

Henning Albrecht, Antiliberalismus und Antisemitismus. Hermann Wagener und die preußischen Sozialkonservativen 1855–1873 (Otto von Bismarck Stiftung. Wissenschaftliche Reihe, Bd. 12), Ferdinand Schöningh Verlag, Paderborn 2010, 596 S., geb., 85,00 €.

In his monumental series about the “Deutsche Geschichte”, Thomas Nipperdey deemed Hermann Wagener among the “klügeren und moderneren Theoretiker und Publizisten unter den Konservativen”. And indeed, Henning Albrecht's book, based on a dissertation submitted in 2007 to the University of Hamburg, seems to reaffirm Nipperdey's assertion remarkably. At the same time, though, the reader cannot escape the impression that at least the subtitle of the book, “Hermann Wagener und die preußischen Sozialkonservativen 1855–1873”, does some injustice to the content of this research, which contains far more than a discussion of Wagener's thoughts and deeds. Through a detailed and well-documented analysis, Albrecht deals with the close correlation that was established in the late 1850s and continued until the beginning of the 1870s between two political and social phenomena: social conservatism and modern anti-Semitism. This dual development was manifested in the work – theoretical, political, and journalistic – of Wagener and the circle of authors, politicians, and publicists who gathered around him to form the social conservatives group.

Though Albrecht elaborates on the social ideas and policy envisioned by this group, his main interest is focused on the anti-Semitism it propagated not merely out of inherent ideological premises, but primarily as an instrumental device to win public support in periods when conservatives suffered electoral setbacks or tried to establish their own party, while campaigning against political and social liberalism. The author identifies three main phases in the anti-Semitic course of the social conservatives, which serve as crucial circumstantial evidence for its instrumental function. The initial development is traced in the years 1860 to 1864, when a relatively young generation of conservatives tried to rehabilitate conservatism after the party sustained a major defeat by liberalism since 1858, and the beginning of the “Neue Ära”. The intensified anti-Semitic stance of social conservatism at this period functioned as a means to attack liberalism. Here, identification between political and economic liberalism and Judaism – the “jüdische[r] Liberalismus” – was intended to win over those social strata who suffered from advanced industrialisation and the capitalistic system that created the “Soziale Frage”. Social conservatives' anti-Semitism operated therefore as a “Mobilisierungsideologie”, gradually accommodating clear racial features. The next phase in the supposed course is the years 1864 to 1868, the period of Prussia's wars against Denmark and Austria, and the electoral recovery of conservatism. At this stage the agitation against “liberal Judaism”, as well as against Jews and their emancipation, was considerably reduced in favour of a more national-militaristic spirit. Finally, a renewed anti-Semitic and anti-liberal tactic of social conservatives emerged between 1868 and 1872, as part of their endeavours to establish themselves as an independent political party. This fluctuation in the course of anti-Semitism testifies especially to its instrumental nature, but at the same time, as Albrecht asserts, it was a reflection of an anti-Semitic tradition that advanced throughout those decades and prefigured that of the “Kaiserreich”.

Quite persuasively, Albrecht demonstrates the rather popular application of the social conservatives' ideas. A long series of newspaper and magazine articles, books, romances, and calendars that enabled the conservatives to widely distribute their anti-Jewish thoughts and beliefs, shows that they were not opinions held mainly by radicals such as Bruno Bauer (as argued by Hans-Joachim Schoeps and Hans-Christof Kraus), but were widely prevalent among conservatives. In this regard, the author claims to provide a contribution that should fill the gaps in research about the conservatives' stance towards the Jews' emancipation since the middle nineteenth century. Very recently, however, this theme, as part of the more comprehensive social worldview of Prussian conservatism during that same period, was extensively discussed in my book “In der Krise der Moderne” (Göttingen 2008). It is most likely that,

due to the close proximity in time between the publication of that research and the one reviewed here, the author of the later book did not gain acquaintance with the arguments of the earlier study.

By underlying the instrumental function of the conservatives' anti-Semitism, Albrecht reinforces – albeit with differing periodisation and focus on varying groups – arguments presented by distinguished historians such as Reinhard Rürup, Shulamit Volkov, Hans-Jürgen Puhle and others, who stressed the functionality of this animosity towards Jews. It seems, though, that the conservatives' anti-Jewish stance was rooted in a deeper and more inclusive conceptualisation of society which originated in the renewed conservative ideology since the "Vormärz", and especially in the aftermath of the 1848 Revolution. This aspect does not, however, receive the appropriate attention in the book. The clear division the author draws between the "old" and "social" conservatives, between the more traditionally oriented conservatives and the modern ones, appears at times artificial. The circle of Gerlach and Stahl was not actually as anti-modern as argued. In the wake of the revolution, the so-called "Kreuzzeitungspartei" gradually started to reflect, in an ever-intensifying manner, the new role of the aristocracy, the obligations of the state towards its citizens, and the German national identity and its possible realisation (as Bernhard Ruetz has also demonstrated), alongside continuous efforts to preserve aristocratic interests. Already at this stage conservatives tried to bestow on the state paternalistic ideals and functions that had lost any practical significance in the "ständische System", and thus entrusted it with greater responsibility for welfare policy (Hermann Beck). Even the concept of the "Christian state" that Stahl formulated, appears on close examination to have acquired a national dimension, and was far more than a means to protect the monarchical system (p. 106). Similarly, Judaism was portrayed more and more in national terms than what Albrecht indicates (pp. 180, 263). And while Wagener and his associates employed racial terminology, they did not replace the religious perception, as indeed mentioned (p. 268), but were even challenged in the social-conservative press itself – in the "Berliner Revue", for example.

Social conservatives – and one might also include their supposed 'old' counterparts – did not seem to totally turn away from modernism. Their national and social ideals, as well as the anti-liberalism and modern anti-Semitism attached to them, seem to represent a different comprehension of the modern state and society. From the second half of the nineteenth century, conservatives realised that the developments of recent decades, culminating in the revolutionary experience of 1848/49, were irreversible manifestations of modernity. The tight correlation between Judaism and liberalism embodied the wrong, negative, symptoms of modernism. The conservatives' social and political ideals introduced an alternative conceptualisation of state and society, one that strove for hierarchical yet harmonised social order, which was not anti-modern. Conflict, even aggressive, between the two versions of modernism was inevitable. Albrecht's book ultimately makes a thorough exploration of some insufficiently researched features in that vehement conflict.

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