

## Wolfgang J. Mommsen: A British Appreciation

Sam Whimster

It is difficult to explain how Wolfgang J. Mommsen came to exercise such an enormous influence within the academic world of the United Kingdom. To an extent his reputation came before him. *Max Weber und die deutsche Politik* had been published in 1959 and almost immediately he was designated the *enfant terrible* of German academia. As the ageing torchbearer of the German Gelehrter tradition Karl Jaspers wrote to Hannah Arendt, 'A young man from the Mommsen family recently wrote an important book about Max Weber's politics...characterising him as a representative of imperialism and, by virtue of his mode of thought, as someone who prepared the way for Hitler'. Mommsen's book did not say that. But that was its reputation first in Germany and also in Britain in the early 1970s, even though it was never translated into English until 1984, by which time its academic and political effect had already been somewhat discounted.

In his doctoral research Mommsen unearthed a profuse letter trail that showed beyond question that Weber throughout his life had been a committed and uncompromising nationalist and, in Mommsen's formulation, that the values and structures of the nation took precedence over those of democracy. In Germany *Max Weber und die deutsche Politik* was a deeply transgressive book. Mommsen had gone over the border to Merseburg in the German Democratic Republic, where the Prussian State Archive was located, and discovered a major part of the Weber 'Nachlass'. Mommsen later reported that his supervisor, Theodor Schieder, was at first disbelieving about the content of Weber's political letters. The book caused an enormous shock at a time when no less an eminence as Theodor Heuss, then President of Germany's Federal Republic, had written a preface to Winckelmann's edition of Weber's collected political writings. Heuss, like Winckelmann, had portrayed Weber as an untainted liberal, a figure whom present-day Germans could look upon without embarrassment. Inevitably Mommsen's book unleashed a huge controversy and it is worth indicating just how multi-layered that controversy was. It was clearly a generational conflict: a father and son conflict