle class.

It is the absence of a similar powerful social democracy that can explain, comparatively, why comprehensive education failed in Germany. Had the Federal Government and the majority of Länder been heavily influenced by social democracy, it is not difficult to imagine that the structural problems between the Federal and Land
ministries would have been solved and a comprehensive school system introduced. However, the SPD did not hold power for very long and educational reform had less immediate appeal to the working-class sectors to which the SPD most catered. Moreover, the SPD failed to sustain a large, stable electoral support base among the middle class. Educational reforms had already been achieved in Scandinavia in the 1950s, because large voter groups, mobilised not only by the Social Democrats but also by the agrarian and liberal parties, could ideologically accept arguments favouring reform advocating that the school system should be a vehicle for achieving greater social equality. The powerful appearance of social democracy in Scandinavia, especially after the postwar period, ensured the consolidation of comprehensive education, and the weakness thereof in Germany resulted in the persistence of the tripartite school system.

Notes on contributor
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