Dr. Frieder Günther (Humboldt Scholar, UNC Chapel Hill)

Ordering, Shaping, Preserving. Ideas of Radical Social Order in German Right-Wing Intellectual Debates 1920-1960

In the third seminar of the fall 2008 semester, Frieder Günther focused on the ideas of “radical social order” (radikales Ordnungsdenken), which several German right-wing intellectuals adopted in order to deal with the political ruptures of mid-twentieth century Germany, in particular the transition from Nazi Germany to the Federal Republic. Dr. Günther argued that although the political system of Germany changed fundamentally between 1920 and 1960, the ideas of “radical social order” were not characterized by any abrupt breaks but rather by a surprising continuity.

The talk traced the intellectual influence of the legal scholar Carl Schmitt on the thinking and writings of his colleagues Ernst Forsthoft and Ernst Rudolf Huber, as well as the sociologist Arnold Gehlen, all of whom pursued successful academic careers between 1920 and 1960. Most of them belonged to the so-called “wartime youth”; they were born around the turn of the century, began their academic careers in the 1920s, fought against the “system of Weimar”, and became leaders in their fields after the seizure of power by the Nazis. The thinking of these right-wing intellectuals could be considered radical because it fundamentally broke with the liberal, bourgeois tradition of the late 19th century. In essence, it strove for a holistic, homogeneous, and harmonious social structure during a time of perceived total crisis and disorder in the Weimar Republic.

Many of the right-wing intellectuals fought so vigorously against parliamentary democracy that they ultimately even embraced the populist Nazi movement. In the first years after 1933, the desired creation of order seemed to be possible in a racist and völkisch environment. By the late 1930s, however, the intellectuals realized that their idea of a prospective order could not be achieved through National Socialism. Yet this disillusionment did not cause any reconciliation with liberal democracy. After 1945, the
right-wing intellectuals distanced themselves from the new political and social structures first enforced by the occupation powers and, four years later, by the Grundgesetz, the new West German constitution. Despite a short interruption due to denazification, they once again exerted substantial influence on West German intellectual debates during the 1950s.

However, the political development of the Federal Republic in the 1950s, as well as its economic success, led most of these right-wing intellectuals to realize that the parliamentary democracy and the liberal, market economy-based social system were not dominated by chaos, but exhibited a surprising stability. Consequently, many right-wing intellectuals adapted themselves to the new conditions. Some did it earlier and some later, depending on their personal situations. Yet those who failed to revise their positions lost their influence within academia; their works were soon regarded as obsolete both in method and content.

The discussion first focused on the break of the academics with National Socialism by the later 1930s—here, the “plebeian” character of the Nazi movement seems to have been more important than ideological differences. The discussion then moved to the question of whether the postwar development differed according to academic disciplines. Dr. Günther emphasized that legal scholars were in general more able to preserve their intellectual traditions than sociologists because the social sciences were more affected by contacts with the Anglo-American world than the legal profession.

*Philipp Stelzel*

Number of Participants: 15