

Lothar Gall, Walther Rathenau. Portrait einer Epoche, München (C. H. Beck) 2009, 300 p., 51 Abb., ISBN 978-3-406-57628-7, EUR 22,90.

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Over the last few years the boom in Rathenau-studies has continued. The latest addition to the list is Lothar Gall's biography, which was published last year. Reading Gall's biography makes it understandable why Rathenau's life has remained such a popular subject. As a multi-faceted polyglot and business man, as an active and critical commentator of political events and contemporary trends and as an early victim of violent anti-Semitism, he remains a focus for study and research.

Apart from a fascination for the life of Rathenau, is there anything new to say about him? Gall has not buried himself in the archives to uncover new material or to gain new insights. Instead, he has relied on the wealth of published sources and has made good use of the recent publication of Rathenau's letters, some of which were unknown before 1991 and some of which had not been published in full in previous editions. For Gall, it is important to present Rathenau as an ambiguous representative of modernist trends in Wilhelmine Germany. For Gall modernism in the arts, in architecture, literature, politics and economics is not a simple movement towards innovation. For him the last decades before the First World War are characterised as a period in which modernist trends broke with the past and pushed for new departures without leading a clear path to the future. In his narrative Gall places Rathenau not as a leader of this new and varied dynamism but as someone who followed these new developments without identifying with them closely. Gall is guided to some extent by Robert Musil's interpretation in the latter's novel »The Man without Qualities« in which the Austrian author based his characterisation of a Dr. Arnheim on his critical assessment of Rathenau whose books he had read and whom he had also met. Musil described Arnheim/Rathenau as a »modernizer« but without inner convictions and without deep commitments.

Despite this interpretation, which is not without its problems, Gall's narrative of Rathenau's life follows a lucid and succinct path, linking his subject repeatedly to the shifts in cultural history since 1900. In the decade before, Rathenau had some conservative leanings. Therefore, it is not surprising to find Rathenau as someone admiring Prussian romanticism of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, adulating Bismarck and being critical of socialism and liberalism. According to Gall, this changed when Rathenau tried to emancipate himself from the influence of his father and his Jewish bourgeois background. Therefore, he followed a more liberal stance that deeply influenced him as a writer and as an industrial leader who was also influenced by modern developments in architecture, literature, music, theatre and painting. Rathenau's reflections on these new trends are not uncritical, but he still fits into this modernist mainstream. Gall rightly emphasizes Rathenau's elitist and individualist outlook, which separated him from, for instance, any socialist concerns. As a representative and interpreter of the new developments, he is also a trend-maker. All of this is for Gall an essential aspect of the »new

bourgeoisie« which understood itself as a »Kulturgemeinschaft«.

Gall then provides some very readable excursions into the new cultural trends in Wilhelmine Germany. Politically Gall identifies Rathenau with left-liberal tendencies although these tendencies may have been less dominant in party political terms. Gall's placement of Rathenau in the modernist camp is not a controversial new interpretation, though in the past some authors have placed Rathenau more in the conservative camp, without much justification. However, unlike several other biographers Gall spends considerable time summarizing these new trends and developments and making it clear to what extent Rathenau fitted in with these new currents.

Rathenau's attachment to the liberal camp did not lead to a political career. Gall is right when he points out that before the war Rathenau was not a member of any party networks, which could have supported him. Despite his efforts to offer his special expertise as an electro-technical industrialist, as a banker, as a liberal reformer or as a diplomatic negotiator, none of these activities resulted in any political career steps before the war. He remained an outsider in the political world. Even in the business world, he did not succeed in following in his father's footsteps and taking up his father's position as Managing Director of the AEG (German General Electric). However being frustrated in this ambition did not mean that he had no influence in the business world or lacked important contacts. He was one of the leading industrialists and bankers in Germany at the time and his many memberships of supervisory boards secured him some important influence, which he exploited for his industrial strategies. Gall's description of Rathenau's business activities does not go beyond what is already known. Therefore, we hear relatively little about of Rathenau's plans in this field and his opposition to the predominance of the steel industry. Gall is much more concerned with Rathenau's writings and his position in the currents of the time. He extends his approach into the Weimar Republic and wrote brief account of Rathenau's life in the Weimar Republic between 1918 and the summer of 1922 when the latter was assassinated as Foreign Minister by right wing, anti-Semitic young officers.

Gall successfully pictures Rathenau with all his ambiguities and contradictions as a typical representative of the modernist trends in early 20th century Germany in which these trends existed side by side with a new nationalism, conservatism and other right-wing tendencies. Rathenau actually lived at a time of great changes and hoped that the winds of modernism would blow in his direction. Gall does not only write about Rathenau but gives a portrait of the trends and tensions of the epoch. At the end of his book, Gall even interprets Rathenau as a forerunner of the bourgeois renewal in Western Germany after 1945. Because of that, he claims that the study of Rathenau's life is still very relevant today. However, there may be other reasons why the study of Rathenau has fascinated recent biographers.

Gall's narrative is well written and readable, but does not offer any substantial new insights. However, Rathenau's industrial world and his role in industry and banking are not dealt with adequately. If one bears in mind that Rathenau largely spent his life in the business world, which provided most of his substantial income, then his industrial influence and strategies before, during and after the war should have been given much more space. Apart from this reservation two critical remarks should be made

here. There are some gaps in the quoted literature. For instance there is no reference to Mathew Jefferies' book on »Imperial Culture in Germany« and to the Harald Olbrich's »Geschichte der Deutschen Kunst 1890–1918«. Further my own English version of Rathenau's diaries which was substantially revised and extended when it was published in 1985/88 under the title »Walther Rathenau. Industrialist, Banker, Intellectual, and Politician« is not mentioned at all. Finally a small point: the photograph on p. 178 does not show the *Kaiser* with Rathenau. It represents the *Kaiser* with the chancellor Bethmann Hollweg.