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The liberal and Christian conservative tradition in Post- WW2 German political thought

The starting point of the paper is 1945 in Germany, a radical break in German politics and society. After the fall of the Nazi regime the whole ship of the state had to turn to another direction. Yet intellectual life cannot be so easily reloaded. While some of the unwanted threads continued, there were certainly new developments, often based on earlier foundations.

This paper wants to show that in intellectual life traditions have a crucial role. This is a claim which is true about Germany, after 1945, too. There remained workshops and schools, networks and discourses that the Nazi period did not compromise, whose members remained morally intact. The paper presents two such surviving traditions in academia, both of them intellectual rivals of the much more famous Frankfurt school, which itself had its prewar prehistory. The first one was less a workshop, more a style of philosophy and public discourse, which we might label as politically liberal-conservative. We shall have a look at the career of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Joachim Ritter, and their ongoing, somewhat parallel reflections on traditions within German philosophy. The second one is a Catholic conservative direction, and here the paper takes Pieper from the prewar scene, and Böckenförde, Spaemann and Benedict, as representatives of a new generation. The point to be made in that context is the relevance of the Catholic tradition in the postwar intellectual landscape. Of course, they also had to deal with critical points of the school's past, including Carl Schmitt's morally degenerated, yet enduring legacy. We shall also see that while in the post-war situation the non-Schmittian Catholic direction was intellectually strong, by now their voice is much less heard – secularism turned out to be the winner of the competition of rival ideologies.

The conclusion will once again point out the role and function of traditions in intellectual life, as proven by the German post-war situation, which was otherwise a moment of radical break with the past and the promise of a new beginning. In fact, due to the monopoly of the Frankfurt School in public discourse, the relevance of these alternative traditions is only now back on the agenda.