Introduction

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HELD AT CORNWALL TERRACE on 26 and 27 September 1997, the conference on 'Reform in Great Britain and Germany, 1750–1850' was a joint initiative on the part of the British Academy and the German Historical Institute. Its organizers were motivated by the belief that in the historiography of late eighteenth-century Europe the concept of 'reform', both in theory and in practice, had been neglected, especially when compared with the attention lavished on its more glamorous relation 'revolution' (the bicentenary of the fall of the Bastille engendered no fewer than 170 conferences across the world, the central event, organized at the Sorbonne in July 1989, alone producing nearly 300 papers). Yet it was reform not revolution which characterized the experience of both Great Britain and Germany during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The British ship of state sailed untroubled through the turbulence created by the French Revolution without having to do much more than take in the occasional sail and flog the odd mutineer. Germany was certainly revolutionized after 1789, not least by the destruction of the Holy Roman Empire, but it was change imposed from outside, not generated from within by domestic subversion. Indeed, the various forms of exploitation suffered at the hands of the French revolutionaries and their heir, Napoleon, only served to strengthen a long-established German preference for gradual change through reform.

If violent and rapid change naturally appears more exciting than gradual adaptation, the papers delivered at the conference revealed that a study of the latter can stimulate just as much intellectual excitement. The ten papers were divided into three sessions. The first, chaired by T. C. W. Blanning (Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge), comprised Eckhart Hellmuth (Munich) on 'Reform movements in Great Britain and Germany in the later eighteenth century', Leslie Mitchell (University College, Oxford) on 'The whigs, the people, and reform' and Diethelm Klippel (Göttingen) on 'Legal reforms: changing the law in Germany during the *ancien régime* and the *Vormärz*'. All three revealed fundamental differences between the British and German political structures. If the popular notion of the former being characterized

by a weak state and the latter by omnicompetent bureaucracies has to be abandoned, the fact remains that in most German states it was the path of reform from above that was followed, while in Great Britain most reforming energy came from below and was directed against alleged abuses and corruption at the centre of government. Whig aristocrats were particularly anxious to seek legitimacy by associating their programme with the people.

In the second session, presided over by Rudolf Vierhaus (Göttingen), there were two comparative papers on Great Britain and Prussia — Hagen Schulze (Free University, Berlin) on 'Napoleon, the Prussian reformers and their impact on German history' and Brendan Simms (Peterhouse, Cambridge) on 'Facing Napoleonic France: reform in Britain and Prussia, 1797–1815' — and two neatly juxtaposed contributions on perceptions — Paul Langford (Lincoln College, Oxford) on 'The English as reformers: foreign perceptions, 1750–1850' and Rudolf Muhs (Royal Holloway and Bedford New College) on 'The Germans as reformers: British perceptions, 1750–1850.'* Some important similarities became apparent here, notably the importance of the 'primacy of foreign policy' in both initiating and shaping reform. In neither country, however, was the pressure exerted by the Revolutionary-Napoleonic wars sufficient to impose radical change in the distribution of power or to bring the two political cultures closer. Germans gradually ceased to see Great Britain as the exemplar of modernity, while the British continued to associate Germany with authoritarian politics.

It was the third component of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland which proved — and has continued to prove — most intractable in the face of metropolitan attempts at reform. However, in the third session, chaired by Roy Foster (Hertford College, Oxford), Theo Hoppen (Hull) showed how Daniel O'Connell was able to lead a movement of rural protest to become a highly effective reform movement. His marriage of Catholicism and liberalism achieved astonishing success in Ireland but could not be exported to the rest of Europe. In the final two papers — Peter Wende (German Historical Institute, London) on 'Chartism and German reformism in 1848 compared' and Derek Beales (Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge) on 'The idea of reform in British politics, 1829–1850' — attention was focused on the meaning attached by contemporaries to the word 'reform'. For German liberals it meant a non-violent revolution, to be secured by negotiation between government and opposition. It was a strategy which collapsed in 1848, frustrated by the intransigence of the *Vormärz* regimes. In Great Britain too, 'reform' had radical connotations, implying a degree of change which just stopped short of revolution. For that reason it was used

* We regret that a publishable version of Rudolf Muhs' paper was not available when we were finally obliged to go to press.

almost exclusively to denote parliamentary reform and more specifically the Great Reform Act of 1832. Conservative social reformers therefore chose a vocabulary with less disturbing associations.

That 'reform' has no reason to feel over-awed by 'revolution' in any conceptual battle was also shown by the lively discussions which followed each of these ten papers. Seventy-odd scholars filled the Cornwall Terrace lecture room on each of the two days and engaged in vigorous debate, both with the speakers and each other. The organizers take the opportunity to thank them for making the conference such a stimulating occasion. They also thank the British Academy and the German Historical Institute for their material and moral support.