

James Retallack, *Red Saxony. Election Battles and the Spectre of Democracy in Germany, 1860–1918*, Oxford University Press, Oxford/New York etc. 2017, 736 pp., Hardcover, 95,00 £.

During the past three decades, James Retallack has gained wide international acclaim as a member of a group of historians who rebelled against the once dominant Prusso-centric interpretations of the Bismarckian empire. Accordingly, David Blackbourn was among the first to write about the Southwest as a »second Germany«. Somewhat later Retallack came along with Simone Lässig, Karl-Heinrich Pohl and others to advance the notion that the kingdom of Saxony constituted a »third Germany«.

Pursuing this line of inquiry, he has now produced what may well be the definitive study of high and popular politics in pre-1918 Saxony. This 690-page tome is extremely rich not only in primary materials from some 20 archives; it also offers many fresh comparative insights into the larger context of 19th-century Central European history as well as thoughtful discussions of the socio-political dynamic of this period and ideas on how to conceptualize it.

Aiming to »throw new light on the reciprocal relationship between political modernization and authoritarianism in Germany over the span of six decades« (p. 2, also for the following quotes), it is his »central argument [...] that political modernization need not lead to democratic rule«, even if »readers may find this assertion less surprising than the ways I go about supporting it.« What interests him most are »questions about the speed and direction of political change in Imperial Germany«, how the country was governed, how the »fear of revolution push[ed] liberal and conservative parties together«, and how the »struggle against democracy before 1918 help[ed] make it possible for more ruthless politicians, later, to lead the Germans into a fascist dictatorship, world war, and the Holocaust«.

It is against this background and the underlying modernization paradigm with its many ambivalences that Retallack approaches the »Kingdom of Saxony as a useful laboratory« that enabled him to »rethink old questions and pose new ones« (p. 3, also for the following quotes). Accordingly, it is his »first claim« that »election battles were fought so fiercely because they reflected two kinds of democratization: social democratization and political democratization«. He then goes on to »explore the degree of historical congruence between democracy understood as a set of values and democracy understood as an institutional arrangement«. To him, the first among two strands of democratization is »social democratization«, i.e., »the fundamental politicization of German society, whereby more and more Germans were pulled into the world of political activity«, as the country's »industrial revolution reached maturity after 1860 and as voluntary associations« expanded, producing »the growth of mass parties, a more vibrant public sphere, the penetration of politics into the countryside«, with turnout rates rising whenever »Germans were called to the polls«.

The second »strand«, i.e., »political democratization«, implies »some degree of constitutional reform«. It was a process »that took a quantum leap forward in 1866–1867, when Bismarck granted universal manhood suffrage for elections to the Reichstag«. As a result and hence before national unification, »Germany had a more democratic suffrage than almost every other national parliament in the world« (p. 4, also for the following quotes). However, this »advance of political democratization«, Retallack continues, »was contested at every turn«. It could be »halted or reversed« at the sub-national level, and the »enemies of democracy« never stopped attacking »universal manhood suffrage as subversive and un-German«. If election battles that the author examines in detail throughout his book became »ferocious between 1871 and 1918«, it was because »social democratization speeded up while political democratization slowed down«. Social democratization, »not its lack«, gave »anti-democrats an incentive to find each other and to unite against the most conspicuous hallmark of democracy: a freely elected parliament to which government leaders were responsible.« Consequently, it was »due to the efforts of democracy's enemies [that] parliamentary government did

not come to Germany until 1918–19« and, it should be added, after the collapse of monarchical government that had *not* been responsible to parliament.

It is from this vantage point that Retallack moves on to a comprehensive and very careful study of elections in Saxony, always juxtaposing them to results in Prussia and the Reich. Proceeding chronologically from election to election, he traces how German men became »habitual voters«, how these elections brought together high and popular politics, and how an »electoral culture« (*Wahlkultur*) emerged from it. He also analyzes socio-economic status and political orientations; the enormous growth of the labor movement that in time began to win over lower middle class voters. According to the author it was these developments that, in turn, terrified both rural conservatives and the urban economic and educated bourgeoisie.

If this, in a nutshell, is the book's conceptual framework, it is generally known that Bismarck's introduction of universal manhood suffrage caused the governments of the North German Confederation and from 1871 of the newly founded Reich endless headaches. In Saxony as elsewhere Bismarck's revolutionary act triggered reforms of the suffrage in the other states of the (con)federation that invariably tried to block the extension of universal manhood suffrage and to maintain or shape suffrage systems that prevented working class voters from gaining equality at the ballot box. In Saxony, as Retallack shows in meticulous detail, this was the purpose of the 1868 Suffrage Reform and all subsequent manipulations all the way down to the »Reform« of 1909. Put bluntly, the rise of the Social Democrats was seen by their opponents as embodying such a fundamental threat to the established order that they had to be prevented at all cost from ever achieving a majority of seats in the Saxon Diet.

It is intriguing to follow the SPD's growth in the tables that the author has assembled for each and every election, always also comparing results with those of national elections at Reich level. They reflect the rising support for the party at the ballot box, while the number of seats gained remained, thanks to suffrage restrictions and gross manipulations by the anti-socialist parties, well under what the SPD would have achieved, if Saxony had had universal manhood suffrage system like that of the Reich. Although the anti-Socialist opposition was often at loggerheads about the measures to be taken, what united them was a fear of a decisive shift in the balance of electoral power that to some politicians and their supporters was tantamount to the end of the world.

Accordingly, Retallack's analysis also considers the use of police violence and restrictions on the right to assemble and to demonstrate. There is extensive material not only on the scapegoating of the Social Democrat politicians and party members, but also on the classic mechanism of blaming the Jewish minority for Germany's ills. After Bismarck's *Kulturkampf* against the Catholics in the 1870s had failed, a vicious anti-Semitic agitation proved effective also in Saxony in conjunction with Bismarck's Anti-Socialist Laws. At first it looked as if these repressive policies succeeded in containing the SPD's growth, a development that must presumably also be seen in the context of Germany's *Weltpolitik* and the stabilizing domestic effects it was designed to produce.

However, all these efforts were undermined by the 1903 national elections in which the SPD achieved a major breakthrough. It was subsequently stymied by the formation of the Conservative-Catholic Bülow Bloc at Reich level that in turn facilitated the 1909 Saxon electoral reform that upheld a restrictive suffrage, disadvantaging the SPD. Always looking beyond Saxony, Retallack traces the gradual descent of Saxon and German politics into paralysis, with the tax question that had been a neuralgic point since the 1903, leading to national deadlock. Although Retallack does not draw a straight line between the enormous confusion in domestic politics and Wilhelmine foreign policy during the years after the 1909 to the outbreak of war in August 1914, it is clear that the Reich government as well as that of Saxony had maneuvered themselves into a corner at home and abroad.

While the earlier power struggles continued during and between elections among the parties and the large number of extra-parliamentary associations, Saxony's governments adhered to a stance that they adopted in previous decades: they maneuvered very cautiously, leaving the politicking to the parties and associations. As the author puts it aptly, governments did not act as »gearboxes« of change, but as »brakes« on Social Democrat attempts to establish the universal suffrage also for state and local elections.

This leads to a most innovative chapter in which Retallack expands his comparative approach to parliamentary developments in Western Europe and the United States. He rightly points out that, in comparison to the Reich, all these nations were less democratic because they did not introduce a universal manhood suffrage as Bismarck had done in 1866/67. Rather they gradually expanded the suffrage to newly emergent male voters. Consequently, it took much longer for the ordinary voter to gain what the Germans had obtained in the mid-nineteenth century. However, there was a basic difference: the suffrage extensions in those other countries were formulated by governments that had emerged from party majorities in Parliament. They were not appointed by a monarch whose legitimation was not democratic but based on Divine Right. In France, Britain, and Belgium a decisive power shift towards the (still restrictively) elected parliament had taken place *before* universal suffrage. In Germany, a reformist shift continued to be blocked by the anti-Socialist opposition, until the Revolution 1918/19 instituted it by force.

It is this sequence of change prior to 1918 that resulted in the *social* democratization of Germany, but prevented its *political* democratization. The idea of parliamentarization that the Social Democrats had been pushing for so persistently remained too terrifying not only to the agrarian conservatives, but also to the bourgeois National Liberals and they resorted to all sorts of devices, including plans to abolish suffrage altogether. Although Retallack is reluctant to call this a German *Sonderweg*, it is certainly a peculiarity for which his book on »Red Saxony« contains plenty of evidence as well as food for thought about processes of modernization and democratization before 1914 so that those who are prepared to read this excellent book from cover to cover, will be richly rewarded.

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