

# The German Right, 1860-1920

## Political Limits of the Authoritarian Imagination

James Retallack

### Opinion

In this book James Retallack brings together two decades of reading, reflection, and research on the German Right. No historian has done more to illuminate the painful choices that German conservatives confronted as they struggled to survive the challenges of democracy and social change. *The German Right* contains some of his groundbreaking research on Prussia and Saxony, as well as his critical reflections on changing trends in historiography. A book to be read and pondered by every serious student of the German Kaiserreich.

– James J. Sheehan, *Dickason Professor in the Humanities,  
Professor of Modern European History Emeritus, Stanford University*

This collection of essays is welcome indeed. From many sources, it draws together James Retallack's reflections on the dynamism of right-wing politics in Imperial Germany. The essays radiate the authority, verve, and good sense that distinguish Retallack's scholarship.

– Roger Chickering, *Professor of History, Emeritus,  
BMW Center for German and European Studies, Georgetown University*

James Retallack again demonstrates that his is a powerful and persuasive voice in modern German history. In *The German Right*, Retallack stakes out a revisionist argument for understanding the political continuities of the German past, and in the process breathes new life into a deflated debate about Germany's "Sonderweg." What emerges is a new interpretation of modern German history, focusing on a highly contextualized political history of the German Right from the middle of the nineteenth century into the maelstrom of the twentieth.

– Helmut Walser Smith, *Martha Rivers Ingram Professor of History, Vanderbilt University*

James Retallack has written a provocative and compelling set of essays on right-wing politics that spans the period from the 1860s to Weimar, the decades of the modernization of Germany in every sense ... As Retallack explains, the essays are designed to trace history and chart historiography simultaneously. The collective result forces historians to rethink many of the current orthodoxies about the nature of politics, political change, and the endurance of authoritarian influence in Germany ...

Retallack's prose is alive with wit and cheeky gestures ... The volume is handsomely produced and replete with instructive illustrations ...

This is a first-rate collection by a historian of the first rank. It makes us appreciate German conservatism's accommodation, conditioning, and manipulation of modernity in new ways. We are richer for the volume, and it will certainly be read by all historians who seek to understand Germany's twisted and ultimately devastating path through the modern political era.

– Michael B. Gross, *Central European History*, 41, no. 1 (Jan. 2008).

Retallack's most recent book offers several alternatives to conventional studies of political movements. Rather than utilizing a chronological framework, there are several essays that illustrate the interpretive points about the German Right that Retallack (Univ. of Toronto) wants to emphasize. These include regional and doctrinal diversities the Right accepted and the political strategies it employed as it sought to preserve its strength while recruiting adherents from social classes outside its traditional base. Thus, this is not an analysis of the Prussian aristocracy's political strategy, but rather one deliberately focused elsewhere, especially on Saxony, where the author's previous research can be utilized. Another unique use of this thematic structure, demonstrated especially in the introduction and the three chapters in the first of four parts, is the skillful discussion illuminating existing interpretations, amounting to critical bibliographical essays. Other emphases include the use of antisemitism as a cohering and recruiting device, the role of journalists, and the Right's efforts to affect government policies while demonstrating loyalty to the emperor. The footnotes well illustrate the impressive variety of sources utilized, and the illustrations, many from Retallack's own collection, are helpful additions to a well-written text. **Summing Up:** Recommended. Upper-division undergraduates and above.

– H. D. Andrews, Emeritus, Towson University, in *CHOICE* 44, no. 11 (July 2007).

James Retallack's study of the Conservative party in Imperial Germany, *Notables of the Right* (1988), is a standard work on the subject, now unfortunately out of print. Since then, Retallack has made notable contributions to the historiography of Imperial Germany, especially on the history of the right, the regional history of Saxony, and the

history of elections. A new edition of *Notables of the Right* would be a great service to students of Imperial Germany, but the publication of Retallack's collected essays on the German Right from 1860 to 1920 is no less welcome in the interim. This new volume brings together material from essays and papers published after 1990, but reworks much of the text so as to provide a synthesis that is both up-to-date and more than the sum of its parts ... The collection stands up well in its own right and is also enhanced by some vivid and well-chosen contemporary illustrations ...

The first two chapters, on conservatism and the rise of 'demagogic' new right politics in Imperial Germany, have a strongly historiographical character ... Subsequent chapters draw on Retallack's work on Saxony, and highlight the importance of the regional level to Imperial German politics ... The final two chapters trace the trajectory of the German conservatives in the Wilhelmine period ...

[This book] should be read by anyone seriously interested in the history of Imperial Germany and, more broadly, in the ways in which the European right adapted itself to the exigencies of mass politics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

– Andrew G. Bonnell, *European History Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (2008).

Only a few scholars would agree with political philosopher Panajotis Kondylis' bold hypothesis of an irretrievable decline of Conservatism by the nineteenth century ... and some of the more profound responses to this provoking theory can now be found in James Retallack's outstanding collection of essays.

All essays ponder different aspects of the crucial conversion and modernization of the German Right in the *Kaiserreich*, thereby extending, specifying, and sometimes slightly adjusting the arguments presented by the author in his highly acclaimed ... *Notables of the Right* (1988). It comes as no surprise, then, that almost all chapters have a sound and strong historiographical basis. The reader is stunned more than once by the extensive knowledge of [this] scholar ... In addition, several chapters also offer fresh empirical insights, for example, his brilliant chapter "Publicity and Partisanship," which deals with the right-wing reservation towards mass communication in general and newspaper journalism in particular. ... While Retallack carefully reconstructs the different roots and levels of antisemitism, we also learn a lot about the spatial dynamics of politics in Imperial Germany. Even though many conservative politicians tried to distance themselves from all racist furors on a national level, they exerted it at the same time for strategic purposes on a regional level. ...

Anyone with an interest in the long and complex transition of right-wing politics from the mid-nineteenth century to the early stages of the Weimar Republic should take a closer look at this book.

– Marcus M. Payk, *Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung, Potsdam*,  
in *German Studies Review* 31, no. 3 (Oct. 2008).

James Retallack's *The German Right, 1860-1920* provides fruitful insights into its topic, laying out a map of the field, challenging received wisdom, and suggesting new roads forward. ... The volume as a whole coheres around the idea that the German Right remained a pillar of an authoritarian and anti-democratic regime, despite the fissures that erupted within the movement and between the Right and the state ...

Retallack concludes that "well before Bismarck fell from power, Conservatives knew that they confronted the immense task of reconciling traditional attachments to authority with the search for political scapegoats upon whom they could load all responsibility for Germany's ills" (p. 313). Jews, capitalism, and liberalism thus formed an unholy triumvirate in conservative minds, to be opposed by Christian social reform. And although the party moved into increasing opposition from the 1890s onward, Retallack argues that one chancellor after another was forced to acknowledge the importance of the Conservative Party in sustaining the authoritarian nature of the empire. Conservatives, too, were keen not to abandon the government altogether, lest it begin to seek support from the left. These were the limits of the authoritarian imagination; while increasingly at odds with one another, neither the party nor the state were seriously willing to contemplate a move to a more popular form of government. Stasis won out over reform, at least until 1914.

– Jeffrey K. Wilson, *Canadian Journal of History* 43, no. 1 (Spring-Summer 2008).

Three main themes run through the essays: the relationship between a more elitist conservatism and a populist, radical-nationalist right-wing politics, the place of anti-Semitism in the politics of the German right, and the relationship between conservative politics and state authorities. Based on an impressive and extensive corpus of empirical evidence, written in a lively and elegant style, the work offers a plethora of insights and reasoned formulations.

– Jonathan Sperber, *German History* 26, no. 1 (2008).

"Authoritarian types with democratic gloves" – Friedrich Naumann's statement (quoted on p. 67) corresponds to one of the important assertions in James Retallack's new book. Retallack maintains that the German Right ... had an "authoritarian imagination" or a broad and often vague concept of authority that dominated its politics. Hence, various attempts by German Conservatives to increase their numbers within federally, regionally, and locally elected bodies were not examples of their faith in a democratic system, but rather a means to further their authoritarian imagination by supporting the monarchy, a rigid social hierarchy, the army, or the nation. ... The first third of Retallack's book reviews scholarly literature, and the number of studies that he scrutinizes attests to the

breadth of his knowledge. ... Just as Retallack views the populism-demagoguery dichotomy as a more complex issue than many historians admit, he also reveals a more intricate history of the time period by examining regional and not just national politics.

...

Examining regional culture and politics also helps to confirm one of the more seminal arguments of Retallack's book, namely that antisemitism pervaded the German Conservative Party earlier in its existence and to a greater extent than previously thought ... Retallack's most interesting chapter examines conservative periodicals and journalism in Imperial Germany. Retallack argues that conservative parties were not as adept as liberal ones at mobilizing magazines and newspapers for political mass influence. Most of their ineffectiveness lay with their distaste for democracy and their cultivation of elitism, both of which ran counter to the basic assumptions of a democratizing press ... [Retallack] does scholarship a service by challenging commonly held beliefs and clarifying others about the German Right during the mid-to-late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

– Michael C. Wallo, *Central Michigan University*, in *H-German* (October 2007).

Über weite Strecken hinweg ist das Buch von James N. Retallack ... eine überaus kompetent verfasste und flüssig zu lesende Geschichte der Historiographie des Konservatismus. Das ist alles andere als ein Nachteil, weil Retallack ein äußerst komplexes Forschungsdesign für zukünftige Studien entwirft und genau dort einhakt, wo die Forschungsdefizite zum Thema bestehen: Bei der Frage nach dem Zusammenhang von „Staatsverständnis“ und „Massenmobilisierung“, von konservativem „Gouvernementalismus“ und „Grundsatzopposition“, und dort wo es gilt, die regionale und „ideologische“ Vielfalt des Konservatismus zu erforschen; bei der Aufhebung der preußenzentrierten Perspektive; bei der Frage, mit welchen Strategien die Konservativen den Aufbruch in den „politischen Massenmarkt“ (Hans Rosenberg) und die „Fundamentalpolitisierung“ (Karl Mannheim) angingen; bei der Einbeziehung der Gender-Perspektive, wo die Forschung trotz vielversprechender Ansätze noch weitgehend in den Anfängen steckt; bei den offenen Fragen nach der Umsetzung des „linguistic“, „cultural“ und „spatial turns“ in der Geschichtswissenschaft und nicht zuletzt bei der Frage nach Genese, Funktionsweise und Erosion eines regional differenzierten konservativen Milieus.

– Reinhold Weber, *Landeszentrale für politische Bildung Baden-Württemberg*, in *H-Soz-u-Kult* (June 2007).