
REMEMBERING 1989: THOUGHTS ON MODERN HISTORY WITH DR.
JAMES J. SHEEHAN

Dr. James Sheehan is the Dickason Professor in the Humanities and Professor Emeritus of Modern European History at Stanford University. He received his PhD from Berkeley and has taught at Stanford since 1964. He is the recipient of many awards, including a *Guggenheim Fellowship* (2000-2001), the *Paul Davies Family University Fellow in Undergraduate Education* (2003) and the *Walter J. Gores Award for Excellence in Teaching* (1993). Furthermore, in 2005, Sheehan served as chair of the national scholarly organization, the American Historical Association (AHA). He has published extensively on a myriad of topics in modern European history, including aesthetics, statehood, liberalism and nineteenth-century culture. Sheehan continues to offer perceptive insights into the ever-changing realm of European History with a keen eye to how historical events shape our cultures and our lives. One of his biggest and most recent contributions to the field of history and culture is his book *Where Have all the Soldiers Gone?* (2008), which probes the depths of Europe's twentieth-century experience, exploring the degree to which modern events have shaped Europe into a society of civilian states that are increasingly focused on the need for diplomacy and interdependence. This interview took place at the "November 9, 1989 – The Fall of the Berlin Wall, Twenty Years After" Conference at the University of Cincinnati to which Dr. Sheehan was invited as one of the keynote speakers, sharing his thoughts on the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall.

FOCUS Where were you when you first received news of the fall of the Berlin Wall? What were your thoughts and reactions?

JAMES SHEEHAN As a matter of fact, I was in Berlin at a large dinner party and someone had listened to the news. They came in with the report that, rumor was, that the Wall was going to be opened. It was a report of the press conference that started it. By this time, I realized that things were happening everywhere in the East. So in a way I was not surprised that the Wall was opened although I was surprised that it simply was going to go down, that is that it would just disappear. And I was especially surprised that East Germany would disappear. When the Wall

opened and it became clear that they were not going to be able to stop the people going back and forth, then I think I realized that without the Wall the state was not going to survive. But up until the time the Wall opened it came to me as a big surprise.

FOCUS This question speaks to your book *Where Have All the Soldiers Gone?* (2008) which chronicles the gradual obsolescence of war in twentieth-century Europe. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the problematic nature of *Wiedervereinigung* is still evident in social and economic indicators in Germany such as the unemployment rate which has only been exacerbated by the global economic recession. Is the age of European civility and peace, which you have depicted in some of your recent writing, contingent on economic prosperity? How has the recession, which has continued to take shape since your book was published, challenged or confirmed your views of mutually cooperative European civilian states?

JS I do think that the whole Post-War era which began in the late 1940s and in some way continues, depended on economic growth and prosperity and the sense that people's lives were going to improve – that they would have a bigger apartment and a better car and a more wonderful vacation than their parents. So I think this sense of economic progress, particularly economic progress as it affects people's lives, was fundamental to the whole political structure: It has to do with the decline of political radicalism, particularly on the left and it has to do with the domestication of the labor movement, which became much less thinking about transforming society and much more about getting what you can get for your members within society itself. Everywhere we turn, in the political, social and cultural world of post-war Europe, we find this driving force of economic growth. There were momentary downturns, there were scares and there was the oil shock of the 70s... But there is at least the possibility now that we may be moving into a new era, a new structural phase of the economy and it will be a phase of, if not decline, at least a phase in which growth as we knew it, and have come to consume it, will change.

Combined with this is the ticking bomb of European demography, the fact that the European population is shrinking – there may not be fewer people living in Europe, but there will be fewer Europeans. Unless people change their childbearing habits very radically, this seems to be more or less in the cards. The economic side is still an open question due to our inability to predict economic developments as you well know. However, there are certainly reasons to think that this may well be a new economic era as well as a new demographic era.

What the political meaning of that is, no one can guess. I think there are diverse reasons why the political systems in most Western European countries and in some former Eastern European countries as well, are now in a kind of state of, if not paralysis, deep uncertainty. It is not a good time for incumbents. It is not a good time for parties that try to base their parties on *more, more, more*, because they are all now faced with turning to their electorates and saying “we are going to have to cut. We are not going to be able to do what we promised.” And that is a very difficult thing to do for any political party, but I think particularly for the kinds of political parties that grew up in post-war Europe. In other words, there is less and less ideological appeal, the old forms of political cohesion and appeal (things like religion). It used to be that the best way to predict political alignments was religion. In Germany as well as in most other places, religion has virtually disappeared. As a form of political loyalty and cohesion, religion has declined. The ideology of class identification and class consciousness has also diminished. A lot of the appeals that people have turned to are much weaker, and what you have left is a promise of economic improvement. And if you cannot even make that promise, or cannot make it plausibly, then you have got to find some other way for people to vote for you.

FOCUS Another question pertaining to your book. In the conclusion you write:

“Since the 1950s, Europeans have enjoyed a period of peace and prosperity unparalleled in their history. [...] Dreams of perpetual peace, born in the Enlightenment and sustained

through some of the most destructive decades in history, seem finally to be realized.” (*Where Have All the Soldiers Gone* 227)

The destruction of the World Wars described throughout the rest of your book, however, suggests rather that the current era of European cooperation is *not* the same optimistic liberalism of the Enlightenment, but rather a civility that was borne at a cost. What have the disastrous wars of the twentieth century cost original notions of enlightened liberalism? What, perhaps, have they contributed?

JS I think Europeans have learned from the destructive wars of the twentieth century. Europe in 2009 is indeed peaceful and prosperous, without the threat of war that was present in 1909 or 1949, not to mention the still violent world of 1919. Europeans know, as perhaps their liberal ancestors did not, just how destructive modern war can be and how much potential violence modernity contains. They are, I think, sadder perhaps but also wiser.

FOCUS This is kind of a meta-question. Your research spans as far back as the eighteenth century to the present. What common threads hold these various eras together? Contrarily, what incongruities do you see between the various periods and themes that you study?

JS If I look back, my work has always been driven by a set of questions rather than thinking about periods. The first set of questions had to do with Germany: the problem of German democracy, the problem of German liberalism. Then the problem of German national identity. There are two dimensions of the German question: One is domestic and political and the other international. Then I took a little bit of a break from this and became interested in art and architecture. Most recently I became interested in the problem of war and society, war and state-making, which I am still interested in, although now I am working on the other end. My book *Where Have all the Soldiers Gone?* was really a book about what happens when the state-making capacity of war begins to disappear. Now I am going back to the beginning of states and talking more about how war and states came together to form what we think of as the modern state.

FOCUS During your career as a historian, the western world has seen significant political, economic and social changes, not to mention the intellectual and ideological changes that have followed. Can you speak to the challenges and adjustments in thought that you have faced in having to be, inevitably, both a first-hand participant while also a critically-distant scholar of the past several decades? What are some challenges or advantages of being a historian during times of dynamic change?

JS A great question! Historians have to be interested in the present as well as the past since one of our jobs is to understand what is new and what is not. That does not mean that everything we do should be directly connected to the contemporary world, but that we should try to be alert to the world around us. In times of rapid change, this is particularly challenging but also particularly necessary.

FOCUS In the introduction to your keynote speech at the Wall conference in Cincinnati, which posed three questions we should ask ourselves in looking back on the fall of the Berlin Wall, you mentioned that the questions you wanted to ask changed over the course of planning your speech. What were some of the other questions you considered?

JS I had thought about concentrating on why the changes were non-violent and also emphasizing the European dimensions a bit more.

FOCUS One point you make pertaining to the significance of the Berlin Wall and its fall is that it is a powerful symbol which can be “easily translated into other [historical] narratives.” But what was unique or unprecedented about the Berlin Wall that also sets it apart from other historical narratives?

JS I remember going to the *Reichstag* the day after the wall opened and thinking about everything that had happened in Berlin around that date: the revolution of 1919, the proclamation of the republic and, most of all, *Kristallnacht*, the night when the synagogues were burned, beginning the spiral of violence that ended in the murder of Europe’s Jews. The distinctiveness of the Berlin Wall’s opening was its connection to Germany, the German past, present and future.

FOCUS In the conclusion to your talk, you connect the fall of the Wall back to the “German Question” posed in the nineteenth century, mentioning that in 1989 Germany “perhaps for the last time” becomes the center of European politics. Do you think, then, that the problem of the German Question, after a century of wars and subsequent division, has been resolved?

JS History so often surprises us that we should be careful about predictions. But today’s Germany is so deeply tied to Europe that it is hard to see a return of “the German question.” There will be other problems and other questions, but not this one.

FOCUS Twenty years have passed since the Wall has fallen. You have won awards for teaching and I am wondering why you think it is significant that we continue teaching students about recent history, particularly issues concerning the Cold War and the Iron Curtain. How do we evoke within students familiarity with the past as well as concern for the various issues that were at stake?

JS That is a great question and it is a question everybody who teaches History has to think about: How do you make this meaningful? In some ways recent history, even though to many students 20 years ago seems like a long time, is easier than more ancient history. But nonetheless, they both pose the same problem, and that is: How do you make students see that there is a connection between their present and the past. And I think there are two ways of doing this. Well, there are more than two ways, but there are two ways that always attracted me. One is to make a direct connection that is to show them the ways in which the world they live in has in some way been shaped by these events. And I think that is not so difficult to do. I can show that the world that took shape after the cold war was really fundamentally different and it is in some ways the world we are still living in. One of the reasons we have trouble understanding our contemporary history is that we do not know how it is going to turn out. We are still in the process of something that is still going on. And I think if you can get students to understand 1989 as a kind of turning point it helps them understand what comes before 1989, but it also helps them to understand what comes after 1989 which is what they are still living in.

That is one way to help students see their connection to the past, making a direct connection. Another way, which is a little harder but I think even more important, is to make clear to students how important history is to *some* people. That is to say, in some parts of the world, where people are not like Americans, and do not live on this great, big continent of ours, in some parts of the world the past is really something you see every day, and it is something you *feel*. I think the people in America who come closest to this are probably African Americans, who feel the weight of a past that means something for them. I think for most of us, we are lucky enough if the past is something we study or are interested in. But it is not branded on our experience the way it would be if we were Irish living in Northern Ireland or if you are an Israeli or a Palestinian. And I think to some degree, the East Germans. For them, the past that took shape after 1989, the past still has some of that painful quality. That somehow there is an immediacy. The past is important to us. This is true, I think, of individuals, but I think this is also true of a society: The past that is important to us is the past that hurts, the past that is branded on us because it is painful, because we have memories, impressions of defeats, conquests... And I think that one of the most important things for Americans to recognize is that for much of the world that painful sense of the past and its immediacy is very much a part of people's lives.

FOCUS Thank you for your time!

This interview was conducted November 8, 2009 and followed up via email by Nicole Lyon.
