*James Retallack*

# August Bebel

## A Life for Social Justice and Democratic Reform*

The arc of my reflections in this essay will try to draw a link between the practice of biography and »the practice of democracy«. Both offer an opportunity to reflect upon the conditions under which political participation can be realised as the »rules of the game« are being transformed by social, economic, political, and cultural change – as they patently were during August Bebel's lifetime. In the first section I discuss the challenge of writing »a life« without falling into what Pierre Bourdieu called the »biographical illusion«. I also address some of the areal relationships, political processes, and historical ruptures that figured prominently in Bebel's career. In part two I consider whether Bebel can be said to have devoted his life to social justice. In part three I consider whether he sought democratic reform, and I will conclude with some observations about Bebel's life of celebrity.

### I. A Life

Three issues crop up for a biographer who has chosen to grapple with a life like Bebel's, which can be told so many ways. These issues revolve around questions of narrative coherence, perspective, and intended audience. Some readers of this journal may not know even the rudimentary contours of Bebel's life: his birth in February 1840 in a military barracks near Cologne, his destitute and mainly fatherless childhood, his years as a journeyman and then a master turner who specialised in making door handles out of buffalo horn, his uncontested leadership of Germany's Social Democratic Party (SPD) by 1890, and his unique position in the Second International until his death in August 1913. By that time, the SPD had over one million members, and with 110 deputies it fielded the largest party caucus in the German Reichstag. In the national elections of 1912, every third voter cast his ballot for the »party of revolution« – an ominous sign for a state preparing for war. On the face of it, Bebel's place in history is assured by this extraordinary upward trajectory. Or is it?

In a short essay published some thirty years ago, Pierre Bourdieu wrote of *l'illusion biographique*, which can be translated as the biographical illusion, fallacy, or trap.[1] By this he meant the mistaken belief that a »biological individual« has a life that can be recounted as a »coherent narrative of a significant and directed sequence of events«. Bourdieu argued that such a life should not be seen as a progression, a passage, a directed journey. In-

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1 *Pierre Bourdieu*, The Biographical Illusion, in: *Paul du Gay*/*Jessica Evans*/*Peter Redman* (eds.), Identity. A Reader, London 2000 (first published in French 1986), pp. 297–303. I am grateful to Roger Chickering for pointing out to me the relevance of Bourdieu's essay to my planned biography.

stead he argued that »reality« is formed from discontinuous elements that are unique and difficult to grasp because they »continue to appear, unpredictable, untimely, and at random«. He cited phrases that commonly crop up when a biographer has fallen into this trap, for example, »from his earliest days«, »from now on«, or »he was making his way«.

Today, few biographies follow the structure of an *Entwicklungsroman*. Biography is usually based instead on discontinuous narrative approaches, to emphasise contradictions, ambiguities, reversals, ruptures, failures, and doubts. How is this done in practice? Karl Heinrich Pohl has offered a good example with his recent biography of Gustav Stresemann.[2] Yet Pohl, in the end, hypothesises that there was a »red thread« running through this life, which readers can grasp in order not to lose their way. Pohl argues that Stresemann was a perpetual border-crosser: his life was shaped by recurring efforts to overcome social, cultural, and political boundaries. A second example comes to mind. Near the beginning of his 2013 biography of Bebel, Jürgen Schmidt refers to Bebel's *Gesellenstück* from the 1850s.[3] He suggests that Bebel, as a craftsman, displayed here what he later in life perfected as a professional politician: »to fit together many small pieces and individual parts and make from them a coherent whole.«[4]

Bebel was a gifted organiser, mobiliser, and conciliator. His only modern biographer in the English language, William Harvey Maehl, has written that, »within his party, he was the gyroscopic stabilizer that balanced and countered all diverse sides. For a man who was the titular head of a party that was a maze of contradictions and who mirrored them all it was difficult to move very far from the centre of gravity of party opinion.«[5] There is food for thought in these ideas of Bebel as a border-crosser, a fitter-together, a »curator« of a movement whose unity was perennially threatened by internal centrifugal forces. The SPD's divergent factions included radicals and moderates, Marxists and revisionists, core regiments and fellow-travellers *(Mitläufer)*. Sometimes, we know, Bebel had to play the role of the ferocious unifier. To echo Bourdieu's words, the biographer cannot ignore the unpredictable, untimely, even random elements of Bebel's constantly evolving relationships with other leaders of the German and international labour movements, who neither gravitated toward Bebel nor orbited around him as though determined by ineluctable laws of physics. However, a life of habitual incoherence can become tedious. Almost certainly it is no fun to read. What other narrative strategies present themselves?

### *Arenas*

All three of the subthemes addressed in this volume on »practicing democracy« – arenas, processes, ruptures – resonate in the life and career of August Bebel. Consider the economic, social, and political arenas in which Bebel first made his mark. The Kingdom of Saxony was a cradle of German Social Democracy: it provided the political launching pad that propelled Bebel into the Reichstag in February 1867 and then, in 1881, into the Saxon Landtag. On many issues – public school fees, religious instruction, state-sponsored fire insurance, women's and child labour, and industrial safety – the Social Democrats in Saxony's Landtag tested the limits of doctrinal purity during the 1880s in ways they could

2 *Karl Heinrich Pohl*, Gustav Stresemann. Biografie eines Grenzgängers, Göttingen 2015.
3 »Gesellenstück«: journeyman's (examination) piece.
4 *Jürgen Schmidt*, August Bebel. Kaiser der Arbeiter. Eine Biografie, Zürich 2013, p. 34 and plate II.
5 *William Harvey Maehl*, August Bebel. Shadow Emperor of the German Workers, Philadelphia 1980, p. 362. Published as vol. 138 of the Memoirs of the American Philosophical Society, Maehl's biography had a limited print run and is difficult for interested readers to find.

not in the Reichstag, where debate on great issues of the day required clear statements of Social Democratic principles.[6]

Bebel's activities in Saxony are under-represented in all biographies of him.[7] How did Bebel conceive of the relative importance of his own leadership at the local, regional, and national levels during these early decades? The local dimensions of the discrimination he suffered are intriguing. After June 1881 Bebel was banished to the small town of Borsdorf outside Leipzig, because the Saxons had imposed the »lesser state of siege« on the city of Leipzig and its surrounding administrative district.[8] In a parliamentary farce, the Prussian Interior Minister Robert Puttkamer had informed the Saxons that socialist activities – of which he said the hapless Saxons could have no knowledge – had made Leipzig a nest of subversion.[9] When the Saxons relented, Article 28 of the Anti-Socialist Law (the expulsion clause) forced Bebel and Wilhelm Liebknecht to abandon their families on seventy-two hours' notice (they walked eastwards until they reached Borsdorf). As Bebel noted in his memoirs: »It was not possible to exceed the effrontery with which the minister of one government [Prussia] dropped a hint as heavy as flat irons to another [minister] of what was expected of him. And in Dresden the hint was understood.«[10]

Such pronouncements relativise Vernon Lidtke's claim that Bebel's Social Democrats »enjoyed« the »more relaxed atmosphere of Dresden« and »felt much more a part of the [parliamentary] system in Saxony than in the Reich as a whole«.[11] Bebel felt that Saxony's »assembly of estates«, despite its relatively liberal suffrage until 1896 and its cosy seating plan, was still antediluvian in the 1880s:

> »A very considerable proportion of the [Saxon] chamber was made up of rural deputies whose political horizons were as narrow as the boundaries of their own constituency. [These were] people who had only the most laughable conceptions of what we Social Democrats actually wanted. Along with them went a number of small-town mayors who lived in a parochial middle-class milieu and thought the same way. The remaining deputies were made up of some government officials, a few industrialists, and a large contingent of lawyers. […] There wasn't a single day when it was a pleasure to sit in such a chamber.«[12]

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6 *Vernon Lidtke*, The Outlawed Party: Social Democracy in Germany, 1878–1890, Princeton 1966, pp. 222–228; *Werner Lesanovsky*, Die bildungspolitische Tätigkeit der sozialdemokratischen Fraktion im sächsischen Landtag von 1877 bis 1890, Diss., Zwickau 1976; *id*., Die Bemühungen der sozialdemokratischen Abgeordneten im sächsischen Landtag um die Verbesserung der proletarischen Familienerziehung und der Kampf gegen die kapitalistische Kinderausbeutung (1877–1900), in: Sächsische Heimatblätter 28, 1982, pp. 121–126.

7 On Bebel and the SPD in Saxony before 1890, see *James Retallack*, Red Saxony. Election Battles and the Spectre of Democracy in Germany, 1860–1918, Oxford/New York etc. 2017, chap. 3–5.

8 *Wolfgang Schröder*, Blickpunkt Borsdorf. August Bebels und Wilhelm Liebknechts Asyl 1881–1884, Borsdorf 2004.

9 This episode is discussed in *James Retallack*, Germany's Second Reich. Portraits and Pathways, Toronto/Buffalo etc. 2015, pp. 68–71.

10 *August Bebel*, Aus meinem Leben, 3 vols. in 1, Berlin (East) 1961 (first published 1910–1914), p. 753. See also *id*., Petition an den Deutschen Reichstag, die polizeilichen Ausweisungen aus dem Königreich Sachsen betreffend, nebst dem stenographischen Bericht über die Verhandlungen der II. Kammer des sächsischen Landtages am 21. Februar 1882, Nuremberg 1882; *Heinzpeter Thümmler*, Sozialistengesetz §28. Ausweisungen und Ausgewiesene 1878–1890, Vaduz 1979.

11 Cf. *Lidtke*, The Outlawed Party, pp. 222–228 and 276f., quotations at p. 227; *Retallack*, Red Saxony, pp. 192–198.

12 *Bebel*, Aus meinem Leben, p. 784. The socialist Georg von Vollmar described his first impressions upon taking up his seat in the Saxon Landtag in 1883. He recalled »how I stood there on the day I entered the chamber, how I was surrounded by a ring of candles that radiated a real sense of ceremony where everyone was dressed in black, how the president gave the representa-

*Processes*

There are so many historical processes in which Bebel played a central role that I can mention only two here. First is the gradual and uneven evolution of German political culture from what has been called *Honoratiorenpolitik* to *Massenpolitik*. This transition did not occur on the day in March 1890 when Otto von Bismarck left office. The 1890s has been cited too often as the decade when Hans Rosenberg's »political mass market« came of age. We have been told that the 1890s constituted a »major moment of flux«, a »vital moment of transition«, a »populist moment«, a »reordering of the public domain«, and a »reconstitution of the political nation«.[13] But critics of Rosenberg's thesis miss the mark when they object that the notion of a political mass market connotes a passivity among voters that is belied by the evidence. Bebel recognised that the de facto deregulation of the electoral arena and party politics was good business for his own party, which offered attractive wares to voters who could conduct their own cost-benefit analysis. Occasionally, though, even Bebel had to be reminded not to let his entrepreneurial spirit sag. In May 1883, Bebel expressed to Friedrich Engels some satisfaction that he was now sitting in the Saxon Landtag, not Berlin's Reichstag. He could recover his health and recharge his political batteries. But Engels was worried that competing interpretations of Marxist »orthodoxy« were taking market share in the movement during Bebel's absence from the national scene. He urged Bebel to invest in the future, roll up his sleeves, and get back to work:

»My dear Bebel! That you would rather not sit in the Reichstag I can well believe. But you see what your absence has made possible […]. Certainly, agitational and parliamentary work become very boring in the long run. It is the same as with advertising, launching promotions, and travelling around on business: success comes only slowly and, for many, not at all. But there's no alternative, and once you're in it, the thing must be carried through to the end […].«[14]

Even though he still had more prison time to serve, the arc of Bebel's career shows that he was, indeed, from that time onwards, forever »in it«. And few political leaders can be said to have so earnestly »carried [the thing] through to the end«.

My second »process« is the partial integration of the trade union movement, workers' cultural associations, and the SPD into what is sometimes too-easily referred to as »bourgeois« or »mainstream« German culture at the beginning of the twentieth century.[15] The

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tives of the people a school-lesson on the sanctity of the oath, which we had to read back to him word for word […]. And then the sessions themselves! We were squeezed together like herrings in a tin, so that the whole row had to stand up if someone wanted to leave. In front of us sat a number of National Liberals; frequently we could tell […] just how much they disapproved of and were appalled by our conversations. Opposite us [sat] their excellencies, the state ministers, into whom no streak of modern thinking had penetrated and before whom the whole chamber, by every entrance and exit, bent low as though it were a cornfield moved by the wind. […] And surrounding our [Social Democratic] deputies were the representatives of the other parties, who for us really were ›a reactionary mass‹ and who accepted our most elementary statements with as much interest and understanding as if we had been speaking to a lifeless wall. My admiration for the Saxon comrades who were able to persevere [in the chamber] longer than I did sprang principally from the fact that neither rage nor boredom killed them off.« Sozialdemokratische Partei Sachsens (ed.), Sozialdemokratischer Parteitag Dresden 1903, [Dresden] [1903], pp. 18–20.

13 For a fuller elaboration of this point, and references, see *James Retallack*, The German Right 1860–1920. Political Limits of the Authoritarian Imagination, Toronto/Buffalo etc. 2006, pp. 124–126.

14 Engels to Bebel, 10[–11] May 1883, in: *Bebel*, Aus meinem Leben, pp. 822f.

15 Three thoughtful attempts to bring political, parliamentary, and sociological perspectives to bear are *Gerhard A. Ritter*, Die Sozialdemokratie im Deutschen Kaiserreich in sozialgeschichtlicher

economic, social, cultural, and political dimensions of this development are illuminated, but also complicated, by a consideration of Bebel's role. Richard J. Evans has demonstrated that a significant proportion of *Kneipengespräche* after 1890 were critical of Bebel and other party leaders who were described by workers (without using the term) as party *Bonzen* – that is, as functionaries who lived off and allegedly misspent the *Groschen* that ordinary union and party members paid as dues.[16] That Bebel spent more of his time late in life in the »Villa Julie« on the shores of Lake Zurich ensured that such complaints persisted even as Bebel's celebrity reached its zenith. Yet Bebel's own dress and deportment reflected and reinforced the social and cultural trend that brought workers, uninvited, into the symbolic and physical centres of power.

A new biography of Bebel provides an opportunity to take up the work of Bernd Jürgen Warneken and Thomas Lindenberger, among others, who have explored the culture of working-class protest.[17] Workers offered more than body language and gestures to make their point. They subjected symbols of authority (e.g. Dresden's Bismarck monument) to indignities large and small. They even compared – without equating – a parade-ground drill *(Gleichtritt)* with a mass march *(Massentritt)*. In his memoirs, Otto Rühle, who stood on the far left of the Saxon SPD, offered a picture of one May Day demonstrator addressing the burghers looking down on him from windows and balconies. They were »full of anger« as they watched the masses march past. But the demonstrators were numerically superior: »we embody so much power and courage!« If they wanted to, Rühle wrote, they could smash the bourgeois onlookers to a pulp. But »we still spare you, magnanimous and dignified as we are; our day has not yet come.« This was not fantasy. For Social Democrats, the dignity and the seriousness of the performance demanded discipline. In how many parliamentary speeches by Bebel, where he addressed the public galleries in the Reichstag and the German nation through its windows, can one hear the same tone of dignified anger and faith in the future that Rühle expressed? Privately too, Bebel's faith that history was on his side cannot be denied even by the historian who is alive to Bebel's own contribution to the fateful domestication of Social Democracy. »Every night«, he wrote to Engels in 1885, »I go to sleep with the thought that the last hour of bourgeois society will soon strike«.[18]

*Ruptures*

Many ruptures in Bebel's life and career were obvious *Umbrüche*. As it happens, Bebel's historical significance is often interpreted in light of two of these he did *not* experience during his lifetime. If he had not died in August 1913, what stance would he have taken

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Perspective, in: HZ vol. 249, 1989, pp. 295–362; *Peter Steinbach*, Die Entwicklung der deutschen Sozialdemokratie im Kaiserreich im Spiegel der historischen Wahlforschung, in: *Gerhard A. Ritter* (ed.), Der Aufstieg der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung. Sozialdemokratie und Freie Gewerkschaften im Parteiensystem und Sozialmilieu des Kaiserreichs, Munich 1990, pp. 1–36; *Andreas Biefang*, Die Sozialdemokratie im Reichstag. Das Parlament als Faktor der Integration 1871–1890, in: Mitteilungsblatt des Instituts für soziale Bewegungen, 2001, no. 26, pp. 25–54.

16 *Richard J. Evans* (ed.), Kneipengespräche im Kaiserreich. Stimmungsberichte der Hamburger Politischen Polizei 1892–1914, Reinbek 1989.

17 For the following, *Thomas Lindenberger*, Straßenpolitik. Zur Sozialgeschichte der öffentlichen Ordnung in Berlin 1900 bis 1914, Bonn 1995, p. 334; *Bernd Jürgen Warneken*, »Die friedliche Gewalt des Volkswillens«. Muster und Deutungsmuster von Demonstrationen im deutschen Kaiserreich, in: *Bernd Jürgen Warneken* (ed.), Massenmedium Straße. Zur Kulturgeschichte der Demonstration, Frankfurt am Main/New York 1991, pp. 97–119, here: pp. 107–114.

18 Bebel to Engels, 7 December 1885, in: *Werner Blumenberg* (ed.), August Bebels Briefwechsel mit Friedrich Engels, London/The Hague 1965, p. 249.

in the party's decision to support war credits in August 1914? And if his uncommonly long life had been extended by another half-decade, what role might he have played in Germany's revolution of November 1918 and the founding of the Weimar Republic in 1919? Actually, it is fairly certain that Bebel would have supported the defence of Germany in August 1914 because he, like most Germans, would have believed it was under attack from the »barbarous« Russians. Yet even Bebel's famous declaration that he would willingly defend his Fatherland was the object of a double-edged cartoon in the Munich satirical journal »Jugend«: it showed Bebel, marching off to war with a rifle on his shoulder, whispering to working-class bystanders, »… Shush! *It's not loaded!*«[19]

More fruitful than pursuing counterfactual history is the challenge of assessing Bebel's prominence in *real* historical ruptures. One reason is that recent studies of other socialist leaders cannot easily chart Germany's political development beyond 1900. Jonathan Sperber frames his biography of Karl Marx as »a nineteenth-century life«. Marx, he writes, should not be viewed »as a contemporary whose ideas are shaping the modern world«.[20] Other recent biographies have been devoted to Friedrich Engels, »Marx's general«, and to Wilhelm Liebknecht, »soldier of the revolution«.[21] For all three, the Revolution of 1848 was a turning point. But Bebel reached the pinnacle of his career fifty years later, and he died on the eve of what George Kennan called »*the* great seminal catastrophe of this [the twentieth] century«, the First World War.[22] Bebel's longevity makes him a suitable subject through which to gauge the problems and promise of Germany's entry into the modern age.

There are three particularly important ruptures in the historical evolution of German political culture that Bebel experienced – and helped shape. The first is 1866–1867, when he co-founded the Saxon People's Party and won social democracy's first Reichstag seat in February 1867. The second is the period from mid-1870 to mid-1872, when Bebel denounced the constitution of the new Reich, decried the annexation of Alsace and Lorraine, supported the Paris Commune, fought state repression in a national election campaign, and defended his creed in a sensational trial for treason. The third is 1889–1890, when he helped found the Second International, when he became a *Berufspolitiker* par excellence, and when the SPD emerged from twelve years of repression under the Anti-Socialist Law.

Existing scholarship on Bebel is understandably oriented toward his national and international stature as the »grand old man« of the Social Democratic movement. In a parallel way, scholarship on Imperial Germany's political culture has tended to focus much more squarely on the Wilhelmine era than on the period of Bismarck's ascendancy (1862–1890). If nothing else, a new biography of Bebel might allow historians to reflect on the real or perceived turning points that he, and Germany, reached on 22 February 1890 – Bebel's fiftieth birthday. Just two days earlier, Bebel's party had registered a stunning breakthrough in Reichstag elections, and within a month the young Kaiser Wilhelm II had dismissed Bismarck from office. As Friedrich Engels wrote at the time, noting the defeat of Bismarck's *Kartell* of antisocialist parties: »All the King's horses and all the King's men can-

19 *Anon.*, Der patriotische Bebel, in: Jugend 12, 1907, vol. 2, no. 40, p. 907. »Wat, Aujust? Du nimmst det Jewehr uff'n Buckel und willst det Vaterland verteidigen?« – »Pssst! *Es ist ja nicht geladen!*« Online at URL: <http://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/jugend1907_2/0313/image> [13.7.2018].

20 *Jonathan Sperber*, Karl Marx. A Nineteenth-Century Life, New York/London 2013, p. xiii.

21 *Tristram Hunt*, Marx's General. The Revolutionary Life of Friedrich Engels, New York 2009; *Wolfgang Schröder*, Wilhelm Liebknecht. Soldat der Revolution, Parteiführer, Parlamentarier, Berlin 2013. Cf. *Ernst Schraepler*, August-Bebel-Bibliographie, Düsseldorf 1962.

22 *George F. Kennan*, The Decline of Bismarck's European Order. Franco-Russian Relations, 1875–1890, Princeton 1980 (first published 1979), p. 3.

not put Humpty Dumpty together again.«[23] By 1890, Bebel had spent more than four years of his life in prison since the 1860s, accused of treason, *lèse-majesté*, and other crimes; but his opponents never dared throw him into prison again. In the summer of 1890, Bebel followed the advice of his colleague Paul Singer and abandoned the »Saxon frog pond« for the »lion's den« in Berlin.[24] It is more difficult to judge how Bebel's experiences in the first five decades of his life conditioned his responses to later – quite different – crises in his party. To say that Bebel's outlook on politics after 1890 reflected a half-century of personal hardship and doubt is an understatement, but it also leaves unaddressed important questions which cannot always be answered with coherent narrative strategies.

I am inclined to downplay »rupture« and emphasise continuity across every one of these lived and posthumous thresholds – except for one. Despite my scepticism about 1890 as a fundamental caesura in Imperial Germany's political culture, I cannot help thinking that dividing Bebel's career into two parts, on either side of 1890, can help readers understand a life *in* its time; it also offers a means to sidestep the biographical illusion. In 1890, the material challenges and the overt repression of the 1880s now lay behind Bebel. For the last twenty-three years of his life, he had different roles to play: as the only unimpeachable unifier in a party increasingly riven by factionalism, and as a spokesman for the policy of defending Social Democracy's accomplishments rather than putting revolutionary policy into practice. To divide a life not in half, but in the ratio of 2 to 1, may seem imprudent. However, what Karl Mannheim called the »fundamental democratization of society«[25] was accelerating after 1890, so historical portraits of Bebel before and after 1890 can legitimately be painted with different analytical brushes.

## II. A Life for Social Justice

A biographer should be willing to take deep dives into his or her subject's speeches and writings. These reveal (at least) six themes that inspired Bebel and contributed to the respect he won as a champion of the underprivileged. The first three suggest that it was less Bebel's adherence to Marxism, or the doctrine of revolution, or even the socio-economic plight of workers specifically, that contributed to his contemporary celebrity and historical significance, but rather his pursuit of social justice on a world-wide scale.

1. Bebel championed the rights of women. His 1879 study, »Woman under Socialism« – affectionately known among Social Democrats as »Frau Julie«, after Bebel's wife –, was issued in fifty-three editions and 140,000 copies during his lifetime.[26] It brought the socialist message to hundreds of thousands of workers for the first time, and as a best-seller of the nineteenth century it made Bebel financially secure. Testimonials to the impact of the book can be cited by the hundreds. Clara Zetkin claimed that the work was »more than

23 Friedrich Engels to Karl Marx's daughter Laura Lafargue, 26 February 1890, cited in: *Wilfried Loth*, Das Kaiserreich. Obrigkeitsstaat und politische Mobilisierung, Munich 1996, pp. 189–191 (English in original).

24 Paul Singer to Friedrich Engels, 13 May 1890, cited in: *Wilhelm Liebknecht*, Briefwechsel mit Karl Marx und Friedrich Engels, ed. *Georg Eckert*, The Hague 1963, p. 370, note 2.

25 *Karl Mannheim*, Man and Society in an Age of Reconstruction, New York 1967 (first published in German 1935), p. 44.

26 The first (1879) and fiftieth editions (1910) appear as vols. 10/1 and 10/2 in *August Bebel*, Ausgewählte Reden und Schriften, ed. *Horst Bartel* et al., 14 vols. in 10, Berlin (East)/Munich 1970–1997. See also *Anne Lopes*/*Gary Roth*, Men's Feminism. August Bebel and the German Socialist Movement, New York 2000; *Ursula Herrmann* (ed.), August und Julie Bebel. Briefe einer Ehe, Bonn 1997.

a book, it was an event, a deed«.[27] Or consider the recollection of Hildegard Wegscheider, the daughter of a Protestant pastor in Berlin who became the first Prussian woman to pass the *Abitur* examinations.

»I secretly read Bebel's Woman under Socialism. The book was still outlawed […] [but] it was read everywhere. I discovered it on my mother's bedside table […]. It struck like lightning. We had already read [John] Stuart Mill […]. However, this was something else. It has been rightly said that if Marx had embodied class thinking turned into reason, Bebel must be class life incarnate. The impact was incredible. […] On top of it all, one learned that Bebel had written the book in prison. That was not true, of course, but it endowed his words with the seriousness of a martyr's gospel.«[28]

Bebel also fought for the rights of homosexuals. He was an early supporter and signatory of Magnus Hirschfeld's 1897 petition to the Reichstag, which argued for repeal of restrictive measures against homosexuals. In his speech of 13 January 1898, Bebel told the Reichstag that repeal of Paragraph 175 of the German Criminal Code was advocated not only by him but also »by people from literary and academic circles, by jurists of the most illustrious standing, by psychologists and pathologists, by experts of the highest rank in this field«.[29] In 1902, however, the SPD's Reichstag caucus refused to support Bebel's demand that Paragraph 175 be repealed.

2. Bebel's defence of Jewish rights helped inoculate workers against the contagion of antisemitism, although he was not the first to label antisemitism »the socialism of fools«. Louise Kautsky, who died in Auschwitz, wrote on the ninetieth anniversary of Bebel's birth that he often spoke out passionately against what Wilhelm Liebknecht in 1881 called the *Judenhatz* sweeping Germany.[30] »Contrary to most people«, Kautsky wrote, »for whom a bit of antisemitism is the most natural thing and who don't give a second thought to a disparaging word against the Jews, Bebel was one of the few people for whom the question ›whether Jew or Christian‹ simply did not exist«.[31] Bebel's address to the SPD's Cologne congress on 27 October 1893 stands as one of the most courageous attacks on antisemitism in the Kaiserreich.[32] He warned Social Democrats that they faced a long, uphill

27 Protokoll über die Verhandlungen des Parteitages der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands. Abgehalten zu Gotha vom 11. bis 16. Oktober 1896, Berlin 1896, p. 164.

28 *Hildegard Wegscheider*, Weite Welt im engen Spiegel. Erinnerungen, Berlin-Grunewald n.d. [1953], pp. 21–22, reprinted in: *Jens Flemming/Klaus Saul/Peter-Christian Witt* (eds.), Quellen zur Alltagsgeschichte der Deutschen 1871–1914, Darmstadt 1997, pp. 103–104.

29 Stenographische Berichte über die Verhandlungen des Reichstags, IX. Legislaturperiode, V. Session 1897/98, vol. 1, Berlin 1898, p. 410 (13 January 1898). *Magnus Hirschfeld*, Von eins bis jetzt. Geschichte einer homosexuellen Bewegung 1897–1922, Berlin 1986 (first published 1921/22), devoted a chapter to Bebel.

30 The term »Judenhatz« appeared in one of Wilhelm Liebknecht's banned election pamphlets from the Reichstag election campaign of 1881. Sächsisches Hauptstaatsarchiv Dresden, Kreishauptmannschaft Zwickau, no. 201.

31 Louise Kautsky, writing (22 February 1930) in the »Arbeiter-Zeitung« (Vienna), cited in: *Brigitte Seebacher-Brandt*, Bebel. Künder und Kärrner im Kaiserreich, Berlin/Bonn 1988, p. 272.

32 After the congress, Bebel's speech was published (with a print run of 10,000) as *August Bebel*, Sozialdemokratie und Antisemitismus, Berlin 1894, reprinted in: *Bebel*, Ausgewählte Reden und Schriften, vol. 3: Reden und Schriften Oktober 1890 bis Dezember 1895, Munich 1995, pp. 363–398. See *Rosemarie Leuschen-Seppel*, Sozialdemokratie und Antisemitismus im Kaiserreich. Die Auseinandersetzungen der Partei mit den konservativen und völkischen Strömungen des Antisemitismus 1871–1914, Bonn 1978. *Lars Fischer*, The Socialist Response to Antisemitism in Imperial Germany, Cambridge 2007, was subjected to withering (and appropriate) criticism in *Andrew G. Bonnell*, Was German Social Democracy before 1914 Antisemitic?, in: German History 27, 2009, pp. 259–269. On workers' opposition to antisemitism, see *Evans*, Kneipengespräche im Kaiserreich, pp. 302–321.

struggle to find fellow-travellers among the ranks of the *Mittelstand*. As he wrote to Friedrich Engels in London, »I was amazed by the deep and fanatical hatred against the Jews that one finds in artisanal and shop-keeping circles. The most sorrowful human being at present is the travelling Jewish businessman. […] There are shops in Saxony where signs are hung, reading: No entrance to beggars, dogs, and Jews.«[33]

3. The rights of indigenous peoples and of military recruits were defended in some of Bebel's most famous parliamentary speeches, even in the 1880s. Bebel denounced adventurers such as Carl Peters who abused native populations in German South West Africa (now Namibia) and other colonies.[34] Germany's war on the Nama and Herero peoples in 1904–1907 has been identified as the twentieth century's first genocide, suggesting that the course of history might have been changed if Bebel's calls to end such injustice had been heeded. His attacks on a state that demanded unquestioning acceptance of authoritarian principles also dovetailed with larger assaults on militarism and imperialism. In a 1886 article he wrote bitterly about Germany's trinity of brute force: »infantry, cavalry, and artillery – the rifle that shoots, the sabre that cuts, and the shell that demolishes.«[35] But the human side of injustice animated him particularly. When Bebel rose in the Reichstag in 1892 to condemn the abuse of military recruits at the hands of non-commissioned officers, he explained that bourgeois officers »were happy, after having been maltreated […] in any number of ways by their superiors, […] to be allowed to whack and abuse one of their comrades«.[36] In a speech in March 1904, Bebel described government policy in German South West Africa as »not only barbaric, but bestial«. In response, the nationalist »Coburger Zeitung« objected to Bebel's »kowtowing« to native insurgents and referred scathingly not to the »heroic« but to the »Herero-like Bebel«.[37] During the Reichstag campaign

33 Bebel to Engels, 25 June 1893, in: *Blumenberg*, August Bebels Briefwechsel mit Friedrich Engels, p. 697.

34 August Bebel, speech of 13 March 1896, Stenographische Berichte über die Verhandlungen des Reichstags, 9. Legislaturperiode, IV. Session, vol. 2, Berlin 1896, pp. 1432–1435, reprinted in: *Bebel*, Ausgewählte Reden und Schriften, vol. 4, Reden und Schriften Januar 1896 bis Dezember 1899, Munich 1995, pp. 7–14. For accounts of the day's debate in the Reichstag and reactions to Bebel's accusations, see *Arne Perras*, Carl Peters and German Imperialism 1856–1918. A Political Biography, Oxford 2004, pp. 214–219; also *Martin Reuss*, The Disgrace and Fall of Carl Peters. Morality, Politics, and *Staatsräson* in the Time of Wilhelm II, in: Central European History 14, 1981, pp. 110–141, esp. pp. 128–133 (however, Reuss ignores the second Peters trial).

35 Bebel in »Der Sozialdemokrat«, 15 April 1886, cited in: *Maehl*, August Bebel, p. 208. Still indispensable on this topic is *Reinhard Höhn*, Sozialismus und Heer, 3 vols., Bad Harzburg 1961–1969.

36 See the exhaustive résumé in *Hartmut Wiedner*, Soldatenmißhandlungen im Wilhelminischen Kaiserreich (1890–1914), in: AfS 22, 1982, pp. 159–197, esp. pp. 172f. August Bebel, speech of 15 February 1892, Stenographische Berichte über die Verhandlungen des Reichstags, VIII. Legislaturperiode, I. Session, vol. 6, Berlin 1892, p. 4218, cited ibid., p. 173. See also *Alex Hall*, Scandal, Sensation, and Social Democracy. The SPD Press and Wilhelmine Germany 1890–1914, Cambridge 1977, pp. 125–133. Especially after 1900, despite his pamphlet of 1898, »Nicht stehendes Heer, sondern Volkswehr«, Bebel tended to demand a more effective military for national defence rather than a »people's army«. See *Nicholas Stargardt*, The German Idea of Militarism. Radical and Socialist Critics, Cambridge 1994; *Helmut Bley*, Bebel und die Strategie der Kriegsverhütung 1904–1913, Göttingen 1975; *Bernhard Neff*, »Wir wollen keine Paradetruppe, wir wollen eine Kriegstruppe …«. Die reformorientierte Militärkritik der SPD unter Wilhelm II. 1890–1913, Cologne 2004.

37 Coburger Zeitung, 17 January 1904, cited in: *Andrew Deas*, Germany's Introspective Wars. Colonial and Domestic Conflict in the German Press' Discourse on Race 1904–1907, MA diss., Waltham 2009, online at URL: < http://hdl.handle.net/10192/23234> [18.7.2018], p. 44.

preceding the so-called Hottentot elections of January 1907, the »Imperial League Against Social Democracy« published a political cartoon depicting »Bebel's Legions at Work«. In this and countless other images, Bebel personified the SPD's un-national, »unreliable« stance on Germany's colonizing mission.[38]

Taking stock of these three themes, it is not necessary to downplay Bebel's allegiance to socialism in order to emphasise the importance of social justice and human rights in his world view. In 1997, Helga Grebing observed that

»no one more consistently and resolutely than […] August Bebel held up against the monarchical-authoritarian state its alternative – not in the first instance, as one might believe, with the utopia of the *Zukunftsstaat*, but rather through his concrete advocacy for human rights, for women's emancipation, for social rights, against discrimination against Poles, Russians, Jews, and non-conformists in the German Reich, against the abuse of soldiers and antisemitism and the inhuman treatment of indigenous populations in the German colonies.«

Grebing then cast her gaze forward to the 1920s and 1930s: »Standing in this tradition, the German labour movement, later, not only postulated but actually realized the right of resistance against an unjust, criminal authority as a human right.«[39] We do not have to rely on hindsight. One English newspaper correspondent in 1912 ascribed the SPD's great Reichstag election victory that year to the fact that Bebel and his colleagues were

»the only unterrified, tooth-and-nail foes of reaction, insensate militarism and class rule, the one voice which cries out insistently, fearlessly, implacably, against the injustices which, in the opinion of many patriotic men, are retarding the moral progress and sapping the vital resources of the German nation«.[40]

## III. A Life for Democratic Reform

4. My fourth theme is Bebel's advocacy of electoral reform, in part to extend the Reichstag's general, equal, direct, and secret suffrage to Landtag elections in Germany's federal states and to municipal elections.[41] Bebel's struggle for democratic reform, however, can-

38 Illustrated flyer Nr. 55 of the Reichsverband gegen die Sozialdemokratie, »Wählt zur Ehre des Vaterlandes gegen seine Zerstörer!« (»Bebels Heerscharen an der Arbeit«), reproduced in: *Michael Klant* (ed.), Der rote Ballon. Die deutsche Sozialdemokratie in der Karikatur, Hannover 1988, p. 87, also in *Retallack*, Red Saxony, p. 425.

39 *Helga Grebing*, Einführung, in: Mitteilungsblatt des Instituts zur Erforschung der europäischen Arbeiterbewegung, 1997, no. 18, pp. 7–9. See also *Gerhard A. Ritter*, August Bebel, Freiheit und Emanzipation. Menschenrechte und Arbeiterbewegung im Deutschen Kaiserreich, in: *Angela Bösl* (ed.), zu aller Nutzen. August Bebel (1840–1913) – Wirken und Wirkung, Essen 2013, pp. 33–42; and *Maehl*, August Bebel, p. 222: »Bebel was the champion of social progress, the visionary who saw a brighter future for the common people.« »Bebel had by the late 1880s become *the* tribune of German democracy«.

40 *Frederick William Wile*, Men around the Kaiser, London 1913, p. 81, cited in: *Hall*, Scandal, Sensation, and Social Democracy, p. 20. Wile was an American journalist who wrote for »The New York Times«, the »Chicago Daily News«, and was a Berlin correspondent for the »Daily Mail«.

41 *August Bebel*, Zu den Landtagswahlen in Sachsen, Berlin 1891, esp. pp. 3–31; for Bebel's resolution and speech of 28 October 1893 on the universal suffrage and German Landtage, see Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (ed.), Protokoll über die Verhandlungen des Parteitages der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands. Abgehalten zu Köln a. Rh. vom 22. bis 28. Oktober 1893, Berlin 1893, pp. 253–265. For context see *James Retallack*, Mapping the Red Threat: The Politics of Exclusion in Leipzig before 1914, in: Central European History 49, 2016, pp. 341–382.

not be distilled down to the demand for a wider, or »democratic«, electorate. From the outset of his political career, and as one of the reasons he distanced himself from the teachings of Ferdinand Lassalle, he understood that universal suffrage was not a panacea for working-class grievances. The lengthy catalogue of electoral, parliamentary, and other reforms Bebel advocated from the beginning to the end of his career can be assessed with surprisingly little direct reference to a socialist state of the future. Even while the internal party debate about the *Zukunftsstaat* raged in the 1890s, it took four successive party congresses before Bebel convinced his colleagues that they should contest Prussian Landtag elections under the notorious three-class suffrage.[42] Bebel's campaign for electoral reform went far beyond the question of formal participation in Prussia or in other undemocratic systems. The electoral chicanery on which he sought to shine a light has a twenty-first-century ring to it. Gerrymandered constituencies, weighted votes, wrangles over candidate selection, illegal campaign contributions, voter suppression, attack ads, »fake news« and »alternative facts« – these were all part of Bebel's world, as they are part of ours.

5. It is not difficult to see why issues of state surveillance and violence attracted Bebel's special attention. During the »heroic« period of the Anti-Socialist Law (1878–1890), which Bebel once described as a »white terror«, German police sought their quarry everywhere: Bebel »was almost never without a police ›poodle‹ dogging his footsteps or without his governmental ›honor guard‹ waiting for him outside his domicile, hotel room, or assembly hall in whatever city he chanced to be«.[43] Bebel's experience of intimidation, repression, and imprisonment in the 1870s and 1880s fuelled his later determination to document and publicise the draconian use of the »Saxon Jewel« – its Association Law dating from 1850 – by Saxon police and civil servants.[44] Bebel was more ambivalent about the use of violence and non-violence. That ambivalence contributed to acrimonious debates within the German and European labour movements about the usefulness of the mass strike as a political weapon. Would it stop war? No one knew. Could it wring Prussian suffrage reform from the authoritarian state? No one knew. Could it block a *coup d'état* from the Right? No one knew.[45]

Bebel's biographer can use the mass strike issue – and other issues that came to the fore after 1900 – to reconsider larger questions. Was Bebel a pacifist or a patriot? What did workers think of his willingness to defend his Fatherland if attacked? Did Bebel perhaps become addicted to Reichstag election victories? Did he *really* have confidence in the masses? In a famous debate between Bebel and the leader of French socialists, Jean Jaurès, at the 1904 congress of the Second International, Bebel declared that »one cannot mobilize the [party's] 3 million voters and bring them before the royal palace to depose the Kai-

42 *August Bebel*, Unsere Betheiligung an den preußischen Landtagswahlen, in: Neue Zeit, 1896–97, vol. II, no. 46, 1897, pp. 609–617, and Neue Zeit, 1897–98, vol. I, no. 7, 1897, pp. 196–203. See *Bernhard Mann*, Die SPD und die preußischen Landtagswahlen 1893–1913, in: *Ritter*, Der Aufstieg der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung, pp. 37–48.

43 *Maehl*, August Bebel, p. 162. More generally see *Dieter Fricke/Rudolf Knaack* (eds.), Dokumente aus geheimen Archiven. Übersichten der Berliner politischen Polizei über die allgemeine Lage der sozialdemokratischen und anarchistischen Bewegung 1878–1913, 3 vols., Berlin 1983–2004; also *Ignaz Auer*, Nach zehn Jahren. Material und Glossen zur Geschichte des Sozialistengesetzes, London 1889.

44 *August Bebel*, Die Handhabung des Vereins- und Versammlungsrechts im Königreich Sachsen. Auf Grund des Thatsachenmaterials dargelegt, Berlin 1897.

45 The literature on the SPD and the mass strike is enormous. One recent contribution is *Michael L. Hughes*, »The knife in the hands of the children«? Debating the Political Mass Strike and Political Citizenship in Imperial Germany, in: Labor History 50, 2009, pp. 113–138.

ser«.[46] But as the German émigré historian Francis L. Carsten rightly concluded in his 1991 biography, neither the SPD nor its leader had a viable »end game« after 1903. It is this long-term perspective in particular that denies sainthood to »the workers' emperor«. Carsten put it this way: Bebel »hoped for more voters, but he did not have an answer as to what these could accomplish, as long as the power apparatus of the Kaiserreich remained unshaken«.[47]

6. We come, lastly, to the issues of international terrorism and global solidarity. Bebel was jailed in 1871 for his »treasonous« support of the Paris Commune. During and after the Anti-Socialist Law he strove to distance his party from another international movement, anarchism.[48] All the while Bebel remained profoundly influential in the Second International. Most bourgeois Germans believed instinctively that Bebel and his followers sought »the total overthrow of the existing state and society« (as they often put it). Loyalty to the nation became a litmus test of German citizenship: as Kaiser Wilhelm II famously pronounced, Social Democrats were *vaterlandslose Gesellen*.[49] These words are often cited, but the question should be put more provocatively. Were the Social Democrats the terrorists of their time?

After his dismissal from office, Bismarck declared:

> »The fact that the government treats the socialists as a political party, as a power in the land to be treated seriously and to be reckoned with, instead of robbers and thieves who need to be crushed […], has greatly increased their power and importance. I would never have sanctioned that. They are the rats in the land and should be destroyed.«[50]

In his lectures delivered at the London School of Economics in 1896, the philosopher Bertrand Russell noted that »Social Democrats are persistently regarded by their opponents as a set of vulgar revolutionaries, prepared at any moment, wantonly and for the fun of the thing, to cut their neighbours' throats and cause a temporary reign of terror.«[51] How did things stand twenty years later? The Centre Party leader Matthias Erzberger, who became one of the fiercest opponents of the Wilhelmine authoritarian state near the end of the First World War, declared in May 1914 that »the biggest problem […] the Reich must solve is

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46 After Bebel's stinging indictment of revisionists at the Dresden party congress of 1903 – that is, shortly after the SPD's »three-million victory« in the Reichstag elections of June 1903 –, his former party friend Johann Most likened the speech to the Catholic dancing procession of Echternach, which takes place in Luxembourg every Whit Tuesday: but whereas pilgrims take three steps forward and two steps backward, Most claimed Bebel's speech offered three steps forward *and* three steps backward. Most, in Der Freie Arbeiter 2, no. 43, Berlin 1905, cited in: *Robert Michels*, August Bebel, in: Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik, 1913, no. 37, pp. 671–700, here: p. 690.

47 Carsten added: »Even an absolute majority of the SPD in the Reichstag would have foundered on the veto of the Federal Council and the Kaiser.« *Francis L. Carsten*, August Bebel und die Organisation der Massen, Berlin 1991, p. 251.

48 See *August Bebel*, Von den Anarchisten trennen uns grundsätzliche Gegensätze. Reden und Diskussionsbeiträge auf dem Internationalen Sozialistischen Arbeiterkongreß in Zürich, reprinted in: *Bebel*, Ausgewählte Reden und Schriften, vol. 3, pp. 349–354. The best treatment of this relationship in English is *Elun T. Gabriel*, Assassins and Conspirators. Anarchism, Socialism, and Political Culture in Imperial Germany, DeKalb 2014.

49 Sometimes loosely translated as »scoundrels without a country«. See inter alia *Dieter Groh*/*Peter Brandt*, Vaterlandslose Gesellen. Sozialdemokratie und Nation 1860–1990, Munich 1992.

50 Bismarck in November 1895, quoted in a copy of the SPD's Maifeier-Zeitung for 1898 found in the Staatsarchiv Hamburg, cited in: *Hall*, Scandal, Sensation, and Social Democracy, p. 200, note 17.

51 *Bertrand Russell*, German Social Democracy, New York 1965, p. 99. Russell's analysis of the German labour movement was, at many points, uncannily prescient.

the *destruction* of the vast power of Social Democracy«. All other problems, Erzberger continued, »stand in second place behind this *core* issue of domestic political life«.[52] A central question for any biography of Bebel – and any future attempt to reconcile the intertwined historical processes of social and political democratisation – concerns how Bebel and the SPD retained their pariah status in the view of German elites and the state from the 1870s to 1913.

Again and again, Bebel and other Social Democrats claimed – and sincerely believed – that their actions and the fate of their movement lay not in their own hands but in those of their bourgeois antagonists. In a letter of January 1882 to Ignaz Auer, Bebel explained the challenges he and his party faced:

> »Our behaviour will not change the behaviour of our opponents one whit. To achieve even modest success, we would have to swear off and deny our activity altogether, destroy our [press] organ, and emasculate our speeches in the Reichstag and Landtag […]. And if we did all that, they would demand still more of us; in the end they would not believe us anyway, declaring instead that everything we do is merely calculated hypocrisy and duplicity, and that now everyone must really be on their guard. […] The only thing that we can and must do is avoid unnecessary provocation and keep our nerve, even though it is damned difficult to do this in the face of the swinishness that is constantly unleashed against us. […] Thus, our tactics […] are determined much more by our enemies than we can prescribe them ourselves.«[53]

The sense of outrage conveyed by Bebel's words provides a useful reminder: we must try to understand what contemporaries thought the Anti-Socialist Law and other examples of political repression actually accomplished. Historians have tended not to believe bourgeois and aristocratic Germans in the Kaiserreich who claimed that Bebel's party was, literally, a criminal organisation, an international conspiracy, an existential threat. In our post-9/11 age, there is an understandable liberal tendency to ascribe overheated rhetoric about such threats to a self-interested, mendacious elite of political insiders. But historians need to listen closely to the enemies of Social Democracy and to judge carefully their avowed fears for the future.

These six issues offer new opportunities to study discrimination based on class, gender, religion, and race; to examine militarism, pacifism, and the use of violence in transnational contexts; to consider how terrorism was defined and anti-terrorism implemented; and to explore the processes of democratisation in Germany and Europe over more than half a century. But one more important question arises from biography's focus on human agency:[54] To what degree did Bebel – personally – widen or narrow the social, political, and cultural divides that separated his party from the rest of Germany? Bebel was a popular firebrand *and* a parliamentary pragmatist, a late-to-the-party Marxist *and* the herald of worldwide revolution, a doctrinal touchstone *and* a political chameleon. The category of

52 Cited in: *Walter Mühlhausen*, Gegen den Reichsfeind – Anmerkungen zur Politik von Staat und Gesellschaft gegenüber der Sozialdemokratie im Kaiserreich, in: *Ulrich Lappenküper* (ed.), Otto von Bismarck und das »lange 19. Jahrhundert«. Lebendige Vergangenheit im Spiegel der »Friedrichsruher Beiträge« 1996–2016, Paderborn 2017, pp. 329–352, here: pp. 350f. (emphases added).

53 Bebel to Auer, 4 January 1882, IISH, ARCH00029, August Bebel Papers, A. Briefe von August Bebel, Inv. nr. 2, Ignaz Auer (online). Fifteen years later Bebel expanded on the same idea. In a speech to students in 1897 he declared that whereas he had once envisioned violent revolution, that was no longer necessary: »The biggest revolutionaries are not the Social Democrats, they are their avowed enemies; Herr von Stumm, for example, Herr Krupp, those are the revolutionaries par excellence.« *August Bebel*, Akademiker und Sozialismus. Ein Vortrag, gehalten in der öffentlichen Studentenversammlung am 14. Dezember 1897, Berlin 1898, p. 12, cited in: *Carsten*, August Bebel und die Organisation der Massen, p. 251.

54 See also *Simone Lässig/Volker R. Berghahn* (eds.), Biography between Structure and Agency. Central European Lives in International Historiography, New York/Oxford 2008.

class is important, but there are two other keys that can help unlock Bebel's contemporary influence and historical significance. The first is a fear of violent revolution found among significant sections of the German bourgeoisie and dating all the way back to the French Revolution. The second is the pervasive set of resentments felt by underprivileged groups in German society when their »hero« was defamed as an outlaw. Bebel's life of celebrity puts these two interpretative keys on the same ring of explanation. Bebel was an enigma, even though, ironically, almost no one thought so at the time.

## IV. A Life of Celebrity

How did German workers »find« Bebel, embrace him as »their emperor«, and put their faith in Social Democracy's message? In what ways did Bebel serve as a metaphorical hook on which German workers could hang their hopes and dreams? One answer was provided by a brickyard worker named Wenzel Holek. A leaflet smuggled into his workplace offered Holek a »revelation experience« that other Social Democrats remembered in similar terms:

> »The message of the leaflet swirled around in my head. […] But when I compared what was said here about the workers with what was written about their demands and character [in the right-wing press], I realized that […] the expressions they used against the workers – ›oily fellows‹, ›traitors to the fatherland‹, ›agitators‹, ›subversives‹ – these just didn't agree at all with what I'd heard in the leaflet. But how was I to be certain who was actually right?«

Holek was looking for *truth*: »Where was someone who really professed socialism and could explain to me its principles and its views of the workers' situation? There I was – at a loss. And for a long time, I groped in the dark […].«[55]

Bebel was uniquely able to provide the spark of enlightenment and hope that Wenzel and millions like him yearned for. This emotional connection can hardly be overestimated. It may be true that more lies are told at a funeral than anywhere else on earth. Nevertheless, at Bebel's funeral in Zurich on 17 August 1913, the Austrian socialist leader and Bebel's friend Viktor Adler expressed a sentiment found in countless obituaries and memoirs: From Bebel, declared Adler, »emanated a warmth of the heart that necessarily embraced everyone who came close to him. He was not able to see the promised land, he did not see victory. But he saw the *Aufmarsch* of the army that will triumph.«[56]

Bebel's portrait often hung beside that of Martin Luther or Kaiser Wilhelm II on the walls of working-class homes. Or it replaced them. This, too, signalled an emotional connection, though it was one that was often ignored outside the Social Democratic milieu. Bebel's political enemies and foreign observers mistakenly believed they understood why he gained such stature as a political superstar. The British envoy in Dresden remarked as early as 1884 that »such is the eloquence of Bebel, that no topic is so mean that he cannot raise it in a few sentences to first-rate interest and importance«. A few months later the envoy added that »[Saxony's] Minister of the Interior recently told me that the great orator's door-handles are nearly as excellent as his speeches«.[57] Prussia's minister of the interior, Robert Puttkamer, once voiced the same opinion: »Deputy Bebel is known to be the most

55 *Wenzel Holek*, Lebensgang eines deutsch-tschechischen Handarbeiters, ed. *Paul Göhre*, Jena 1909, excerpted, edited, and translated by *Alfred Kelly* (ed.), The German Worker: Working-Class Autobiographies from the Age of Industrialization, Berkeley 1987, pp. 102f.

56 For Adler's remarks, see Die Trauerreden im Krematorium, in: Vorwärts, 18 August 1913, p. 2.

57 British envoy to Saxony, George Strachey, Dresden, to British Foreign Secretary, Earl Granville, London, no. 14, 23 February 1884, and no. 31, 7 May 1884, The National Archives, UK, FO 68/168.

capable and eloquent, as well as the most dangerous, of all Social Democrats. […] I fear his oratory and the impression he has made upon the masses.«[58] However – and this is the more important point – nothing would be more mistaken than to see Bebel *only* as a great orator, as a cold, professional politician.[59]

As Germany's medial age dawned, celebrity mattered. For it was also an age of mass politics, mass culture, and the mass press.[60] Once the age of film dawned in the 1890s, the towering figures of Bismarck and Bebel even appeared on the big screen: apparently cinema patrons did not always know – because they were not let in on the secret – that actors were playing these parts.[61] As both the foundation and the consequence of his celebrity, Bebel became a master at exploiting monarchical, colonial, and other scandals, using them to identify myriad injustices in his world.[62] But as the sociologist Robert Michels noted perceptively, the root of Bebel's stature and influence was not to be found exclusively in any one arena: not in the party alone, not in parliament alone, not even in personal sacrifice or political celebrity. »What made the masses trust Bebel«, Michels wrote,

»was his nearness. His language was their language. His manner was their manner. He did not distinguish himself from them through profound theorizing. […] He was the man of political *Praxis*. He was their man. They did not mind that he was a parliamentarian through and through. On the contrary.«[63]

Why is the attitude of non-working-class Germans so important in this story? Why are the cat-calls that greeted Bebel in parliament and the broadsides launched against him in the press just as important as the applause and adulation he received? As I have argued elsewhere, many members of Germany's newly ascendant bourgeoisie wanted no part of a global order based on the rights of workers, women, and other oppressed groups.[64] Thus Bebel became the bourgeoisie's anti-Kaiser too, a kind of German Robespierre poised to

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58 *Hermann Wendel*, August Bebel, 3rd ed., Offenbach 1948, p. 67, cited in: *Maehl*, August Bebel, pp. 176f. The same tone of grudging respect was found in Theodor Mommsen's observation of December 1903 in Theodor Barth's journal, »Die Nation«: »But it is unfortunately true; at the present time Social Democracy is the only great party that can lay claim to political respect. It is unnecessary to mention talent; everyone in Germany knows that with a brain like Bebel's one could outfit a dozen East-Elbian Junkers so that they would shine among their own kind.« Cited in: *Maehl*, August Bebel, p. 7.

59 See *Thomas Welskopp*, Existenzkampf um Abkömmlichkeit. »Berufspolitiker« in der deutschen Sozialdemokratie bis zum Sozialistengesetz, in: *Lothar Gall* (ed.), Regierung, Parlament und Öffentlichkeit im Zeitalter Bismarcks. Politikstile im Wandel, Paderborn/Munich etc. 2003, pp. 185–222.

60 See also *Lucy Riall*, The Shallow End of History? The Substance and Future of Political Biography, in: Journal of Interdisciplinary History vol. 40, 2010, pp. 375–397.

61 See still frames of actors playing Bismarck and Bebel in a »Wochenschau«, illustrated in *Otto-Ernst Schüddekopf* (ed.), Herrliche Kaiserzeit. Deutschland 1871–1914, Berlin 1973, p. 74. Images of Bebel as a wild revolutionary, armed with a dagger in one hand and a bottle of petroleum in the other, are prominent in *Klant*, Der rote Ballon.

62 See *Frank Bösch*, Öffentliche Geheimnisse. Skandale, Politik und Medien in Deutschland und Großbritannien 1880–1914, Munich 2009; *Martin Kohlrausch*, Der Monarch im Skandal. Die Logik der Massenmedien und die Transformation der wilhelminischen Monarchie, Berlin 2005.

63 *Michels*, August Bebel, pp. 674f. The left-liberal politician Friedrich Naumann, who once argued for a parliamentary bloc from Bebel on the left to Ernst Bassermann on the centre-right, expressed a similar comment: »[Bebel] was flesh of the flesh and bone of the bone of the common people. […] The grandeur of German Social Democracy rests in part upon the limitless trust that the masses reposed in their ›August‹.« Friedrich Naumann, Erinnerungen an Bebel, in: Neue Hamburger Zeitung, 20 August 1913, cited in: *Maehl*, August Bebel, p. 7.

64 *Retallack*, Germany's Second Reich; *id.*, Red Saxony.

unleash another Reign of Terror. Perhaps the comparison with Danton would be more accurate. Bebel and his party comrades famously spoke »out the windows of the Reichstag« when the extra-parliamentary activities of their movement were suppressed under the Anti-Socialist Law. One wonders whether conservatives in the Reichstag, after the »devil incarnate« spoke, were tempted to throw open the windows of parliament to dispel the smell of sulphur.[65] Whatever the answer, Bebel's biographer needs to explore how the title of »emperor« conferred iconic authority on Bebel and what these developments meant for the future of democracy.

Rather than simply register the reverence or the abuse directed at Bebel, we need to dig deeper to understand the man and the message. Ironically, Bebel's words sometimes mattered hardly at all. Consider one report from a Social Democratic rally during the national election campaign of 1912:

»The giant room is already filled. Feverish excitement grows and grows. […] Over there at the railway station, a train pulls in. […] Suddenly […] a gap has opened down the middle of the hall. A small, silver-grey-haired man stands at the entrance, hat and briefcase in his hand. Three times a *Hoch*! thunders out. […] Bebel speaks. What he said, I don't know, I never did know. Most of the assembled listeners experienced the same thing. It lay over us all, like hypnotism. One saw only white hair, the movement of arms; one heard rage, ridicule, slashing barbs. […] If Bebel had said two times two is five, everyone would have believed it. And in closing: a short, clipped command: […] ›Man for man to the polls, for the candidates of Social Democracy!‹ […] Only later did the excitement die down, when Bebel sat in the train.«[66]

The point here is not that Bebel's contribution to the SPD's growth was always decisive, but rather that his symbolic presence often was. Celebrity and excitement, solemnity and respect – these were ties that bound Bebel to the masses and the masses to him. Recent studies have analysed the rhetorical power of parliamentary speaking and the symbolic power of parliamentary routine.[67] These, too, put issues of inclusion and exclusion on public display. The biographer's task is to look behind »the barricades of the courageous word«.[68] There we find not one Bebel, but two: the hero and the heretic.

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65 Once, after the rebellious French painter Eugène Delacroix visited the Louvre, the conservative court painter Jean-August-Dominique Ingres had the windows thrown open for exactly this reason. Recounted in *Julian Barnes*, Keeping an Eye Open. Essays on Art, London 2015, p. 53.

66 *Heinz Kühn* (ed.), Auf den Barrikaden des mutigen Wortes, Bonn 1986, p. 51f. Cf. a similar account in *Michels*, August Bebel, p. 693. For the larger context, see inter alia *Gerhard A. Ritter*, Zu Strategie und Erfolg der sozialdemokratischen Wählerrekrutierung im Kaiserreich, in: *Otto Büsch/Monika Wölk/Wolfgang Wölk* (eds.), Wählerbewegung in der deutschen Geschichte. Analysen und Berichte zu den Reichstagswahlen 1871–1933, Berlin 1978, pp. 313–324.

67 *Hans-Peter Goldberg*, Bismarck und seine Gegner. Die politische Rhetorik im kaiserlichen Reichstag, Düsseldorf 1998; *Thomas Mergel*, Parlamentarische Kultur in der Weimarer Republik. Politische Kommunikation, symbolische Politik und Öffentlichkeit im Reichstag, Düsseldorf 2002; *Dieter Langewiesche/Klaus Schönhoven/Peter-Christian Witt*, August Bebel. Repräsentant der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung, Heidelberg 1991; *Elfi Pracht*, Parlamentarismus und deutsche Sozialdemokratie 1867–1914, Pfaffenweiler 1990. On different aspects of »political ceremony« in the medial age, see also *Andreas Biefang*, Die Reichstagswahlen als demokratisches Zeremoniell, in: *id./Michael Epkenhans/Klaus Tenfelde* (eds.), Das politische Zeremoniell im Deutschen Kaiserreich 1871–1918, Düsseldorf 2009, pp. 232–269 (and other contributions to the same volume); *Andreas Biefang*, Die andere Seite der Macht. Reichstag und Öffentlichkeit im »System Bismarck« 1871–1890, Düsseldorf 2009; *id.*, Wahlsieg 1912 – der glücklichste Moment der Parteigeschichte, in: *Anja Kruke/Meik Woyke* (eds.), Deutsche Sozialdemokratie in Bewegung 1848 – 1863 – 2013, Bonn 2012, pp. 88–91.

68 *Kühn*, Auf den Barrikaden des mutigen Wortes.

## V. Conclusion

August Bebel has provided his biographers with a subject, but has he provided them with a story? Most biographers try to weigh individual agency against structural constraints. When they encounter biographical dissonances, they must resist the temptation to eliminate all cognitive static from their narrative. They must be ready, when necessary, to call their subject a horse's ass. And they can choose to construct their biographical subject, at least in part, as discourse. But in doing so, might Bebel's biographers be instrumentalising or even subverting his life? This danger is real, as Roger Chickering has noted: discourses, too, have a life of their own, extending over time. Often they appear to have a beginning, middle, and end that prove to be illusory.[69] Bebel was *sui generis*, yet the contemporary discourse about his role in Germany's political culture, while fractured, can illuminate more than just the phenomenon of celebrity itself.

In studying power, privilege, and social cohesion through the analytical lens of their preferred genre, biographers cannot always sidestep the dangers of an overly presentist perspective, as scholarship on Bebel amply demonstrates. Not long before the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, one West German study was unwilling to concede an inch to Marxist triumphalism, while East German biographies celebrated Bebel according to strict Marxist doctrine.[70] A careful balance must be struck, not only in judging »the man« but also in assessing the prospects and paradoxes of »his times«. Both in the present day and over the *longue durée*, the mobilisation of expanding electorates can be seen as a success story – and as a cautionary tale. The success story points toward social inclusion – liberty, equality, fraternity, and their twenty-first-century variants. The cautionary tale takes account of the power of social exclusion: it reminds us that the struggles for social justice and democratic reform waged by Bebel shaped much of the twentieth century and continue today, without clear trajectories. In many parts of the world, as in Germany in a bygone age, leaders still seek to be responsive to the masses without being responsible to the people. Authoritarian strongmen and the criminal abuse of human rights – hallmarks of »illiberal democracies« – are also possible outcomes of the fundamental democratisation of society.

Despite his many flaws and failures, Bebel throughout his long career was animated by a belief in pluralism and a faith in human compassion. He provided a banner around which advocates of a new, more egalitarian model of democratic *Praxis* could and did rally. That set him apart from millions of bourgeois Germans but provided the foundation for his celebrity among the working classes. In 1913–1914, before Social Democratic conscripts were sent to die in Flanders and on the eastern front and in the Atlantic, Kaiser Wilhelm II and the authoritarian German state were haemorrhaging political legitimacy: the respect of the masses flowed in a different direction. By viewing strategies for emancipation and counter-strategies for exclusion through the lens of a single life, Bebel's biographer can suggest that struggles for democracy are inseparable from beliefs, institutions, and conflicts that claim to make the world safe for it.

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69 *Roger Chickering*, »Comment« at the session entitled »Leben schreiben: Historische Biographien als Impulsgeber für die Geschichtswissenschaft?«, German Studies Association, Annual Meeting, San Diego, 29 September – 2 October 2016.

70 *Seebacher-Brandt*, Bebel; *Heinrich Gemkow*, August Bebel, Leipzig 1986 (first published 1969); *Ursula Herrmann/Volker Emmrich*, August Bebel. Eine Biographie, Berlin (East) 1989.