# CONFERENCE REPORTS

## Election Campaigns and Franchise Struggles in Regional Perspective
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Historical research on German elections is currently in crisis. It is afflicted by dwindling interest and conceptual problems, by biases that have left eastern regions and gender issues largely uninvestigated, and by an unwillingness to consider the 'inner meanings' of politics. In danger of being marginalized completely, electoral research is already considered by some to be nothing more than a tool for those in more 'up to date' (*zeitgemäß*) fields.

This surprising assessment was offered by Thomas Kühne (Konstanz) at the outset of a workshop entitled '*Wahl- und Wahlrechtskämpfe im regionalen Vergleich*'. This gathering was convened by James Retallack, Jürgen Schmädeke, and Peter Steinbach, sponsored by the Freie Universität and the Historische Kommission in Berlin, and held in the congenial premises of the Mittelhof in Berlin-Nikolassee. As Peter Steinbach (Berlin) pointed out in his opening remarks, the Historische Kommission had provided the setting for Otto Büsch and another group of scholars when they addressed some of the same issues twenty years ago.[1] But those attending in 1994 focused their theoretical, methodological, and empirical observations on two interrelated questions: How do election results mirror the political choices faced by voters in the midst of election campaigns and franchise struggles; and how can electoral politics be studied in a comparative regional perspective? These questions were conceived in order to structure an analysis that moves 'backward' from outcomes to origins and 'inward' from consequences to contexts. The workshop was also convened to bring into closer proximity the local and regional studies that have recently grown in number but whose conclusions have remained largely isolated from one another.

In an introductory paper entitled '*Die gegenwärtige Lage der deutschen Wahlforschung*', Thomas Kühne identified three problems that may explain

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[1] Cf. O. Büsch, M. Wölk and W. Wölk (eds), *Wählerbewegung in der deutschen Geschichte. Analysen und Berichte zu den Reichstagswahlen 1871–1933* (Berlin, 1978); P. Steinbach, 'Historische Wahlforschung', *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte*, 21 (1981), 499–526.

the current stagnation (*Verdrossenheit*) in the field.[2] The first of these is a mainly conceptual problem. According to Kühne, research on electoral *systems* still takes priority over that on electoral *practices* and electoral *behaviour*; this suggests that an older view of German history 'from above' has not disappeared from the scene. As evidence Kühne pointed to the work of Stein Rokkan, M. Rainer Lepsius, and Karl Rohe, who have introduced and applied the conceptual tools—social-moral milieu, regional political culture, cleavage, and *Lager* (camp)—that virtually all electoral historians still use today. Kühne noted, however, that all three scholars examine mainly short- and medium-term electoral processes, and they have tended to see the emergence of definable milieux as the 'natural' result of economic and political modernization. Consequently scholars may be ignoring important alternatives to the concept of milieu, among which Kühne identified the transmission and communication of political mechanisms and cultural traditions.

Second, Kühne proposed that electoral research needs more intensive work on election campaigns. Since about 1980, the type of research pursued by the Nuffield School has made considerable progress in Germany; but lacking a strong foundation in both theory and methodology, it can still be 'considerably refined'. The model of competing political *Lager*, as developed most recently by Karl Rohe, remains very problematic.[3] According to Kühne, modern and traditional elements of any electoral system must be considered together. Moreover, campaign research must begin to pay much closer attention to the subjective dimensions of electoral behaviour if it is to be enriched by the methods of cultural history and the history of mentalities. Kühne then developed the idea of 'electoral culture' (*Wahlkultur*), which could (i) problematize the 'conflictual' character of elections; (ii) move beyond the mere chronicling of party programs; (iii) consider the individual meanings of casting a ballot in terms of political '*Leistung*'; and (iv) explain the genesis and functioning of different electoral systems.

Third, Kühne argued that the history of franchise reforms in Germany has been badly neglected, again most notably at the local and regional levels. What reforms were possible at these levels of politics? What strategies and tactics were worked out to co-ordinate possible changes at the top and at the base of politics? And how did these strategies constitute part of the political understandings, calculations, and mentalities of common citizens? How did

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[2] See further T. Kühne, 'Wahlrecht—Wahlverhalten—Wahlkultur. Tradition und Innovation in der historischen Wahlforschung', *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte*, 33 (1993), 481–547; idem, *Dreiklassenwahlrecht und Wahlkultur in Preussen 1867–1914. Landtagswahlen zwischen korporativer Tradition und politischem Massenmarkt* (Düsseldorf, 1994); and P. Steinbach, 'Reichstag Elections in the Kaiserreich: The Prospects for Electoral Research in the Interdisciplinary Context', in L. E. Jones and J. Retallack (eds), *Elections, Mass Politics, and Social Change in Modern Germany: New Perspectives* (New York and Cambridge, 1992), pp. 119–146.

[3] See further K. Rohe, *Wahlen und Wählertraditionen in Deutschland. Kulturelle Grundlagen deutscher Parteien und Parteiensysteme im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt, 1992).

they reflect regional political traditions, and how did they mirror an (alleged) nationalization of political culture?

Lastly, Kühne identified two especially galling gaps in the literature on German elections. The first concerns the neglect of eastern Germany relative to the work done on, say, the Rhineland. Even though Kühne conceded that a comparative model based on East–West differences is itself problematic, the 'West bias' in some recent Anglo–American studies may reflect a deeper 'democratic bias'. Second, there is still no comprehensive gender analysis of franchise struggles before 1918 or election campaigns thereafter. In light of these two desiderata, Kühne concluded that one can legitimately ask when— or even whether—historical election research can be brought up to date.

Mirroring the diversity of viewpoints represented at the workshop, Kühne's remarks raised immediate counter-arguments. Jürgen Winkler (Mainz) took issue with Kühne's pessimism and suggested that recent electoral research displayed no conceptual or methodological lethargy whatsoever. The theoretical foundations of campaign research, he suggested, had drawn many useful concepts from political science and mass communications—for example, the idea of 'climate of opinion' (*Meinungsklima*). Kühne did not readily concede the point, declaring that he could find no evidence that theory was applied in even the most rudimentary way to the study of election campaigns. Then Winkler asked pointedly: What is the purpose of historical election research in the first place? Why *should* it consider questions about electoral behaviour and mentalities? Karl Rohe (Essen) asked Kühne to explain further what he meant by a deficit of theory in campaign research, and other discussants echoed similar views. Jürgen Schmädeke (Berlin) argued that his own forthcoming study of Reich elections uses statistics drawn mainly from the national level which, he argued, are important in their own right and need no 'refined tools' from other disciplines to make them meaningful.[4]

On the other hand, Gerhard A. Ritter (Munich) agreed with Kühne that the integration of franchise questions into electoral research was a high priority. Merith Niehuss (Munich) seconded Kühne's call for more regional research, even suggesting that a global analysis of Reich elections may no longer be possible.[5] Peter Steinbach agreed, but noted that we should not try to eliminate gaps in our knowledge in the way one might clean a carpet—by removing one spot after another until the whole area has been covered. Instead, a much more systematic research agenda (*Fragestellung*) is necessary. James Retallack (Toronto, Berlin) elaborated on Ritter's earlier point by suggesting that not franchise questions alone, but their relevance within a

[4] J. Schmädeke, *Wählerbewegung im Wilhelminischen Deutschland. Eine historisch-statistische Untersuchung zu den Reichstagswahlen von 1890 bis 1912* (Berlin, forthcoming 1994).

[5] See further, M. Niehuss, 'Party Configurations in State and Municipal Elections in Southern Germany, 1871–1914', in K. Rohe (ed.), *Elections, Parties and Political Traditions. Social Foundations of German Parties and Party Systems, 1867–1987* (New York, 1990), pp. 83–105.

broader spectrum of 'fairness issues' as elaborated by Brett Fairbairn,[6] has yet to be properly integrated into either election campaign analysis or the statistical study of election outcomes.

When Steinbach asked how one could realistically expect a meaningful payoff from more intensive research on gender questions in electoral politics, the discussion took a new track. Kühne observed that the female franchise is a perfect example of the many issues that must be considered over the longer term and across such traditional turning-points as 1918. Merith Niehuss agreed that all parties, but especially the Centre, learned very quickly in 1919 that women tend to vote differently from men—a lesson also picked up by the CDU/CSU after 1945. Niehuss nonetheless noted that we still need to know more about how women conceived their options under the secret franchise, and how many of them might have cast ballots as a kind of silent protest against husbands and fathers. Ritter argued that even before 1918 women were anything but negligible factors in shaping election campaigns, election styles, election propaganda, and the wider context in which Wilhelmine political culture evolved.

The last major point of discussion concerned the ability of electoral research to explain, as Hermann Buchstein (Berlin) put it, the behaviour of voters and citizens together. How did elections help to set the parameters for institutional change and modernization in other spheres of political activity? In the same vein, Rohe suggested that if electoral research is to be something more than a means to an end, it must generate new ideas with broad relevance. Concentration on dividing voters into social milieux, for example, must be considered in a double sense: as a means to saying something new about elections as a political institution dependent upon the whole political system, but also in order to hold up a kind of mirror to contemporary society. This double function (*Doppelheit*), argued Rohe, can be extremely complex and variable. Ritter agreed that its 'transmission' function between society and politics is probably the most interesting aspect of electoral research. Citing Fairbairn's recent analysis of two Wilhelmine elections,[7] Ritter noted that differences between 'national' and 'normal' election campaigns reveal much about German society. Schmädeke noted that national *versus* local and regional campaign themes provide another window on German society: If one considers the actual materials found in the archives rather than historians' persistent preoccupation with events at the national level, regional concerns appear to have remained uppermost in voters' minds far longer than has been commonly assumed.

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[6] B. Fairbairn, *Election Battles: German Politics, the Parties, and the Reichstag Campaigns of 1898–1903* (unpublished MS, 1994).

[7] B. Fairbairn, 'Interpreting Wilhelmine Elections: National Issues, Fairness Issues, and Electoral Mobilization', in Jones and Retallack (eds), *Elections, Mass Politics, and Social Change*, pp. 17–48.

The second session was introduced by Karl-Heinrich Pohl (Bielefeld) with a paper entitled '*Kommunalwahlpolitik: Ein regionaler Vergleich*'.[8] Pohl chose to stress the 'modern' elements of local politics and the ability of liberal burghers in particular to adapt their style of politics to pressures for reform in German cities. For German liberals, Pohl argued, the municipal arena was not just a sideshow. Quite the contrary, it was the *main* area of liberal politics well into the 1920s, the venue for an 'original' brand of liberalism that emanated from below. German liberals' flexibility, openness to reform, successful coalition strategies, and other accomplishments come into full view, argued Pohl, only when one appreciates that municipal liberalism constituted nothing less than 'its own political system'. Yet it is just as interesting that liberals were able to 'decouple' their local and national functions. This helps to explain why their relatively well-developed organization of politics went hand in hand with their relatively underdeveloped mobilization of the masses, and why municipal franchise laws, fashioned largely to suit liberal wishes, differed dramatically from those in Germany's Reichstag and Landtage. It is also significant that liberals believed that local questions could be addressed 'objectively' (as *Sachfragen*) and remain insulated from the debilitating effects of *Parteipolitik*. In this sense, there is an odd incongruence between liberals' 'shying away from democracy' and their preference for face-to-face 'personality' politics. In any case, concluded Pohl, the Reichstag franchise and current ideas of democracy provide false yardsticks against which to measure liberal accomplishments.

In the ensuing discussion, Retallack noted the difficulty in measuring the degree to which liberals actually believed they were merely 'administering' rather than 'ruling' their local communities; local politicians obviously preferred the rhetoric of *Verwaltung* over *Herrschaft*, but the reality may lie elsewhere. Ritter observed that liberal politics were always influenced by the fact that mayors and other local officials had to be confirmed in office by the state, while Rohe asked whether an alleged 'unpolitical politics' is characteristic of a universal German political culture or a specifically liberal one; if the latter is true, he added, to what degree were such political conceptions determined by individual personalities within the liberal movement? Steinbach then identified four problems for further consideration: (i) the difficulty in bringing under one hat 'oppositional' and 'governmental' liberals; (ii) the connection between what he termed '*local* electoral politics' and 'local *electoral* politics' (as determining, for example, the ease with which yesterday's opponent on the hustings might become tomorrow's ally in the Rathaus); (iii) the influence of local elections as a means to winning advantage in Landtag and Reichstag elections; and (iv) the general and widening politicization of local politics, for example, in elections to local *Krankenkassen*. Siegfried

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[8] See further K.-H. Pohl, 'Die Nationalliberalen—eine unbekannte Partei?' *Jahrbuch zur Liberalismus-Forschung*, 3 (1991), 82–112.

Weichlein (Berlin) added that we need to know much more about which level
of politics—municipal, regional, or national—captured the imagination of
voters at particular times and thus might be considered more 'popular'.

At this point Pohl emphasized the thinness of available literature on virtually
every one of these issues. Nevertheless, based on his research on National
Liberals in Saxony, Bavaria, and other states, Pohl felt confident in identifying
a more 'engaged, practical, and reformist' brand of local liberalism than has
hitherto been generally accepted. To this Kühne replied that Pohl may be
stressing the liberals' good intentions too vigorously. 'Non-partisanship',
Kühne observed, 'is the great lie of the authoritarian state.' Ritter, too,
distinguished between the ideology and the reality of nonpartisanship, and
noted that it would be interesting to explore whether German liberals profited
from local patronage to the same degree as their counterparts in England and
America.

The third session was introduced by Simone Lässig (Dresden) with a paper
entitled '*Wahlrechtskämpfe in Sachsen und im Kaiserreich*', which examined
the role of state franchise laws in contributing to the modernization and
survival of individual Bundesstaaten and the German Reich as a whole.[9] In
an appeal for a more intensive comparative approach, Lässig outlined the
diversity of franchise reforms in the individual states, stressing the role of
extra-parliamentary forces in compelling parliamentarians to address franchise
reform in virtually every German Landtag. Surprisingly, there exist few studies
of the role that street protests played in shaping the electoral culture of
Germany at this time, even though such protests clearly served as a catalyst
for consensus (which might nonetheless favour reform or retrenchment).

The Kingdom of Saxony, Lässig also noted, stands out as the only large
state that enacted *two* major reforms, in 1896 and 1909. Both reforms entailed
special risks for Saxon statesmen: first, because of the unrivalled strength of
the SPD in the state, and second, because of Saxony's reputation as a 'pioneer
land' of both progress and reaction. As a result, Saxon franchise reform
aroused unique expectations *and* frustrations. In southwestern Germany,
by contrast, franchise reform could be successfully implemented within the
individual Landtage. Yet the possibility that the Saxon government had to
give back in 1909 more franchise rights than it had taken away in 1896 may
suggest that the notion of a parliamentary 'dead end' in Wilhelmine Germany
needs to be reconsidered.

Lässig noted in conclusion that studying franchise reform reveals the nar-
rowness of governments' freedom of manoeuvre, the number of fronts on
which they faced opposition, and their indecisiveness in taking the initiative
to foster compromise or build coalitions among the parties. Although franchise
reforms may not have been well-intentioned toward the SPD, in practice they

[9] See further S. Lässig, 'Parlamentarismus zwischen Tradition und Moderne. Der Sächsische
Landtag zwischen 1833 und 1918', in K. Blaschke (ed.), *700 Jahre politische Mitbestimmung in
Sachsen* (Dresden, 1994), pp. 35–49.

demonstrated a willingness to compromise and revealed opportunities for further reform that showed how constitutional deadlock might be overcome. With this in mind, argued Lässig, Rohe's notion of an unbridgeable gap between the *bürgerlich* and socialist *Lager* might not apply very well to the analysis of franchise issues. In the end, street violence, parliamentary infighting, and official calculation all dovetailed to help to *overcome* this 'great divide'.

In the discussion, Ritter noted his own amazement when he discovered the fine calculations made by Saxon parliamentarians when they tried to determine how many (or even whether) SPD deputies should be allowed to enter the Landtag.[10] Pohl agreed, yet suggested that Saxony is an ideal case because of the profound ambivalence toward franchise reform displayed by government officials, party leaders, and the general public in the state. Kühne observed that many states were willing to consider franchise reform only because they knew that Prussia would not take this step. In contrast to Lässig, Pohl felt that Saxony successfully reformed its franchise in 1909 *despite* the SPD's street demonstrations. Retallack observed that both Lässig and Pohl may be correct on this question; he also took up Kühne's point in noting that the other states could never be certain that franchise reform would fail in Prussia; in fact the Saxons honestly believed that Chancellor Bülow, if he had survived the chancellor crisis of 1909, would have accomplished far more than Bethmann Hollweg did the next year. Rohe noted that the dichotomy between an authoritarian state and a reformist state might be drawn too sharply by concentrating on franchise issues narrowly, and pointed to England as a fruitful model for comparison.

The second day's discussions opened with a session introduced by Retallack, whose paper was entitled '*Politische Kultur in regional- und national-geschichtlicher Perspektive*'. Citing Max Kaase's famous quip that the task of defining 'political culture' is like trying to nail a pudding to the wall, Retallack asked whether the investigation of *regional* political cultures *in the past* might be likened to nailing *two* puddings to a wall that has disappeared from view. On the one hand, Retallack noted that in the context of this workshop, to call for a closer integration of local, regional, and national studies of German elections would mean preaching to the already converted. Yet he also identified a persistent belief among historians that more local studies must be gathered before we attempt a synthetic new appraisal of political culture in the *Kaiserreich*. For some, regional history still has a kind of twilight existence, something less than a *histoire totale* and something more than 'merely' a methodology.

[10] Cf. G. A. Ritter, 'Das Wahlrecht und die Wählerschaft der Sozialdemokratie im Königreich Sachsen 1867–1914', in idem (ed.), *Der Aufstieg der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung* (Munich, 1990), pp. 49–101; and J. Retallack, '"What is To be Done?" The Red Specter, Franchise Questions, and the Crisis of Conservative Hegemony in Saxony, 1896–1909', *Central European History*, 23 (1990), 271–312.

One cause of this, Retallack suggested, may lie in the divergence of *Regionalgeschichte* from its roots in *Landesgeschichte*. This has accelerated a preference among historians for studying a 'social-anthropological' territory (*Raum*) rather than a political one. There are many reasons to applaud this development, Retallack noted, and few tears need be shed over the fact that *Landesgeschichte* is now something of a 'non-starter' for political historians of the modern era. Nonetheless, disregarding the natural categories of political activity defined by the administrative borders of a territory or *Land* may deprive us of a useful tool for studying regional political cultures in the past. Without trying to give exclusive priority to political history in any way, the limits of evidence and conceptualization imposed by political boundaries in the past might be used in a *positive* way to illuminate themes, behaviours, and mentalities of both local and national significance. With this approach, the 'outer' and 'inner' meanings of local political cultures could be juxtaposed and findings could be compared more meaningfully across regions or among different levels of politics.

Lastly, Retallack identified three areas of electoral research where historians might address their audience in a new way. First, he suggested that quantitative historians have developed such refined statistical tools that they are experiencing more and more difficulty in making their findings comprehensible and relevant to mainstream historians. Second, it would seem advisable now to choose a unit of study that transcends an individual constituency or a single general election. Third, Retallack argued that the role of the state must not disappear from view. In the electoral 'game', the state acted not principally as an abstract concept but rather through clearly identifiable actors: kings, ministers, local officials, mayors, election overseers, and so on. These individuals left a record in German archives that has remained virtually untouched to date. Moreover, they determined how the 'state' put its stamp on civil liberties, franchise rights, other fairness issues, and perhaps *all* the elements of harmony and disenchantment in civil society that elections help to measure.

In the discussion, Nils Diederich (Berlin) and Niehuss noted that qualitative and quantitative analyses present difficulties for other disciplines too. Niehuss added that the future of electoral research may lie in group projects. Steinbach and Ritter suggested that the role of the state is very difficult to gauge, as its agents pursued different goals and used different methods at each level. Ritter added that the influence of the state in other countries should not be neglected, and that international comparisons are lacking. Rohe then expressed scepticism about what postmodernism could contribute to historical election research. He added that even the notion of 'political culture' may often be inapplicable: it merely provides a 'framing' or 'context' for the study of certain processes that evolve more or less quickly. In contrast to Steinbach and Ritter, Kühne argued that the state was in fact relatively united in its aims and methods when it tried to manipulate elections, even though the state was probably *least* influential at the centre. It is less clear, however, that con-

temporaries regarded the intrusion of the state as a 'self-evident' feature of German electoral culture. Kühne also addressed the alleged 're-regionaliz-ation' of German politics during the *Kaiserreich*,[11] noting that the trend toward increasing numbers of local candidates in Prussian elections might surprise many who have perceived an unstoppable 'nationalization' of German politics after 1871.

On balance, this discussion illustrated that some historians are impatient to define 'political culture' more precisely and perhaps even to quantify it. Jürgen Winkler, for example, suggested that before 'political culture' can become workable as a concept and as a practical tool, one must first draw a map of Germany, showing the political culture of each region or constituency, and then render 'political culture' as one among many variables for quantitative analysis. Another participant suggested that one should be able to chart the competing political cultures in a single constituency over time by chronicling the electoral fortunes of the various social-moral milieux and political parties. Others, however, saw a positive virtue in the fact that the concept of 'political culture' can be defined loosely and applied broadly.

The penultimate session was introduced by Siegfried Weichlein with a paper entitled '*Wahlkämpfe, Milieukultur und politische Mobilisierung*'. After summarizing the contributions of Lepsius and Rokkan, Weichlein argued that recent analyses based on their theories have tended to become too rigid. As a possible remedy, Weichlein proposed that one consider the concept of 'milieu' under three headings: i) as a *Lebenswelt* and a social milieu together; ii) as an *Organisationskultur*; and iii) as a means of representing the milieu politically to the outside world. Weichlein also stressed that members of a milieu generally behaved rationally and were not simply manipulated by the state or by their own leaders. He acknowledged that the liberal and con-servative milieux are much more difficult to identify than the SPD and Catholic milieux, but added that innovative research methods can help to overcome this dilemma.

In the subsequent discussion, Ritter observed that one can legitimately ask (i) whether a liberal or a conservative milieu existed at all in pre-1933 Germany, and (ii) when the Catholic and working-class milieux were dissolved into a *Massenkultur*. Schmädeke emphasized regional disparities as con-tributing to the (self-) destruction of the liberal milieu after 1890, whereas Niehuss noted the relative strength of the milieux (especially the 'extreme' milieux) in the large cities of Weimar Germany. Richard Bessel (Milton Keynes) pointed out the importance of generational factors in the reproduction of milieux, again especially with reference to the KPD, and Diederich noted that historians of elections too often forget that many voters were extremely mobile, voting in different constituencies from one election to the next.

[11] See further S. Immerfall and P. Steinbach, 'Politisierung und Nationalisierung deutscher Regionen im Kaiserreich', in D. Berg-Schlosser and J. Schissler (eds), *Politische Kultur in Deutschland* (Opladen, 1987), pp. 68–79.

Jürgen Winkler drew on his statistical findings from Reichstag elections during the *Kaiserreich* and Weimar periods to suggest that the global stability of milieux does not amount to much when one considers the macro level.[12] Simplistic claims that groups of voters who cast ballots for liberal candidates in 1871 also did so in 1912, noted Winkler, cannot be supported with a shred of evidence. Moreover, Winkler discerned no positive relationship between liberal voters in the 1870s and Nazi voters after 1928. If Lepsius had considered this question intensively, Winkler suggested, he might have formulated his concept quite differently. Ritter and Steinbach in turn cautioned against underestimating the heuristic value of Lepsius's 'construct' or ignoring Lepsius's own cautionary remarks about the flaws inherent in any aggregate analysis.

In the final 'summing-up' session, Steinbach emphasized the inter-disciplinary nature of the discussion and stressed the fruitfulness of bringing historians and political scientists together to discuss interpretative problems common to both disciplines. He also recapitulated the 'modern kaleidoscope' of issues now addressed by historical election research. These features of the workshop set it apart from the Büsch conference twenty years ago, Steinbach noted, although strong continuities were also evident. At that point Steinbach and Retallack announced their intention to publish the five session papers in revised and expanded form. As the workshop wound to a close, Retallack asked Kühne if he still believed electoral research in Germany was experiencing a crisis. With a smile, Kühne replied that he was now confident that the low point had been overcome.

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[12] J. Winkler, *Sozialstruktur, politische Traditionen und Liberalismus* (Opladen, forthcoming 1994).