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Fabricating the 'dual system'. Conservative resistance against progressive TVET reforms in West Germany 1969–1982

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ABSTRACT

Over recent years, mainstream literature on TVET system development has presented an idealised picture of institutional evolution. In doing so, the social forces that shape history – namely, the various interest groups – are relegated to the background, as if the outcome of the story were never really in doubt, whilst the contributions of educational actors are especially neglected. This is especially true for the internationally much-admired German dual system. This paper challenges such deterministic narratives by focusing on the so-called 'reform era' – a period in West German educational history when the dual system was explicitly contested by progressive institutional actors and academics. Simultaneously, this contestation met with conservative resistance from actors seeking to preserve the status quo. The paper draws on archival evidence from conservative actors, including correspondence, published statements, policy papers and newspaper articles; whilst drawing on scholarly texts to present academic voices. The paper concludes by discussing the empirical and theoretical implications for TVET research and theorisation that can be drawn from this period, during which progressive idealism and conservative resistance openly clashed.

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1. Introduction

On 16 May 1997, members of the North-Rhine Westphalia parliament, in the most populous of Germany's 16 federal states, discussed a bill ending an era in German educational history. The *Kollegstufe*, a 20-year-long school experiment to reframe the relationship between general and vocational education, was facing closure. This school was a symbol of an era, peaking from the late 1960s to the mid-1970s, during which the educational system, and with it the TVET system in West Germany, was radically challenged by ambitious attempts at reform. Simultaneously, a new Vocational Training Act (VTA) was strongly demanded and discussed by progressive politicians and academics, trade unionists and apprentices during most of the 1970s further challenging the *status quo*. These specific reform attempts coincided with profound political, social, and cultural upheaval across much of the Western world, including a growing critique of authoritarian

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structures, a generational push for democratisation, and increasing demands for social mobility and educational equality. In West Germany, calls for permeability between vocational and general education, comprehensive schooling, and curriculum modernisation reflected beliefs that education should sustain post-war social progress. Progressive politicians and scholars alike expressed optimism about the reforms, with public support and history apparently on their side: anything seemed possible and plannable. Yet these ambitious goals were not achieved.

The significance of the eventual failure of the reforms reported here goes far beyond one specific historical outcome. Empirically, this paper challenges the presentation of Germany's totemic 'dual training' as the product of a relatively harmonious social partnership, a unitarist concept supported by a broad and growing literature across that spans the social sciences. The paper draws on source material evidencing the systematic attempts of employers to undermine these reforms. It highlights the contested positions by these actors and reveals their underlying ideological assumptions that were widespread in this group. Such ideologies, if seldom expressed openly, continue to influence the discourse on TVET in Germany.

Theoretically, our paper calls into question the influential theorisation of 'skills formation systems' and its account of a 'collectivist' approach to vocational education that balances the interests of institutional actors. This account has informed multiple leading accounts of the genesis and evolution of TVET systems (e.g. Busemeyer 2016; Busemeyer and Christine 2012) whilst providing researchers with frameworks to explain the field (e.g. Clarke, Westerhuis, and Winch 2020; Valiente, Sepúlveda, and Zancajo 2021). Following this theorisation, the story of the reform era, and indeed of 'dual training', is told as if the outcome was never really in doubt, obscuring the genuine uncertainty, contestation, and alternative futures that were foreclosed by the active resistance of employers. Historical institutionalism, exemplified by Thelen's (2004) study of Germany's 'political economy of skill', acknowledges the ideological and political battles that shaped Germany's dual system but narrates its outcomes as predictable consequences of institutional constraints and rational strategic behaviour. Whilst Thelen (2004) has comprehensively dismissed the functionalism of much comparative work, including from the 'Varieties of Capitalism' school, and drawn attention to the threat of a 'segmentalist' erosion of the dual system (e.g. Thelen 2014; Thelen and Busemeyer 2012), such concerns centre on the survival of the institutional form and its (partial) replacement by the neoliberal norm of the 'liberal market economy' (see also Hall and Soskice 2003). By contrast, we argue that employer resistance is also endemic to the 'collectivist' systems widely endorsed as an alternative to the drive towards neoliberalism. Claus Offe, who discussed at an early stage the tensions inherent in the dual system and its legislation (Offe 1975), conceptualised education within welfare states subject to regular attacks from the economic systems whose irrationalities they seek to compensate (Offe 1984).

Pilon (2021) argues that historical institutionalism itself tends to adopt a positivist lens, reducing historical inquiry to the identification of causal mechanisms whilst downplaying interpretive depth. Historical institutionalism may find its analytical limits when comparing European countries during the reform era. Friedeburg (1989) observed that, despite sharing similar historical roots in apprenticeship systems, many European countries succeeded in implementing educational reforms within TVET that West Germany did not. Friedeburg's observation raises

the need for a deeper historical inquiry into the ideological and power dynamics at play. The shift from reform euphoria to conservative revisionism is a recurring pattern in German educational history (Friedeburg 1989, 9), as is the role of employer and industry associations during TVET reform attempts (Friedeburg 1989, 247–248).

Yet in much of the mainstream literature on TVET system development, historical actors all but disappear, their conflicts, intentions, and struggles reduced to faceless abstractions within institutional trajectories. Edward Thompson (1966) noted that history is not the unfolding of predetermined paths but the contested making of social relations by real actors. In this paper, we follow Thompson's observation on the agency of history in bringing together contributions by engaged politicians, industry, and scholars, examining the ideologies underpinning the various positions of these actors during the reform era. Approaches to comparative TVET, not least political economy, largely neglect the significance of educational settings and educational actors (Frommberger & Porcher 2023). The significance of workplace settings, where young people spend substantial amounts of time in systems of 'dual training', can be overstated, described by Gonon (2014, 1) as the 'specific superficial structure of a more work-based VET' at the expense of questions of governance. The concrete questions of curriculum, qualifications, progression and educational practice that directly determine the outcomes for young people within TVET systems reflect the struggles of policy actors and social partners but also of educational actors.

Scholars of education and TVET, often regarded as figures rather distant from the field of action, form the second group of social actors who shaped the reform era. As a further original contribution to discussion of Germany's dual system, our paper identifies the central role played by educational theory in the political debates of the time. Herwig Blankertz (1927–1983) was a leading figure not only in the conceptualisation but in the practical implementation and evaluation of these educational forms (Esmond, Schmees, and Wedekind 2026, in press, p. 54ff.). Jürgen Zabeck (1931–2014) also published extensively on the reforms, expressing scepticism and criticism, especially of Blankertz's work. The direct interventions of scholars in these policy debates are in marked contrast to the usual abstraction of scholarship from real political struggle but are also powerfully indicative of the way that ideas generated in the sphere of educational research not only reflect but in turn influence developments in the field of practice, including within the sphere of production.

This paper proceeds as follows: section 2 presents and discusses our extensive source material. An insight into the reform era, the envisioned frameworks for a new educational system in West Germany, and the political discussion that followed is subject to section 3. The paper then proceeds with the empirical analysis: section 4 presents the arguments made by employer and industry associations against the TVET reforms, especially against a new VTA, while section 5 will show how scholars of (vocational) education engaged in scholarly and political debate during this period, revealing how academic work itself can become a site of conflict directly related to struggles over practice, in turn affecting the outcomes at policy and institutional levels. Finally, section 6 will present our conclusions about the implications of this study for the future of vocational education and its theorisation.

2. Source material

In focusing on both political and academic debate during the reform era, we draw from archival sources as well as published works authored by industry associations and scholars of TVET. Newspaper articles covering the political debate of the period serve as a third, although smaller category of sources in this paper.

The resistance of German industry to the VTA reform was coordinated by the *Kuratorium der Deutschen Wirtschaft für Berufsbildung* (KWB) [German Industry Council for TVET], an umbrella organisation established in 1970 by various industry lobbying associations and still active today. The KWB functioned as a central coordinating body through which member associations circulated position papers, internal correspondence, media talking points, and commentaries on parliamentary debates. The surviving archival material, held primarily in the *Rheinisch-Westfälisches Wirtschaftsarchiv* in Cologne, covers the years 1973 to 1980, when the most intense debate on a new Vocational Training Act took place in West Germany. It includes confidential memoranda, draft position papers, letters between leading industry figures, and annotated records of parliamentary debates.

For the academic sphere we draw attention to two scholars of West German vocational education studies who engaged actively in the reform period and fit well into this conceptual framework are Herwig Blankertz (1927–1983) and Jürgen Zabeck (1931–2014). Both shared similar formative experiences in their youth and rose quickly in academia, attaining professorships in education at a relatively young age – Blankertz in 1963, Zabeck in 1969. Their interventions in the reform debate were not confined to scholarly publications but extended to public forums, including presentations at events organised by lobby groups. Most significantly, they maintained a direct correspondence in which they confronted their opposing interpretations of vocational education. Preserved in the archives of the University of Münster, this exchange exposes both a personal and intellectual rivalry and the wider ideological divide of the reform era, with Blankertz symbolising progressive reform and Zabeck conservative resistance.

3. From reform enthusiasm to pragmatism: historical contextualization of the reform era

The dual system has emerged from a battle of dominance and ideology extending over decades (Blankertz 2025), which becomes evident when considering the debate over the statutory framework of TVET. The first attempt to restructure the educational system in Germany by introducing new laws was amid the revolution of 1918/19, which saw the collapse of the old social order. Trade unions pushed for a reform of vocational training by introducing a uniform Vocational Training Act (VTA). Due to conservative resistance, especially by industry associations, this VTA was never passed (Porcher and Frommberger, 2026). After World War II, the trade unions, in alliance with the Social Democratic Party (SPD), once again pressed for a uniform VTA. After more than two decades of debate, the West German *Bundestag* finally passed the VTA in 1969 (Pätzold 1982).

The VTA can be regarded as the legal foundation of the modern dual system. Much of the academic literature portrays its adoption as the rational outcome of a historically evolved consensus among key stakeholders (e. g. Deißinger and Gonon 2021). For these

authors, 1969 represents the point at which these social actors came together to fabricate (in the manufacturing sense) a compromise that served the interests of all parties involved. In practice, the VTA faced immediate criticism from various interest groups. These critics regarded the VTA not as a progressive reform but as a codification of the status quo – failing to improve training quality or meaningfully integrate vocational and general education (e. g. Heyder 1971, 88–89; Lempert 1971; Offe 1975).

To understand the immediate debates and the sharp criticism directed at the VTA and the TVET system in the 1970s, it is necessary to situate them within their broader historical context. Historians of German cultural and political history often frame the period from the 1960s to the early 1980s as a period associated with far-reaching social, cultural, and political upheaval across much of the industrialised West on the one hand, but as the rise of conservative counter-movements, alongside economic recession and high unemployment on the other hand.

Across many Western societies, traditional authority structures – whether rooted in racial segregation, patriarchal norms, or hierarchical political institutions – faced unprecedented challenges. Mass movements championed ideals of equality, justice, and self-determination, calling for liberation, peace, and participatory democracy. In West Germany, this spirit of reform was expressed more vividly in the field of education than in any other political arena in West Germany (Rudolff 2005; Später 2024, 190–211). Since the early 1960s, the principle of equal opportunities through education had appeared – albeit in differing formulations – in nearly every party programme (Krenkmann 2000, 414). Educational reform thus emerged as perhaps the most emblematic political project of this time (Doering-Manteuffel and Raphael 2008, 22).

A symbol of this political project was the *Deutsche Bildungsrat* [German Education Council], a national advisory board of academics established by the Federal Government and the state governments (*Länder*) that ran from 1966–1975 (Gessler and Howe 2015). The *Bildungsrat* published the highly influential structural plan in 1970. While the initial phase of educational reform focused on expanding the education system within the existing structures in order to meet the growing demand for higher qualifications, it was advised by the Education Council to restructure the West German education system. The structural plan envisaged, among other things, a restructuring of the three-tier school system, the abolishment of the *Gymnasium* – the school that is closely related to elitism and social injustice – in favour of *Gesamtschule* [comprehensive schools], and a convergence of general and vocational education (Rudolff 2005, 275–80).

The individual TVET reform initiatives varied in scope, with some confined to individual federal states or *Länder* and others debated at the national level. However, they were united by common principles. At their core was the ambition to narrow the divide between general and vocational education, often framed as bridging the gap between school and workshop, theory and practice. To this end, reforms sought to modernise training regulations, expand vocational schools, and strengthen links between company-based training and classroom instruction. A central guiding idea was *Wissenschaftsorientierung*, the effort to base vocational curricula more strongly on scientific knowledge and systematic theory. The *Bildungsrat* called for *Wissenschaftsorientierung* at all levels of education in its *Strukturplan* published in 1970 (Deutscher Bildungsrat 1970). This orientation not only elevated vocational training but also challenged the traditional notion of a non-

utilitarian general education, redefining theoretical learning as directly relevant for work and professional life. Pilot projects such as the *Kollegstufe* experimented with comprehensive school models that combined academic and vocational elements, while federal legislation attempted to standardise curricula and improve the status of vocational qualifications. Taken together, these efforts reflected a broad consensus that vocational education should not remain a second-tier track but instead offer permeability, modern skills, and closer alignment with the needs of a rapidly changing economy.

Up until the early 1970s it seemed that the progression towards a more just, democratic, and wealthy society through reform was inevitable. Public opinion seemed to agree, as the re-election of Chancellor Willy Brandt (Social Democratic Party) in 1972 highlights. The Social Democratic Party became the largest party in parliament for the first time since 1930, and the progressive coalition gained a large majority to further push their reform agenda. However, in the wake of the global economic downturn triggered by the 1973 oil crisis confidence in state-led economic management waned and as fiscal pressure and social conflict intensified, conditions became increasingly favourable to the emergence of a new political discourse that emphasised market liberalisation, individual responsibility, and the reassertion of traditional values. In West-Germany, as in many Western nations, this led to a retreat from comprehensive policy agendas and a turn towards incremental, pragmatic approaches in the face of mounting inflation, unemployment, and fiscal constraints (Frese and Julia 2005, 9).This retreat into cautious policy-making not only marked the end of the ambitious reform spirit of the post-war decades, but also paved the way for a broader ideological shift. It 'was a decisive international transition period during which traditional, collective-oriented socio-economic interest and welfare policies were increasingly replaced by the more individually and (neo)liberally oriented value policies of the post-industrial epoch' (Villaume et al. 2016, 1).

The term *Tendenzwende* [tendency reversal] began circulating in the mid-1970s. Originally coined in conservative networks (Wehrs 2010, 91), it soon came to symbolise the growing public scepticism – if not outright hostility – towards reform politics. Progressive intellectuals, sensing a shift in political mood, began to warn of a broader restorative trend. Many of the earlier reforms, particularly in education, were subsequently revised or abandoned under mounting public and political pressure, often flanked by conservative voices (91–93).

4. The reform of the vocational training act and the resistance by industry

Although the reform era cannot be reduced to a single legislative initiative, its most salient and contested project concerned the reform of the Vocational Training Act (VTA), which became the subject of debate almost immediately following its enactment in 1969. In his inaugural government declaration, the newly elected Chancellor Willy Brandt of the Social Democratic Party identified the modernisation of the educational system as the foremost priority of his administration. While this commitment remained relatively indeterminate in 1969, Brandt, upon his re-election in 1972, explicitly highlighted the VTA and underscored the necessity of its revision in a subsequent government statement. Brandt's coalition agreed that vocational training must be a matter of state responsibility by signing a statement that the quality of vocational education would no longer be left

primarily to the judgement of private enterprises. However, the material and financial commitment of industry would continue to be maintained and encouraged. Equal participation, co-determination, and shared responsibility would be ensured (Die Zeit 1974a, 1974b).

In 1973, the Federal Ministry of Education published the *Markierungspunkte*, a programmatic position paper that delineated the government's conception of the dual system within the framework of a modern, democratic society. The document articulated a clear objective of fostering greater integration between vocational and general education in order to enhance social mobility and systemic permeability. At its core, the reform agenda aimed at improving the qualitative standards of apprenticeships, a goal that, in the government's view, presupposed an expansion of state regulatory authority.

The *Markierungspunkte* were heavily discussed. The chemical industry association, [*Arbeitsring Chemie*], argued that certain aspects of the *Markierungspunkte* were influenced by comprehensivist approaches to vocational education, associated with Herwig Blankertz's theory, which introduced school-like educational expectations into apprenticeships. The call for increased theoretical education, they argued, would lead to apprentices spending more time in vocational schools, thereby reducing the time available for practical training within companies. The association further claimed that additional time spent in vocational schools would also allow left-leaning teachers to promote a political agenda to the apprentices (Leiter der Arbeitskreise des Berufsbildungsausschusses des Arbeitsrings Chemie 1974).

Despite this criticism, the 1973 *Markierungspunkte* influenced the development of a first draft of the new VTA, which became public in February 1974. It faced harsh criticism by the industry. An article in a large German newspaper cited leading organisations of Germany's economy outraged by the draft, with numerous industry representatives expressing their fear of 'nationalization' of apprenticeships, stating that they no longer want to participate in the dual system (Die Zeit 1974b). In fact, the fear of nationalisation, a school-like reorganisation of apprenticeships, and the eventual loss of employees' predominant position in the dual system is well-documented, as shown in opinion pieces written by member associations of the German Industry Council for TVET and sent to management of large companies (KWB 1974a). In April 1974, the draft document was withdrawn by the Ministry of Education, and soon the administration argued that the paper was in fact no official draft bill of a new VTA. A German newspaper interpreted this as a retraction and a caving in by the Ministry (Die Zeit 1974b).

It was during this debate that the characteristics of the tendency reversal became empirically evident, even within the governing coalition. A news article from April 1974 highlighted the role of the coalition partner, the FDP – the liberal party that gradually shifted its programme towards a neoliberal agenda during the 1970s. The article described how the FDP engaged with industry associations and aligned itself with opponents of the VTA reform efforts. This was striking, as the *Markierungspunkte* had been regarded as a coalition agreement between the SPD and FDP (Die Zeit 1974a). Given that both parties had endorsed the aforementioned statement by Chancellor Willy Brandt, this episode illustrates the profound tensions that emerged during this time. Federal Minister of Education Helmut Rohde (SPD) was consequently described as the last of the Mohicans due to his undeterred belief in the success of progressive vocational education

reform efforts, while the Federal Finance Minister Hans Friderichs (FDP) criticised him, his enthusiasm, and the VTA reform (Grunenberg 1974).

When a revised draft became public, documents suggest that the industry, united under the German Industry Council for TVET, was pleased to acknowledge certain improvements. A document, most likely edited for all member associations, outlines the revisions while also reiterating key points of criticism. The industry welcomed the retraction of excessive demands on apprenticeships. For example, while the first draft required standardised, state-organised examinations for workplace trainers – testing both professional and pedagogical suitability – the revised draft softened this requirement, referring only vaguely to examinations that could be substituted with various alternatives. The most striking change, however, was that oversight of these examinations was handed back to the chambers. It also appreciated that the draft no longer cited civic education as the primary goal of apprenticeships. The document criticises this goal as belonging to general education rather than vocational training and welcomes the shift in emphasis towards vocational qualification as the main objective. Additionally, the document acknowledges that the draft no longer describes vocational education as serving the common good – a phrasing the industry feared could justify increased state control over apprenticeships (KWB 1974b).

Nevertheless, some criticism remained. One point of contention was the requirement for workplace trainers to guarantee the success of the apprenticeship. The text raises the rhetorical question: should a trainer be expected to provide private tutoring to a less gifted apprentice? Industry also continued to express concern about the potential *Verschulung* of apprenticeships – that is, the fear that the reform of the VTA would impose school-like, educational requirements on companies. For instance, employers criticised the stipulation that training regulations – the curriculum for in-company training within the dual system – must align with the vocational school curriculum, rather than the other way around (KWB 1974b).

In 1976, a bill to reform the VTA was introduced and passed in the *Bundestag* with the support of the governing coalition. However, because this bill also affected the school system – a domain constitutionally under the jurisdiction of the federal states (*Länder*) – it required the approval of the *Bundesrat*, where the conservative opposition held a majority. There, the bill was rejected. It appears that industry was prepared for this event. In May 1976, the *Hauptgemeinschaft des Deutschen Einzelhandels* [German Trade Association] wrote a letter to its members. The letter mentions that the Chancellor Helmut Schmidt – who became Willy Brandt's successor in 1974 – and Minister of Education Helmut Rohde met with officials of the Trade Unions, and that they probably discussed a strategy in case the VTA bill fails in the *Bundesrat*. The German Trade Association predicted that industry and its lobby groups would be blamed for the failed bill. In response, they provided eleven arguments to be used when engaging with journalists. Once again, the usual arguments against a trend towards nationalisation were raised. The preference for practical knowledge over theoretical knowledge is also evident, as the requirements to become a certified trainer under the new VTA were changed to a more standardised curriculum and state examinations. The employers, however, insisted that extensive practical experience, rather than formal education, should remain the primary qualification for becoming a trainer (Hauptgemeinschaft des Deutschen Einzelhandels 1976).

Similar arguments were sent by the *Zentralverband des Deutschen Handwerks* [German Confederation of Skilled Crafts]. Once again, the rhetoric emphasised the dangers of nationalisation and the erosion of practical training. The preference for hands-on experience over formal credentials was also reiterated. The Confederation demands that vocational education must maintain its autonomy, serving its distinct function within the educational system, and this function is to provide a skilled labour force for the industry (Zentralverband des Deutschen Handwerks 1976).

Following the failure of the reform bill in the *Bundesrat*, industry associations promptly issued a press release that distilled their core message: the failed reform was evidence that there is no alternative to the existing dual system. This assertion was more than a policy preference – it was an ideological statement. By framing the dual system as irreplaceable, industry representatives positioned it not simply as one model among others, but as the only viable framework for vocational education in a modern industrial economy. This rhetoric served to delegitimize reform proposals by equating change with destabilisation. Any attempt to re-balance theoretical and practical education, to integrate general and vocational education content, or to expand public oversight was interpreted not as progress, but as a direct threat to the efficiency and autonomy of the system (KWB 1976).

However, the proponents of the reforms, especially Federal Minister of Education Helmut Rohde seemed also prepared for the event of the failing VTA. As documented in the *Bundesrat* debate, Rohde appeared undeterred: the no to the reform bill can only delay the solution; it cannot stop it (Bundesrat 1976, 183). Indeed, the federal government soon introduced a revised bill to reform the VTA – this time, however, focused not on structural reform but on changing the financing mechanisms of dual training. This bill passed the *Bundestag*, and the government argued it did not require *Bundesrat* approval. However, in 1980, the *Bundesverfassungsgericht* [Federal Constitutional Court] ruled the bill as unconstitutional due to this incorrect interpretation of legislative procedure. The follow-up legislation of 1981 was far less ambitious. It limited itself to defining the role of the *Bundesinstitut für Berufsbildung* [Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training], rather than enacting broader structural reforms. These later efforts reflected the waning idealism of the earlier decade. No longer driven by a vision of a more equitable society, associated with the 'Long Sixties', educational reforms during the 'Long Seventies' became more technocratic and politically cautious (Villaume, Rasmus, and Helle 2016).

Industry associations, however, continued to voice concerns that educational policymakers sought to gradually nationalise the dual system (1977). The discourse surrounding the issue assumed a less confrontational tone only after the VTA reform process formally ended in 1980, when the bill was declared unconstitutional and political priorities had clearly shifted. In the end, industry interests prevailed, securing both institutional autonomy and the preservation of their dominant role within the dual system.

5. The turning point of West German TVET theory: emancipation or functionalization?

The reform era was marked not only by institutional change but also by a rethinking of the role of knowledge and expertise in democratic societies. Educational scholars did not confine themselves to academic settings; they acted as public intellectuals (Später 2024),

advising ministries, unions, and employers' associations while intervening in parliamentary hearings and mainstream debates. Some provided theoretical and empirical backing for reformist projects, while others raised doubts about their feasibility or ideological direction. Hans-Ulrich Wehler describes those who rose to leadership positions at universities in the 1960s as a striking exception. Although they were primarily scientists, they did not shy away from public debate (Wehler 2008, 188). Those who turned to academia as a profession did so with unbridled intensity, often with success, but at the same time they entered the arena of political debate, with rules very different from those in academia, in order to publicly defend their opinions (Wehler 2005, 138).

One way to situate such figures is as part of the so-called '45ers' (Moses 2007): West German intellectuals born in the 1920s or early 1930s who were shaped by their youth under National Socialism, yet began their professional lives after 1945. Many of them advanced quickly into the elite circles of the young West German democracy, becoming professors at a relatively young age. Marked by their early life experience, they were determined to contribute productively to the building of a new German society. While united in their commitment to democracy, they disagreed over how the Nazi past should shape the present. Some stressed continuity with established cultural and intellectual traditions, seeking stability and moderation. Others insisted that 1945 marked a profound rupture that required a thorough re-founding of German society on new democratic and egalitarian principles. In the field of vocational educational studies, this divide was particularly visible: it shaped whether scholars saw reforms as pragmatic adjustments to an established system or as opportunities for structural transformation.

Herwig Blankertz became a leading figure of the progressive '45ers' in vocational education studies, arguing for a structural transformation. Even as a young academic, Blankertz began to make a name for himself through critical analyses of the methodology of vocational education studies, which he viewed as being too metaphysical and conservative (Blankertz 1961). Around this time, Blankertz began to turn his attention to Critical Theory. The premise of his research was to enable all social classes to participate in the democratic process, and he viewed the educational structures, especially the dual system as unfitting for this aim.

Blankertz's contribution to the discourse of TVET theory must be understood from his historical works. He distinguished himself by applying the concept of critique of ideology that broke with much of the conventional historiography of vocational education of his time. His work is notable for combining elements of the emerging Marxist-inspired, structural history with more traditional narrative history. This mediating position enabled him to craft a history that was at once critical and programmatic. He developed a narrative of modernisation at the centre of his historical reconstruction of the dual system (Blankertz 2025), aligning with the conviction of inevitable progress in history that was prevalent by reform proponents. Blankertz interpreted the 19th century as a moment when general and vocational education had initially converged under the pressures of industrialisation, only to be driven apart by reactionary school policies and middle-class ideology later in the century. In highlighting this divergence, he implicitly legitimised the contemporary reform goal of overcoming the schism between general and vocational education. On this ground, Blankertz claimed the irrevocable dissolvement of the separation between general and vocational education (Blankertz 1967, 410). His academic writing thus functioned less as detached scholarship and more as a contribution to

ongoing debates, reinforcing the educational experiments and reform projects in which he was directly involved.

Political developments in North Rhine-Westphalia, the state where Blankertz was a professor at the University of Münster from 1969 until his sudden death in 1983, did not differ significantly from those in the other states during the reform era. The SPD governed in a social-liberal coalition from 1966 onwards. Under this government, ambitious reforms were initiated that were not limited to the education system. From an educational policy perspective and with an interest in vocational education, North Rhine-Westphalia nevertheless plays a special role, as the reform of secondary education initiated there appears almost revolutionary in its objectives, even if the *Kollegstufe* is indistinguishable in terms of performance from other upper secondary reforms in other states at that time. However, it is precisely the objective of removing the separation between general and vocational education in the school system that makes this experiment so special. The *Kollegstufe*, which envisaged the establishment of schools integrating upper secondary schools and vocational schools, i.e. full-time and part-time schools, was intended to contribute to equality and equal opportunities. The most important instrument for this was the awarding of dual qualifications in the form of vocational qualifications and university entrance qualification.

Commissioned by the Ministry of Education in 1970, a planning commission was formed whose mission was to plan the *Kollegstufe*, and it was chaired by Blankertz. He began to incorporate the work and findings of the planning commission into the educational discourse. With the *Kollegstufe* becoming increasingly concrete, Blankertz announced: it must be said without beating about the bush: with the *Kollegstufe*, the *Gymnasium* has ceased to exist (Blankertz 1972a, 18). Elsewhere, he spoke of the end of the *Gymnasium* and the vocational school that the *Kollegstufe* would usher in (Blankertz 1972b). Blankertz also criticised many scholars of vocational education studies for their pretence of being apolitical (Blankertz 1973). At the same time, however, strong criticism of Blankertz and the educational reforms began to emerge within the academic community and the political and public sphere.

When the general planning euphoria of the early 1970s gradually subsided, scepticism towards political planning set in and a neoliberal turn was on the horizon (Frese and Julia 2005, 10–11). Criticism of the educational reforms also seemed to intensify. Conservative reaction began to become increasingly influential, and education policy became a battlefield on which a culture war for interpretive power and political-cultural hegemony was fought (Später 2024, 193). This was the time when the harshest academic critic of Blankertz and the reforms appeared: Jürgen Zabeck.

While Blankertz was a leading figure in the application of Critical Theory to education, Zabeck, on the other hand, developed into a supporter of Critical Rationalism during the reform period. When he took up his first professorship at the *Freie Universität Berlin* in 1969 – as the successor of Blankertz – he was quickly confronted with the movement of student protest, which included disruption to lectures and sometimes physical attacks on professors considered to be right-wing. Zabeck is also said to have been the victim of such an attack (Beck, Deißinger, and Müller 2014, 436). During this time, Zabeck began to increasingly criticise the attempts at vocational education reform at the time, receiving and applying a liberal-conservative ideology (Porcher 2025a). According to Zabeck, most reform approaches aimed to eliminate the existing and proven social and economic order.

He attacked the planning commission for the *Kollegstufe* and compared its didactical concept with those existing in communist dictatorships (Zabeck 1975b, 128).

Like Blankertz, Zabeck positioned himself as a leading voice in the historiography of vocational education, but he sharply rejected Blankertz's interpretation. Whereas Blankertz argued that the roots of vocational schools could be traced to neo-humanist traditions, Zabeck dismissed this as a misreading of early nineteenth-century educational thought. For him, there was no substantive link between neo-humanism and vocational education. Instead, he focused on the classical theorists of vocational education – such as Georg Kerschensteiner and Eduard Spranger – and criticised traditional vocational theory for clinging to an overly idealised and abstract notion of work. In response, Zabeck sought to strip vocational education theory of ideological overlays, though in practice his critiques were directed above all against Marxist and neo-Marxist approaches (Zabeck 1975a).

From this point, Zabeck develops his general didactic concept of vocational education, which is oriented towards functionality and the preservation of the overall social system. He insists that vocational education studies must take the reality of the world of work as its starting point and ground didactical theories in the actual demands of working life. The guiding question for vocational education, according to Zabeck, is: what skills will workers need in the future in order to maintain their value in the labour market? The task of educational research, in Zabeck's view, is to identify these future skill requirements, translate them into a coherent didactic theory, and provide guidance for teachers and trainers. On this basis, Zabeck argues that vocational education – and especially the dual system – fulfils two central functions in society: the qualification function, i.e. the transmission of skills and knowledge required for the performance of concrete work; and the allocation function, i.e. the distribution of individuals into occupational positions according to the needs of the social division of labour (Porcher 2025a).

Zabeck's position is thus a fundamentally conservative one. He explicitly rejected reform initiatives that sought to integrate general and vocational education at the upper secondary level – such as the *Kollegstufe* – arguing that such projects ignored the specific educational tasks of vocational education and were therefore doomed to failure. In characteristic rhetorical exaggeration, he even warned that such reforms would produce troublemakers and ultimately threaten the collapse of the free democratic system (Zabeck 1975a). This sharp rejection of emancipatory ambitions in vocational education illustrates how Zabeck's system-preserving functionalism stood in direct opposition to Blankertz's attempt to legitimise reforms through historical and ideological critique. At the same time, Zabeck's stance also signalled the broader direction in which the field of vocational education theory was moving: away from reformist and emancipatory projects and towards a model of functionalization, in which the value of vocational education was measured by its capacity to maintain social order and serve the needs of the labour market.

However, the confrontation between these two poles during the reform era was not limited to scholarly publications. Blankertz and Zabeck maintained a more or less intensive correspondence over the years. It began with the submission of Zabeck's dissertation to Blankertz and a review by Zabeck of one of Blankertz's historiographical works (Blankertz 1963). Over time, discussions of questions in the philosophy of science and the history of education developed into a respectful exchange. It is evident how Blankertz

supported Zabeck's academic career and how pleased he was when Zabeck became his successor in Berlin in 1969. Yet from 1971 onward, a rupture appears in their correspondence: the ideological divide becomes clearly visible.

In a letter to Zabeck, Blankertz expressed anger:

> Although I never assumed that our views were entirely identical, I did believe that we had reached a level of understanding with regard to fundamental scientific premises and the assessment of the political and social function of our discipline. In any case, you have given me ample reason to assess the situation in this way [. . .]. I had to assume that you did not consider yourself conservative [. . .] (Blankertz to Zabeck, 11 January 1971).

This break in their exchange can be traced to a meeting in which Blankertz had remarked that a didactical theory must ensure students do not become '*Kapitalismusknechte*' [servants of capitalism]. While Blankertz seems to have framed this as a humorous aside with a reformist undertone, Zabeck took strong exception. In his subsequent letter, he admitted that his objections might have sounded somewhat irritable, but explained this by pointing to his growing aversion to what he regarded as the frivolous squandering of society's fundamental principles. He rejected the notion that socio-political positions lying to the left of prevailing social democratic policy could provide the basis for vocational education, calling Blankertz's remarks as a vision of society painted in the colours of orthodox Marxism – something he could not accept. In the same letter, Zabeck expressed his surprise that Blankertz thought that they both shared the same scientific idea. He emphasised that he differed from Blankertz in that he did not present his non-university activities as science. He further argued that making property the centrepiece of a new social policy – when approached through Marx – meant that Blankertz ignored the urgent concerns of individuals, such as young people seeking job opportunities, in favour of a utopia drawn from the dusty archives of the nineteenth century (Zabeck to Blankertz, 1 February 1971).

These are more than anecdotes – more than curious or peculiar exchanges between two scholars. They reflect two fundamental stances towards education and the role of scholarly expertise in a democratic society. Zabeck's portrayal of Blankertz's academic work as a utopian project rooted in the dusty archives of the 19th century illustrates his opposition to a form of vocational education studies concerned with the distribution of wealth, power, and the means of production in a democracy. This, however, was precisely the guiding premise of the reform era's proponents. Zabeck's educational theory was by no means one-sided; he did not claim that the needs of industry should be the sole priority of vocational education. His ambition, rather, was to preserve the status quo while incrementally improving the quality of vocational training.

Both scholars interpreted the tendency reversal of the 1970s in different ways. In 1975, even before the *Kollegstufe* was officially launched, Blankertz began to doubt the future prospects of the reform project, as he expressed in a letter to like-minded colleagues (Reh 2022, 128–29). He believed the political pendulum had swung towards conservative positions, and the debate about a new VTA seemed to confirm this view. Zabeck, by contrast, explained the shift in a typically conservative manner. He adopted the term tendency reversal in his writings, arguing that common sense and a renewed belief in the

supremacy of the dual system had returned to politics, academia, and the public sphere (Zabeck 1980, 85). In doing so, however, he obscured the decisive role played by lobbying from conservative politicians, industry associations, and allied scholars in bringing about this shift.

6. Discussion: implications for TVET research and TVET theory

The outcome of these events represents a setback for progressive ideas, especially with regard to the possibilities of a broader, more substantial vocational education. The dominant German strand in vocational education studies today closely aligns with the theoretical orientation articulated by Zabeck, though its consolidation cannot be attributed to him alone. Rather, the prevalence of this perspective reflects connections among academic research, political decision-making, and the interests of industry associations, which are often under-stated in the literature. The focus on incremental improvement, stability, and the preservation of the dual system has gradually marginalised more critical approaches that linked vocational education to questions of democracy, power, and social inequality. In this way, what was once a contested field has narrowed into an orthodoxy that reproduces existing structures rather than challenging them, illustrating how scholarship and policy have mutually reinforced a conservative trajectory in vocational education.

A further irony is that, during the intervening years of neoliberal ascendancy, this relatively conservative orthodoxy has been seen internationally as a relatively progressive alternative to the narrow, generic, competency-based regime of learning outcomes that has dominated vocational education in English-speaking countries (Esmond 2019; Wheelahan and Moodie 2017). Whilst the latter is taken as the preferred position of neoliberal politicians, the broader, occupation-based industrial training of Germany, alongside school-based imitators in neighbouring countries, has provided a pole of attraction for critical researchers in the Angloshpere. The influence of trade unions in Germany is preferred to their progressive exclusion from apprenticeships, as in Britain from the 1970s onwards (Esmond 2018; Keep, Lloyd, and Payne 2008).

Yet the events reported here serve to challenge some of the more generalised accounts of 'collective skill formation' (Busemeyer and Christine 2012) and 'varieties of capitalism' (Hall and Soskice 2003). The contending actors repeatedly agreeing to compromise around an institutional model whose fundamental principles are shared has been central to historical institutionalism, with continuous settlements interrupted only at critical breakpoints. Thelen (2004, 79ff.) refers to contestation and shifting alliances, such as the political coalition against reform through which craft and heavy industry (represented by the segmentalist, ultra-conservative DINTA) opposed pre-war reforms but describes tensions after the 1969 VTA as 'effectively regulated within the existing institutions of corporatist self-regulation' (265). The shadows of such reform-minded ministers as Helmut Rohde and Chancellors as Willy Brandt appear fleetingly on the stage, to be quickly banished by employer action (264–5). Our account not only implies that this understates the resistance of employers over a prolonged period but suggests that the unitarist conceptualisation of 'dual training' provides a different kind of fabrication: a discourse that conceals a fundamental social and educational struggle.

This struggle can in turn be seen here as being shaped by significant theoretical debate in the sphere of education. The debate between Blankertz and Zabeck was never confined to the groves of academe. It emerged in practice, first through Blankertz's role as project leader of the *Kollegstufe* in North Rhine-Westphalia during the planning phase, and subsequently through his involvement in the practical organisation of the *Kollegstufe*. Of course, the reverse remains true: the outcome of political contestation has been reflected not only in educational spaces, where the gap between vocational and university tracks has been deepened despite the appearance of 'dual track' formations, but in educational theory. In short, Blankertz and Zabeck made their own history in given circumstances, no less than the reform politicians of the SPD and FDP and the chemical industry employers. The triumph of employers in the reform era became the triumph of a more cautious approach to educational theory among TVET researchers. The intolerance of reform by employers, noted by Offe (1975) in relation to the 1969 VTA and multiplied in the intervening years, both sustains and is sustained by the conservatism of much vocational education research.

Reconstructing the reform era as a short summer of concrete utopia (Ruck 2000) means more than recalling a failed experiment; it means recognising that other paths were once possible – and might still be. The proponents of the reforms expressed their strong belief in their scope and aims, even after political majorities shifted towards a conservative and neoliberal government in 1982 under Chancellor Helmut Kohl. Helmut Rohde, one of the political architects of the reforms, expressed melancholy in a 1982 article about the emergence of a new conservative culture of educational politics that, in his view, lacked idealism. He argued that the reform efforts of the 1960s and 1970s had not failed because of idealism or utopianism; rather, their boldness – the courage to dream big – had made them successful in a certain sense. The reforms demonstrated that anything was possible if educational politics were willing to commit (Rohde 1982). And Herwig Blankertz, despite his own dwindling confidence in the reforms' success, nevertheless retained a degree of optimism in his later writings. Although the tendency reversal had begun, Blankertz still foresaw an inevitable victory for the reformers. In 1982, he wrote that conservative education policy might slow the development, but it could not stop it. Any policy that emphasised and reinforced the boundaries imposing class-specific characteristics on separate educational pathways, he argued, only increased the attraction of *Gymnasium* and higher education for members of the middle class (Blankertz 1982, 336).

While Blankertz was wrong about the inevitable victory of the reformers, he was right about the further development: the *Gymnasium* became the most popular school form in (West) Germany. Once individuals had been socialised through this type of school and had thereby come to see themselves as entitled to a higher position, increasing numbers chose to proceed directly to higher education rather than enter vocational training. Against this backdrop, the pragmatically motivated decision to take up an apprenticeship was often perceived as a form of failure or downward mobility (Gruschka 2022, 5). Even industry associations began to demand an upgrade of vocational training. This marked the beginning of a gradual academisation of various professions, the opening of universities to those with vocational qualifications, the rise of dual study programmes, and the granting of higher-education entrance qualifications on the basis of advanced vocational credentials. From today's perspective, Blankertz's attempt to overcome the opposition between general and vocational

education therefore appears not so much outdated as fundamentally sidelined. To read this development as a resolution of the reform agenda would, however, be misleading. Whereas the reform era was centrally concerned with questions of educational certification and entitlement, these issues now occupy only a marginal place in German policy debates. Rather than confronting the structural problems of the education system, current approaches largely accept the decoupling of vocational education from general education and instead promote compensatory measures aimed at upgrading vocational education in its relationship to higher education (Porcher 2025b).

This finally leads us to the question of how any kind of progressive synthesis might arise from these events. These questions appear to depend on the extent to which alternative actors within and around TVET might succeed in making their voices heard above the monotone of employer-led 'collectivism'. These might include those relatively marginalised, even in Germany: educators and educational theorists; trade unions and workers engaged in training activity; forms of collective organisation by students and apprentices. In this, educational theorists have a responsibility to point out where notions of the collective are mispresented in order to provide a cover for the advance of policies that promote inequality and exclusion in the name of efficiency and progress.

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