

Optimizing the German Workforce: Labor Administration from Bismarck to the Economic Miracle.
By David Meskill. New York and Oxford: Berghahn. 2010. 276 pp. £95.00 (hardback).

The complex relationship between private business, labour movements and state administration in Germany across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is one of the classical issues of social history, which has led not only to the production of much historiographical material but also to a good deal of methodological controversy. In this book, David Meskill returns to this crucial aspect of German history, from the vantage point of the formation of a coherent concept of human resources. He retraces the history of a German 'Skills Machine' from the early days of the Kaiserreich to the economic miracle (*Wirtschaftswunder*) of the 1960s.

The changes in social stratification after the first German unification are Meskill's starting point. With the decline of traditional artisanry, new ways of forming a skilled pool of labour for increasingly specialized industries became more important to the economy. But instead of making every attempt to stabilize a mobile workforce—the classic aim of paternalism—this became a question of 'managing the flows', and therefore of turning skill-building partly into a matter of public policy. This concept, which Meskill labels *Totalerfassung*, represents the strongest element of continuity until the early 1960s.

Forming and distributing the workforce required an active contribution by the state. Various social scientists and lobby groups took up this issue and linked it to their own economic or ideological interests. Meskill situates the varieties of possible solutions on a scale ranging from a liberal vision of self-support (*Selbsthilfe*) to a social conservative interpretation of state support (*Staatshilfe*). The 1910 law on recruitment tried to combine these two approaches, an attempt that would be radically terminated by the outbreak of World War I. It opposed new private recruitment agencies to concepts of centralized state institutions that were not yet in place. In analysing these early institutions, Meskill is primarily interested in the 'highly skilled' male worker, but not especially in new socio-professional profiles such as the growing number of employees, officials (*Beamte*) and other white-collar workers. The reader might also have liked to learn more about increasingly gendered forms of labour markets, which are not part of Meskill's inquiry.

World War I quickly dismantled ideological conflicts and turned the problem into an issue purely of distribution at a time when skilled labour was scarce. This state of things did not automatically change in the Weimar Republic, where the conflict between social division and a growing rationalization and Taylorization of production was to be crucial. An ongoing debate emerged as to whether vocational training should remain a sphere of free and individual choice or whether the needs for central planning laid new imperatives on society. This discourse became all the more important since the spheres of politics and of private business were closely related, most prominently in the case of Walther Rathenau. Here, Meskill focuses more on the political debate than on, say, structural problems or social discourses such as the increasing fears of depopulation. But he also describes how these new evolving schemes of vocational allocation were confronted with the problem of restoring confidence, both for the private business sectors and for the families seeking support in their search for adequate vocational training for their children.

These debates paved the road to the creation of a central Office of Labour Administration (*Reichsanstalt für Arbeitsvermittlung*) in 1925. Its essential goal lay in vocational counselling, in order to improve the match between economic needs and the skills available. Despite the world economic crisis, the allocation of labour remained a problem. Even if the overall number of unemployed workers was high, certain sectors still suffered from a scarcity of skilled workers.

Writing about the Nazi dictatorship, the author underlines a certain institutional continuity. Existing debates on the macroeconomic allocation of labour were reinforced, and freedom of choice was once again questioned. The economic upturn in the later 1930s led to new shortages, ushering in a shift in the perception of labour as a manageable and moveable good within the policy rationales of the totalitarian system.

A good deal of recent historiography on the political culture from Weimar to the early Federal Republic has emphasized that planning as the core instrument of policy-making constitutes one of the continuities of contemporary German history. Meskill adds a chapter to this story of continuity. He claims that despite all political or economic insecurity after the war, there was no major opposition to the reestablishment of a national office, the *Bundesanstalt für Arbeitsvermittlung*. But the author also analyses how conflictual this process was, and how much it was affected by fundamental ideological divides. Unfortunately, Meskill's analysis does not return to the multiplicity of perspectives that characterized his first chapters. Many of the important agents of postwar German politics do not appear; the dialogue between new forms of scientific approaches, and the role played by private business, are both absent.

On the whole, Meskill convincingly links recent trends in social and cultural history, and in the history of science. He analyses political concepts through the interplay of intellectual ideas, networks of agents with varying backgrounds, and social and economic practices. The benefit of his approach is threefold. He highlights the intersectional character of one of the most important institutions of the German welfare state between politics, economy and society, without imposing visions of a total primacy of any of these spheres. He brings out the continuities of these concepts across twentieth-century ruptures and transformations. And he mostly addresses the part played by private business.

Nevertheless, the author is sometimes rather quick to assess the big ideological principles of German political culture through a quite limited corps of archival material. To give one example: the question of whether the ordoliberal consensus of postwar German society really constituted 'some form of socialism', as Meskill puts it, remains unclear. Instead, planning appears to be more a supra-ideological rationale. To answer such big questions, a more profound discussion of the core literature and a larger amount of published sources would have been beneficial.

In spite of these criticisms, Meskill's enterprise is courageous, and the benefit of analysing concepts and institutional practices of vocational training and labour administration is evident. With such renewed approaches, it is worth revisiting some classic controversies of German historiography.