

BOOK REVIEW

Bessner: Democracy in Exile

Christian Dayé

christian.daye@tugraz.at

Bessner, Daniel (2018) *Democracy in Exile: Hans Speier and the Rise of the Defense Intellectual*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

312 pp.

ISBN: 9780801453038

Price: \$35,00

The book under review is a considerably revised version of a PhD dissertation at Duke University's Department of History that was successfully defended in 2013 ("The Night Watchman: Hans Speier and the Making of the American National Security State"). It relates the biography of Hans Speier (1905–1990), a German social scientist who immigrated to the United States after the Nazi seizure of power and became a widely recognized and respected policy advisor, analyst, and institution-builder in his new home. *Democracy in Exile* describes Speier's intellectual development across the variety of contexts in which he was active.

To all those interested in the history of the social science-foreign policy nexus during and after the Second World War, Speier is a figure sufficiently central to warrant interest in his biography. Born in Berlin as a single child to middle class parents, Speier studied sociology in Heidelberg, where his supervisors included Emil Lederer, Karl Mannheim, and Karl Jaspers. Upon completing his studies, he returned to Berlin, worked in various positions related to the Social Democratic Party (SPD), wrote articles for party outlets, and taught at the Hochschule für Politik, a higher education school that offered academic evening courses to members of the working class. When the political situation worsened, he accepted an offer by Alvin Johnson to join the New School for Social Research in New York City, where he became the youngest member of faculty at the "University in Exile." During the Second World War, he entered government service and rose to fame within the agencies for his abilities in analyzing Nazi propaganda, a line of research he had begun earlier together with émigré psychoanalyst Ernst Kris. After the end of the war, Hans Speier felt that he could not return to academic life. He became the inaugurating director of the Social Science Division of the RAND Corporation, a think tank with headquarters in Santa Monica, CA. Soon after its opening, RAND became a central player in the science-foreign policy networks that created the strategy of the United States during the Cold War.

While Speier's career in itself would deserve a biography, Bessner takes it a step further. Speier's intellectual career, Bessner argues, reveals some important lessons with regard to the history of political and strategic thought more generally. The most important of these lessons is that in alleged contrast to the claims of other historians, Speier's case shows that the global political situation of a two-side confrontation that emerged in the 1950s was only one source informing the core beliefs of U.S. defense intellectuals. Beyond that, their thinking was shaped fundamentally by ideas, debates,

and events that had taken place in Europe twenty years earlier. The ideology of the U.S. National Security State, Bessner suggests, can be fully understood only if the collapse of the Weimar republic, the ensuing Nazi takeover, and the repercussions of these events for social scientists and intellectuals enter the picture. Fear of repetition was a fundamental emotion among many exiles who, by serving as analysts in the war effort and by remaining in the policy-oriented research and analysis networks after the end of the war, played a considerable role in shaping U.S. foreign policy. Whereas historians have hitherto emphasized the discontinuities in strategic thought that were brought about by the atomic bomb, Bessner claims that, provided one broadens the view to include the European history and traditions of thought, there are crucial continuities to be found.

The book's introduction—"Democracy, Expertise, and U.S. Foreign Policy"—describes the main puzzle in Speier's intellectual biography: his conviction that while democratic values were important, democracies were weak. In times of crisis, then, the responsibility of intellectuals was to directly offer advice to the decision makers. If intellectuals wanted to contribute to avoiding authoritarian disasters, their audience had to be the elite, not the demos. For democracy's own sake, democratic ideals had to be put in exile—hence the title.

Chapter 1—"Masses and Marxism in Weimar Germany"—follows Speier's childhood in Berlin, his studies in Berlin and, from 1926 on, in Heidelberg, and his return to Berlin two years later, upon receiving his PhD *summa cum laude* with a thesis on "The Philosophy of History of Ferdinand Lasalle." Two intellectuals were influential for Speier during this period. One was Karl Mannheim (1893–1947), whose project of a sociology of knowledge attracted Speier and informed his decision to pursue a PhD in Heidelberg. Mannheim's works were intensively discussed in a circle in Heidelberg that, besides Speier, included intellectuals and scholars who would later rise to prominence, such as Norbert Elias, Werner Falk, Hans Gerth, Ruth Neuberger, and Svend Riemer (cf. p. 21).

The second person was the Heidelberg economist Emil Lederer (1882–1939), who offered Speier an assistantship that allowed him to cover the expenses of his studies (his father refused to do so). Upon completion of his studies, Lederer connected him to the Federal Ministry of Finance in Berlin, then led by socialist Rudolf Hilferding, where Speier landed a job as analyst.

While these two persons certainly exerted considerable influence on the development of Speier's own thinking, as Bessner shows, more important than these were the political events happening in these years, and most crucially the collapse of the Weimar republic. This downfall of a democratic order, Bessner argues, and the ensuing triumph of the Nazi party convinced Speier of a series of ideas that he held throughout his life and that also informed the "logic of governance he helped institutionalize in the Cold War United States" (p. 17). The lessons that Speier drew from the political events were: 1) Democracy is a weak form of governance and can quickly be destroyed in confrontation with radical movements. 2) Intellectuals were partly responsible for the Weimar collapse, because they stuck to the naïve idea that the masses could be educated to make thoughtful political decisions. 3) Marxism was just another set of radical ideas threatening democracy. And finally, 4) while Speier had developed quite a deep understanding of democracy—as an idea fostering economic, cultural, and political equality—in his youth, the term to him did not refer to much more than procedural equality. Everything that was not authoritarianism could qualify as democracy.

Speier's convictions consolidated over the coming years in Berlin, which saw him, besides his job as ministry analyst, working as an editor for the Ullstein publishing house, as assistant to Lederer when the latter moved from Heidelberg to the University of Berlin, and as a part-time teacher at the

Hochschule für Politik, a college funded by the social democrats to provide education, mostly in evening courses, to the Berlin's working strata. These views were further fortified when, after the Nazi takeover in 1933, Speier on the recommendation of Lederer became the intermediary for Alvin S. Johnson's (1874–1971) attempt to invite renowned European scholars to join the "University in Exile," which Johnson planned to set up as part of his New School for Social Research in New York City (Krohn 1987). Chapter 2—"The Social Role of the Intellectual Exile"—covers Speier's last years in Berlin, his decision to go to the United States and join the "University in Exile," and the people he met upon his arrival as well as the thoughts he wrote down during this period.

Chapter 3—"Public Opinion, Propaganda, and Democracy in Crisis"—then covers Speier's most important scientific project during the war years: the Research Project on Totalitarian Communication that he co-led with the Austrian psychoanalyst and art historian Ernst Kris (1900–1957). The project resulted in a book called *German Radio Propaganda* written by Kris and Speier, which became a heavily used point of reference for the propaganda studies undertaken by various U.S. wartime institutions such as the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) or the Office of War Information (OWI), as chapter 4—"Psychological Warfare in Theory and Practice"—relates. The book also led to Speier being selected to head the German Desk of OWI, where he became responsible for developing the guidelines for the propaganda materials that were to be distributed in Germany. As most social science and humanities scholars involved in the U.S. war effort, Speier moved repeatedly and easily between various organizations. After the end of the war, he was also sent to Germany on behalf of the OWI "to counsel those who are concerned with information activities with respect to Germany" (as the Executive Order by President Harry S. Truman read, cited on pp. 121–2).

After his wartime experiences, Speier realized that he was unwilling to return to the New School, which had put him on leave for his government service. He did return for some months, but felt like "a fish out of water" (autobiographic interview, cited on p. 139). Thus, he was quite interested in listening to what the RAND Corporation, a newly established think tank funded mainly by the U.S. Air Force and Douglas Aircraft Company, had to offer: the position of director of the yet to be established Social Science Division. After some negotiations, Speier accepted the position and joined RAND in 1948. The history of this think tank has been narrated quite a few times (e.g., in Smith 1966; Kaplan 1983; Collins 2002; Ghamari-Tabrizi 2005), and Chapter 5—"The Making of a Defense Intellectual"—sums up the literature quite elegantly and with a focus on the Social Science Division.

As this chapter and the ensuing chapter 6—"The Adviser"—aptly show, Speier was convinced that the addressees of social scientific policy advice were the deciding elites, not the people. As Bessner puts it, "For Speier, democratic foreign policy was not by the people, of the people, and for the people, but was for the people, by the intellectual, who had finally assumed his or her proper place within the "shadow" American state" (p. 155). To make this point, Bessner describes a series of research and analytical works that Speier carried out in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The most prominent—and arguably the most influential—among them was Project Troy, a large interdisciplinary research project funded by the Ford Foundation with the intent to identify and provide solutions for the main problems—theoretical, cultural, and technological—faced by anti-communist propaganda (cf. Nedell 1998; Schwoch 2009).

Apart from the intellectual consequences of Project Troy, it also led to a series of organizational innovations, and Speier played an active role in two of these. Already before Project Troy began, Speier had close relations with a few officials of the Ford Foundation. His participation in the project only served to strengthen these ties. Chapter 7—"The Institution-Builder"—explores how the networks that had brought Project Troy to life also created (or helped create) the Center for Advanced



Study in the Behavioral Sciences (CASBS) at Stanford University and the Research Program in International Communication at MIT's Center for International Studies (CIS). On all these occasions, Speier succeeded in getting some of his ideas to materialize, although, as Bessner shows, not all of them.

Chapter 8—"Social Science and Its Discontents"—takes the reader back to the RAND Corporation and discusses the role of the social sciences at this organization that valued numerical analysis higher than qualitative or interpretive scholarly approaches. Consequently, and in stark contrast to the self-proclaimed culture of "interdisciplinarity" at RAND, the Social Science Division struggled to get the recognition within RAND that it deemed adequate. In this context, Bessner discusses the development of political gaming, a qualitative technique of crisis simulation, as a reaction towards the perceived expectations of other RAND divisions and as an attempt to anchor social scientific perspectives more broadly in RAND's research agenda. A brief conclusion—"Speier, Expertise, and Democracy after 1960"—describes Speier's move from RAND to the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, one year prior to his obligatory retirement date, and the last years of his life.

Bessner's book is a masterful exemplar of an intellectual biography—densely written without getting dry, engaged without losing the distance. The two large theses of the book—that there are considerable continuities between the lessons from the collapse of the Weimar republic and the emerging U.S. national security state, and that the elitist view on the science-democracy nexus promoted by Speier was one of these continuities—are well developed and corroborated by the presented materials. Beyond that, in light of some recent publications, the intervention also seems timely.

Clearly, an intellectual biography has to emphasize some ideas as more important than others. It must do so in order to not lose its narrative in a marsh of complexities. However, this has inevitable repercussions. Regardless of how central they might have been to his life, the four convictions of Speier described above focus on the social and political role of social scientific policy recommendations. They do not, however, reveal much about how Speier understood the epistemological nature of the social sciences. What was scientific about social science, in his view? What did make it a science? The theme appears in several places throughout the book (and therefore Speier's life)—for instance, when Speier claimed that Marxism would have to "shake off the positivist calcification of its method" (p. 32); when he criticized the New School for failing to provide proper training in empirical research methods and statistics (p. 138); when Speier figures as a consultant to one of the key promoters of the "Behavioral Sciences" (chapter 7); or when he defended the qualitative-historical approach of his Social Science Division at RAND (chapter 8). The fact that Speier's teacher, Karl Mannheim, had developed a very influential epistemological view of the social sciences, which lies at odds with some of the standards of the Behavioral Sciences that grew in the 1950s, gives particular urgency to the question of why this perspective did not receive more sustained treatment in this book.



References

- Collins, Martin J. (2002) *Cold War Laboratory: RAND, the Air Force, and the American State, 1945–1950*. Washington, London: Smithsonian University Press.
- Ghamari-Tabrizi, Sharon (2005) *The Worlds of Herman Kahn. The Intuitive Science of Thermonuclear War*. Cambridge (Mass.), London: Harvard University Press.
- Kaplan, Fred (1983) *The Wizards of Armageddon*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Krohn, Claus-Dieter (1987) *Wissenschaft im Exil. Deutsche Sozial- und Wirtschaftswissenschaftler in den USA und die New School for Social Research*. Frankfurt, New York: Campus.
- Nedell, Allan A. (1998) “Project Troy and the Cold War Annexation of the Social Sciences.” In C. Simpson (Ed.), *Universities and Empires: Money and Politics in the Social Sciences During the Cold War* (pp. 3–38). New York: The New Press.
- Schwoch, James (2009) *Global TV: New Media and the Cold War, 1946–69*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Smith, Bruce L. R. (1966) *The RAND Corporation. Case Study of a Nonprofit Advisory Corporation*. Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press.