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History in the Service of Politics: A Reassessment of G. G. Gervinus

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The year 1971 marks the centenary of the death of Georg Gottfried Gervinus. This fact might seem to warrant attention only of antiquarians, since Gervinus appears in most textbooks (if at all) as a professor dismissed from the University of Göttingen for protesting the revocation of the Hanoverian constitution in 1837. But two facts about his reputation inspire greater attention. First, Gervinus was buried with unseemly haste by a host of unflattering necrologists, from Ranke on down, in the very year of the founding of the German Empire.¹ Second, he has again achieved some attention recently as one of the few German democrats among the nineteenth-century professorate, thanks to publications in both East and West Germany. As an opponent of the "reactionary class compromise which underlay the unification of the Reich from above,"² he has become an object of veneration in East Germany. In the west, the publication of his *Introduction to the History of the Nineteenth Century* and the subsequent *Treason Trial* against Gervinus has focused attention on the fate of those who sanctioned democratic revolution in the reactionary 1850's.³ In both cases, in obscurity and tendentious revival, Gervinus has been blamed or praised more for what he stood for than for what he was.

Aside from a few dissertations,⁴ Gervinus's political and scholarly position in nineteenth-century Germany has not been investigated extensively. The purpose of the present essay is to show that Gervinus was a more complicated figure than some of his recent champions allege and a much more interesting scholar than his contemporaries, with their allegiance to an apolitical ideology of *Wissenschaft*, believed. Naturally those who were openly engaged in propagandizing for the Prussian-German power state, such as Treitschke, belittled him too. Gervinus was an outsider in German intellectual and political circles, a dry-goods clerk who struggled into a promising professorial career, a historian too radical to hold a teaching chair but too popular with his readership to be ignored, and a more and more vociferous Cassandra in an age of increasing accommodation to and optimism about Bismarckian power. Gervinus's life was a passion in the service of democratic liberalism; as a result, he suffered during his life, and his reputation has suffered ever since.

Gervinus's life, like his political views and historical method, deviated from the typical pattern of his fellow history professors. Dahlmann, Droysen, Gneist, Mohl, Ranke, and Sybel, to name but a few, came from the *Bildungsbürgertum* of preachers, lawyers, and civil servants. By contrast, Gervinus's father was successively a tanner, a failed tanner, and an innkeeper, "the coarse son of a coarse father."⁵ His mother, who came from a prosperous mercantile family, suffered in her marriage. Although he was bright and showed considerable enthusiasm for literature, young Gervinus found little challenge in the mediocre Darmstadt Gymnasium and little support at home. He dropped out at fourteen. It was only because of wealthier and more ambitious age-mates, with whom he shared an adolescent passion for writing plays and verses, that Gervinus finally abandoned an apprenticeship in a clothing store for a university course. As a "late bloomer" he had to make up his lack of formal schooling before enrolling, at the (then) advanced age of 20, in Giessen University. It was still possible to enter German universities as an autodidact, particularly for the study of philology. Gervinus, like Ranke, Droysen, and many other historians trained in early nineteenth-century Germany, turned to history after starting out as a devotee of literature and languages. But he broke with philology much more severely than the others, probably as a result of becoming a student of the liberal historian F. C. Schlosser at Heidelberg.

Gervinus's professional career, too, was somewhat unusual in comparison to his historian-colleagues. To be sure, he and Dahlmann were not the only historians to feel the backlash of autocratic governments for their role in the political opposition. But there was something unusually severe and dramatic in the form of Gervinus's "martyrdom" in 1837: the affair of the Göttingen Seven, of whom he was one, became the favorite example among progressives of the pre-March struggle between the reactionary instincts of German officialdom and the constitutional principles of an enlightened professorate. After protesting the royal nullification of the Hanoverian constitution and fleeing the country to avoid persecution, Gervinus, unlike the other six professors, never resumed a regular university career. While he did receive an appointment as honorary professor at Heidelberg in 1844, he was effectively excluded from the Ordinariat and the academic power structure in Germany.⁶ This effectively reduced his ability to place his own students in high positions and build a loyal school of followers to carry on his work. Gervinus claimed that he preferred the life of private scholar and political thinker, but he evidently understood that his political views would "embarrass" even a relatively liberal institution like Heidelberg. "I will not easily let any [university] seduce me," he wrote in 1838, "even if it wanted or were allowed to." Instead he concentrated on his life-long passions: contemplative study of literature and history, active participation in German politics, and the melding of the two into a politically meaningful scholarship. Thus Gervinus could criticize even his fellow political activist Dahlmann for excessive scholarly caution and narrowness in his influential bible of North German liberalism, *Politics* (1835).⁸

Few professors went so far in their leadership of the liberal cause as to found and edit an avowedly political newspaper with no special scholarly justification.⁹ This was exactly Gervinus's intention in editing the *Deutsche Zeitung*, one of the most important pre-March liberal journals, from 1847 to 1848.

In that fateful year, Gervinus began as a full participant in the hope-filled "parliament of professors" in Frankfurt. But when such erstwhile political allies as Dahlmann deluded themselves about the power of the Frankfurt National Assembly, Gervinus rapidly perceived the weakness, disunity, and incompetence displayed by the German middle class and quit his mandate altogether. It was from this point on that Gervinus parted company with moderate liberalism and criticized the timidity of a middle class blinded by "the swindle of power" as well as the authoritarian and militarist spirit of Prussian Junkers. He refused to accommodate himself to the "realities" of the 1850's or to Bismarck's methods in the 1860's. While others cautiously returned to the safety of their academic lecture halls and avoided "contemporary history" during the post-1848 reaction, Gervinus conceived and executed a political assault on the ideology of the status quo. In an atmosphere not unlike that of the McCarthy era a century later, however, Gervinus chose to mount his attack obliquely in the form of historical analysis. The result was a counterattack by the Baden government, a trial for high treason because of his *Introduction to the History of the Nineteenth Century*, in 1853. Although a somewhat Schweickian defense and, more probably, a great deal of pressure from high-placed friends resulted in acquittal, Gervinus's courage should not be belittled. More consistently than any other leading historian he continued to denounce both the weakness of the German middle class (as shown in 1848) and the falseness and danger of Bismarckian unity from above. When Gervinus died in 1871, only weeks after Bismarck's triumph at Versailles, he was completely isolated. It only remained for a series of detractors, speaking ill of the dead, to see that he was quickly forgotten, as well.

Even in this brief sketch of Gervinus's life it is easy to detect certain traits of character which set him apart. A certain friendly vitality and exuberance shine through most of Gervinus's letters, but he was not a man to be carried away by whimsical ideas or to compromise in an argument even with his closest friends. A search for wholeness, consistency, and principle underlay Gervinus's life and thought, even though these qualities often eluded him. His age encouraged the building of systems of thought at the same time that such systems were becoming more and more insupportable in the face of new knowledge. With extraordinary zeal and devotion, but without the intellectual subtlety essential for such a task, Gervinus built a rough but serviceable system for himself. Its major components were literature, history (or rather philosophy of history), and politics. Gervinus thus dwelt upon the three questions which were most vital to early nineteenth-century German intellectuals. But he distributed his

attention to all three in roughly equal portions, whereas most of his fellow academics chose to emphasize just one or two. Both his enemies and his admirers have tended to dwell only on one aspect of Gervinus's thought, doing violence to the systematic nature of it.

What united all three major concerns of Gervinus's thought was a firm belief in the independent existence and motivating power of ideas or, in their tangible manifestation, words. Granted, critical historical method emerged in the early nineteenth century from philology, the "love of words." The careers of Ranke, Droysen, and Dahlmann, to name but a few, illustrate the close genetic connection between the study of language and history. But most German historians turned against imaginative literature when they began carving out a special place for history in the German universities. While adopting some of the critical apparatus of the new philology, history was to be elevated out of its old subordinate role as a "moral science," leaving classical rhetoric behind for the edification of schoolboys. Ranke's famous remark about describing the past "as it actually was" appeared, it should be recalled, in the context of criticizing the romantic imaginative evocation of the past by Sir Walter Scott. Ranke's idea was to make history a *Geisteswissenschaft* instead of a *Moralwissenschaft* and to substitute verifiable documents for fantasy. Ambassadorial reports were to be preferred over speeches and other forms of literature.

Gervinus, on the other hand, loved literature and the ideas expressed in it. The bulk of his scholarly work was devoted to explication and criticism of it, even though he had to give up his youthful dream of being a poet himself. Following Schlosser, Gervinus believed that imaginative literature offered a unique key to the ideas of the Volk, in striking contrast to the narrow and untrustworthy ambassadorial reports which reflected only sentiments at the court.¹⁰

An even more important reason for Gervinus's attachment to literature than its value as a source was his vision of its usefulness. Like many other historians who began as philologists, Gervinus rejected his first subject for the "realities" of history. Schlosser at Heidelberg cured him of romantic Schwärmerei.¹¹ Nevertheless Gervinus, like Schlosser, continued to believe in the value of studying literature for its ethical and political content even as they rejected its value-neutral function of training aesthetes in "feeling" or historians in "critical method." Thus Gervinus rejected what Ranke and most other historians retained from philological studies and retained what they rejected. Whereas imaginative literature had been life itself to the young Gervinus, it became a mirror of life to the emerging scholar. Ironically, in the end, Gervinus emerged both more fascinated with literature and more critical of it than other historians, because he continued to believe in its potential value as a spur to action and to despair of the waste which current German writers were making of its potential. In criticizing the poets of "Young Germany," for example, Gervinus overlooked the common aesthetic charge that they were ruining verse with political demagoguery (and the political charges that they

were unpatriotic "nest-foulers"). Gervinus's complaint was that their political opposition was a typical German negativism, couched in satire and character assassination, not the clarion call to positive political reform which he desired. "We have three centuries behind us," Gervinus wrote to a friend in 1835, "in which we lived simply in religion and literature; we have forgotten how to live in politics, in the world of action."¹² In his most important scholarly work, *Die Geschichte der poetischen Nationalliteratur der Deutschen* (1835-42) Gervinus saw his task as curing the Germans of their dreamy attachment to the cloud-world of poetry – especially romantic poetry – by showing that the great age of literature had passed. His major complaint against German literature was that it was not fulfilling its politicizing mission.¹³

Gervinus criticized German academic history, especially the Rankean variety, on the same grounds. But here Gervinus was in a better position to offer a constructive alternative. He began to write political history.

The history of literature, in his mind, had to yield to the history of politics, just as the German public mind must be turned from poetic dreams to the realities of power. What Gervinus did was to change the object of his thought, but not the old techniques: his political histories described the development of political ideas. The minutiae of routine governance, the endless records of the deeds and misdeeds of statesmen not only did not reflect reality for Gervinus; they threatened to obscure it. Gervinus did not consider documented facts irrelevant, but he did consider them insufficient.¹⁴ Gervinus enunciated a plea for more empiricism. By this he did not mean an extension of the method of Ranke and most subsequent German historians, which in stressing the importance of the discrete and unique event blocked the path of valid generalizations. Nor did he accept Hegel's philosophy of history, which was too speculative. Gervinus sought a middle way of empirical deduction, as he understood it from Newton, one that would combine the fact-finding zeal of the Rankeans with the search for a higher meaning in Hegel's manner. Even though he was skeptical about the problems applying physical-science methods to the "moral" sciences, Gervinus believed the attempt should be made.¹⁵ In practice, however, Gervinus was more interested in large generalizations than in empirical evidence. Indeed, what isolated Gervinus most from his fellow historians was his belief in some sort of a law behind the confusion of events.¹⁶ To be sure, almost all his colleagues believed in some unstated teleological element in history. For Ranke the unimaginable purpose of a benign divinity stood behind human chaos; for men of a younger generation it was the development of "freedom," necessarily through the agency of a Protestant (and therefore liberating) state, one powerful enough to end the unnatural division of Germany. Gervinus, too, supported Prussia's "mission" as leader and unifier of "little Germany," at least through 1848. But those who substituted the Prussian state and the various reified

"ideas" of the nation, freedom, etc, for Ranke's God had no firm idea about the course history would take. They were voluntarists who were lost in confusion and disappointment when the willpower of the Prussian leaders failed at Olmütz. Gervinus, on the other hand, still had the consolation of a broader view of historical "laws." Depending on cyclical theories going back to Aristotle and arguing by analogy, he foresaw a dialectical development of almost Hegelian subtlety. The American democratic model, the leader in the world, had been achieved with ease because no significant forces had existed in a new world to oppose it.¹⁷ As in the English and French revolutions, the dawn of freedom and the unification of Germany would come only after a bloody democratic Armageddon. The path to strength, stability, and justice lay through anarchy, revolution, and democratic dictatorship, which itself would pass away after doing its work. Had he not personally felt at least ambivalence, if not fear, toward this "immanent" upheaval which he predicted, Gervinus might later have been embraced by the German working-class movement. But while he turned in disgust from the middle class as a capable engine of change, Gervinus could not betray his own bourgeois preferences. As he wrote to a friend at the very time he was predicting democratic revolution, the "mixed" English constitution remained his short-term ideal.¹⁸

No doubt one of the reasons for the decline of Gervinus's professional reputation after his death was that his predictions frightened the middle class; but perhaps even more important, his predictions proved incorrect. Historians who had little eye for the future and dared not speculate about the "laws" of political development did not run similar risks. It is no accident that German historiography developed, in addition to a cautious respect for documents, a distaste for "contemporary history" and a strong resistance to both normative values and the positivistic search for "laws of history." These were politically explosive in that they could encourage certain groups in society to regard themselves as the bearers of historical missions. Gervinus's conscious effort to preserve history as a moral science and a spur to historical action, particularly since he finally linked it to democratic agitation, seemed more and more dangerous in the eyes of an establishment trembling before the growing threat of a socialist revolution.

If these reasons were not enough to put the value of Gervinus's later historical work in serious question, then the execution of his ideas was. The *Introduction to the History of the Nineteenth Century*, to take the most outstanding example, had a style which cut two ways. It had a rare lucidity and precision in presenting all of classical and Christian time as the unfolding of Aristotelian laws in politics. Power runs from the hands of the few to those of the many -- through kingship and aristocracy. Even if the transition from aristocratic to mass rule often had to go through the mediate stage of tyranny, the tyrants prepared the ground for their subjects' self-rule. The other side of Gervinus's style,

however, was the terrible simplicity of flimsy dogmatism. It could easily be attacked and ridiculed. Gervinus made daring escapes from the traps of his logic, but they were traps nonetheless. Sometimes he simply had to fabricate a lame "explanation" for "unlawful" behavior in some historical situations. The Puritan Revolution in England, for example, fit into Gervinus's laws well enough, but to explain its failure, he had to resort to the excuse that the "times were not right" for such an experiment.¹⁹ Although similarly platitudinous "explanations" abounded in respectable contemporary history writing, they became harder to forgive as time went on. They were doubly hard to forgive in a writer who considered himself "scientific." Gervinus's reputation suffered, through no fault of his own, from the increasing identification in German historical writing of truth with detail and wisdom with caution.

It also suffered among those who regarded Rankean historical writing as merely another weapon of the ruling class in its struggle against "the workers." For Marx, who also sought to find laws of development in history, offered a much more coherent explanation of historical development than Gervinus. The latter told the masses that their day would come; but the former told them why it would come and what they were to do to hasten its arrival. Gervinus was notably weak on economic theory. He developed no coherent explanation for why political power should pass from the hands of the few to the many. Gervinus was himself too much a voluntarist, too much an heir of German idealism, to regard the overt happenings of political life as the mere expression of covert economic forces. He could, for example, work out an elaborate theory showing that revolutions recur in geometric cycles, with each one gaining in scope and intensity;²⁰ but he did not explain the sense behind this alleged "law." Gervinus attributed modern revolutionary movements in large measure to "Germanic-Protestant" spirit (Rousseau was a political Calvinist; America was the highest and purest bloom of "Saxon" culture).²¹ In his pages, "ideas" moved men, but they were ideas connected in some way to biology, nationality, and race. To the present younger generation, it is virtually inconceivable democratic or liberal ideology could be allied with "racism." To the nineteenth-century mind, however, the contradiction was not so obvious. One of the most remarkable features of Gervinus's thought was precisely this sort of combination. He was not only the most left-liberal and pro-democratic of the famous German historians of his day but also one of the most outspoken advocates of racial explanations of history.

To be sure, Gervinus never clearly expressed a genetic theory. Instead he espoused a species of cultural racism which identified the "best" in every culture as Germanic in origin.²² This sort of racism had reliable antecedents, for even Montesquieu had subscribed to it. When forced to deal with a people such as the French, who could not be dismissed as enemies of the free human spirit, Gervinus resorted to wholly ungenetic explanations: the French, for example, occupied sort of halfway house between the Germanic and Latin worlds. Nevertheless, despite all contradictions, Gervinus consistently clung to his

developmental typology: the Germanic produced an aristocratic spirit which produced a love of freedom, expressed first in Protestant and later in secular liberalism.²³ Tolerance, Gervinus believed, was possible only in a Germanic country. Insofar as the virtues of the German cultural heritage were absent in Germany itself, Gervinus found the cause in the "foreign," un-Germanic nature of the Prussian state, whose symbol was the uniform, denying the rich individuality and love of liberty inherent in "Germans" everywhere. Thus it is clear that Gervinus's racism was neither pure nor connected with the arrogant claim that Germans ought to rule the world. As Butterfield has said, Gervinus denied that the authoritarian militarism of Prussia was typical of German history. "It was limited to a couple of hundred years and superimposed upon a much longer tradition of federalism, local autonomy, free cities, and lax government."²⁴ Brutal repression of other races and peoples, Gervinus believed, was alien to the Germanic tradition and had not been carried out wholeheartedly even under extreme provocation.²⁵ Gervinus's racism was not different in kind from that of most other Protestant German historians of his age; it was different chiefly in degree. Ranke, for example, designated the tension between the Romance and Germanic "peoples" as the prime motive force in modern history. But he opposed the conquest of one "people" by the other as a threat to the foundations of European culture, including liberty. For Gervinus, the apposition was not a creative tension but a tragic confrontation of good and evil.

If Gervinus's references to "race" (and the Germanic "race" in particular) were more frequent and more systematic than those of, say, Ranke or Dahlmann, the reason may be sought in Gervinus's concept of democracy and the demos itself. Just as his view of the historical process was more sweeping, organized, and teleological than the half-articulated assumptions of other historians, his vision of the role of the masses – the beneficiaries of the process – was more clearly formulated. Gervinus, like Schlosser, regarded the Volk with a sympathy and respect uncommon among nineteenth-century historians. Schlosser's so-called "democratic" tendencies, however, had not gone much beyond an insistence that government should be for the people. Gervinus was also an imperfect democrat, even after he turned to the democratic revolution as the only possible salvation for Germany after 1850. Ultimately, he believed, the world would become democratic: this was the aim of the historical process. But in the meantime, Gervinus harbored certain ideas which he could ill reconcile with pure democracy. One was a sneaking admiration for elitism: he often wrote in the Introduction that an aristocratic spirit was both a logical outcome of Germanic culture and, in its uncorrupted form, the font of liberty. Gervinus furthermore insisted that tolerance and the peaceful resolution of conflict were inherent in Germanic-Protestant culture. How were these to be reconciled with the rule of the majority. As an opponent of moral relativism in historical writing, Gervinus was committed to the idea that truth exists. Like his guide Rousseau, he was unequipped for the conflict

which might arise between truth and power, between a "wrong" people and a "right" government. He was even less willing to accept the right of opposition for its own sake, one of the few English parliamentary practices of which he disapproved.²⁶ In defining democracy and anticipating its problems, Gervinus was much closer to his favorite theorist, Aristotle, than to contemporary ideas. In the last analysis, he remained ambivalent and uncertain about the masses. They were to be the objects of good government and the destroyers of bad, but once they had created the German republic, they presumably would lapse back into their passive role, as we shall see later. Gervinus's assessment of the historical role of the people was thus too hedged about with uncertainties and contradictions to allow one to call him an unreserved democrat, let alone a celebrator and chronicler of the masses.

Nor did Gervinus the historian deal effectively with personalities and institutions, the other traditional objects of historical study. His portraits of great men are fleshless, and his descriptions of institutions are few and thin.

Thus far Gervinus has proved vulnerable to criticism for his salient ideas about history. But most of the criticism applies to inconsistencies and gaps in his vision of a regular cyclical process, "history" in the grandest sense. Of Gervinus's contribution to "history" in the workaday sense, as an act of human interpretation of past events, something must now be said. In three ways Gervinus resisted the developing canon of German historiography. First, following Schlosser's lead, he objected to the relativism which progressively undermined the moral value of history. With Gervinus's death in 1871, the last major bulwark against historicism in the German historical profession disappeared. Second, Gervinus always endeavored to turn the moral value of history in a political direction, insisting for that reason on the study of "contemporary history." Gervinus was attracted to that field for the same reason Ranke and others were repelled: it was politically relevant, sometimes explosively so, and one had to be guided more by political commitment than by documentary evidence. And third, Gervinus resisted the effort to narrow history down to the story of the state. Although his attempt to focus on the people was more a gesture than a realized program, Gervinus must be given credit for helping lay the foundation of the science of serious history of literature.

The historical thought and political action of Gervinus were so closely related that it is questionable whether one can treat them separately. The more radical Gervinus became politically, the more he turned to history as a means of expressing his views. The standard picture of Gervinus's political development shows him initially as a moderate, an advocate of constitutional monarchy, a man too cautious to approve wholly of the Young Germany movement. The other members of the Göttingen Seven were hardly wild-eyed extremists. Indeed, it is easy to see how Gervinus, then only 32, could get

caught in the protest action of the Seven at least partly out of his regard for his friend and patron Dahlmann, who had played a major role in writing the very constitution that was at issue. No doubt this experience of injustice, plus the disappointment of being unofficially boycotted by universities, tended to radicalize Gervinus somewhat. But he had nevertheless achieved a respectable position as a moderate Upper Rhenish liberal by 1848, hardly the sort to advocate democratic revolution. The standard picture then shows Gervinus becoming so bitterly disappointed by the debacle of 1848 that he turned his back on the bourgeoisie and its academic representatives to take up prophetic historical writing with a democratic message. As the predominantly national-liberal, monarchistic professorate replaced resistance to Prussian reaction and Bismarckian force with cooperation, especially from 1866 on, Gervinus became completely isolated. As an opponent of Prussian authoritarianism, militarism, and caste spirit, as one of the few professors who remained immune to the alluring "swindle of power,"²⁷ Gervinus has naturally benefited from historians critical of the Bismarck Reich. The added ideological rarity of his profession of faith in a democratic future for Germany makes him truly unique among the major German historians.

How accurate is this picture of Gervinus? How does one explain the radical jump from moderate liberal to radical democrat after 1848? In actual fact, the picture needs some correction. First, Gervinus's faith in the moderate-liberal cause before 1848 was by no means unshakable. In numerous letters of the 1830's and '40's he complained in terms, familiar even today, of the "unpolitical German." Two months before the Hanoverian constitution was suspended, giving rise to the conflict of the government and the Göttingen Seven, Gervinus clearly expressed his lack of illusions about the possibilities for active political life, let alone democracy:

I am... astonished to see what immaturity *in politica* holds sway in Germany. We have a confused *jus* [legal system], but no politics; all can be lost because of the damned habit of overplaying these political questions into the area of the legal experts.... It is fortunate that the king [Ernest August of Hanover] is neither as clever nor as energetic as expected; if ever a regular strong man came along, he would soon put an end to the constitutional farce in Germany.²⁸

Gervinus, far from seeing himself as a popular martyr of the good cause, remarked that the Hanoverian people had been "passionately partisan" for the king even as he took away their constitution.²⁹ Repeatedly Gervinus bemoaned the lethargy and love of peace and comfort which he regarded as ingrained traits of the "German character." Before he came to see these very traits as threatened by the Prussian "spirit," Gervinus held up Alexander the Great and Machiavelli as models for Germans to follow. In short, his "break" with the German middle class because of its "political incapacity" may have become exacerbated after the 1848 debacle, but he had never put much private faith in it. Indeed,

if Gervinus's own testimony is to be accepted, he turned to writing political history precisely because of the lack of political education among the German people.

In view of his despair over the ability of the Germans to reform themselves, Gervinus eventually turned to a catastrophic solution. To the mid-nineteenth-century German historian, the most terrifying historical disruption was a political upheaval from below, as in the Puritan and French revolutions. Gervinus seized on this means of purging Germany after 1848, not because he regarded democracy as the ideal form of government for Germany (as an end in itself) but because it was the only revolutionary force capable of destroying the impediments to political progress. There can be little doubt that Gervinus hoped ultimately for a constitutional monarchy with ministerial responsibility and civil rights on the British model. In an otherwise undistinguished study, one of Gervinus's most recent students found he had to differentiate between "idea" and "reality" in Gervinus's thought.³⁰ On the question of Gervinus's "democratic" views, such a distinction must be made. The "idea" of democracy, in a utopian sense, appealed to Gervinus at all times: he was not a theoretical elitist. But his ideal democracy would have to include protection for the individual and a liberal dose of recognition for talent. Furthermore, Gervinus's idea of democracy was evidently grounded in particularism, racism, and nationalism rather than in the universalism of the "rights of man." In discussing the "democratic" ideas of his teacher Schlosser, for example, he constantly confuses democratic thought with sympathy for the poor and a feeling of brotherhood, not with all men but with one's *Landsleute* (in this case, Frisians) or, at most, other Germans.³¹ If a sense of tribal (*Stamm*) community was enough to earn the name "democracy" from Gervinus, his standards were not very modern. In practice, Gervinus was much more favorably disposed to the "mixed" constitutions. He had read his Montesquieu as well as his Tocqueville; he was as alive to the advantages of the "British constitution" as to the drawbacks of American democracy. Before 1848, Gervinus had made the British constitution his model. What changed in Gervinus's view after 1848 was not disillusionment with the British model but a recognition that it would be extremely difficult to apply in Germany. His panegyrics to America in his Introduction would seem at first glance to make him a staunch democrat. But the reasons for that admiration, as his letters from the same period make clear, were tactical, not ideological. Democracy was infinitely easier to obtain for the European states, Gervinus thought. In any case the object of a democratic revolution was not to establish perpetual democracy. Instead it would destroy the old bulwarks to political action and set an evolutionary process in motion. As he wrote in 1851, after returning from a trip to Britain:

I always gladly confess my preference for a state like England, but I cannot help believing that America's charms will outstrip all other political influences. To resist is vain. Especially for us in Germany. We, who are so hard to set in motion, will probably arrive at a thoroughgoing political change only if a future convulsion passes over the whole world simultaneously and allows us to get

set up right away, without outside interference. Such a general convulsion can only be effected by republican ideas.³²

Gervinus went on to say that he came to this conclusion after studying the "democratic" phases of the Puritan and French revolutions, implying that the German revolution, too, would merely have a democratic phase. For despite his warnings against idolatry of power, Gervinus did not believe a state could do without it. And democracies, including the republican states of Switzerland and the U.S.A., were too weak. Thus in the end, Gervinus's advocacy of democracy in practice turns out to be a prediction -- or, as he once put it, a "fear . . . among my constitutional hopes"³³ -- rather than an ideal.

Where, then, is Gervinus's proper place in the context of the nineteenth century? His stature, quite small in the eyes of the German intellectual establishment until recently, clearly deserves to be upgraded. As a student of the literary arts, Gervinus was something of a pioneer in Europe. He helped lay the groundwork for the serious historical study of modern literature and attempted to return literature to its proper context amid social and political realities. His repeated call to the German people to stop mistaking fiction for fact, to see literature as a mirror of life and not life itself, was a needed corrective to the inward-turned, dreamy, and pessimistic idyll of the Biedermeier life-style. In the world of poets Gervinus was a sharp-eyed pragmatist. Among historians, however, he was a dreamer, increasingly so as the sound but limited antiquarianism of Ranke's school came to be accepted as the *sine qua non* of academic historical writing. For Gervinus the object of historical study continued to be "ideas," by which Gervinus meant the categories of human aspiration. The technique of study combined, in a crude fashion, something of philosophy, sociology, and intellectual history. All these disciplines were notably underused by the Rankean and Prussian schools of historiography. Ranke (and many others to a lesser degree) did entertain half-articulated philosophies of history, but Ranke's *Ideenlehre*, somewhat like Hegel's, regarded ideas as superhuman ordering principles arising out of the nature of things or God's will. In Gervinus's view, ideas arose in a purely human context and recurred in cycles, reflecting unchanging human needs. One should not grossly exaggerate the unifying links between so-called "schools" in German historiography, but it is fair to say that Gervinus employed history as a spur to political action and a means of political education much more than either the Rankean or Prussian "schools."³⁴ To them, historical writing was essentially a craft which explained the past, especially the past of the state, to the citizen. To Gervinus, it was an art which exploited the past for examples and indications for the future as a means of awakening the citizen to action. Had Gervinus not turned more openly to the broad reading public with his books; had he concentrated on elaborating the first steps in the direction of a new kind of historiography; had he been able to build up

a school of his own through the power of a university chair and wide professional contacts; or had he not shuddered inwardly and held back when faced with the possibility of becoming the literary champion of the great masses, his stature today might not need upgrading.

Having said all this, one must then warn about inflating Gervinus too much. He was and remained an outsider and, in the view of many, an eccentric. Only in the field of the history of literature did he succeed, with his critical works on Shakespeare and Handel, in carrying through his own program. His early attempts at a philosophical and methodological system for studying the past cannot be compared to the similar work of Dahlmann or Droysen. His beginnings along the lines of historical sociology, intellectual history, and "contemporary history" remained torsos. As an active politician Gervinus cut a dubious figure: from the Göttingen expulsion through the Frankfurt Parliament and down to the bitter ending as a lonely critic of Bismarck's Reich, he was more victim and Cassandra than one who stained his hands with compromise. And even in his intractable opposition, Gervinus harbored certain ideas -- about *Volk*, race, and power -- which diminish his appeal to today's "democrats" of eastern or western observance.

Gervinus as political prophet was a failure in his time -- a man for whom the great democratic upheaval did not come as soon as anticipated. Those who remained in the favor of the new Prussian-German Reich, men such as Ranke and Treitschke, could comfortably conclude that the historical method which had led to such unfulfilled predictions was, as they had always suspected anyway, wholly untenable. Hardly any contemporaries had the insight to take Gervinus seriously after his death. Yet in a sense Gervinus proved right after all. Germany did finally undergo a great and violent upheaval, a period of fire, terror, and the sword, from which it seems to have emerged with new and stable institutions. It may be that the experiences of Weimar and Hitler have rehabilitated Gervinus as a prophet and raised the credit of the sort of history he tried without full success to write. It is this living link between himself and the present concerns of the German people, both east and west, which explains his reemergence from obscurity. But sympathy with him and interest in the methodological trails he hesitantly walked should not obscure the fact that Gervinus was too firmly wedded to the thought of his own time -- even as an outside critic -- to bring forth a powerful new synthesis of ideology, historiography, and political action.

ENDNOTES

1. For a sample of some of the unusually hostile necrological articles on the occasion of Gervinus's death, see the following: Hermann Grimm, "Gervinus," *Preussische Jahrbücher*, XXVII (1871); 475-78; Karl Hillebrand, "G. G. Gervinus," *Preussische Jahrbücher*, XXXII (1873), 379-428; Leopold von Ranke, "G. G. Gervinus," *Historische Zeitschrift*, XXVII (1872), 134-46; Alfred Dove, "Gervinus," in his *Ausgewählte Schriften vornehmlich historischen Inhalts* (Leipzig, 1898), 393-96. The quasi-

- official view of Gervinus as a stubborn, unrealistic, dogmatic outsider persisted as late as the end of the Hohenzollern Empire: see Otto Harnack, "Gervinus," *Hessische Biographien*, 1 (Darmstadt, 1918), 370-76.
2. Gerhard Schilfert and Hans Schleier, "Georg Gottfried Gervinus als Historiker," *Studien über die deutsche Geschichtswissenschaft*, I (Berlin, 1963), 149.
 3. Walter Boehlich edited both Gervinus's *Einleitung in die Geschichte des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts* (Frankfurt a.M., 1967) and *Der Hochverratsprozess gegen Gervinus* (Frankfurt a.M., 1967).
 4. The dissertations of Leonhard Müller and Klaus Lutze (both titled "G. G. Gervinus," the former submitted to Heidelberg in 1950, the latter to the Free University of Berlin in 1956) both stress the pre-1848 period.
 5. Georg Gottfried Gervinus, *Leben von ihm selbst dargestellt* (Leipzig, 1893), p. 2.
 6. The honorary professorate was unsalaried but allowed Gervinus to give lectures as he chose and, presumably, to collect student fees. These often constituted a major part of a popular teacher's income, more than just a supplement to his salary. In addition, Gervinus evidently managed to eke out a modest living from journalism, book royalties, the inheritance of his young wife (he was married in 1836), who was the only heir of a noted professor, and possibly (considering Gervinus's admissions in his autobiography about the earlier financing of his education and travels) occasional help from well-to-do friends and political allies.
 7. Letter from Gervinus to Georg Beseler, Darmstadt, Jan. 2, 1838, in Nachlass Gervinus, Heidelberg University Library, Heid. Hs. 2544. The italics are mine.
 8. *Ibid.*
 9. To be sure, Welcker and Dahlmann had contributed to the *Kieler Blätter* in 1815, but this was essentially a professorial paper. Hauser, Schlosser's other notable student at Heidelberg, co-founded the *Deutsche Zeitung* with Gervinus but did not actively edit it until Gervinus resigned. Ranke's short-lived *Historisch-politische Zeitschrift* of the early 1830's hardly fulfilled its intended purpose of providing a counterweight against the influence of the July Revolution in France and was in any case rather scholarly in tone.
 10. See Gervinus, *Leben*, pp. 165f.
 11. *Ibid.*, p. 124.
 12. Letter from Gervinus to Georg Beseler, Heidelberg, Sept. 4, 1835, Nachlass Gervinus, Heid. Hs. 2544.

13. For further light – and much heat – about the value of Gervinus as a historian of literature, see the following works: Max Rychner, *G. G. Gervinus. Ein Kapitel über Literaturgeschichte* (Bern, 1922); R. Unger, "Gervinus und die Anfänge der politischen Literaturgeschichtsschreibung in Deutschland," *Zur Dichtungs- und Geistesgeschichte der Goethezeit* (Berlin, 1944); and Richard Gosche, *Gervinus* (Leipzig, 1871), a defense. East German historians of literature are generally full of praise and emphasize Gervinus's path-finding efforts in this field. See, for example, Walter Dietze, "G. G. Gervinus als Historiker der deutschen Nationalliteratur," *Sinn und Form*, xi (1959), 445-67; Gotthard Erler, "Gervinus als Literaturhistoriker," *Weimarer Beiträge*, VII (1962), 34-84, reprinted as the "Einführung" by Erler in Gervinus's *Schriften zur Literatur* (Berlin, 1962), a lengthy and interesting analysis of Gervinus's view of literature.

14. Gervinus's attitude can best be illustrated by his comments on two diverse poles of historical writing. He criticized Schiller as a historian for having contempt for factual detail. "Rightly understood," Gervinus wrote, "it is certainly true that the historian must first structure the collected material and construct it into history. But whoever lacks the most extreme respect for the material and the most complete sense of the single detail whoever does not have the gifts to follow the idea discovered in the details back through a long route through the smallest particulars and, even if he has to limit himself to the essentials, cannot show that he is limiting himself by his own choice -- not forced by the poverty, but despite the richness [of his material]; that man must of necessity miss the purpose and the presentation of history." Gervinus, *Neuere Geschichte der poetischen Nationalliteratur der Deutschen*, vol. v of his major work, *Geschichte der poetischen Nationalliteratur der Deutschen* (5 vols., Leipzig, 1835-42), v, 371. At the other pole, Gervinus despised mere chroniclers who never dared go beyond the facts. Although he held Ranke to be far more than one of these, he nevertheless criticized Ranke for being too slavish toward "words" (in diplomatic documents and in the description of the particular event, to the detriment of the "whole picture"). He especially disagreed with Ranke's view of Machiavelli, a man Gervinus held up as a model for both historiography and political action. Gervinus, *Leben*, pp. 163-66, 261-62.

15. Gervinus attempted to set out his views of the proper aims of historical writing in a brief work, *Grundzüge der Historik* (Leipzig, 1837), which is also reprinted in his *Leben*. He attempted to develop rules for the "historical art" as a parallel to (and drawing on) Aristotle's aesthetics. Gervinus sought to strike a balance among the approaches of the antiquarian, the poet, and the philosopher, each of whom alone distorts the past. The historical work of art, Gervinus argued, must be "a closed whole, with a unity of plan, a fusion of the parts in the whole" ("Historik," in *Leben*, p. 365). Anticipating Dilthey's work, Gervinus even discussed the possibility that Newton's prediction -- that empirical methods

would someday be applied to the *Wissenschaften des Geistes* – would soon be realized, although Gervinus was somewhat skeptical (*Leben*, p. 277).

16. Overtones of this belief can be found at least as early as the *Historik* (1837), but references to the *Gesetzmässigkeit* of history took on a major role in Gervinus's later works. In the preface to his *Einleitung in die Geschichte des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts*, he even uses the search for the laws of history as an excuse for not including any new research results: "Should laws be derived from history, they can only emerge from that which is known to all, from that which is assumed and incontrovertible."

17. Gervinus, *Einleitung in die Geschichte des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts* (Leipzig, 1853), pp. 89ff.

18. Gervinus, letter to Baron von Rutenberg, Heidelberg, May 26, 1851, Heid. Hs. 2560.

19. Gervinus, *Einleitung*, p. 82.

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 177f.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 98; Gervinus, "Politik auf geschichtlicher Grundlage," lecture notes, Hs. 1405, pp. 4f.

22. Gervinus did not employ the term *Rasse*, preferring a mixture of other words such as *Stamm*, *Geschlecht*, "*germanische Volksnatur*," and so forth. In context, however is no reason why *Rasse* could not have been used. The word was not yet popular; Gobineau's *Essay on the Inequality of the Races*, the foundation-stone of nineteenth-century racism, appeared concurrently with Gervinus's *Einleitung* in 1853. There is no evidence that Gervinus read Gobineau, but both men were strongly influenced by Montesquieu.

23. Gervinus, *Einleitung*, pp. 42-49 and *passim*.

24. Herbert Butterfield, *Man on His Past* (paperback ed., Boston, 1960), p. 26.

25. See, for example, Gervinus's treatment of the English repression of Ireland in *Geschichte des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts* (8 vols., Leipzig, 1855-66), VII, 456ff. Here the story emerges as a long-standing tragedy. Gervinus sympathized with the Irish, but he concluded that the reason the Irish tragedy had gone on so long was that Englishmen were simply incapable of exterminating, exiling, or converting the Irish because their love of tolerance and freedom enfeebled their determination!

26. Gervinus, *Geschichte des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts*, IV, 43.

27. Gervinus, letter to Georg Ewald, Heidelberg, Apr. 28, 1867, Nachlass Gervinus, Heid. Hs. 2549.

28. Gervinus, letter to Georg Beseler, Göttingen, Sept. 2, 1837, Nachlass Gervinus, Heid. Hs. 2544.
29. Gervinus, letter to Georg Beseler, Darmstadt, Jan. 2, 1838, Nachlass Gervinus Heid. Hs. 2544.
30. Klaus Lutze, "G. G. Gervinus, seine politische Ideenwelt" (unpub. diss., Free University of Berlin, 1956).
31. See Gervinus, *Leben*, p. 176.
32. Gervinus, letter to Baron von Rutenberg, Heidelberg, May 26, 1851, Nachlass Gervinus, Heid. Hs. 2560.
33. Gervinus, letter to Baron von Rutenberg, Heidelberg, May 6, 1851, Nachlass Gervinus, Heid. Hs. 2560.
34. For a full discussion of other historians (such as Treitschke) who employed history to teach a political lesson, in the context of images of England, see the author's book, *The German Historians and England: A Study in Nineteenth-Century Views* (Cambridge, 1971).