

The Collapse of the German Middle Class & the Power of Public Culture

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A century ago hyperinflation gave rise to modernizing values and a new German middle class, foundations for today's economic stardom. Could this history inspire American industrial renewal?

Virginia Williams ate a lot of cheap breakfast cereal, for dinner even, while growing up in Oklahoma during the Great Depression. When soles on her shoes wore through, her folks cut cardboard from a cereal box, and taped it inside to cover the holes.

In those days poor kids without shoes might avoid classes, so their families could keep up appearances. With the help of a little Scotch tape, Virginia Williams soldiered through and got her education.

To me, she was a middle-aged spinster teaching school outside Washington, DC in the late 1960s, during a time of surging prosperity the French call *les trente glorieuses*: the thirty glorious years which lasted until the end of cheap oil in the 1970s.

I loved Miss Williams. I loved her earnestness, humility, and 'attitude' telling of growing up during hard times. I knew I was sheltered, but she understood the extent of sheltering which involuntarily enveloped almost all the adolescent musicians around her. We were really spoiled, and she imagined one redemptive scenario.

What we could really use, she would say, is another Depression.

Her idea went beyond comeuppance, it would change how we saw the world. Could such an ordeal awaken us to the foundations of good fortune? Could it stimulate a practical reflex, helping us respond to challenges we'd never before imagined? Could it spur us on to a better and more sustainable future?

The answer, I suspect, is actually yes, though arguably it would have taken a steeper fall than what most Americans -- Dust Bowl-era Oklahomans excepted, perhaps -- experienced during the Dirty Thirties. But step back another decade, for an inside look at Germany as it was in the beggared years after World War I.

I think of Miss Williams each time I read Frank Alsworth Ross's [1924 paper](#) titled "The Passing of the German Middle Class". The term "middle class" was not then so broad as to include people in a skilled trade or strictly technical job, no matter their earnings. Frank Ross's middle class was the highly cultured German professional class, heritor to the legacy of Beethoven and Goethe, privileged and obligated by its status as custodian of an exalted civilization.

Ross, who was from the University of Wisconsin, lamented the impoverishment and degradation of this genteel class, as much of it was passing into history.

Germany lost the war and owed heavy reparations, plus debts from wartime borrowing. The truly rich numbered, according to Ross, no more than 100,000 families having substantial investments or business abroad, which provided income in valuable foreign currency rather than the almost worthless German mark. The rich alone were not numerous enough to sustain the cultural glories of the fatherland. In the beleaguered professional class, many abandoned the pretense of superiority and made almost unheard of compromises, the consequences of which are still felt, I believe, by the German people down to the present day.

High culture was undermined, sidelined. But what Ross thought of as the passing of the middle class turned out to be something else, for Germany today has as strong a middle class as you'll find anywhere.

Instead, what he documented was the dissolution of elements of the old highbrow middle class into what became a more inclusive and practical industrial middle class. What Germany lost in cultural pretensions it more than made up in the blossoming of another type of culture, a more egalitarian one, elevating clear-eyed pragmatism level with -- if not superior to -- artistry or tradition or the weight of upholding grand legacies and a public face. Liberating Germans from old conventions and formalities, this fresh outlook eventually ushered an enduring and widely shared prosperity, now the envy of the world.

So durable is this culture, that it survived the horrible and disgraceful adventure into Nazism, massive wartime destruction, and decades of communism in the East. More than survive, this culture helped the nation rebuild at each stage. While recovery in West Germany was swift and sure, even East Germany, while lagging the West, was the star economic performer among the Iron Curtain countries during the Cold War.

What happened in the 1920s that rocked old ways? Frank Ross, a teller of stories as good as today's "micro-histories", offers key insights. In the waning middle class a new practicality was begat in responses to pressing needs, like what to do about shoes:

I know a former high government official. One day I noticed the leather covering on his big easy chair had been removed and cheap cloth substituted. I spoke about it. He smiled apologetically. "The children needed shoes."

Nominal pay skyrocketed, as the national currency dipped close to worthless. Yet pay for skilled workers rose faster than for educated professionals. Ross explains:

In October of 1922 the mark salaries of lower government officials were sixty-nine times as high as in 1914; of middle officials, sixty-two times as high; and of higher officials, only fifty-seven times as high. Meanwhile, a bricklayer made one hundred and forty-seven times as many marks as in 1914. A skilled workman was paid more than three-quarters of the income of a principal of an elementary school or a medical officer.

People in the clutches of penury cast decorum aside, and grasped for small lifelines. Ross recorded these incidents:

The principals of the two higher schools in a small town in Northern Bavaria could not afford to buy wood for the winter, so they went into the forest with their wives, cut and hauled it themselves. One day I returned to my pension to find the lobby thronged. I asked the portier if it were a delegation of foreign visitors, for they all wore frock coats, though shabby ones. No. Two Japanese had put a want ad in the paper the night before for a German instructor who could speak English.

Actors in the legitimate theater were forced into films. "One by one the [theatrical] actors are becoming discouraged and dropping out," Ross complained. "The drama is perishing from money starvation, and so it is with music."

As practical concerns rose women flooded into the job market, while becoming less numerous among university applicants.

Inside the universities themselves came the most consequential development of all. Ross called it a "steady drift toward the engineering and technical faculties."

And what of those already with a degree?

The intellectuals are scattering into better-paid but less cultural subjects. Scientists are wrenching away from the white-collar brigade to join the blue.

He continued:

I knew a minister in Dusseldorf who joined the ranks of labor. His income amounted to little more, but he had no white shirts to launder, no books to buy, no prestige to maintain. Everywhere in Germany the shift is going on — from the professional classes, the artists, lawyers, and scientists, to the working classes, to the farms. Sometimes the shift is by stages. The philologist does translating in his spare time, and finally is employed as a translator by a business firm with foreign customers. Sometimes it is a clear break. One day the scientist is working in a laboratory, the next day is at the factory bench in overalls...

Movement toward the middle was upward, too.

Contrast the peasants. I rode from Munich to Berlin, second class, as only the very wealthy can travel in Germany today. Three peasants boarded the train at a small village just out of Munich, and with their green, second-class tickets in their hands, entered my compartment. At noon they ate their lunch — large hunks of bread, a whole ham, a long liver sausage, a dozen hard-boiled eggs, and two apples apiece.

The public's appreciation of the practical middle was ascendant. An intellectual could no longer count on instinctive respect or deference:

The perpetual uncertainty of his material existence inevitably lowers the estimation in which the public holds his professional work and intellectual achievement. His lack of confidence, his loss of pride, begets lack of confidence and lack of appreciation on the part of others. Today the scientist thinks not of the value of his contribution to learning, but of what it will bring him. And he has not much faith it will bring him anything. He reflects: "What's the use?" and his despair drives him to the factory or the farm.

But what, really, is wrong with factory and farm?

Plenty is wrong, it turns out, according to old thinking that associates productive labor with slavery and low status. Here's what Ira Howerth said in his 1924 paper on "[The Origin and Development of Productive Industry](#)":

To slavery we owe the ideas that productive laborers, as a class, are inferior, and that manual labor is degrading. In Uganda, for instance, where slavery has long prevailed, all manual labor is looked upon as derogatory to the dignity of a free man. Among the Arabs, labor is regarded as humiliating... The warlike tribes of America held the same view. In Sparta, free men were forbidden to engage in any industrial occupation. In Athens, the laborer was despised.

The journalist and architect Frederick Law Olmsted had his own ideas, after travels in the American South during the 1850s. In [The Cotton Kingdom](#), published in 1861, he wrote:

...to work industriously and steadily, especially under directions from another man, is, in the Southern tongue, to "work like a nigger;".... It is this habit [among whites] of considering themselves of a privileged class, and of disdaining something which they think beneath them that is deemed to be the chief blessing of slavery. It is...supposed to give great military advantages to those who possess it.

But to underscore the lassitude and weaknesses of whites, he added this about slavery:

It should give advantages of some sort, for its disadvantages are inexpressibly great.

In the South and other traditional societies military roles were considered manly, noble, chivalrous. At the intersection with industry was smithing: the useful processing of metals, including production and repair of firearms. So the old culture, even in slaveholding countries, encouraged productive industry in this one area. Howerth acknowledged the exception, observing that

...we find the slaveholder bestowing patience and skill upon the making of weapons and other military necessities. Hence the occupations of the armorer and the smith were early regarded as honorable professions.

It was *culture*, then, not incapacity, that seems to have discouraged American Southerners, among others, away from industry. Southerners understood responsibilities and privileges inherited at birth. Gunsmithing and blacksmithing aside, the economy was overwhelmingly agricultural, with limited upward mobility. When slaves were allowed time to work for their own account, some earned enough to buy their freedom. But there were states where freed blacks were required to leave, so as not to become role models.

In the North, craft and industrial production played a bigger part in the economy, and a more meritocratic spirit prevailed.

In the era of artisanal craftsmanship before the industrial revolution, the American economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen [noted](#) that "industry is conceived in terms of the skill, initiative, and application of the trained individual." The craftsman, Veblen continued, "draws on the resources of his own person alone [counting on] neither his ancestry nor the favour of his neighbors..." nor "inherited wealth or prerogative."

For centuries German lands had traditions of precision artisanal work. The first movable type printing in Europe was done by Germans, in the 1400s. In 1577 [German workers travelled to England](#), to help refine metal-bearing ores mined on an expedition to Baffin Island.

Industrialization was nevertheless slow to develop. Though German engineering and manufacturing are benchmarks today, it wasn't always so. In the 18th and 19th centuries, as the industrial Revolution sprouted and grew, the British -- Scots in particular -- came to be thought of as the greatest masters of engineering, and engineering-driven industries.

The Watt steam engine was developed by a Scotsman, powering much of the revolution in manufacturing and transportation. A cluster of British maritime might rose along Scotland's River Clyde, where great sailing ships were made of wood and iron, and the industry gradually transitioned to steam powered freight carriers, passenger ships, and naval vessels made from steel.

And speaking of steel, the leading industrialist of the Victorian and Progressive eras was the Scottish-born steelmaker Andrew Carnegie. Another Scotsman, Alexander Graham Bell, developed telephone technology and co-founded AT&T.

Though Britain birthed the Industrial Revolution, Carnegie and Bell made their names in a rising North America. Germany, too, eventually took large strides. According to [a paper](#) titled "Productivity comparison between Great Britain and Germany, 1855–1913" by the economist Rainer Fremdling, "British commodity output was initially higher than the German, but subsequently the German economy expanded rapidly and had overtaken the British by the eve of World War 1".

Veblen discussed culture in [his 1915 book](#), *Imperial Germany and the Industrial Revolution*, writing:

The culture spoken for will, further, include such tangible elements as technology and the exact sciences... A priori, it should apparently follow that the current work, both in science and technology, should under the German discipline show more of "thoroughness," in the sense of a close application to detail and a diligent work of routine, with results more notable for elaboration and sobriety than for bold or large innovation....

A century later we know the German economy turned out superbly well, with this emphasis on diligence and thoroughness. Yet English-speaking peoples cling as tightly as ever to belief in that most overworked idea: the economic imperative of out-of-the box thinking, leading to bold and disruptive innovation. Germany is not the only less boldly imaginative society where a competitive, Anglosphere-beating economy has long been nourished by diligence and thoroughness, specialized skills and knowledge, and incremental improvements to processes. Think of China, Japan, other East Asian countries, as well as Switzerland, the Netherlands, the Scandinavian countries, and even portions of Eastern Europe.

Mid-19th century Britain did hold some residual manufacturing partisanship. Henry Cole, an industrial designer and public official, produced industrial exhibitions in the 1840s. Queen Victoria's husband, Prince Albert, was another advocate, working with Cole to mount the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations in 1851, at a splendid "Crystal Palace" erected for the occasion in London.

The exhibition earned a large surplus, and [the royal commission](#) organizing it -- which, believe it or not, still exists to this day -- was given those surplus funds to [endow ongoing work](#) toward "increasing the means of industrial education and extending the influence of science and art upon productive industry." But the current editor of Prospect Magazine, Tom Clark, considers what followed a perfect sham, [writing this in 2019](#):

Since—at least—the Royal Commission set up by Prince Albert in 1851 [sic], the UK has fretted that it isn't matching competitors such as Germany in training the next generation in industrial know-how, and then has failed to do anything about it.

The prince's views were outside mainstream British thought, and in 1856 a book was published with the title *Prince Albert, Why Is He Unpopular?* [A review](#) in "The Spectator" answered, after summarizing less-than-consequential complaints:

The grain of truth that is in them may be nothing more than a necessary consequence of German birth and manners...simply vulgar prejudice -- mistrust of the Prince because he is "a German."

The differences likely went far beyond manners to the prince's values and ideas. Those on industry and vocational education were at odds with British public opinion, then and now.

But the lesson for us is much larger: spending big money to fund ambitious institutions and "programs" does not necessarily generate any traction at all, absent a sympathetic public culture.

So what is public culture? It amounts to values, habits, and perspectives embraced by the public at large, or significant portions of it. Among English-speaking peoples some prominent elements are individualism, a love of freedom, and – in the case of Americans, at least – an appreciation for the power of transformative ideas to create technological breakthroughs, reinvent lives, even remake society.

For Germans public culture diverges, stressing the primacy of groups -- neighbors, colleagues, family, and the state -- and valuing incremental improvements over reinvention, along with that diligence and thoroughness.

Germany and other nations successful in the competitive world economy are sustained by strong middle class cultures. The broad middle is largely accepting of hands-on executional roles in disciplines like engineering, toolmaking, robotics, technical drafting, and machine programming. While some people become entrepreneurs, the norm is to find satisfaction working as an employee, or managing an established business already held by one's family.

Their middle class cultures are suffused with satisfaction and contentment. The German word is *Gemütlichkeit*, a feeling of cozy well-being and social acceptance said to be untranslatable into English. It seems antithetical to the restlessness celebrated in origin stories of migratory settlers -- like those in the American West -- and accounts of individuals who cast off steady jobs to "strike out on their own".

Gemütlichkeit has been compared with similar concepts like the Danish *hygge* and the Dutch *gezelligheid*. The latter, [according to one source](#), is "a rather general and abstract sensation of individual well-being that one typically shares with others." It is also said to be imbued with a notion of remembering.

Before it closed, I visited the Chicago Brauhaus restaurant, in 2017. It was packed with folks seated at long, narrow tables, like those in pictures of banquets from the 1920s. Playing "Happy Birthday to You", "Take Me Home, Country Roads", and the "Chicken Dance" -- to which many people actually chicken-danced! -- the lederhosen-garbed house band fomented a lively middlebrow contentment. Though I've partied at Munich's Hofbrauhaus, this night in Chicago seems, in retrospect, as close as I might ever be to true *Gemütlichkeit*. It was pure corn, without irony or urbanity, enjoyed by people you would not expect to see dog-walking outside. They looked instead to be visitors from distant suburbs, or small towns: earnest and enthusiastic people -- lovely people -- reminiscent of studio audiences on video recordings from early television quiz shows. There is still an American middle class, but it has been shrinking for a long time, and somehow the Brauhaus clientele now looked out of place in this former German-American enclave, the modestly gentrifying neighborhood known as Lincoln Square.

The success of the German economy, among others, rests largely on competent execution in old economic sectors. Fareed Zakaria once observed that Germany excels at industries of the nineteen-teens, not those invented recently. Germany has led in the *application* of new technologies more than in their original conception. Though costs are high, it has consistent success nonetheless competing in tradable sectors, notably manufactured goods and technical services bought and sold across national boundaries and over seas. (If your business is cat grooming or closet organizing, you're not in a tradable sector, as competition is strictly local.)

The U.S. does not have the same success in the internationally tradable economy, and many Americans avoid it in career planning. The entertainment industry is a notable exception. Ardent admiration or envy falls on creative people, as well as those who are "their own boss." We're impressed by brainy ideas, from professors at Stanford and MIT, in the form of novel business models consciously geared to disrupt, as if disruption were the only way to win.

In 1973 the astronaut Michael Collins told me solar energy was a space program technology destined for civilian use. He was right, but today China dominates in the production of solar cells converting sunlight to electric power. As many Americans pined for a so-called "post-industrial" society, the Chinese people embraced manufacturing as career and calling.

During the years of American ascendancy public culture did stress execution, as when Carl Sandburg celebrated Chicago as hog butcher and tool maker. Brainy idea-mongers were the ones ridiculed. Twentieth century popular culture was replete with absent-minded professors, mad scientists, and spinners of grand theories who couldn't quite tie their own shoelaces, or ask someone on a date. We valued makers like Henry Ford, and relentless tinkerers like the Wright Brothers. In the 1950s American voters went for a man of action, General Eisenhower, far and away over the intellectual Adlai Stevenson.

By the late twentieth century few people could recall who had invented the automobile, but many knew about Henry Ford and the systems of mass production he and his employees engineered.

Our most celebrated inventor, Thomas Edison, was also a manufacturer and a tough businessman, founder of General Electric. As mentioned, the famous innovator Alexander Graham Bell co-founded AT&T. Today it's fashionable to celebrate others, brilliant visionaries like Nikola Tesla, dreamers who never built a great industrial enterprise. During most of the last century Tesla was known to geeks and scientists, but to the public at large he was pretty much a nobody, a blank stare, a line of latent letters, perhaps, on a crossword puzzle in a high class newspaper.

The success of manufacturing industry itself was proxy for national well-being. A popular mid-century slogan noted "what's good for General Motors is good for the U.S.A." Shorthand for economic health? That was the Dow Jones Industrial Average, dating from when companies in the index were all still bona fide manufacturers.

In [his 1907 book](#), *Folkways*, sociologist William Graham Sumner echoed a common attitude, writing

A man of talent, practical sense, industry, perseverance, and moral principle is worth more to society than a genius, who is not morally responsible, or not industrious.

Values have shifted. Today, native-born Americans laud brilliant visionaries and strategists, while those who industriously execute toil in the shadows. In so-called "tech" sectors many of the latter are earnest immigrants, non-immigrant foreigners on temporary visas, or simply overseas employees of contractors to which executional type work, like engineering and programming, is offloaded.

And American workers are on to our culture's demoralizing distinctions. There is now a car company named for the dreamer Tesla, started by another visionary, Elon Musk, who is far more famous. A production worker at the company's Fremont, California factory, [speaking of himself and colleagues](#) making cars there in 2018, had this lament: "Everything feels like the future but us."

In the late 19th century African-Americans kicked off a decades-long debate over vocational and technical careers in industry versus the imperative that more capable blacks hold out for traditional higher education, and preparation for careers like law, medicine, and the clergy. The lead debaters were Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Dubois, respectively.

Today no comparable figure to Washington exists, and resistance to executional roles abounds. In January, 2021 a North Carolina pastor and activist wrote this [rueful commentary](#), referring to his fellow African-Americans:

Some people are taught to work instead of think. Run instead of read. Do instead of plan.

Today, irrespective of race, the American idea of a fashionable role in manufacturing is pretty much limited to artisanal production of custom work, or small batches of high-end consumer goods. Even then, production and the abilities requisite to its execution are not stressed. The small batch artist may think of himself as an opinion leader, or might be compared to a museum curator, or noted for the discriminating taste and bold inspiration she brings to thinking up unique new products, or for her artfulness in burnishing the marketing "story" around her "brand".

Competitive manufacturing requires capable people prepared for demanding technical careers which, notwithstanding the pastor's comment, require both thinking and doing. Americans, however, often imagine factories -- small hipsterish shops aside -- as workplaces only for people with few options, like the less intelligent, or ex-convicts.

Toolmakers craft molds used to mass produce parts from plastics and other materials. Highly skilled and highly paid, they once were respected as aristocrats of the blue collar world.

Three decades ago, however, a journalist from Crain's Detroit Business noted this:

Meeting in Chicago one day in 1990, a roomful of toolmakers was asked a simple question. Who would encourage their children to follow in their own career footsteps? Among the more than 50 toolmakers present, not a single hand went up.

For decades American employers have had difficulty staffing executional roles like these. Some engineering and technical positions are filled by people from abroad. Blue collar workers, however, are not nearly as mobile as professionals are, posing special challenges for manufacturing.

Overseas machinery suppliers have told me they don't even bother to exhibit their most advanced equipment at U.S. trade shows, because factories here have few if any people capable of learning to maintain such equipment, or operate it using the advanced features. Many plants just muddle through. Anthony Weiner, the disgraced former congressman from New York, now [runs a Brooklyn factory](#) making kitchen countertops, with much of its workforce comprised of other ex-convicts, and refugees from Tibet.

The United States has run a [trade deficit each year since 1976](#), signaling a lack of competitiveness. Deficits have persisted during war and peace, high interest rates and low, under weaker and stronger dollars. The first \$100 billion dollar trade deficit was in 1984, years before NAFTA or the rise of China as a global economic power.

For decades Germany -- along with the Netherlands, Switzerland, the Scandinavian countries, South Korea, Japan, and others -- has run large and consistent trade surpluses, supplying to other countries much more than the value of imports. For Germany this is an accelerated continuation of developments from before World War I, when elements of Prussianized German culture spurred the advance of a newly unified country.

Germany fought and lost World War I, bringing on economic turmoil and mass privation. Legions of its high born took mighty tumbles. Or so they thought. At the same moment most English upper middle class families had scant interest in younger generations working in manufacturing or trade. The fashion by then was to avoid work in precisely those fields where wealth was or could be created, in favor of work where wealth is used.

Frank Ross' rare period of radical change in Germany was followed by much more. Riding a tsunami of racist and nationalist passion, and the public's deep feelings of victimhood, the Nazi party took charge and began remaking the world. Beyond military conquest and the programmed savagery of genocide, its project included downgrading the role of religion, and [enforcing economic policies](#) meant to actualize Germany's self-concept as rightful master of the entire world's economy.

What followed was huge loss of life, mass destruction, demoralization, destitution, shame, and more reparations.

In the 1980s debris from the war still cluttered the harbor in Palermo, Italy, while Germany had long since moved on. After the war the U.S. provided extensive foreign aid to Western Europe, in part to thwart the spread of communism. Then what?

In 1960, yearly [real GDP per capita](#) in West Germany was already \$473 higher than in the United Kingdom. In 1979 the gap had increased to more than \$3600, as converted to U.S. currency in 2011 by economists at the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, using purchasing power parity as the basis for their calculations.

In 1990 Germany reunified, and West Germany's economy merged with the laggard East. Still, a decade later, per capita GDP was \$2868 ahead of the UK's. In 2011 the gap had increased to just shy of \$3500.

What happened? Clearly, after the war Germans snapped back from national pathology to vital elements of their pragmatic culture, and reasserted cultural constancy itself.

The German economy has at its core thousands of family owned multi-generational mid-sized exporting companies. A good many date to the 19th or early 20th centuries, and have become strong competitors in specialized global markets for high value machinery, technical instruments, and related services. Such firms have typically grown at a measured pace, on the basis of improvements to native capabilities rather than from buying outside businesses.

Other economically successful societies likewise value constancy. Peter Hessler teaches writing at Sichuan University, after first teaching in China as a Peace Corps volunteer in the 1990s. In 2020, [he wrote](#) in *The New Yorker* about the Chinese respect for science, and then this:

Hard work is another core value, and somehow society has become more prosperous without losing its edge. Nearly a quarter century ago, I taught young people who were driven by the desire to escape poverty; these days, my middle class students seem to work at least as hard, because of the extreme competitiveness of their environment.

Hours after reading this, four women of South Asian origin passed by me on Chicago's Devon Avenue. They were obese, about forty pounds heavier than healthy. Behind them walked a man, woman, and girl, all dressed in baggy clothing and overweight, too, though not by as much. Other overweight people of South Asian stock milled about nearby.

It struck me how much their physiques resembled those of native-born Americans. Many that day were likely also native born, children and grandchildren of immigrants who began coming to Chicago in the 1970s. Until recently, overweight people on this South Asian shopping strip were uncommon, but for men within sight the new norm appeared to be a basic "Dad bod" plus another 15 pounds.

As the community Americanized it seems to have slackened, and in a generation's time was starting to look very different. In China, on the other hand, Peter Hessler observed a constancy of culture: privileged children and grandchildren of hungry people working at least as hard as their antecedents.

Germans have maintained cultural constancy even abroad, as historian Bruce Kraig has observed. In Chillicothe, Illinois, he noted many non-Germans made money bootlegging during Prohibition, then became dependent on public aid after losing old habits of self-reliance. The Germans stuck to farming and did not change their lifestyles or aspirations. Generally poor, most neighboring families on the eve of World War II were of English, Irish, African, and Scots-Irish origins. "Only people of German extraction, their way of life different from their 'English' neighbors, were more prosperous," [Kraig wrote](#). And the Germans did not even farm the most fertile land.

Dr. Kraig told me that in Belleville and Sparta, Illinois, German Protestants and German Catholics kept their communities "separate and hostile" to one another until the 1960s, a longstanding legacy of the Thirty Years War fought in the 17th century. But separate though they were, Kraig noted that "both had this work ethic that English speakers did not." He said it was imbued with "an ethos of orderliness".

In the U.S. intermarriage and other factors have watered down German constancy. Still signs can be glimpsed in our time, in Amish and Mennonite communities, and in Hutterite colonies like the one I visited 20 years ago, in South Dakota, where families who came to America soon after the Civil War still spoke English haltingly, with heavy accents. And near Chicago, astonishingly, is a pioneer farmstead largely unchanged in appearance from the 1840s, still owned by descendants of Germans who settled it during the Tyler administration, and continuously inhabited by members of this same family up until the year 2019.

So what, you may ask, do Germans and culture have to do with Miss Williams, the music teacher, and the merits of an economic depression?

In a 2017 [paper on cultural evolution](#), biologists from Vanderbilt and Stanford stressed cultural modification via a process resembling natural selection:

Human culture encompasses ideas, behaviors, and artifacts that can be learned and transmitted between individuals and can change over time (1). This process of transmission and change is reminiscent of Darwin's principle of descent with modification through natural selection, and Darwin himself drew this explicit link in the case of languages.

Natural selection drives the episodic betterment of living things. Adversity -- new predators, climate change, food and water shortages, what have you -- forces adaptations in populations of organisms that survive. This is natural selection.

If human culture evolves in similar ways, it stands to reason that adversity would force salubrious changes in culture and the human condition. But what if there's interference with the process? What happens if some combination of cleverness and fortune suppresses those natural forces of adversity which ultimately could lead to improvements in culture and human achievement?

Miss Williams may or may not have read academic journals, or Darwin. But she knew adversity -- knew it in her bones -- and likely understood, by the late 1960s, its considerable suppression as already a *fait accompli*, in our communities of unprecedented and widely shared prosperity, public safety nets, and easy second chances.

With few, if any, exceptions, her suburban baby boomer students had known nothing except this fantastic and fabulous postwar status quo. They could relax, like only the rich once could, and would feel free to blithely -- even blindly -- take almost unimaginable risks in pursuit of personal passions. To a woman from Depression-era Oklahoma, it must have felt otherworldly.

In Germany during the early 1920s, on the other hand, there was little or no interference with personal adversity, nor mitigation of harsh consequences -- possibly dire or fatal consequences -- for bad decisions or even a single innocent miscalculation. Most people struggled and worried mightily, living in destitution or the real fear of it, and the government was broke.

The recoveries and stunning economic successes of Germans since should provide inspiration for American industrial renewal. For years the United States has been a downwardly mobile country, and many who want to "Make America great again" acknowledge the trend but imagine the wrong response. Rather than blaming foreigners we must learn from their examples, from perspectives of pragmatic and adaptable immigrants in our midst, and from Germany and other countries. And what we study must include values and culture, the ultimate drivers of national success and character. We cannot rely alone on well-meaning institutions and "programs". We cannot count on wheel-spinning educational initiatives funded by our government agencies any more than the British can count on those supported by Prince Albert's Royal Commission these last 170 years, and still waiting.

America will never become Germany. Americans yet unborn will treasure freedom as we do, and feel the call of new frontiers. The United States will retain its culture of excitement and possibilities, and its attraction for the world's most innovative and creative. At the same time, and for the sake of most of the rest of us, the culture guiding our work lives can and should evolve in ways that revive competitiveness and grow the middle class. We should renew our old appreciation for the work of execution, and the acquired knowledge and skills of those who perform it.

We can, in effect, modulate the weight assigned to passion -- which really is no prerequisite for excellence, notwithstanding [Steve Jobs's dictum](#) about work and love -- and bend back to a time of more deliberative personal and educational choices, when average Americans were likelier to prepare for the future with anticipation and canniness than flinch before it in fear.

Not that fear is without its place in instigating human progress, far from it. But do we want to wait for another Great Depression?

Even then, there is no guarantee. Depending on its amplitude and the dispositions of those it inhabits, fear can also debilitate, and freeze people into *inaction*. During the Great Depression, in the dire winter of 1933, a new American President [spoke of it](#) as "nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance."

As with so many things, culture and perception matter.

German economic success was built on valuing what may seem prosaic: technical proficiency, incremental change, the easy assumption of middle class roles, and the embrace of stability and constancy. Let it nevertheless be known that one of Germany's greatest moments came in a fit and frenzy of transformative change a century ago, an upheaval whose effects on public culture were both sudden and long-lived.

This great transformation came about when members of the privileged upper middle class took decisive action, tossing aside hollowed pride and antique dignity, and broke cleanly with the past. It happened when scientists and college professors -- some of the better minds -- left behind old notions and applied themselves to practical pursuits, and to competitive industry. It happened when high school principals went into the woods with their wives to cut down trees, so the next generation would be warm.

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