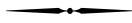




Chapter 14

Ideas into Politics

Meanings of “Stasis” in Wilhelmine Germany



JAMES RETALLACK

Of all civilized peoples, the German submits most readily and permanently to the regime under which he lives.... His character combines understanding with phlegma: he neither indulges in subtilizations about the established order nor devises one himself. ... [I]n keeping with their penchant for order and rule, [the Germans] will rather submit to despotism than venture on innovations (especially unauthorized reforms in government).
— *That is their good side.*

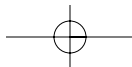
– Immanuel Kant¹

Introduction

Whole books could be filled citing Germans who felt that every dimension of their personal, communal, and political existence was in flux between 1890 and 1914. There is hardly another period in which German society, culture, and politics were allegedly more “turbulent,” “tumultuous,” or “disorienting.” Historians concur that Germany in these years was also undergoing its definitive “transition to modernity.” Nevertheless, debates about the nature of these changes continue to exercise scholars, as do disagreements about their magnitude and trajectory.² Hence there exists an opportunity to take stock of competing viewpoints and to consider whether the *Kaiserreich* was fundamentally transformed by 1918 or whether it remained a recognizably close approximation of the Empire founded in 1871.

Commonly, this problem has been approached as one of political dis/continuity: What lines of development do or do not extend across the divides of 1864–71, 1888–90, and 1918–23? In what follows, however, the focus is shifted slightly: away from the search for epochal thresholds, watersheds, and turning points;³ away from

Notes for this section begin on page 249.



analyses of the "rise" or "decline" of Germany's Great Power status;⁴ away from personalistic appraisals of distinctions between the Bismarckian and Wilhelmine eras;⁵ away from attempts to explain why life in the Empire was not so brutish or boring after all;⁶ away from questions about the regional diversity of the Empire (not because such questions are uninteresting but because they have attracted growing attention elsewhere);⁷ and *toward* the question of why the *Kaiserreich's* basic political institutions remained consonant with so many of its citizens' desires and expectations until the very last weeks of its existence. Thus, this chapter will explore selected aspects of political life in the Empire that were deemed by contemporaries to be closely enough aligned to their own interests and ideals that they deserved to be defended (or at least not challenged openly). In this way I hope to grapple with the multiple meanings and varied consequences of both "reform" and "stasis" in Imperial Germany.

How should we set about appraising contemporaries' alleged preference for political "stasis"? Recent studies that examine centennial or millennial turning points as representative of a distinctive *Zeitgeist* illustrate that an interdisciplinary approach is the ideal toward which we should strive.⁸ Only by taking stock of Germany's economic, social, and cultural development in these years can we hope to explore whether Wilhelmine political culture can best be described in terms of its edginess or its immobility. Notwithstanding the impossibility of ranging across so many spheres of endeavor in a single essay, it is arguably in the political sphere that historians of the *Kaiserreich* can profit most directly from a new appraisal of the "blockages" to modernity that remained in place up to 1918. One strategy for beginning such a reappraisal was offered in the introduction to this volume; a rather different one is presented here. Indeed, this essay is conceived as a think piece, in which I consciously play devil's advocate by trying to set up a counter-argument to other essays in the volume.

In asking why so many aspects of Germany's political institutions and processes did *not* fundamentally change during the Wilhelmine age—this is the thesis that I defend in the first two-thirds of this essay—it is patently unwise to proceed by cutting selected examples of political change from their historical context and fixing them to the static conceptual backdrop encapsulated in the phrase "life goes on." To address crises and continuities together, we must concern ourselves not only with aims and ambitions, but also with underlying values; not only with strivings and successes, but also with lingering regrets. This approach seems particularly useful when dealing with an age in which new motifs of liberation became tied to actual embodiments of vitality. Hence, I build my historical analysis upon the twin observations that the quest for emancipation often falls short of the act of rebellion, and that bodies gradually become less vital with the passage of time. Such analysis involves taking the pulse of the German body politic in subjective as well as objective ways. Thus, we want to determine why Wilhelminians did not *feel* compelled to rebel against their government before 1918.

On the other hand, in this chapter's penultimate section—titled "Nemesis"—I suggest that exploring elements of stasis and reform together in the post-1900 period does in fact reveal compelling transitions to modernity. Precisely because preceding

acts of restraint were so successful, precisely because persistent political blockages had created a backlog of reforms too massive—too *embarrassing*—for “modern” Germans to ignore, stasis itself fueled and facilitated new ways of bringing “ideas into politics.” It nevertheless bears emphasizing that, for the structure of my larger argument, the idea of nemesis does not make sense without its antecedent. Only once the dynamic, dialectical relationship between stasis and reform is established can we understand why contemporaries after 1900 came to accept certain means of crisis management (qua system stabilization) that they had previously considered unthinkable or unacceptable. Only then can we begin to determine why the solutions proposed to problems of political deadlock after 1909 were so radical. And only then can we discover a new meaning of reform in Wilhelmine Germany, namely, reform as a reluctant response to stasis rather than a ringing endorsement of change.

Economy, Society, Culture

We are told that Germans could not have been unaware of the accelerating pace of economic change in the Wilhelmine era. For example, the growth of giant cartels in German big business is generally taken as one feature of the “full-throttle capitalist transformation between the 1890s and 1914.”⁹ But cartels are meant primarily to stabilize things, not encourage change willy-nilly. They make forward planning easier, simplify industrial relations, and insulate both individual enterprises and larger economic sectors from shocks to the economic system.¹⁰ Cartels, in other words, freeze economic advantages that are already in place. Much the same could be said of other “corporatist” features of the economy and society. Klaus Tenfelde has recently argued that these social aspects did not differ as much as we suppose from those of an earlier age. “The concept of [social] ‘estate’ [*das Ständische*] continued to have a virulent but real effect—even an increased one, possibly, but at the very least one that decisively conditioned perceptions well beyond its time.... It may be too much to claim that milieus can be conceived as surrogates for [social] estates, but arguably there was a certain functional equivalency nonetheless.”¹¹ Thomas Kühne and Gerhard A. Ritter have demonstrated that corporatism also infused German political thought—and Prussian political practice—much longer than we have believed.¹² The Nazis were not the first to recognize the political dividends to be reaped from freezing labor relations and the organization of key industries in corporatist modes or extolling, however hypocritically, the virtues of a stable *Mittelstand* of peasants, artisans, and small shopkeepers. Even the role of banks in the Wilhelmine era tended in the same direction. Long-term financing gave bankers a tangible motive to prefer stability and security over upheaval and risk, and the investment of huge amounts of capital inclined bankers to opt instinctively for steady growth and continuity: “By tying up their capital, they tied their own hands.”¹³

In short, although the Wilhelmine era can rightly be seen as an age in which the distance between economic interests and politics diminished, we should not identify

the "modern" aspects of this relationship unequivocally with a tendency toward economic experimentation or accelerating change. It may be true that government ministers and party leaders asked themselves every day whether stability was "best served by traditional, paternalist nostrums, or by more modern policies geared to the new kind of society that had emerged."¹⁴ However, it is equally important to note that even contemporaries who opted for modern policies were seeking to ensure steady economic growth, social harmony, and political stability.

Joachim Radkau has reminded us that many things took a lot longer during Wilhelm's reign than in previous decades.¹⁵ Of course, time was controlled in many new ways—had been controlled since the advent of the first industrial revolution; but that did not change the rhythm of the seasons one whit. The "kinetic energy" of German society was increasing; but psychosomatic suffering hobbled more and more Germans. Radkau explains that his grandfather could date precisely the arrival of his own personal pathology of nervousness: it occurred on the morning of 28 January 1901, after which he acquired—nerves. But like the knotted *Zeitgeist* itself, personal "nervousness" was not necessarily channeled into excitable aggressiveness. It might foster a reaction akin to that of the proverbial deer caught in the headlights. Or it might foster new faith in an old adage: "The good things in life come to those who wait."

University education took longer than ever before in German history. So did the making of a career, the decision to marry, the planning of children, the path to death. More time than ever was needed to wring decisions from an expanding bureaucracy and increasingly complex industrial management. Even the new kinds of fast food and refreshments available on Wilhelmine street corners required greater time (and effort) to digest. So did the task of recuperating from things unwisely ingested, for instance, by bringing the daily alcohol-coffee drinking cycle into balance.¹⁶ The German lifestyle reform movement (*Lebensreformbewegung*) focused on exactly these kinds of novelties and targeted them for criticism and study. However, that very criticism fueled a new dialectic between the changing pace of life and the confused, pragmatic, stubborn efforts of contemporaries to understand and deal with it. Often, lifestyle reformers' lobbying efforts merely fed a bad conscience or led to closer self-inspection. As reported in the records of a rehabilitative center in Ahrweiler, a corpulent pastor spent half a day reclining on a sofa, thinking of nothing but passing his next stool.¹⁷

Cramping and constipation: Are these the proper subjects of political history? Could reduced motility of the intestines possibly be relevant to the fate of political reform in Wilhelmine Germany, even metaphorically? Does stasiphobia—the fear of standing upright—lie on the same axis as the tugging of German forelocks identified by Immanuel Kant in this chapter's epigraph, or of German democracy's alleged self-abasement long before the Nazis or the GDR's secret police appeared on the scene? Could bacteriostasis be related to Germans' desire to inhibit the growth of (without destroying) foreign elements in their body politic? Were Wilhelminians more anal-retentive than their Victorian counterparts?

Notwithstanding their quixotic boldness, such leaps between personal and political pathologies do not require as much analytical athleticism as one might suppose.

After all, other essays in this volume document the efforts of Wilhelmine reformers to draw linkages among the “modern” problems of unhealthy lifestyles, dysfunctions of class society, and bottlenecks in governmentality. The larger point, though, is that contemporaries eventually started to make the same linkages: They moved away from the “sterile equilibrium” or the “static balance among opposing tendencies” that are listed among definitions of the word “stasis,” toward a new condition in which impediments to “the normal flow of fluids in an organ” could be progressively removed. As this process unfolded in late Wilhelmine Germany, previously unimagined strategies to overcome political immobility were considered plausible for the first time. Quiescence and stagnation give way to new (or renewed) creative activity. Even then, though, anxiety and self-reflection were not removed entirely from the equation. Radkau has written illuminatingly about this:

Social counter-reactions and stress effects of the modernization process do not as a rule follow promptly but rather are delayed. . . . It is precisely the hindrances that contribute to the fact that particular features of modernization, as soon as the hindrance is removed, proceed in reverse and give rise to severe upheavals. That was apparently the case in the “age of nervousness.” And more: between the process and the reaction it elicits, there frequently occurs not a calm equilibrium but a knotting-up, which itself produces new tensions.¹⁸

What, then, of culture? The best discussions of both high- and low-brow culture in the Wilhelmine era stress its “extraordinary richness,” creative energy, and diversity. Nor do the fluidity and indeterminacy of Wilhelmine high culture often go unmentioned. One recent account, for example, posits a “general identification by most Germans with the ideas of newness, regeneration, and change”¹⁹ in late Imperial Germany. But only at their peril do historians forget that most of Wilhelm’s subjects retained their conservative artistic tastes or that pre-war Germany’s avant-garde actually generated only a tiny following before the war. Thus, Peter Jelavich has reminded us that “movements” within Wilhelmine Germany’s modern artistic scene developed “against the backdrop of, and often in direct hostility to, a persistent tradition of idealized realism in literature and academic painting.”²⁰

Against this backdrop we can test reactions to the attack on German *Kultur* allegedly unleashed by the Allies in August 1914. Was German vitriol generated because Wilhelm’s subjects wanted to defend change? Or did most of them believe instead that German *Kultur* was threatened by the same “superficiality, caprice, and ephemera” that they had ascribed to the works of their own avant garde before 1914? Friedrich Nietzsche had predicted many years earlier that the European response to German “effervescence” would be to pronounce it “invariably *evil*, wanting as it does to break through the old limits and subvert the old pieties.” But arguably, Germans themselves—whom Nietzsche also labeled “procrastinators [*Verzögerer*] par excellence”²¹—were at least as bloody-minded as their enemies when they declared that the Germany of Goethe and Schiller (not Nolde or Wedekind) had to be preserved and enshrined for the sake of “honesty and sincerity.”²² In any case, the victories that Expressionists won in the half-decade before 1914 or that German

academics won (so rhetorically) in the first months of the war cannot be said to have contributed decisively or unambiguously to overcoming political stasis. Arguably, they did the exact opposite. Wolfgang J. Mommsen has written that the independence of German artists and writers may have helped resist the instrumentalizing intentions of Germany's rulers and political parties; nevertheless, he adds, the tendency toward "purely theoretical negation" of the existing order—for example, *against* large cities and other aspects of modernity—"accelerated the emergence of largely nonpolitical subsystems within Wilhelmine society and thereby contributed indirectly to the weakening of reformist forces" in the Empire.²³ In making much the same point, Modris Eksteins has stressed the darker irony in this:²⁴ "The modern temper had been forged; the avant-garde had won. It tried to fight new battles, but these turned out to be the same old battles, or in fact no battles at all because the infamous bourgeoisie now often bowed with polite, if silent, respect. The 'adversary culture' had become the dominant culture, irony and anxiety the mode and the mood, hallucination and neurosis the state of mind."

Plus ça change ...

The list of political institutions that retained their contours between 1871 and 1918 is familiar to most scholars.²⁵ First to be mentioned is the federal structure of the German Empire. The constitutional arrangement devised by Bismarck left to the individual federal states considerable autonomy in the realms of culture, education, policing, religion, schools, and health. While a centralizing Reich government made inroads in some of these areas, federalism itself blocked many political initiatives that might otherwise have contributed to significant constitutional reform. Second, and related to this point, is the overwhelming dominance of Prussia within the Empire. Quite apart from the unchanging demographic and geographical preponderance of Prussia—constituting roughly two-thirds of the Empire—the Prusso-German dualism that was readily apparent to constitutional scholars and politicians alike in 1871 had diminished hardly at all by 1918. For that very reason, reformist efforts to devise a "new order" (*neue Ordnung*) during the last years of the war were directed against this anomaly of German national life. The Prussian state parliament (*Landtag*) and the Prussian bureaucracy remained such bastions of conservative interests that the wheels of state in the Reich seemed to turn—or more often stop—at the command of Prussian civil servants and conservative *Landtag* deputies. Much the same conclusion arises when we consider the Kaiser's continuing influence as supreme warlord (his *Kommandogewalt*), the survival of the aristocracy, and other aspects of the existing constitutional order.

While recent studies of Wilhelmine elections acknowledge that ministerial responsibility and the formation of national governments on the basis of parliamentary majorities were never within the realm of practical possibility in Imperial Germany, they point to the increasing importance of national elections based on the

principle of “one man, one vote.” Arguably, however, they still direct their gaze too infrequently toward elements of political stasis in the Empire. As just one among many possible examples, historians tend to note only in passing that constituency boundaries for Reichstag elections were never redrawn between 1871 and 1918. Not only the government but the majority parties themselves refused to endorse legislation that would have made reapportionment a reality, even after population shifts made a mockery of the original principle behind such geometry. Over time, the relatively underpopulated constituencies of the rural east continued to send Conservative landowners into parliament, whereas the refusal to consider reapportionment effectively devalued the votes of Socialist supporters in the huge urban constituencies. This apparently mundane aspect of constitutional stasis set parameters of far-reaching importance for larger political contests.

I have argued elsewhere that it is helpful to differentiate between two kinds of continuity discernible within Wilhelmine politics: continuity of political alignments and continuity of political styles. These elements of continuity should be considered as two sides of a single coin. There is no opportunity here to review either earlier, groundbreaking studies that focused on the national plane or recent accounts that consider local and state-level politics as a means to address questions of national importance. The latter kind of study, nevertheless, has proved particularly important in reminding us that liberals as well as conservatives changed their voting habits, party alignments, and styles of campaigning much more slowly at the state level than in national politics. The ingrained rituals of Prussian *Landtag* voting, for example—in which up to a week might be required to complete the complicated two-stage voting procedure—found their analogy in the parties’ unwillingness to break with the face-to-face style of campaigning, the preference for home-grown candidates, and the perpetuation of time-honored party blocs at the local and regional level. Recent studies of state *Landtage* and their associated political cultures in Württemberg and Saxony also illustrate that the new tempo of national politics was not uniformly reflected at the subnational levels.²⁶

Nor have studies of Wilhelmine political culture undermined an interlocking group of three hypotheses, each of which points not to dramatic changes in the political culture of Wilhelmine Germany but to the resiliency and longevity of political alignments that arose during the Reich’s first decade. The first of these theses points to the remarkable degree of continuity within German social-moral milieus, from the dawn of the Imperial era until the Nazis’ electoral breakthrough after 1928. Second, historians and political scientists continue to work through the significance of four persistent cleavages within Wilhelmine political society: between the center and the periphery, between state and church, between the agrarian and industrial sectors, and between employers and employees. Third and lastly, the concept of camps (*Lager*) focuses on sentiments that seemed at least as permanent, and sometimes more so, as milieus and cleavages. For example, the gulf between the working-classes and *bürgerlich* society was reflected in the enduring political division between the socialist and nationalist camps. Two points are worth emphasizing here. On the one hand, histo-

rians continue to disagree about the function of these camps and the degree of flux within them. Nonetheless, most analyses recognize that changes in the nature of Wilhelmine elections had the effect of asserting and confirming the divisions between these camps. On the other hand, a camp is defined as something more than a convenient or momentary coalition: it is built on powerful historical, cultural, and emotional foundations. By definition, only political continuity lends it historical significance. It is predicated, in a word, on stasis.

Ideas into Politics: Real Men, Skirted Decisions

On Thursday, 25 July 1912, the man who has been called Wilhelmine Germany's "grand master of capitalism" dined with Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg at his country estate. Later, in his diary, Walther Rathenau described the course of the evening's discussion. He did so in a way that speaks volumes: about the two men in conversation, about Germany's foreign and domestic political situation at that juncture, and about how the most fundamental and far-reaching reformist ideas concerning Germany's future were—and were not—translated into practice by those who had the power to do so.

Dined at Hohen-Finow.... Chancellor [Bethmann Hollweg] ... asked what I meant by what I had called political goals. He saw no such goals for Germany. Long discussion on this after dinner. I put forward: (1) Economy ... (2) Foreign Policy ... (3) Domestic. Reform of parliament. Prussian franchise. Reich constituencies. Proportion. These are all ways to a full parliamentary system.

Bethmann in overall agreement; arguing against 3 (a) inferiority of the Reichstag, lack of political personalities. Reply: No one wants to enter a mere debating machine. (b) [He]: we have the most perfect self-government (municipal, country, provincial). Reply: Only as far as the kitchen, not as far as the drawing-room.

I went on to explain. He could not very well dispute that change would come. Answer: No (!). Hence: either it would come as a result of unfortunate circumstances, or "heroically" amid sunshine, through a new Hardenberg. ...

Bethmann urged me three times, the last time as he accompanied me to the car, to elaborate my ideas regarding electoral reform for him. *Each time I declined: he has better people for that among his staff.*²⁷

This diary entry can be taken as evidence of the complexity with which Rathenau and other moderate liberals regarded the meanings of reform. Those meanings clearly included the limits of reform, enthusiasm for reform, fear of reform, love and hatred of reform, and—not least—satisfaction with particular but not inconsequential aspects of the political status quo. Rathenau's words substantiate Mark Hewitson's observation that although the relationship between the nation and politics in the *Kaiserreich* was invariably close, it was also "brittle, opaque, and frequently taboo."²⁸ When Rathenau remarked that Bethmann Hollweg had "better people ... among his staff" to undertake the drafting of reforms—reforms for which he had just spent a full evening serving as impassioned advocate—both the brittleness and the taboo-like

qualities of reform come into focus. For Rathenau, it was one thing to counsel “a full parliamentary system” or other equally far-reaching departures from the political status quo. It was quite another thing to carry those proposals to fruition in practice.

At this point we should also pause and consider how our perspective shifts when we convert the unexciting passive voice used so often in analyses of the *Kaiserreich* to the more affirmative active voice. Thus, rather than claiming that “skirted decisions” and “delaying compromises”²⁹ persisted from the beginning to the end of the Empire, it may be more helpful to say that particular groups and individuals actually wanted such things to “persist.” Why? Because they believed that such elements of stasis—albeit in particular combinations—might accrue to their material or spiritual benefit. That is, stasis might increase their standing in the hierarchies of wealth, status, and power.

In practice, although real men might make political decisions to realize (or avoid) one or the other extreme of “stasis” or “reform,” most commonly they sought to mediate between change and no change. Any future, no matter how boldly or timidly envisioned, could not be balanced, harmonized, or reconciled with the present except via the mediation of compromise or gradualism. Seen in this light, Rathenau displayed the idiosyncratic mixture of conflicted feelings, ranging from self-righteousness to self-contempt and everything in between, that was so typical of other Wilhelmine figures unwilling to make a leap of faith into an unknown political future. In fact, Rathenau was not very different from either the constitutional theorists about whom Mark Hewitson has written, or the left-liberal politicians whom Alastair Thompson has studied.

Hewitson has argued convincingly that support for the idea of German constitutionalism *as it existed* in Wilhelmine Germany “prevented the practice of parliamentarization from extending beyond certain critical thresholds.” On the one hand, this debate signaled that “the meaning of ‘parliamentarism’ and ‘constitutionalism’ remained in flux and thus contributed for a time to a feeling of crisis.” Nevertheless, writes Hewitson, the debate “eventually led to a stabilization of the German regime” by “serving to reinforce contemporary support for the *Kaiserreich*.”³⁰ In this way, even such dedicated reformers as Friedrich Naumann acknowledged in 1908 that “the constitution, as it was fashioned by Bismarck’s hand, was to be accepted as the fixed property of the German people.”³¹ Like many of his liberal contemporaries, Naumann “had accepted the institutional structure of the *Kaiserreich* as the invisible framework of his political thought.”³²

In his study of Wilhelmine left liberalism, Alastair Thompson rightly sidesteps the unpersuasive version of history that depicts liberalism as “a study in failure.” Indeed, writes Thompson, on this point “there is even some danger of historians exaggerating those aspects of Imperial Germany which were successful and ‘modern.’”³³ Nevertheless, he acknowledges that the pressure on liberal politicians to be pragmatic increased in the final peacetime years of the Reich: “[L]eft liberals increasingly identified with the Wilhelmine state and yearned for practical results after over two decades in opposition.”³⁴ Although most left liberals in Prussia shared

Rathenau's support for electoral reform, responsible government, and the rule of law, they were also, like him, "visibly patriotic and not *insistent* on full parliamentary rule."³⁵ When these men added up the numbers, they saw that they did not need "to trouble their heads" about the imminent introduction of a system whereby shifting parliamentary majorities could force a change of government. As Friedrich von Payer declared in December 1908: "We can leave this question to future generations; for we lack the unavoidable prerequisite for it, namely a closed, capable, enduring majority, as in England."³⁶

If we follow the liberals' preference for stability and pragmatism into the war years, are we correct to find "defeat in victory" and "victory in defeat," as Thompson suggests? Is Jan Palmowski correct in asserting that bourgeois liberals "came to appreciate the power of the state because of their inability to reconcile their own desire for social, cultural and political unity with the reality of ever-increasing social and confessional division"?³⁷ Such would appear to be Palmowski's conclusion when he assigns priority to questions about "*how* liberals combined opposition to state authoritarianism with trust in state reform [and] *how* liberals translated their political appeal from the local to the state and national levels." Palmowski has no wish to deny the liberal talent for organization he has uncovered in his own research into municipal liberalism in Frankfurt am Main.³⁸ But Palmowski also suggests that German liberalism was most important as a mediating factor within the "ruptured polity" of Imperial Germany:

The studies reviewed here do not contradict the *Sonderweg's* assumption of a society deeply divided along the lines of class and authority. Instead, they argue that superimposed upon these fissures were evolving frictions between town and countryside, rivalries between and within religions, and contrasting regional identities distinguished by popular culture, history, social structure and politics. The complexity of the German polity is thus moving to the fore, as its dividing lines in part limited, and in part reinforced each other.³⁹

Thus, by emphasizing the dynamic nature of that polity too vehemently, we run the risk of underplaying the significance of *both* conflict and complexity as hallmarks of a political system that provided few opportunities without corresponding constraints.

A full consideration of this question would invariably take us too far afield. Nevertheless, if one considers what, for example, the National Liberal government that came to power in the Kingdom of Saxony in October 1918 actually attempted in terms of overturning the political status quo, one discovers more reasons to question liberals' alleged fixation on change. One finds that well into 1918 the National Liberals, left liberals, and Social Democrats in the Saxon *Landtag* continued to postpone domestic quarrels for the sake of the common war effort. These parties "may have asked for the rudder to Saxony's ship of state; but they did not rock the boat when their request was denied."⁴⁰ Then, on 26 October 1918, the Saxon king appointed the National Liberal leader in Saxony, Rudolf Heinze, as government leader. For over a fortnight Saxony was ruled according to the principles of parliamentary government.

Because this experiment was effectively freed from the “death throes” of the Hohenzollern dynasty, we can “look for clues to what the political system of the *Kaiserreich* might have become” if liberals elsewhere had found themselves at the helm.

What did they do with this opportunity? Not very much. The Saxon National Liberal administration proclaimed in its inaugural program of 5 November 1918 that it would “keep the wheels of the state bureaucracy well oiled.” Otherwise, it proposed a hybrid system of governance that was “neither democratic nor authoritarian, but a delicate mixture of both, with a corporatist flavor.” The liberals, for example, were to enjoy a free rein in the fields of industry and commerce; the Social Democrats would preside over a ministry of labor; and Saxon Conservatives would be allowed to exert decisive influence in the realms of finance, justice, and culture. A state of parliamentary equipoise appears also to have been the liberals’ goal when they aimed to introduce proportional representation without, however, abolishing the upper house of the Saxon *Landtag*—the very institution against which they had lobbied for more than two decades. For these reasons, Christoph Nonn has correctly used inverted commas to refer to the “modern” political system that the National Liberals in Saxony intended to introduce with their “new course” in early November 1918. Nonn concedes that the authoritarian political system in Saxony did evolve during the war and would have continued to do so if revolution had not broken out a few days later. However, he concludes that the renowned slipperiness of the term “modern” should make us doubly cautious: cautious about seeing parliamentary democracy as the desired end point of that evolution, in Saxony or elsewhere in Germany, and cautious about imagining that all reformers were in a hurry to implement change. When given the opportunity, National Liberals introduced a political system that was more corporatist than democratic. And to implement it they chose a political process designed quite conspicuously to slow down, not speed up, the pace of future developments.

Drawing together the threads of this argument, my aim has not been to suggest that these decisions were dilatory, or insufficiently modern, or indicative of the unchanging hegemony of established elites in the economic, social, and cultural realms. To argue that many defining features of the Empire’s political system remained essentially static between January 1871 and November 1918 is not to resurrect an outdated view of the *Kaiserreich* as “rigidly authoritarian [and] sclerotic.”⁴¹ Rather, I have tried to suggest that more Germans avoided firm decisions in favor of reform, and did so at more potentially significant turning points, than historians have generally thought. Putting it more pointedly, if Wilhelminians did not necessarily get the system of governance they envisioned or deserved, in both respects they seem to have gotten what they actually wanted.⁴²

Nemesis

There is a certain irony in the fact that historians who consistently stress the new, modern, dynamic nature of Imperial politics beginning in the 1890s have themselves

provided key arguments tending to highlight the meanings of stasis after 1871. For example, they have convincingly illuminated the "newness" of political institutions set in place by Bismarck at the founding of the Reich, including the constitutional, administrative, parliamentary, and electoral institutions that remained largely unchanged over the next half-century. They have drawn attention to the relatively early date—certainly not later than the 1870s—at which both bourgeois and (national) liberal Germans can be said to have exerted not only economic, social, and cultural dominance but something approaching political hegemony as well. And they have demonstrated the degree to which party-political conflicts that gave a peculiar openness and dynamism to the decade of the 1870s—the struggles against the Catholic Church and Social Democracy being just the two most obvious examples—had hardened by 1880 into battle lines that remained largely unchanged until just before the war.⁴³ All new? New and improved? Surely these labels are applied more appropriately to Germany in 1871 and 1919 than in 1900 or 1913.

Elsewhere I have rehearsed questions about what was actually "mass" in the "political mass market" (Hans Rosenberg) and what was "new" about "politics in a new key" (Carl Schorske).⁴⁴ Much of the revisionist scholarship of the 1980s and 1990s argued that the decade of the 1890s witnessed the "reconstitution of the political nation." In that literature, any number of recurring phrases were used to give decisive priority to change over stasis. Thus we read that the 1890s constituted "a major moment of flux," a "vital moment of transition," a time of political "fission," a "populist moment," a "major enlargement of the public sphere," a "reordering of the public domain," and "a fundamental change in the scale and intensity of public life."⁴⁵ Recently, however, historians have begun to distance themselves from a view that singles out the 1890s so categorically. And certainly when we consider the decades in which truly innovative strategies were not just worked out but implemented by the political parties and leading interest groups,⁴⁶ when voter turnout for national elections increased most conspicuously, when the socialist and Catholic milieus were first mobilized, and when party membership in the Social Democratic Party (SPD) rose at its steepest rate (this list of indicators could be extended), then the 1890s recede as a time when the fundamental politicization and democratization of Imperial Germany occurred. When considering larger changes in political ideologies, styles, discourses, and means of mobilization, the discontinuities of 1871 and 1918 seem far more compelling.

Nevertheless—and here we come to the hinge of this chapter's argument—after 1900 Wilhelminians began to feel that political stasis was itself a destabilizing factor in their lives. Stasis began to generate its antithesis. It was *this* dialectic, at least as much as the activities and arguments of flesh-and-blood advocates of change, that now necessitated the accommodation of social, economic, and cultural changes from which politics had been largely insulated up to that point. And it was this dialectic that eventually dissipated a confidence shared by many Wilhelminians that they could continue to build on the achievements of the past. In the final years before the war, Wilhelmine Germans began to recognize that they had no choice—no skirts to

hide behind—in confronting challenges and uncertainties that were distinctively twentieth-century in nature.

By and large, such recognition brought with it a clearer, more hard-nosed vision of the future. Thus, for example, Wilhelm's personal rule, precisely because it rested on such pillars of strength, eventually generated its own devastating critiques. The issue of the Prussian three-class suffrage, precisely because it remained unreformed up to 1910 and beyond, fueled suffrage debates in both the Reich and the individual federal states that questioned the political status quo more fundamentally than was possible even in the 1890s. The Bülow Bloc (1907-9), which seemed to epitomize the balancing of right and left, blew apart because of, not despite, the flaw in its founding logic. Subsequent political detonations may have released more heat than light, but their frequency and resonance increased over time. The Black-Blue Bloc (1909-14) satisfied no one, whereupon a continuing left-liberal renaissance in the final prewar years soon brought alternative alignments into focus. In 1914-18, the SPD's integration into the political system—which had long been underway before 1914 but which became apparent to all in the early war years—generated its own internal challenge from an alienated, pacifist rank and file, while Conservative hot-heads opted increasingly for *va banque* solutions to their own marginalization.⁴⁷

What evidence points to a new political dialectic between stasis and reform after 1900?⁴⁸ First, the older Bismarckian dichotomy between “friends” and “enemies” of the Reich became increasingly irrelevant as another division arose: that between producers and consumers.⁴⁹ Founded upon the “commodification” of politics that was perceived as sharply by contemporaries as by historians, this conflict shifted the initiative toward reformers who, after the turn of the century, began to wrest from the state the power to determine which political discourses resonated most loudly in the public sphere. Second, it was only after 1899 that Wilhelmine debates about civil liberties moved from the realm of discourse (challenges and threats) to one of practical action. When we consider the efforts of Bismarck and his ministers in the 1870s and 1880s to curtail such rights as freedom of association, universal manhood suffrage for Reichstag elections, and freedom of the press, we begin to see that in the 1890s there was nothing new under the sun. At the end of this long period of constitutional incubation, and especially during the Reichstag election campaign of 1898, the Center and the left-liberal parties successfully called attention to the government's and the right-wing parties' plans to amend the Reichstag suffrage. In quick order, other new ideas were subsequently floated about the possibility of plural voting, proportional representation, the abolishment of upper houses of parliament, and the female vote. To be sure, the “pillarization” of political parties conspired against the realization of many of these ideas before 1919. Nonetheless, the broad front on which suffrage reform and other “fairness issues” were pushed after 1900 suggests that the former Bismarckian consensus began to unravel not with the Iron Chancellor's dismissal in March 1890 but only upon his death in July 1898.⁵⁰

Third and lastly, the pluralization of social and regional allegiances after the turn of the century changed the largely static party alignments of the previous three

decades. Whereas previously electoral coalitions had formed around constitutional questions of a demonstratively national type (*Kulturkampf*, military budget, anti-socialist laws), whereby enemies of the Reich could be targeted with relative ease, conflicts that fell along the urban/rural and consumer/producer axes sundered the Conservative-Free Conservative-National Liberal *Kartell*. The most conspicuous aspect of this sundering was to free the National Liberals and a new generation of liberal politicians from their "client" relationship with the two conservative parties. Neither the German Conservative nor the Free Conservative camp threw up leaders after 1900 who could be described as particularly innovative. On that score, both parties largely abdicated to the leaders of the *völkisch* movement,⁵¹ most of whose factions offered some combination of *mittelständisch*, hypernationalist, reform-oriented promises to overcome the stasis on the right. By contrast, both the National Liberal and the left-liberal parties produced a new generation of spokesmen who were willing to undertake what has been called both a programmatic and a mental reorientation.

The career of Gustav Stresemann, first in Saxony and then, after 1909, in national politics, epitomizes three aspects of this new political orientation: its endorsement of imperialist *Weltpolitik*, its advocacy of urban and industrial interests, and its fixation on suffrage reform in Germany's federal states. In each respect, and notwithstanding continuing divisions within their own camp, the National Liberals' redefinition of their central political goals tended to increase their distance from the conservative parties and lessen the distance to the left liberals and Social Democrats. Especially on the regional and local levels, and particularly once changes at the basis of the moderate and leftist parties' voting constituencies were consolidated in ways that forced party leaders to move in the same direction, the "learning processes" we commonly regard as characteristic of the late Wilhelmine years began to overshadow and displace the political "failures" of the Bismarckian era. Granted, those learning processes were slow, uneven, and incomplete, as preceding sections of this chapter have tried to illustrate. However, they would contribute by 1914 to the relative isolation of those Wilhelminians who continued to insist that stasis was the only option. As Thomas Kühne has written:⁵² "The processes of democratization did not overcome the authoritarian condition [*obrigkeitsstaatliche Verfaßtheit*] of Imperial Germany; nor did the beginnings of pluralization and integration neutralize the sociocultural fragmentation of the party system. But in the half-decade around 1900, these processes developed a momentum [*Schubkraft*] they did not exhibit either before or after in the *Kaiserreich*."

Conclusion

The puzzles, paradoxes, and ironies of Wilhelmine Germany cannot be contained within the framework of "either-or" questions. Although the ambiguous, incongruent dualisms taken up as topics of debate in recent historical overviews are dissatisfying to many readers, they contribute to larger reinterpretations in a positive way. In the

case of Wilhelmine Germany, they demonstrate that the growing complexity of the political system (and its individual parts) was balanced by more persistent features already present at the birth of the Reich: the institutionalization of diversity through federalism, the fracturing of political consensus, the persistence of sociocultural milieus, and the gradual accumulation of skirted decisions.

As we cast our gaze back over the Imperial era as a whole, we tend to highlight the dynamic aspect of Wilhelminism because that is the nearer, sharper end of the historical stick we pick up. That dynamism seems all the more compelling when it is associated with a man who was disparaged even in his own time as “His Impulsive Majesty” and “Wilhelm the Sudden.” However, Wilhelm has recently been described as a monarch who fulfilled a commitment to an anachronistic Bismarckian legacy rather than one who heralded a new age.⁵³ Count Harry Kessler recalled: “As life’s purpose, he [Wilhelm II] offered us youthful Germans a political retirement, the defense and the enjoyment of what had already been attained. . . . As was painfully evident to the eye, he represented no beginning but rather an end, a grandiose final chord—*ein Erfüller, kein Verkünder!*”

This essay has tried to demonstrate that a careful attempt to balance elements of reform and stasis, of progressivism and traditionalism, can recover important aspects of *Kaiserreich* history that may have had their historiographical heyday in the 1970s but do not deserve to be disregarded today. Reassessing the degree to which traditionalism continued to influence German life reminds us that many contemporaries foresaw the possibility that the *Kaiserreich* would not only continue to exist, but actually thrive, well into the twentieth century. After all, a typically modern aspect of both state governance and bourgeois taste is to try to monitor, manage, and control change, rather than to embrace it across the board or reject it out of hand. Similarly, the many compromises struck between groups and individuals defending authoritarian and emancipatory political stances have tended to distract attention from those occasions when the sort of compromise that would have permitted further, meaningful political reform of the Reich’s central institutions was rejected outright. It is one thing to emphasize how modern, pluralistic, and dynamic life in the Empire was after 1900 and to document the important growth of the Wilhelmine left. It is quite another thing to suggest that the “success”⁵⁴ of the opposition parties did not also entail compromises, ambivalences, and outright failures—not ephemeral failures, but arguably ones that reached from the margins of the respective ideologies to their very core.

It is too much to say that historians who study the “meanings of reform” without also studying the “meanings of stasis” steer close to boosterism. Yet to do one without the other presents the sound of only one hand clapping—a non-event that provides neither confirmation of what came before nor transition to something new. Instead, in seeking to recover elements of stasis in the German Empire and in trying to explain why they remained so important until November 1918, we have an opportunity to integrate the more resounding measures of Wilhelmine history with the political silences that also deserve our attention. By listening carefully for both, we may discover some new harmonics—muted and not always benign—lying in between.

Notes

1. Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. Mary J. Gregor (The Hague, 1974; orig. 1797), 179-80; emphasis added.
2. See Volker R. Berghahn, "The German Empire, 1871-1914: Reflections on the Direction of Recent Research," and Margaret Lavinia Anderson, "Reply to Volker Berghahn," in *Central European History* 35, no. 1 (2002): 75-82, 83-90. I am grateful to both essayists for sharing their insights with me at proof stage.
3. For example, Dietrich Papenfuß and Wolfgang Schieder, eds., *Deutsche Umbrüche im 20. Jahrhundert* (Cologne, Weimar, and Vienna, 2000).
4. For example, Volker Ullrich, *Die nervöse Großmacht 1871-1918. Aufstieg und Untergang des deutschen Kaiserreichs* (Frankfurt a.M., 1999).
5. For example, Lothar Gall, ed., *Otto von Bismarck und Wilhelm II. Repräsentanten eines Epochenwechsels?* (Paderborn, 2000).
6. As attempted (unsuccessfully) in Jack R. Dukes and Joachim Remak, eds., *Another Germany: A Reconsideration of the Imperial Era* (Boulder, 1988). See also James Retallack, *Germany in the Age of Kaiser Wilhelm II* (Basingstoke and New York, 1996), esp. 105-7.
7. For example, Simone Lässig, Karl Heinrich Pohl, and James Retallack, eds., *Modernisierung und Region im wilhelminischen Deutschland*, 2nd ed. (Bielefeld, 1998); James Retallack, ed., *Saxony in German History: Culture, Society, and Politics, 1830-1933* (Ann Arbor, 2000).
8. See Ute Frevert, ed., *Das Neue Jahrhundert* (Göttingen, 2000); August Nitschke et al., eds., *Jahrhundertwende, 2 vols.* (Reinbek, 1990); Barbara Beßlich, *Wege in den "Kulturkrieg"* (Darmstadt, 2000); Thomas Rohkrämer, *Eine andere Moderne?* (Paderborn, 1999).
9. See Geoff Eley's contribution to this volume.
10. The following paragraphs draw on David Blackbourn, *The Fontana History of Germany, 1780-1918* (London, 1997), esp. chaps. 7-8; here 313.
11. Klaus Tenfelde, "1890-1914: Durchbruch der Moderne? Über Gesellschaft im späten Kaiserreich," in Gall, *Bismarck und Wilhelm*, 119-41, here 136.
12. Gerhard A. Ritter, "Politische Repräsentation durch Berufsstände. Konzepte und Realität in Deutschland 1871-1933," in *Gestaltungskraft des Politischen*, ed. Wolfram Pyta and Ludwig Richter (Berlin, 1998), 261-80, esp. 269-74; Thomas Kühne, *Dreiklassenwahlrecht und Wahlkultur in Preussen 1867-1914* (Düsseldorf, 1994). Cf. idem, "Zur Genese der deutschen Proporzkultur im wilhelminischen Preußen," *Politische Vierteljahresschrift* 36, no. 2 (1995): 220-42.
13. Blackbourn, *Fontana History*, 323, and ff. for much of the following.
14. *Ibid.*, 347f.
15. See Joachim Radkau, *Das Zeitalter der Nervosität* (Darmstadt, 1998).
16. Cf. Anson Rabinbach, *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity* (New York, 1990).
17. Radkau, *Zeitalter*, 26.
18. *Ibid.*, 25.
19. Modris Eksteins, "When Death was Young ...: Germany, Modernism, and the Great War," in *Ideas into Politics*, ed. R. J. Bullen, H. Pogge von Strandmann, and A. B. Polonsky (London, 1984), 25-35, here 29 and for the following citation. Cf. Wolfgang J. Mommsen, *Bürgerliche Kultur und Künstlerische Avantgarde 1870-1918* (Frankfurt a.M. and Berlin, 1994), 98.
20. Peter Jelavich, "Literature and the Arts," in *Imperial Germany*, ed. Roger Chickering (Westport, 1996), 377.
21. Cited in Mommsen, *Bürgerliche Kultur*, 104.
22. Eksteins, "Death," 31.
23. Mommsen, *Bürgerliche Kultur*, 107.
24. Eksteins, "Death," 33.
25. The relevant literature for this section is cited in Retallack, *Germany*, 34-52.
26. Andreas Gawatz, *Wahlkämpfe in Württemberg* (Düsseldorf, 2001); Elvira Döscher and Wolfgang Schröder, *Sächsische Parlamentarier 1869-1918* (Droste, 2001).

27. Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann, ed., *Walther Rathenau. Industrialist, Banker, Intellectual, and Politician: Notes and Diaries, 1907-1922* (Oxford, 1985), 163-4; emphasis added.
28. Mark Hewitson, *National Identity and Political Thought in Germany* (Oxford, 2000), 253.
29. See Wolfgang J. Mommsen, *Imperial Germany 1867-1918* (London, 1994), 1-40.
30. Mark Hewitson, "The *Kaiserreich* in Question: Constitutional Crisis in Germany before the First World War," *Journal of Modern History* 73 (2001): 725-80, here 725-30.
31. Cited in *ibid.*, 733-34.
32. *Ibid.*, 734 and f. for the following.
33. Alastair P. Thompson, *Left Liberals, the State, and Popular Politics in Wilhelmine Germany* (Oxford, 2000), 7.
34. *Ibid.*, 23 and f. for the following.
35. Emphasis added.
36. Cited in Hewitson, "*Kaiserreich*," 770.
37. Jan Palmowski, "Mediating the Nation: Liberalism and the Polity in Nineteenth-Century Germany," *German History* 18, no. 4 (2001): 573-98, here 584. On the "conserving" ambitions and "modernizing" strategies of German dynastic states, see Jean H. Quataert, *Staging Philanthropy* (Ann Arbor, 2001), and Abigail Green, *Fatherlands* (Cambridge, 2001).
38. Jan Palmowski, *Urban Liberalism in Imperial Germany* (Oxford, 1999). Interestingly, when Friedrich Naumann asked rhetorically, "Can one organize liberals?" his answer conceded that organization was "a liberal idea, but not a liberal habit." Cited in Manfred Hettling, "Partei ohne Parteibeamte. Parteisekretäre im Linkliberalismus von 1900 bis 1913," in *Parteien im Wandel*, ed. Dieter Dowe et al. (Munich, 1999), 109-34, here 109.
39. Palmowski, "Mediating the Nation," 597-98.
40. Christoph Nonn, "Saxon Politics during the First World War: Modernization, National Liberal Style," in Retallack, *Saxony*, 309-21, here 315-16; for the following, 317-21, and Ralph Czuchun, "Political Modernisation, Democratisation and Reform during the First World War: The Case of Saxony" (M.A. diss., University of Toronto, 1998).
41. See David Blackbourn, *English Historical Review* 109, no. 432 (June 1994): 667, reviewing vol. 2 of Thomas Nipperdey, *Deutsche Geschichte, 1866-1918* (Munich, 1992).
42. Cf. David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History* (Oxford, 1984).
43. Including three of the most able Anglo-Saxon historians to have focused attention on Bismarckian Germany: David Blackbourn, "New Legislatures: Germany, 1871-1914," *Historical Research* 65 (1992): 201-14; Margaret Lavinia Anderson, "Voter, Junker, Landrat, Priest: The Old Authorities and the New Franchise in Imperial Germany," *American Historical Review* 98 (1993): 1448-74; and Geoff Eley, "Society and Politics in Bismarckian Germany," *German History* 15 (1997): 101-32, esp. 111, 121, 128.
44. James Retallack, "Demagogentum, Populismus, Volkstümlichkeit. Überlegungen zur 'Popularitätshascherei' auf dem politischen Massenmarkt des Kaiserreichs," *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* 48, no. 4 (2000): 309-25, where further references can be found.
45. These terms are found in Geoff Eley, "Anti-Semitism, Agrarian Mobilization, and the Conservative Party: Radicalism and Containment in the Founding of the Agrarian League, 1890-93, in *Between Reform, Reaction, and Resistance*, ed. Larry Eugene Jones and James Retallack (Oxford and Providence, 1993), 187-227, here 194; and *idem*, "Notable Politics, the Crisis of German Liberalism, and the Electoral Transition of the 1890s," in *In Search of a Liberal Germany*, ed. Konrad H. Jarausch and Larry Eugene Jones (New York, Oxford, and Munich, 1990), 187-216, here 192, 210-11. For an appraisal that reflects my own, see Thompson, *Left Liberals*, 21.
46. See the important study by Axel Griebner, *Massenverbände und Massenparteien im wilhelminischen Reich. Zum Wandel der Wahlkultur 1903-1912* (Düsseldorf, 2000), esp. 49-50.
47. James Retallack, "The Road to Philippi: The Conservative Party and Bethmann Hollweg's 'Politics of the Diagonal,' 1909-1914," in Jones and Retallack, *Reform*, 261-98.
48. Besides works cited in notes 3-9, the following relies heavily on Thomas Kühne, "Die Jahrhundertwende, die 'lange' Bismarckzeit und die Demokratisierung der politischen Kultur," in Gall, *Bismarck und Wilhelm*, 85-118.



49. See Christoph Nonn, *Verbraucherprotest und Parteiensystem im wilhelminischen Deutschland* (Düsseldorf, 1996).
50. See Kühne, "Jahrhundertwende," 118.
51. See Uwe Puschner, *Die völkische Bewegung im wilhelminischen Kaiserreich* (Darmstadt, 2001); also Uwe Puschner et al., eds., *Handbuch zur "Völkischen Bewegung" 1871-1918* (Munich, 1996); Diethart Kerbs and Jürgen Reulecke, eds., *Handbuch der deutschen Reformbewegungen 1880-1933* (Wuppertal, 1998).
52. Kühne, "Jahrhundertwende," 117.
53. Lothar Gall, "Otto von Bismarck und Wilhelm II.: Repräsentanten eines Epochenwechsels?" in Gall, *Bismarck und Wilhelm*, 1-12, including the following passage from Kessler's memoirs (8).
54. Anderson, "Reply," 88.

