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Learning the Scholar's Craft

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Growing up in 1970s Phoenix was hardly an obvious starting point for a career as a historian of Modern Europe. In formal terms of American history, Arizona was one of the newest political entities of the New World, having only acquired statehood in 1912, the last territory in the contiguous United States to do so, followed by Alaska and Hawaii in 1959. The state's cultural identity oscillated between the poles of Texas and California, and loyalties to sports teams generally split along these lines, especially since the state only had one major sports franchise at the time. Phoenix was a fairly sleepy town through the 1970s, mostly serving as an overland stop on the way to the beaches of San Diego and Los Angeles, or a winter holiday destination for retiree 'snow birds' from the Midwest looking to play golf and tennis in January. Geographically and culturally, the East Coast was very far away, to say nothing of Old World Europe. Local history taught in school was provincial and colonial, pivoting on recounting the glories of the Mexican-American War (1846-1848) and the Gadsden Purchase of 1854, landgrabs trumpeted as triumphant tales of Manifest Destiny. The typical diet of national(ist) history was occasionally complemented by forays into a more open-minded "world history," usually conveyed in UNESCO-style "separate but equal" modules on Egyptian, Aztec, Greek and Roman Civilizations. I don't remember much of it, mainly because school knowledge of history was tested exclusively through tedious multiple-choice examinations. I was able to memorize facts and dates quite easily, so that meant that I did well in history courses and probably carried on with them for that reason, with not much thought devoted to it.

That said, my early life was very much shaped by European history, especially the Second World War. My mother was born in Berlin in 1942 to a Baltic German mother and Jordanian father, and spent her first few years in Pomerania and then in a refugee camp in 1945 before moving to the Hanseatic city of Lübeck with her mother in 1946. She was orphaned by the time she was ten, then eventually bundled off to Copenhagen to be looked after by her aunt, and spent her teens at various schools in the Danish capital. She met my father while he was stationed in Copenhagen with the US Navy, and he eventually brought her to New York City to get married, after which he took her to Phoenix. Our house looked very different from those of everyone else in our neighborhood, replete with Danish furniture and Scandi decorative items. We were in contact with about 20 other Danish families scattered across the city and would get together for holidays and special events, and much of the Danish community there centred on a Danish import furniture store, where my mother eventually worked. Her keen interest in objects from Denmark – as well as Scandinavian memorabilia from her childhood that often substituted for lost family photographs or letters – sparked a lifelong interest of mine in the cultural and emotional importance of everyday material things for the creation of identities of all kinds, which is most directly on display in my first book, *The Authority of Everyday Objects: A Cultural History of West German Industrial Design*.[1]

[1] Paul Betts, *The Authority of Everyday Objects: A Cultural History of West German Industrial Design* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

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By the time I was a high school senior I aspired to "go East" for college to study history, driven by the standard career prospect of attending law school after that. My paternal grandmother took me on a boat tour around the Black Sea when I was eleven, and then a week-long trip to Rome when I was 17, both of which stimulated my interest in studying Modern Europe. I headed off to Haverford College in the autumn of 1981, in part because I had two cousins and an uncle from Philadelphia who had studied there, and the strong Quaker tradition appealed to me too. Like most history majors of my generation, I was required to take the foundational course on The History of Western Civilization, a course first designed in the 1920s for returning GIs to give them a sense of what American soldiers were fighting for in the war, and what role the US should play in world affairs. By the early 1980s, the course was under intense fire, and became a battlefield of the pitched cultural wars of the day concerning race, elitism, sexism and national identity. The campus conflicts around the curriculum became national news, spearheaded by the rear-action polemics by President Ronald Reagan's Education Secretary William Bennett and conservative intellectual Allan Bloom, among others.[2] History was at the heart of these heated political debates, and it was a heady time to be studying the contested legacy of European History at the time -- Polish *Solidarność* and anti-apartheid were the campus campaigns of international justice. I took a wide variety of European, US and non-Western history courses at Haverford and Bryn Mawr, including several on African history from V.Y. Mudimbe and wrote my thesis on the Tuskegee Institute with Paul Jefferson. In those days I still planned to go to law school as the default option for most history majors. What changed things was a summer teaching internship at the Massachusetts Advanced Studies Program for select state school students, which paired me with an excellent teacher from Cambridge Rindge Latin School (Mo Randall) who led an intensive course on the history of Western drama from Aeschylus to Marlowe. That experience killed off any lingering career interest in law, and after graduating I taught high school history (European and US) for several years at a prep school outside of Hartford, Connecticut.

At that point, I was keen to pursue further study and in 1987 moved to West Berlin to learn German and prepare applications for graduate school. The manifestations of Berlin's storied Cold War history – from the foreign military presence to bullet-ridden buildings, from well-subsidised hothouse cultural institutions to regular police checkpoints – were everywhere visible. German history was also in the throes of international scandal. The Bitburg debacle - in which President Reagan accompanied Chancellor Helmut Kohl on a ceremonial visit to a German military cemetery to honor fallen German soldiers (49 of whom were members of the Waffen-SS) as part of the larger 40th anniversary commemorations of World War II, which predictably provoked international outrage at the moral equivalence drawn between Jewish and German victims of the war – had occurred only two years before. The so-called 'Historians Debate' (*Historikerstreit*) about whether the Holocaust was unique or not exploded in the West German media in the spring of 1986.[3] And little did I know that I arrived in West Berlin in such a remarkable year – in 1987 both sides of the divided city mounted huge exhibitions about the 750th anniversary of the city, albeit from rival ideological perspectives. The shows generated massive media coverage, and the duelling municipal histories were a source of constant discussion and dispute. Living that year in West Berlin, which included numerous day visits to East Berlin and two trips to Prague, directly led me to pursue a career as a historian of Modern Germany.

In 1988 I headed off to University of Chicago to pursue a MA in European Intellectual History. The history department had a long tradition as one of the most established places to study the history of ideas, and I was extremely lucky to have been taught by a star-studded team of Modern Europeanists, including Michael Geyer, Leora Auslander, John Boyer, Jan Goldstein and Moishe Postone; François Furet and Reinhart Koselleck also taught courses every autumn. At Chicago, the European history seminar series were marked occasions, boldly interdisciplinary and reflecting a fierce earnestness toward the world of ideas that I have never quite encountered anywhere else. Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida were omnipresent, with comparatively little British intellectual influence at the time. The main debates were continental skirmishes between the exponents of French post-structuralism and the champions of Frankfurt School Critical Theory

[2] For example, Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987).

[3] Charles S. Maier, *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust and German National Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988) and Richard J. Evans, *In the Shadow of Hitler: West German Historians and the Attempt to Escape from the Nazi Past* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 1989).

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over the mantle of Marxism.[4] It was also a propitious time to be studying German History, as I started by PhD just a few weeks before we all watched the dismantling of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War order unfold in real time on television. Everything suddenly felt up for grabs politically and intellectually, and there were endless prognoses about the future of Europe, and how the events of 1989 would reshape the study of the past.

I wrote my Master's Thesis on Weimar urban planning, but then shifted my focus to industrial design after 1945 given its centrality in the economic, political and cultural history of the Federal Republic. Leora Auslander was instrumental in helping to shape the project from an inchoate proposal, and Michael Geyer was an ideal supervisor and interlocutor. For my dissertation research I returned to Berlin in 1991, and spent two years there (and in Frankfurt) gathering archival material for my thesis. Berlin was now a totally changed city from what I remembered just four years before. I initially set out to do a comparative study of East and West German design culture, but unfortunately the East German archival records that I needed were closed indefinitely – reflecting the unclear status of East German archives more generally at the time. Researching a thesis on West German industrial design culture seemed pretty puzzling to most German historians I encountered in those days, not least because design history was a discipline exclusively taught in art schools. Even so, such scepticism spurred me to make a stronger case as to why the topic might be worthwhile to mainstream historians, and to try to integrate political and cultural history. After finishing the dissertation and without any history post, I taught design history at Parsons School of Art and Design in Paris, and wondered if becoming a design historian might be an easier career path. By the end of that experience, however, I was determined to return to the US and look for a job in a History Department.

I was very fortunate to land a tenure-track post at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, and stayed there for four years. This was my first experience of living in the South, and the power and presence of regional memories (including deep local knowledge of the Civil War) was very striking to me. I offered courses on the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich as many historians of Modern Germany do, but also created a course on The Revolutions of 1989 on the causes and effects of that 'annus mirabilis.' Charlotte was one of the key 'New South' cities, and reflected wider demographic changes in North Carolina. Charlotte attracted an increasing number of Northerners to campus, especially on the faculty, and students were supposedly less than sanguine about having instructors with Yankee accents teaching them about the Civil War. The student body was diverse but almost all came from one of the many Protestant denominations. In my first week on the job, while lecturing on the seventeenth century Age of Religious Wars, one student casually raised her hand and asked me why I kept referring to Catholics as Christians – scarcely a better indication that I was south of the Mason-Dixon Line. Getting to know the South was a great discovery, and I had a very congenial experience in Charlotte, not least because our two daughters were born in the city. Lyman Johnson, David Goldfield, Donna Gabaccia, Heather Thompson and John Flower were friends and good colleagues.

For family reasons my partner wished to move back to Europe, and in 2000 we moved to Brighton, England, where I started a new post at the University of Sussex. I had only spent several days in England before making the transatlantic move. The university was founded in the early 1960s by the British historian Asa Briggs, and Sussex became a pioneering force in developing Interdisciplinary Studies in the UK. History had pride of place in the new university, and while over time this humanities-centric model eventually morphed into standard departments, Sussex's strong interdisciplinarity made it a place of unusually creative scholarship. There was a large contingent of Europeans teaching across the humanities, and many European students studied at Sussex on ERASMUS educational exchanges, which gave the campus a continental flavor.

While at Sussex I finished my first book, *The Authority of Everyday Objects*, and even had an exchange year at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London thanks to an ongoing exchange program with the Art History department. I grew more interested in the communist half of Germany and began a new project on the history of private life in the German Democratic Republic, in large measure to counter the prevalent notion that Communism had done away with private life altogether in the state's jealous quest for 'totalitarian' control. To me such an argument seemed facile and untrue, and I

[4] Indicative was Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1987).

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devoted several years of research to showing how the private sphere actually thrived under communism in many ways. The book appeared in 2010 as *Within Walls: Private Life in the German Democratic Republic*, published by Oxford University Press.[5] In the meantime, I had become Co-Editor of the journal *German History* in 2003, and also co-edited several volumes related to various academic interests, such as the place of the dead in twentieth century Germany, socialist modernity and the future of Holocaust Studies.[6] The university faced some serious financial and administrative crises along the way, but Saul Dubow, Rod Kedward, Pat Thane, Beryl Williams, Uffa Jensen, Steve Burman, Trevor Burnard, Vinita Damodaran, Gerhard Wolf, Laura Marcus, Daniel Kane and J.D. Rhodes helped keep things in perspective.

In 2012 I was offered a post in the History Faculty based at St Antony's College, Oxford, which was quite a transition. I felt very fortunate to have landed at St Antony's - it was founded in 1950 as a dedicated graduate college composed of various regional study centres that often feels more like a social science thinktank than traditional Oxford college. And it looks that way too, complete with a 1970s New Brutalist dining hall – when then US Secretary of State John Kerry visited the college a few years ago for a debriefing with college fellows, he decamped to get his photos taken in front of one of the traditional old colleges in town, since it was more in keeping with expectations of what an Oxford college should look like. My task at St Antony's has been to try to carry on the legacy of my prominent Germanist predecessors Tony Nicholls and Jane Caplan, and Jane has been a good friend in helping me find my bearings.

At St Antony's I found time to return to an old idea of mine to write a trade book on Europe after 1945, with the aim of integrating Eastern and Western Europe – as well as parts of Africa – into a broad international history of the continent that reflected its changed place in the world after the war. It appeared in 2020 as *Ruin and Renewal: Civilizing Europe after the Second World War*, with separate US and British editions.[7] It was an attempt to blend cultural, social and political history, and reflected my changing approach to the study of Europe, with a strong dosage of material culture and visual sources to boot. Meanwhile, I edited several further volumes based on conferences, among them religion, science and Communism (with Steve Smith); heritage and collecting (with Corey Ross); and German history and photography (with Jennifer Evans and Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann). In the History Faculty, I am grateful to my Modern Europeanist colleagues: Patricia Clavin, David Priestland, Nick Stargardt, Steve Smith, Dan Healey, Robert Gildea, Anne Deighton, Martin Conway, Ruth Harris and Margaret MacMillan; Timothy Garton Ash, Kalypso Nicoläidis, Othon Anastasakis, Tim Vlandas and Hartmut Mayer at the European Studies Centre have been great colleagues as well.

Not surprisingly the shock Brexit secession of 2016 hijacked discussions at our European Studies Centre about the rapidly shifting relationship between Britain and Europe. It kicked off vociferous debates about the political fallout of "unsplendid isolation," often in connection with the refugee crisis caused by the Syrian Civil War. More recently, the campaigns of Black Lives Matter and, more locally, Rhodes Must Fall have directed renewed attention toward the ongoing legacy of racism and imperialism, and efforts to 'decolonise the curriculum' have justifiably put Europe and European History under intense scrutiny. Taken together, these issues have challenged Europe's (and Britain's) place in international politics and world history. To my mind this is the most uncertain era in Europe since 1989, but this time without the old trumpeted pieties of Cold War triumphalism and the sturdy scaffolding of an America-led international order. Europe is in the process of repositioning itself anew, and we will have to see how things turn out. The call to 'europeanize' European history was the

[5] Betts, *Within Walls: Private Life in the German Democratic Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[6] Alon Confino, Paul Betts and Dirk Schumann, eds., *Between Mass Death and Individual Loss: The Place of the Dead in Twentieth-Century Germany* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2008); Katherine Pence and Paul Betts, eds., *Socialist Modern: East German Everyday Culture and Politics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008); and Christian Wiese and Betts, eds., *Years of Persecution, Years of Extermination: Saul Friedländer and the Future of Holocaust Studies* (London: Continuum, 2010).

[7] Betts, *Ruin and Renewal: Civilizing Europe after World War II* (London: Profile Books, 2020).

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first step in overcoming the limitations of discrete national histories, but broader thinking is now required. Whatever European identities will develop, the rewriting of European pasts will be central to it.

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