Looking back to the historical period of the German Empire, both the Bismarck and the Wilhelminian eras appear as a heavy burden and fatal handicap for the German history of the twentieth century. It was that period which created the German authoritarian state that eventually led to Hitler's totalitarian rule and which was not overcome before 1945, when the new German democracy finally turned its back on the German Sonderweg (special way). The frequently quoted 'General Dr. von Staat' (Thomas Mann), and the despised 'Untertan' (Heinrich Mann), the ridiculed and pitied 'Hauptmann von Köpenick' (Carl Zuckmayer) all embody characteristics and currents of an age of subservience which had a decisive impact on the mentality and values of later decades.

Nevertheless, the German Empire cannot be explained by its authoritarian character and social rigidity alone. It was only in the retrospect of Prussian historiography that the making of the German Empire in 1871 appeared as the longed-for keystone of internal political developments. In reality a number of unsolved problems stemming from the Empire's past history influenced political values and opinions after 1871. Thus, the unity of the nation-state proclaimed and symbolized by the Emperor could only gradually become reality despite a common constitution, the German army and navy and the German flag, not to mention universal franchise and the Parliament of the Reichstag (which, however, embodied political division rather than unity).

Similarly, the political culture of the early years of the Bismarck era was characterized by a diversity of values, opinions and views, which reflected the political experiences of the periods of restoration and revolution, reaction and the foundation of the Reich as well as the expectations, hopes and disappointments of the political parties and associations, churches, scientific institutions and the press. Traditions of the old German individual states overlapped with the specific interests and aims of different political groups and movements. It was
only gradually that a new set of more common values emerged from the diversity of regional, confessional, social and political views and tendencies.

**POLITICAL CULTURE AND SOCIAL CHANGE**

In 1867 the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, mouthpiece of the new German democracy, characterized the political situation in Germany as ‘the forceful and irreversible dissolution of the old state of affairs rather than the emergence of a subsequent new entity’. Although most Germans recognized the necessity and inevitability of social change, they had only vague ideas of the ‘modern world’ which was to replace the familiar social cosmos of estates, of hierarchic order and perseverance.

It was the journalist and folklorist Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl who had pointed out that in the Revolution of 1848 the conflict between the forces of tradition – gentry and peasants – and those of social change – bourgeoisie and workers – had become evident. This conflict, according to Riehl, corresponded with a clash of mentalities: class contentment (*Behagen im Stande*) stood against the covetousness of the dissolving social classes and emancipated individuals. Riehl drew a consistent and plausible picture of the social situation after the Revolution; however, he was not able to point out an appropriate perspective. The development of a new social consciousness was hindered by social reality. Migration, industrialization and urbanization put the individual under a strain of adaptation hitherto unknown. Division of labour, mobility, pressure of time, shortage of money and economic insecurity not only influenced the contemporaneous view of life but also impeded creativity in organizing both the private and public environment. Compared with the many workers flocking to the industrial cities in search of a secure living for their families, the affluent peasants and bourgeois took their chance of reshaping the social and political conditions. They gathered in clubs, organizations and parties, which maintained social contacts in a homogeneous, but not a narrow, circle of equal-minded citizens, and at the same time devoted themselves to issues and aims of a higher and more general importance.

The ‘dignitaries’ thus represented both political competence and participation. They made use of the growing financial independence and leisure that the changing economic and social conditions gave them and became increasingly engaged in political affairs. In government