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The “Dark Ages” of German Macroeconomics and Other Alleged Shortfalls in German Economic Thought

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The “Dark Ages” of German Macroeconomics and other alleged shortfalls in German economic thought

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Abstract

Ordoliberalism is often accused as being responsible for Germany’s policy stance during the Eurozone crisis. Ordoliberalism originates from the so-called Freiburg School of Economics, founded by Walter Eucken during the 1930s at the University of Freiburg, which is in fact in Germany. It is however neither true that ordoliberal thought has continuously been predominant and a prevailing idea in German macroeconomic policy, nor that it is responsible for Germany’s policy stance during the crisis in EMU. In this paper, we show why a proper analysis must arrive at this conclusion by referring to Eucken’s thinking and the development of German ordoliberalism across time in relation to the “Rules vs. Discretion” debate and to Constitutional Economics. Although ordoliberalism may have had some influence on the design of EMU, pragmatism, the status-quo and national interests are dominant in German economic policy.

JEL-Classification: B13, B26, B31, D78, E61, E63

Keywords: Ordoliberalism, Eurozone Crisis, Constitutional Economics, Monetary and Fiscal Policy

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1. Introduction

The German approach to macroeconomics has recently been subject to many debates. The first is less controversial and concludes that German macroeconomics is in a good state – especially with regard to the quality of research by German macroeconomists (see [here](#)). The second debate is devoted to the ill-reputed “German approach” to macroeconomic policy (see [here](#)). The debate is far-ranging, rich in hyperboles and poor in historical differentiation: A small camp of Keynesian economists view German ordoliberalism as responsible for leading us into these “dark ages of German macroeconomics”, denouncing this peculiar school of thought as “the wacky economics of Germany’s parallel universe” (see [here](#)).

The offending object is Germany’s policy stance during the crisis in the European Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) to date. Germany is criticized for its reluctance to accept debt mutualization at the supranational level of the European Union (EU), its insistence on the enforcement of European fiscal rules and its high current account surplus. Though starting from different analytical perspectives, these criticisms usually lead to the recommendation that Germany should incur higher public debt in order to solve the problems in Europe and reduce the current account surplus.

What is true about such statements is that ordoliberalism originates from the so-called Freiburg School of Economics, founded by Walter Eucken during the 1930s at the University of Freiburg, which is in fact in Germany. It is neither true that “ordoliberal” thought is prevailing in German macroeconomic policy today nor that it is responsible for Germany’s policy stance during the crisis in EMU – as we have pointed out already (Feld, Köhler and Nientiedt 2015). A more substantial argument supporting our proposition that the history of economic thought needs differentiation is provided by Brunnermeier, James and Landau (2016). But we doubt that their contribution will quieten the critics, such as Bofinger (2016), who perceives himself as “the last Keynesian” in Germany and feels “like the last Mohican” (see [here](#)). The debate has turned ideological and may therefore be immune to prudential arguments – not only in Germany, but throughout the OECD. Why is that?

Many economists feel uncomfortable with governments that are reluctant to use active fiscal policy to restore full employment. These economists doubt that a combination of structural reforms with an expansionary monetary policy and automatic stabilizers can be sufficient to restore full employment (see [here](#)). That is an empirical observation throughout the OECD after the Great Recession rather than a “normative” statement from ordoliberalism, by the way. However, this is simply too simple for Malthusian inspired macroeconomists like Paul

Krugman or Peter Bofinger. There has to be something more behind this empirical truth – and, once again, it has to do with Mill, Bentham, Kant, the 1930’s, Germans, Nazis, but [please, don’t mention the War](#).

Much of what demand-side economists dislike is attributed to the influence of Eucken, Frank Knight, Milton Friedman and Friedrich August von Hayek: Rule-oriented (monetary) policy, low inflation targets, and sound public finances. This view often held in the Anglo-Saxon world as well as France and Italy aims at weakening the German position in the Eurozone crisis (see [here](#)). It claims that Germany should finally cease to insist on the consolidation of public finances and structural reforms in the Eurozone. Supposedly, what the Eurozone needs is expansionary fiscal policy, fiscal transfers and a fiscal capacity. Since the EU does not have a fiscal authority, the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP) should be interpreted more flexibly or Germany should abandon its consolidation efforts.

The position laid out above seems to be agnostic to the fact that, because of its shrinking structural primary balance, German fiscal policy can currently be described as expansionary (German Council of Economic Experts 2016, 2017). Similarly, this position seldom asks whether a radical change in German fiscal policy would have considerable impact on other member states. So far, at least, the estimation of multiplier effects yields sobering results (German Council of Economic Experts 2015a, Chapter 4).

It is flattering that, 125 years after his birth, Eucken is still perceived as an important economist. This is too much of an honor, however. The notion that his work holds the key to explaining the German position in the Eurozone crisis is not tenable (Feld, Köhler and Nientiedt 2015). In this paper, we argue that a proper analysis must arrive at this conclusion. We first outline Eucken’s thinking and its embeddedness in the context of his time (Section 2). In Section 3, we broadly summarize the development of German ordoliberalism across time emphasizing its relation to the “Rules vs. Discretion” debate and to Constitutional Economics. The role of German ordoliberalism for the design of EMU as well as for the German policy stance during the Eurozone crisis follows in Section 4. We conclude with a few remarks on the potential development of EMU based on the principles of ordoliberalism in Section 5.¹

1. In this paper, we draw on our previous work (Feld, Köhler and Nientiedt 2015; Feld 2012, 2016, 2017).

2. The Origins of the Freiburg School in the Thinking of Its Time

At the center of the debate about the role of ordoliberalism in the Eurozone crisis is the question as to what extent Eucken and his colleagues were aware of the Keynesian paradigm and the birth of modern macroeconomics. Eucken did not discuss Keynes and Keynesian thinking in detail. The *General Theory* was published in 1936 three years after the Nazis seized power. At this point, Germany was already relatively isolated from the outside world. It was difficult for Eucken to follow international scientific debates and continue, for example, his exchange of letters with his colleagues at the University of Chicago. Eucken was in close contact with Henry Simons in particular (Köhler and Kolev 2013). This exchange influenced Eucken's rule-oriented thinking considerably. The course of events eventually prohibited such contacts. Thus, some developments in economics since the mid-1930s simply passed Eucken by.

In the early 1940s, Eucken was occupied with other concerns, as he was in contact with the German resistance movement and questioned by the Gestapo after the failure of the plot of 20th July 1944 (Goldschmidt 2005, Maier 2014). During the short time Eucken lived after the war, from 1945 to 1950, reconstruction had first priority. A main concern was the establishment of a free market economy – an effort that stood in contrast to both the war economy of the Nazi era and the central planning of the Soviet-occupied zone. Eucken was in direct contact with Ludwig Erhard; moreover, his student Leonhard Miksch drafted the *Leitsätze-gesetz*, which abolished price controls and proved crucial for the German economic miracle (Feld and Köhler 2015). It was only after Eucken's death that Keynesian ideas became influential in Germany (Bombach 1990).

Aside these historical considerations, Eucken was not generally opposed to expansionary fiscal policy. For example, he supported the ideas of German (Proto-)Keynesians during the Great Depression. This can be seen from the discussion about the so-called Lautenbach plan (Köhler 2015). Wilhelm Lautenbach was a German Keynesian before Keynes who advocated expansive fiscal policy financed by debt in order to overcome Germany's dire economic situation of the early 1930s (Röpke 1931, Lautenbach 1952). At a secret meeting of the Friedrich List Society (Borchardt and Schötz 1991), during which the plan was discussed, Eucken welcomed the underlying idea of credit expansion (Köhler 2015). Miksch noted in his diary that Eucken suggested that "one should try the Lautenbach plan after all" (Feld and Köhler 2016).

Eucken is sometimes mentioned in current discussions about macroeconomic policy because he was quite critical of full employment policy as discussed after the Second World War (Eucken 1951). Eucken was afraid that such a policy would lead to a distortion of price signals

(Eucken, 1952/2004, pp. 140-144). Two aspects should be noted. On the one hand, policy proposals at that time had little in common with the discretionary fiscal policy measures of today. Full employment policy was often designed to give the state far-reaching means to control the economy (Lerner 1951, Röpke 1952). On the other hand, the functioning of the price system is the foundational – i.e., most important – principle in Eucken’s system of constitutive principles of a competitive market economy (Eucken, 1952/2004, pp. 254-255).

Apart from the functioning of the price system, Eucken’s constitutive principles also include open markets, private property, freedom of contract, the constancy of economic policy and particularly the “primacy of currency policy” and the principle of liability. The primacy of currency policy refers to the objective of maintaining price stability – not least because of Germany’s experience with inflation and deflation. The principle of liability says that liability and control should be aligned. Put differently: Those who stand to profit from a particular action should also bear potential costs and risks. Both the primacy of currency policy and the principle of liability play an important part in today’s discussion about the Eurozone crisis. For example, Jens Weidmann (2013), President of the Deutsche Bundesbank, emphasized in his Walter Eucken lecture those two principles as guiding principles for the actions of the Bundesbank. Still, it should be noted that Eucken himself opposed the concept of an independent German central bank. (Feld, Köhler and Nientiedt 2015). Instead, Eucken was in support of the idea to impose one hundred percent reserve requirements for commercial banks as put forward in the so called Chicago-Plan by Frank Graham (1936) in combination with commodity backed securities as supported by Milton Friedman (1948, 1951).

If we pose the question whether the German approach to the Eurozone crisis is influenced by ordoliberalism and whether the ordoliberal approach to economy policy is obsolete, we have to go beyond a mere analysis of Eucken’s work. After this short and cursory analysis, we can assess that Eucken’s thinking was definitely modern in the context of his time, at least before the Nazi’s seizure of power. This assessment needs to be substantiated further by investigation of Eucken’s estate. However, the modernity of German macroeconomic policy today is a different matter.

3. The Development of Ordoliberalism after Eucken’s Death

German economists caught up with the international developments in economic science soon and relatively quickly after the Second World War. Eucken’s contribution in this development was rather of a theoretical sense, paving the way for post-war economics to be finally

transferred into a theoretical science by cutting its roots to the yet infamous German Historical School (Bombach 1990). Today, German economists publish rather successfully in fields such as experimental economics, behavioral economics, public finance and public choice. In some areas of macroeconomics, German economists have initiated new developments or influenced them (Issing and Wieland 2013).

Starting in the 1950s, Keynesian thinking was adopted very quickly in Germany. This is particularly true for advisory bodies that are sometimes labelled “ordoliberal”, such as the Academic Advisory Board for the Federal Ministry of Economic Affairs. Members of this board, most notably Erich Preiser, demanded a more powerful advisory council on economic policy (Blesgen 2000). After some policy debate, this initiative in 1963 led to the creation of the German Council of Economic Experts (GCEE, *Sachverständigenrat zur Begutachtung der gesamtwirtschaftlichen Entwicklung*). The respective law was the first formal step in direction of Keynesian economic policy, before Karl Schiller tested countercyclical fiscal policy in 1966 and before the German Stability and Growth Law passed. At that time, it was assumed that by fine-tuning the economy it would be possible to achieve a “magic square” characterized by price stability, a high level of employment, steady and adequate growth as well as international balances. These four policy goals entered the GCEE Law. Thus, the Council has rightly been described as a child of Keynesianism (Sievert 2003). Despite this Keynesian background, the work of the Council was however also influenced by ordoliberalism (Sievert 2003). It has aimed at finding rule-based policy solutions and arriving at explanations of macroeconomic developments that are rooted in market processes. The efforts of the Council can be interpreted as early attempts to provide a microeconomic foundation of macroeconomic analysis.

The further adoption of international developments was often reminiscent of ordoliberalism, but it mainly has been the normal way as to how scientific progress moves across the world. This applies, for instance, to Monetarism or the theory of rational expectations. German speaking economists, some of whom had worked abroad, ensured the speedy reception of these ideas in the German speaking countries. An example is Karl Brunner, a Swiss economist and one of the most important representatives of Monetarism. He taught at Konstanz and initiated the famous “Seminar on Monetary Theory and Policy” (Fratianni and von Hagen 2001). It applies even more so to the so-called supply-side economics. In the mid-1970s, before this expression was coined in the US, this concept was introduced and elaborated upon by the German Council of Economic Experts (Sievert 1979). Still today, the concept plays an important role in the work of the Council.

It is interesting to note that Eucken's rule-oriented approach can be described by using the English terminology of "rules vs. discretion". As was mentioned before, Simons (1934/1948, 1936), the leading representative of the "Old Chicago School", argued in favor of rule-based monetary policy. Rules help to reduce or contain time inconsistent behavior on the part of decision makers. To date, this idea – associated with the works of Kydland and Prescott (1977), Barro and Gordon (1983) as well as Taylor (1993) – is well-established in macroeconomics. James Buchanan's constitutional economics is another case in point (Feld and Köhler 2011). Seen from this perspective, rule-orientation is not specifically German; also, the underlying idea of ordoliberal policy does not appear to be outdated.

4. Ordoliberalism and the European Monetary Union

The architecture of EMU as laid out initially in the Maastricht Treaty was much influenced by the rules vs. discretion debate. EMU should provide a framework of rules that ensures time consistent decisions by policy-makers even in hard times. The Maastricht criteria do not necessarily constitute for an important element of that framework. The framework rather consists of the ban of monetary financing of fiscal policy and the no-bailout rule. Both elements should ensure that each member state would be responsible for its own fiscal and economic policy. This also holds despite the SGP, as member states have preserved their control over fiscal policy even in the excessive deficit procedure. The weakening of the SGP in 2003 and 2005 shows that member states could easily organize a silent majority that would not want to trigger the next step of the procedure if the European Commission proposed this.

These elements of EMU are open to the interpretation that they are consistent with ordoliberal thought (Weidmann 2013). An independent central bank for which the mandate of price stability is dominant and the no-bailout requirements that supposedly ensure an alignment of liability and control are examples as to how two constitutive principles of Walter Eucken, the primacy of currency policy and the liability principle, are implemented. Moreover, some protagonists in the negotiations of EMU were influenced by German ordoliberalism as well. For example, Hans Tietmeyer participated in the negotiations of the Maastricht Treaty for the Deutsche Bundesbank. He studied in Bonn and Cologne and was a student of Alfred Müller-Armack, a leading figure of German ordoliberalism. Tietmeyer started in the Federal Ministry of Economic Affairs in 1962 and stayed there until 1982, moving from lower ranks to the head of department of economic policy matters (*Grundsatzabteilung*). Tietmeyer was the author of the so-called Lambsdorff paper that triggered the break-up of the social democrat-liberal

coalition in 1982 (Feld 2013). After the change in government, Tietmeyer became State Secretary in the Federal Finance Ministry until 1990, when he criticized the economic decisions during German unification heavily. In the Deutsche Bundesbank, he started as a member of the Council and became President in 1993. In 1988, he narrowly escaped an assassination by the terrorists of the Rote Armee Fraktion (RAF). Similar biographical sketches could be written about Horst Köhler, Jürgen Stark or Otmar Issing. Ordoliberalism influenced all of them.

One of the most dedicated proponents of EMU in the German debates was, however, Olaf Sievert (1993) who mainly endorsed it following ordoliberal arguments. In EMU, monetary policy is denationalized in the sense that EMU member countries would have to pay their public debt by a currency they could not create individually. In essence, Sievert interpreted EMU as a possibility of disciplining fiscal and economic policy of member states. Losing their national sovereignty in monetary policy, member states need to converge to sound fiscal and economic policies supporting monetary policy in the monetary union as in other international monetary arrangements like the gold standard or the Bretton Woods system. Financial markets provide for the disciplining device, a device that may not work immediately and may be excessive due to over-shooting tendencies. Sooner or later, though, the disciplining effect prevails.

Interpreting EMU from an ordoliberal perspective neglects, however, the fact that other member countries of EMU had quite different objectives (James 2012, Brunnermeier, James and Landau 2016). Moreover, the theory of optimum currency areas (OCA) could similarly provide the insight as to how adjustment in a monetary union should take place (Mundell 1961). If aggregate demand decreases in France and increases in Germany, i.e., in the case of asymmetric shocks, neither the Banque de France nor the Bundesbank are able in EMU to conduct expansionary or contractionary monetary policy for only one country in response, because the ECB conducts monetary policy and it does it for the whole currency area. Moreover, demand will not be stabilized by the exchange rate because the instrument is not available anymore in EMU. In order to restore the Franco-German equilibrium, real adjustments must take place. Alternatively, the member states could agree on a system of fiscal transfers to absorb asymmetric shocks. Without a transfer union, a common currency will require either high mobility of workers and capital or the possibility for wages and prices to adjust. If we take into account the imperfect mobility of labor between the member states of the Eurozone (e.g., as compared to the United States), it follows that labor and product markets have to be more flexible. This could be interpreted as a disciplining effect of EMU for economic policy in Europe to become more market oriented, but it also follows logically from OCA.

Does ordoliberalism play a role for German policy during the Eurozone crisis? This holds at best in some policy dimensions. Particularly regarding banking union, the liability principle guided German positions. Schäfer (2016) demonstrates this by digging deeply into documents, protocols and press releases. The German government adopted this position, however, only after it had bailed out German banks during the financial crisis. In addition, Schäfer (2016) also shows that there has been much pragmatism in order to arrive at compromises:

“Ordoliberal ideas were constitutive for German preferences. The manipulative use of ideas as strategic resources by the German government’s opponents explains why it made significant concessions. Germany’s government publicly acknowledged that breaking the ‘vicious circle’ between banks and sovereigns was the main objective of the banking union. This became a rhetorical trap used by a coalition of Southern European member states to force the German government to make concessions.” (Schäfer 2016).

Pragmatism prevails even more strongly regarding other policies during the Eurozone crisis. One example is the European Stability Mechanism (ESM). There has been a heated debate in Germany – reflected until today in the proposal of abolishing the ESM put forward by the Free Democratic Party in its 2017 election platform – whether this rescue mechanism violates the no-bailout clause, although the ESM actually provides for a development logically complementing the no-bailout clause. The no-bailout requirement prevents member states from being forced to help another member state in financial troubles. Given that the ECB is not allowed to bail out such a member state either, that country runs into default. A subsequent restructuring of its government debt is more easily achieved if a liquidity mechanism provides financial resources to allow the proper functioning of the institutions of that country until an agreement about restructuring is reached. The credit lines of the ESM should be accompanied by an adjustment program. Thus, the provision of finances by the ESM does not violate the no-bailout rule in particular if it is completed by a restructuring mechanism (Andritzky et al. 2016).

In other respects, pragmatism and national interests characterize German policy during the Eurozone crisis even more strongly. Evidence for pragmatism are the Greek rescue packages and the acceptance of the ECB’s monetary policy. Regarding Greece, the German government did not only endorse three different programs although the discussions in the public were extremely critical (Sinn 2014). It even remained engaged after the Greek government reneged on the agreed upon adjustment program (German Council of Economic Experts 2015b). Regarding monetary policy of the ECB, it defended the Outright Monetary Transactions (OMT)

at the Federal Constitutional Court against several complaints although this program interferes into fiscal policies of member states (Kronberger Kreis 2016). The German government still supports monetary policy of the ECB and respects its decisions about Quantitative Easing (QE), although monetary conduct is too expansionary for Germany and induces misallocations. It remains to be seen what the most recent decision of the Federal Constitutional Court to seek a decision of the European Court of Justice (ECJ) regarding QE will finally lead to.

Evidence that German national interests play a role exists mainly in the area of fiscal policy. German governments have consistently rejected any proposal for mutualization of government debt whereas the German Council of Economic Experts (2012) proposed a debt redemption pact in an attempt to guard the ECB from being too much involved in fiscal policies. The government obviously fears that it will finally be liable for public debt of other member states. In the discussions about the creation of a fiscal capacity at the EU level, the government has rejected anything to date. It is still reluctant to accept proposals for a fiscal backstop to the Single Resolution Fund (SRF). In these cases, the liability principle might provide an argument for the German government, but it certainly aims at sheltering its financial position.

5. What Can We Expect?

Overall, government policy during the Great Recession and the Eurozone crisis in Germany is not dominated by ordoliberalism. During the Great Recession, the German government bailed out its banks in order to avoid a meltdown of the financial system, just like other countries did, in particular the United States. Similarly, Germany conducted expansionary fiscal policy during the years 2008 and 2009, e.g., a cash-for-clunkers scheme, in addition to the automatic stabilizers that are much higher than in the U.S. During the Eurozone crisis, Germany showed its pragmatism in several respects, mainly regarding monetary policy or the Greek rescue packages, but also the ESM. Even in the case of banking union, most closely related to ordoliberal thinking, Germany finally accepted several pragmatic compromises (Schäfer 2016). It must be acknowledged that, with the exception of Greece, adjustment programs have been successful. Ireland, Portugal and Spain are in much better situations than Italy, which still struggles with adverse political conditions to conduct reforms.

Against this background, the responsibility for fiscal and economic policy in EMU will largely remain in the autonomy of member states. German governments will continue to be reluctant to accept any mutualization of government debt or any notable fiscal capacity at the EU level. Recent German proposals to develop the ESM to a European Monetary Fund mainly aim at

ensuring a stronger compliance with fiscal rules and establishing a restructuring mechanism (Andritzky et al. 2016). Moreover, the doom loop between banks and sovereigns should be weakened by de-privileging government debt. Government bonds and other loans to governments should be risk-weighted and there should be large exposure limits to sovereigns. This would certainly have effects on German banks and jurisdictions as well, but it would enhance the credibility of the no-bailout clause.²

Ordoliberalism influences German macroeconomists very little. It may have played a stronger role in previous times, but these times are long gone. Perhaps, economic policy in Germany emphasizes rules more strongly in the rules vs. discretion debate than other countries would (Brunnermeier, James and Landau 2016). However, as economic policy in the past illustrates, German economic and fiscal policies easily deviate from such rule-guided behavior whenever national interests or particular political considerations become dominant. Hasn't it been Germany that did not comply with the SGP and that put effort in its reform in 2005? Finally, German economic policy is as pragmatic as U.S. economic policy.

By the way, if we follow the assumption that responsible fiscal policy must be considered “ordoliberal”, we cannot help but notice that Eucken’s ideas are gaining ground in the Bank for International Settlements as well. In their 2016 annual report, the bank explicitly cautions against the further accumulation of debt: “The global economy cannot afford to rely any longer on the debt-fueled growth model that has brought it to the current juncture” (2016, p. 22). Has the morbus Eucken spread to Basel, too?

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