
Marjorie Lamberti’s study of elementary school policy in Prussia between the time of German unification and World War I addresses the concerns of both historians of education and historians of modern Germany. She begins with historiographic debates around the “peculiarity” of German political development, in order to criticize interpretations that argue that the schools were simply one aspect of the state’s political crusade against socialistic and democratic tendencies, another one of the many manifestations of Germany’s peculiarly undemocratic character. Lamberti wants to broaden the discussion of schooling history to include the many parties that shaped it, and in so doing she illuminates the particular Prussian political situation and adds a degree of subtlety to our understanding of how educational institutions change and persist.

Lamberti is particularly interested in bringing religious factors into the discussion of school history—both the role of parental religious attitudes and the institutional role of church personnel in the formulation and implementation of educational policy. She argues that the overemphasis on political and material factors in existing accounts underestimates the role of religious sentiment and identity. In fact, the whole study is centred on the question of why the “anachronism” of confessionally organized schools persisted in one of the most “modern” educational systems of the late nineteenth century.

Although her research centres on policy questions, Lamberti attempts to avoid the overemphasis on state actions that often characterizes educational (and other) policy studies. She is interested in exploring the dynamics of interaction between state officials, local authorities, Church officials, teachers, and parents. She examines both the passage of legislation and its implementation. Her study is a rich and well-researched one, informative even where it does not convince entirely.

Lamberti’s answer to the puzzle of persistence of confessional schools emphasizes the cultural strength of confessional identity in Germany and a kind of tacit political and ideological alliance between Catholic and Protestant clerics determined to preserve the schools’ confessional character. This alliance is understandable only in the context of the *Kulturkampf* and its political residues. Briefly, during the 1870s, Prussian state authorities had attempted through a series of anti-Catholic measures to secure the parliamentary support of nationalist liberals holding anti-clerical views. The *Kulturkampf* seemed to liberals to be a step toward a secular school system and a more enlightened and nationally oriented citizenry.

Many liberals gave priority to nationalist and anti-clerical rather than libertarian principles in the struggle and came to see state monopoly over schooling as the only “solution” to clerical domination. The main tactic they evolved during the *Kulturkampf* era was the creation of interconfes-
sional schools, supervised by secular officials and funded by communities regardless of confession. But the *Kulturkampf* was not administered evenhandedly. Lamberti’s research into the local implementation of the *Kulturkampf* laws showed that it was enforced almost exclusively against Catholic clergy in the schools. Although many local school officials would have liked to see reforms spread to Protestant supervisors as well, state authorities largely backed away from this degree of anti-clerical zeal, which did little to forward their political aims.

The effects of the *Kulturkampf* were far-reaching. The mass dismissal of Catholic school inspectors left the Catholic clergy permanently suspicious of the state and in opposition to any state effort to tamper with the confessional character of the schools. Moreover, as liberal school officials pushed for the development of secular interconfessional schools in the era following the *Kulturkampf*, they discovered the limits of their abilities to loosen the hold of clerics over the schools. When later attempts were made to promote interconfessional schools even where Protestant populations would be affected, another source of opposition was heard from—namely, Protestant Conservatives who in fact mounted a more effective opposition to secularization because they were a party long friendly to the state. Conservatives formed a tacit alliance where it was least expected—namely with the Catholic Centre Party outsiders—in defence of the clerical control both parties wanted. Beyond this, in Lamberti’s view, the whole effort to alter the religious character of the schools was doomed to fail anyway as a misguided elitist effort that was neither practical nor supported by Catholic or Protestant parents who were attached to their confessional identities and schools.

Lamberti’s analysis of the political disputes over school administration in the post-*Kulturkampf* era centres on three factors: first, the changing place of the Catholic Centre Party in parliamentary strategy; second, the particular dynamics of confessional school struggles in the Eastern Polish-Catholic provinces of Prussia; and third, the fiscal implications of policy reforms that would reduce clerical control. In all of these discussions, Lamberti attempts to demonstrate how the persistence of confessional schools was politically overdetermined.

In a time when Liberal influence and electoral strength was waning and socialist strength was on the rise, earlier arguments in favour of popular enlightenment and the diminution of religious influence lost their appeal. Moreover, as the state sought parliamentary majorities that did not depend on the weakening Liberals, a Conservative-Centre core seemed all the more appealing. But such a strategy required the abandonment of *Kulturkampf* tactics.

In the case of the Polish-majority provinces, despite a series of aggressive measures to convert the schools to tools of “germanization,” the opposition of clerics and parents that culminated in a series of embarrassing school strikes in the first decade of the twentieth century showed the dangers
of anti-confessional measures even where there was some larger political
gain to be expected.

Finally, the fiscal implications of
school reform were unacceptable. In
brief, a switch to interconfessional
schools would have resulted in many
regions in increases of the tax burden
upon Protestants and landowners. This
precluded alternative arrange-
ments for schools in the absence of
substantial increases in state school
subsidies. This was a price too high to
pay in an era when efforts to reform tax
policy were stymied by Conservative
opposition.

In the end, Lamberti's analysis
supports many aspects of the familiar
argument about German political
development. Certainly the failure of
attempts to secularize Prussian schools
cannot be understood without refer-
ence to the increasingly desperate
search for a pro-government majority
in the face of the rising socialist threat,
and to the resistance to fiscal reform
that alternative school administration
would entail. Both of these aspects of
the story point back to previously ar-
gued connections between politics and
economic development that Lamberti
set out to correct. Even if the schools
were not simply vehicles of ruling
strategy (and there is plenty of
evidence that they were not), this study
illustrates the many aspects of those
strategies that shaped them at every
level. Nevertheless, we get in
Lamberti's research a far more
nuanced view of how political, social,
and cultural conflicts manifested
themselves in the school system, and
of the degree to which state policies
were enacted or frustrated.

The effort here to rehabilitate
religious explanation also falls some-
what short of the author's claims, even
though the research into Catholic and
Protestant religious politics is inval-
uable. The nature of the revision that
Lamberti argues is apparent in rhetori-
ical characterization of clerics and their
political allies. Catholic clergy and
Christian Conservatives are generally
described as moderate and practical
because they recognize the confes-
sional character of Germany, whereas
Liberals and Progressives are seen as
too often motivated by political con-
siderations—as if it were possible in
this era of (in Lamberti's own analysis)
religiously driven politics neatly to
separate out religious from political
motivations. Moreover, despite the
evidence presented here concerning
the ways in which religious identities
were used, altered, adapted, and
 politicized during this era, there is no
explicit recognition in the analysis of
the historical malleability of this "con-
fessional character" of Germany,
which is instead accepted as a given
rather than an historical construction.
Still, it is a mark of the richness of the
research presented here that readers
can find bases for somewhat alterna-
tive interpretations. Lamberti's book
is an important contribution to our un-
derstanding of the history of educa-
tional policy and a fine example of
how to embed that history in broad
political and cultural developments.

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