

Hans Rosenberg Article Prize 2015-2016

James Retallack, "Mapping the Red Threat: The Politics of Exclusion in Leipzig Before 1914,"
Central European History 49 (2016), 341-382.

The Central European History Society (CEHS) is pleased to award the biennial Hans Rosenberg Article Prize for 2015-2016 to James Retallack, for "Mapping the Red Threat: The Politics of Exclusion in Leipzig Before 1914," published in *Central European History* in 2016.

Retallack's article traces the electoral process in Leipzig on three levels – local, regional and national – in the decades before 1914. To show how these three electoral regimes were interrelated, he compares their election data, the effects they had on each other as the Social Democratic Party grew in size, and how, as a result, the authoritarian state, municipal authorities, and conservative burghers tried to control the electoral system through redistricting and overt gerrymandering. With this evidence, Retallack demonstrates that, in the German Empire, democracy was both "practiced and deferred at the same time" (381).

In Retallack's analysis, local, regional and national elections had a reciprocal effect on each other as concerned burghers used the electoral successes of the SPD in the Reichstag elections as motivation to contain the number of socialists elected to Saxony's Landtag and Leipzig's municipal government. Entrenched in their positions of power, conservative politicians used multiple tactics to limit working class voting, including traditional forms of restrictive franchises like tiered-elections, poll taxes, and citizenship and residency requirements. Increasingly, though, they also turned to redistricting and outright gerrymandering. Redistricting practices became indispensable in the late 1880s, when the city of Leipzig incorporated seventeen suburbs – a record number in Wilhelmine Germany – and thus extended the municipal vote to formerly outlying and often industrial neighborhoods.

Retallack's article breaks fresh methodological ground by reading election statistics and municipal maps together to present a more fully rounded analysis of "the processes of political modernization" in Germany and "the perceptions and attitudes" that constitute electoral culture (344). What these sources show us in particular is that the three different suffrage regimes – national, regional and local – were open to different levels of manipulation, so that their elections could have very different outcomes.

Leipzig, as a stronghold of Social Democratic politics, presents an ideal case study of how suffrage could be contained, especially through the praxis of mapping. In 1903, in the national elections, socialist candidates were elected in twenty-two of Saxony's twenty-three Reichstag districts, while at the same time, there was not a single SPD representative in Saxony's Landtag. The evident imbalance between national and regional election results was not coincidental, but the result of intentional gerrymandering.

Nonetheless, despite being overtly exclusionary, Leipzig's city fathers managed to reconcile redistricting with their sense of civic duty, political progress, and independence from the authoritarian state. Retallack exhumes these burghers' contradictory conceptions of political fairness by analyzing the maps that were commissioned by municipal politicians to redraw

electoral district boundaries, as well as the discussions and debates that led to their construction. Using maps in this way is not an easy task and requires a sensitive touch: as Retallack notes, maps, like statistical tables, “will yield their secrets reluctantly” since the professional statisticians who constructed them and civil servants who used them “rarely mused on the political objectives they sought” (381).

Despite this silence, Retallack’s careful analysis and cross-reading of the maps with electoral data demonstrates that political democratization could be “slowed, stopped, and even reversed on a local scale,” while “social democratization,” the politicization of society and expectations of political participation were “relentless” (346). On the one hand, district maps were drawn up on the basis of statistical tables meant to provide a political prognosis of future voting patterns, and as such were a tool for anti-socialist political exclusion on the municipal level. The framers of the redistricting, who came from the political “parties of order,” regarded themselves as the guardians of civic order who had to protect voters “loyal to the Reich” (or Reichstreu) from the rising red tide of socialism. While these conservative power holders no longer felt they could (or wanted to) disenfranchise whole groups of voters outright, they did feel justified in preventing the revolutionary SPD from infiltrating and “terrorizing” the municipal assembly into enacting radical policies.

Still, none of these policies were able to stop the growth of Social Democracy, due in part to inevitable demographic changes and because the routine practice of suffrage cemented expectations of political participation across the class spectrum. But the SPD’s continuing growth was also fostered by the failure of the municipal authorities’ attempts to hide their exclusionary intentions behind cold statistics and seemingly impartial maps. When these unjust and imbalanced measures were discovered, socialist politicians not only found ways to work around the obstacles, but also protested the measures in public and used the ensuing resentment to galvanize socialist voters and prompt other left-liberals – and at times even radical Mittelstand voters – to make common cause with them.

In sum, the article offers an innovative contribution to the long-standing debate within German historiography about the extent to which Germans were practicing democracy, while simultaneously, and consciously, speaking to contemporary political discussions about the risks a democracy incurs when its political officials gerrymander districts with impunity. In doing so, Retallack sets out the potential contemporary resonances of his work without falling into anachronism. His analysis of Wilhelmine electoral politics is squarely that: an analysis of that other time and place. Yet, readers can appreciate how and why redistricting on different levels of governmental elections mattered so much then, by considering how much they continue to matter today.

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