



# Red Saxony

## Election Battles and the Spectre of Democracy in Germany, 1860-1918

### Opinion

James Retallack has become perhaps the most interesting and important historian of Imperial Germany currently working in the field. ... His most recent work ... constitutes a major landmark in the historiography of Imperial Germany. The depth of research on display in this book reflects decades of close and thoughtful engagement with the subject matter.

Retallack's book ... consciously 'runs with the grain of recent research in some respects, and counter to it in many others' (2). ... Retallack endorses key planks of the critique of the notion of a German *Sonderweg*. ... In Saxony, it was not just the pre-modern agrarian elites who resisted political democracy – Retallack demonstrates the 'determination of bourgeois Germans to man the ramparts against democracy' (372). ...

As far as Retallack's more specific disagreement with [Margaret Lavinia] Anderson and other recent scholars on Imperial German elections is concerned, the key issue is succinctly expressed by a quotation from the playwright Tom Stoppard: 'It's not the voting that's democracy, it's the counting' (1, 621). The core strength of Retallack's book is the detailed reconstruction of how Saxony's non-socialist political parties and government officials engaged in concerted and highly deliberate efforts to contain and thwart pressures for political democratization in Saxony by successive manipulations of the franchise and systematic gerrymandering of electoral boundaries. Connoisseurs of the political black arts should also consult Retallack's recent article on the latter in *Central European History* ('Mapping the Red Threat', *CEH*, 37, 3/4, 2016), which makes marvellous use of visual and statistical evidence to reconstruct the ways in which Saxon electoral officials sought to minimize Social Democratic gains at the polls. ...

Retallack writes with verve and often wit – he is able to make the sometimes abstruse and complicated machinations of Saxon politicians and officials as transparent as one could hope through the lucidity of his prose. His book is a valuable corrective to the excessively optimistic narrative that much English-language historiography of the *Kaiserreich* has been tending towards in recent times. ... The book is also handsomely produced,

with a wealth of illustrations, some in colour; maps, and tables. ... It is hard to think of a better book on Imperial Germany published in recent years.

– Andrew G. Bonnell, *European History Quarterly* 48, no. 2 (April 2018): 382-4.

James Retallack's *Red Saxony* delivers a sharp rebuke to the partisans of the most recent trends in German historical writing who dismiss political history—and particularly the history of political parties and elections—as passé. At the same time, this book offers a superb example of just how that history needs to be written in the light of those trends. This is no mean accomplishment but one that Retallack meets with a combination of exhaustive archival research, complete mastery of the existing body of secondary scholarship, and writing that is engaging, erudite, and replete with literary references to sources as disparate as Shakespeare, Mark Twain and a choice comment by Lyndon Johnson on the meaning of loyalty (59). The result is a singular accomplishment that will rank for years to come among the very best studies of Germany and the transformations of its political culture in the tumultuous period between unification and the end of World War I. ...

Retallack's study ... reminds us that the political situation of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was far more fluid and more open to multiple possible outcomes than recent scholarship on the Second Empire has been willing to admit. The final result is a reading of the recent German past that places Retallack's *Red Saxony* on the cutting edge of political history and how it should be written—with multiple methodologies, command of the sources, a sense of nuance and discernment, and a sensitivity to the different ways in which the material in question can be interpreted.

— Larry Eugene Jones, *American Historical Review* 124, no. 1 (Feb. 2019): 351-2.

[Retallack] has produced probably the most important English-language study ever published of the suffrage struggles that characterized 19th-century Europe. The product of decades of research, ... this volume studies the repeated, bitter franchise battles in heavily industrialized Saxony, ... typical of those which ... were perhaps the single most important focus of late-19th-century domestic politics. Drawing on intensive and extensive archival research, Retallack provides irrefutable documentation of the usually behind-the-scenes electoral “engineering” that produced bizarre, pervasive European suffrage laws designed to hide, behind a public façade of “democracy,” arcane, carefully crafted schemes to highly restrict or entirely deny the political impact of the vast majority of the population, while allowing a tiny privileged percentage to rule largely unhindered. Summing up: Highly recommended.

– Robert J. Goldstein, *CHOICE* 55, no. 4 (December 2017): 503.

Retallack's profoundly erudite text – and extensive online supplement – is marked by meticulous research in a massive source base, as well as careful, perceptive analysis and argumentation. ...

Previous work on Kaiserreich electoral politics has focused on either the national or Prussian levels. *Red Saxony* offers a unique regional study of Saxony, noted for its high levels of industrialization and urbanization; Saxony was home both to a flourishing bourgeoisie and to the SPD's greatest electoral successes. Retallack skillfully details the path through which a shared fear and loathing of Socialism led elements of Saxony's liberal bourgeoisie to form an alliance not just with the kingdom's aristocratic/agrarian Junker elites but also a rising anti-Semitic movement. ... In the face of this powerful anti-Socialist cabal, advances in democracy were precarious, and always subject to reversal. In making this argument, Retallack forces historians not only to reassess the Wilhelmine era, but also the assumed connections between nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century European liberalism and democratization more broadly.

Among *Red Saxony*'s many accomplishments is the book's ability to engage with existing scholarship in a multidimensional way. Retallack confirms the 'modernity' of the Kaiserreich as manifested in the effective strength of the German bourgeoisie, the fundamental politicization of society, the central importance of elections, and the rise of the largest working-class movement in the world. At the same time, he manages – in surprising, persuasive ways – to document the gap between socioeconomic modernization and political democratization. *Red Saxony* is a powerful contribution that calls into question long- and widely-held assumptions while establishing new ones: it will define the field for years to come.

Prize Committee, Hans Rosenberg Book Prize, Central European History Society, 2019.

Retallack's magnificent study explores ... election battles—encompassing both election campaigns and debates over suffrage laws—as the best site for understanding the course of regime transformation. And it is not just any election battles that Retallack focuses on, but elections in 'Red Saxony', where the Social Democratic Party (SPD) enjoyed widespread support in the years before the First World War. ...

[H]istorians will be impressed by [Retallack's] breathtaking knowledge of political life in Saxony, based on a firm command of the archival and secondary materials. He provides a close reading of election battles, drawing upon a now well-established literature on political culture. This in turn builds on a robust field of studies probing the experiences of elections and voting behaviours. Retallack affirms the claims made in these previous works about the emergence of democratic practices in Germany before 1918 but goes one step further by exploring how universal and direct manhood suffrage for the Reichstag sat alongside limited and unequal suffrage for state and municipal parliaments. ...

Retallack ... [separates] out what he terms 'social democratization' and 'political democratization' in the larger schema. Political democratization ... refers mainly to constitutional reform (p. 3). But by social democratization, Retallack means 'the fundamental

politicization of German society, whereby more and more Germans were pulled into the world of political activity'. This includes the growth of mass parties, development of the public sphere, the penetration of politics into the countryside, and rising rates of voter turnout (p. 3). Retallack's identification of these two strands of democratization over the period 1860 to 1918 enables him to be far more exacting in identifying what was speeding up, slowing down, stopping or being reversed in the process of democratic development (p. 4). ...

In other words, by placing Saxony's debates about suffrage reform in a context of increasing social democratization, Retallack's work explores the tension between growing participation in the political system but a lack of political reform to bring about democratic features and franchises. In short, Retallack shows that 'universal manhood suffrage for Reichstag elections was not necessarily conducive to parliamentarism and that "mass" politics could serve authoritarian aims as much as it did liberal aspirations' (p. 11). ...

Retallack argues that it was Social Democracy's symbolic importance—that is, its ability to frighten Germany's upper-middle classes (p. 8)—that plagued and prevented political modernization between 1871 and 1914. ... In doing so, he corrects any sense that the presence of a growing bourgeoisie or the rise of an organized working class will automatically result in political democratization, as per other models put forward by political scientists.

– Anna Ross, "Discussion: On Unsettled Democratization: History and Political Science in Conversation," *German History* 36, no. 3 (2018): 432-7.

After years of research and some of the most important publications on the Second Empire and the German right, Retallack is too nuanced a historian to draw facile comparisons to today's Saxony, even if the current rise of populist and antidemocratic politicians and parties does indeed concern him. He mentions US President Donald Trump and Britain's pending withdrawal from the European Union (Brexit) at the very end of the book, but he does not refer to contemporary Saxon politics at all. Facile or not, some parallels are nevertheless striking—for example, the territorial division between a townhall dominated by liberals and socialists in Leipzig, and a conservative and antisemitic one in Dresden, which mirrors the different political cultures described by the *Atlantic* piece of 2017.

Retallack's main interest lies elsewhere, however. His goal is to intervene in the historiographical debate around the degree of democratization in the German Empire and the consequences this had for the Weimar Republic. In a sense, it is a more nuanced extension of the *Sonderweg* debate, to which Retallack directly alludes in his introduction. Retallack takes aim not at those who still embrace the *Sonderweg* approach, but rather at Anglo-American historians of Germany who, he believes, have become too sanguine in their assessment of the Empire's democratizing effort because they are blinded by the ritualization of, and high rate of participation in, elections on all levels. ... [Retallack] draws a line between 'social' and 'political' democratization: the former term, he explains, refers to the 'fundamental politicization of German society, whereby more and more

Germans were pulled into the world of political activity' (3). But this did not result in 'political democratization,' Retallack argues, ... which slowed down, stopped, and even occasionally went in reverse. ...

*Red Saxony's* chapters on the 1909 suffrage reform are nevertheless the richest and most important ones for Retallack's argument about the successes anti-democrats had in devising strategies aimed at keeping Socialists out of positions of influence. By Retallack's own account, the plural voting law of 1909—while far from democratic—bowed to public pressure to increase the franchise and move away from the system of indirect voting. The reform thus seemed more like a rearguard action—an attempt to cling to the wave of democratization rather than being swept away by it. The drafters of the reform were entirely modern in their use of statistics, however, and Retallack's attention to the latter, to their compilation and use, is one of the greatest strengths of his book. (More details about the tabulations of these statistics are available on an open-access website set up by the author: [www.redsaxony.utoronto.ca](http://www.redsaxony.utoronto.ca)).

Philipp Nielsen, "Featured Review," *Central European History* 52, no. 3 (2019): 333-8.

Der in Toronto lehrende, regelmäßig auch in Deutschland forschende Historiker hat viele Jahre seines Gelehrtenlebens der sächsischen Wahlrechts- und Wahlkampfgeschichte im Kaiserreich gewidmet. Politische Auseinandersetzungen wurden sozialgeschichtlich fundiert, Wahlrechtskämpfe auf die Dynamik von Machtveränderungen politischer und kulturellen bezogen, schließlich nach den Auswirkungen politischer und gesellschaftlicher Konflikte für die regionale politische Kultur gefragt. Ein Spezifikum seines Ansatz war überdies, dass er die politischen Mit- und Gegenspieler in den Blick nahm und so den Fehler vieler Wahlkreisstudien vermied, die ihren Untersuchungsgegenstand isoliert betrachtet und so die verschiedenen Wahlebenen – Reich, Einzelstaat, Kommunen – nicht integrierten. Retallack kennt die Literatur zur Geschichte des Kaiserreichs. Weit mehr als 1000 Titel werden nicht nur zitiert, sondern verarbeitet. Hinzu kommen die Bestände von 25 Archiven – kurzum: Dieses Buch spiegelt ein Lebenswerk. ...

Retallack ist so nicht nur eine packende Erzählung, sondern auch ein Lehrstück der historischen Demokratieforschung gelungen. Er zeigt, wie sich soziale und politische Strukturen auf die ‚longue durée‘ auswirken. Es gibt neben Sonderwege präformierende Entwicklungspfade, die erklären, weshalb die deutsche Katastrophe auf das Ende des Kaiserreichs folgen konnte. Weil Retallack weiß, dass „Diktatur und Völkermord“ Folgen sozialer Demokratisierung sein können, bekennt er sich zu Gleichheit und Rechtsstaatlichkeit, aber auch zur politischen.

— Peter Steinbach, *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* 67, Heft 12 (2019): 1054-6.

James Retallack's story about democratization processes in Imperial Germany ... is full of rich nuances, intriguing stories, and convincing analysis. ...

Retallack has spent many years in Saxon and German archives to piece together the fascinating story of why these mutually exclusionary processes [*social* democratization and *political* democratization] were so strong in one of the most industrialized and populous parts of Germany, and why it produced the strongest Social Democratic bulwark in the empire. Going down to the regional and often the local level of politics, he puts together the picture of a powerful anti-democratic consensus in the non-Social Democratic parts of German society before 1918. ...

Retallack in many ways presents a masterpiece of sober historical research. He patiently examines many agendas for historical reform, and analyses parliamentary and electoral histories as well as various strategies of exclusion at many levels—rhetorical, legal, and physical. He provides a whole host of new electoral analyses and looks in depth at party politics, their presses, finances, and political leaders, always with a regional focus on Saxony. He analyses the motives of members of parliament and the civil servants who served the authoritarian Saxon state. By delivering in-depth studies of election and suffrage battles in Saxony, Retallack produces a cutting-edge, culturally inflected political history that combines a view from above with a view from below. ...

Retallack's conclusion in relation to the path of democratization in Imperial Germany is a warning not to overestimate the will of the *Bürgertum* to go down the road of genuine democratization. It is shown beyond any reasonable doubt that the majority of the Saxon bourgeoisie was not liberal and had no truck with either parliamentarism or democracy. Indeed, the spectre of democracy that was connected with the French revolution of 1789, the events of 1848, the Paris Commune, and Social Democratic Marxism haunted the Saxon bourgeoisie and made many shy away from democracy, seeking to limit it and make it safe for bourgeois interests. Instead, the Saxon middle classes had a strong orientation towards order and authoritarian rule.

— Stefan Berger, *German Historical Institute London Bulletin* 41, no. 1 (2019): 134-8.

Retallack, Professor für Geschichte und Deutschland-Studien an der Universität Toronto, hat in den zurückliegenden Jahren eine ganze Reihe profunder Untersuchungen zur Geschichte des deutschen Konservatismus, zur deutschen Verfassungsgeschichte sowie zur Geschichte Sachsens im 19. und frühen 20. Jahrhundert vorgelegt. ...

Dem Verfasser sind mit der vorliegenden, umfangreichen Untersuchung am Beispiel des „Roten Königreichs“ Sachsen nicht allein zahlreiche Einblicke in alltagspolitische, parlamentsgeschichtliche und verfassungsrechtliche Zusammenhänge gelungen. Er betont darüber hinaus die Fragwürdigkeit der Sonderwegsthese sowie die Annahme einer Kontinuität vom Kaiserreich zum Dritten Reich (S. 616). Vielmehr sprächen sowohl die hohe Wahlbeteiligung bei Landtags- wie bei Reichstagswahlen als auch die Bereitschaft der absoluten Mehrheit der Wahlberechtigten, „demokratische Parteien“ zu wählen, für die Tatsache, dass es auch im Deutschen Kaiserreich ein großes Interesse an der Entwicklung bürgerlich-demokratischer Strukturen in Politik und Gesellschaft gegeben habe.

Nicht zuletzt deswegen hätte Retallacks Werk eine deutsche Übersetzung und damit eine noch größere Verbreitung verdient.

— Hendrik Thoß, *Historische Zeitschrift* 307, Heft 3 (2018): 858-9.

James Retallack, seit seinem ersten Buch *Notables of the Right* (1988) mit zahlreichen Aufsätzen und Sammelbänden als einer der führenden Historiker der Geschichte des Deutschen Kaiserreichs hervorgetreten, legt mit diesem gewichtigen Werk die Summe seiner in den frühen 1990 Jahren begonnenen Forschungen zum Königreich Sachsen vor. ... Retallack analysiert detailreich und quellengestützt; er schöpft aus zwei Dutzend Archiven und Forschungsbibliotheken. Speziell die vielfach verwandten zeitgenössischen Berichte deutscher und englischer Diplomaten (Gesandtenberichte) erhellen interne politische Motivationen. ... Retallack distanziert sich vom Begriff Sonderweg (11, 618-619), belegt aber die scharfen Konfliktlinien bis 1914 und beharrt auf Kontinuitäten zur Zwischenkriegszeit, zumal in form der nationalistischen Anti-Bewegungen. ...

Insgesamt hat James Retallack unzweifelhaft ein bedeutendes und anregendes Buch vorgelegt, das (zu) positive Sichtweise des Kaiserreichs konterkariert.

— Hartwin Spenkuch, *German Studies Review* 42, no. 2 (May 2019): 387-9.

During the past three decades, James Retallack has gained wide international acclaim as a member of a group of historians who rebelled against the once dominant Prusso-centric interpretations of the Bismarckian empire. ... [H]e has now produced what may well be the definitive study of high and popular politics in pre-1918 Saxony. This 690-page tome is extremely rich not only in primary materials from some 20 archives; it also offers many fresh comparative insights into the larger context of 19th-century Central European history as well as thoughtful discussions of the socio-political dynamic of this period and ideas on how to conceptualize it. ...

»Red Saxony« contains plenty of evidence as well as food for thought about processes of modernization and democratization before 1914 so that those who are prepared to read this excellent book from cover to cover, will be richly rewarded.

– Volker R. Berghahn, *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 58 (online) (13 Sept. 2018), <http://www.fes.de/cgi-bin/afs.cgi?id=81863>.

For a long time the research discussion on the reform capacity of the empire suffered under a Prussian and later a southern bias, which led to a one-sided emphasis on backward-facing, anti-parliamentary forces and the democratic reform approaches in Bavaria, Württemberg and Baden after the turn of the century. In this context, research on Saxony, that began in

the 1990s and was substantially supported by Retallack, helps to set new trends and thus also to highlight the political complexity of the empire. ...

With his extremely knowledgeable work on the political development of Saxony from 1866 to 1918 Retallack made an important contribution to the discussion about the modernization ability of the empire. Using the example of Saxony, he is able “to show that universal manhood suffrage for Reichstag elections was not necessarily conducive to parliamentarism and that ‘mass’ politics could serve authoritarian aims as much as it did liberal aspirations” (11). Ultimately the study underlines the interplay between reform-oriented and retarding forces and at the same time the gradual democratization of political culture. It is also clear, however, that this democratization was a very ambivalent, multi-layered process, which resulted in recognition of political and social pluralism and party competition, as well as in heating up political conflicts with anti-Semitic, nationalist and imperialist visions combined with the aversion to the mass political market and the individual right to vote.

– Volker Stalman, *Journal of Social History* (advance article) (22 August 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1093/jsh/shy063>.

James Retallack ist keineswegs ein Anhänger der längst überkommenen Sonderwegs-These, für deren Entkräftung er mit seinem Buch „Red Saxony“ auf der regionalen Ebene auch gute Argumente liefert. Dennoch: „soziale Demokratisierung“ (S. 629), die Gegenstand von Retallacks Buch ist, war und ist keineswegs ein Garant gegen Diktatur oder gar Völkermord. ...

James Retallack gehört dabei fraglos zu den ausgewiesenen Kennern jener Geschichte Sachsens im 19. und frühen 20. Jahrhunderts, in den vergangenen Jahrzehnten erschienen zahlreiche Beiträge zur sächsischen politischen Geschichte aus seiner Feder. ...

Reichhaltig ist der Band nicht nur in seiner Quellenbasis, der materialreichen Darstellung tiefgreifender Forschung und in den Perspektiven, die er eröffnet. Er ist zugleich vielfältig und teils bunt illustriert – Kartenmaterial, mehr als 40 Statistiken und zahlreiche Fotografien ergänzen den Inhalt maßgeblich; über eine zusätzlich eingerichtete Unterseite der University of Toronto sind zudem weiteres Kartenmaterial und Statistiken herunterladbar (<http://redsaxony.utoronto.ca>). ...

Insofern ist „Red Saxony“ nicht einfach nur die Synthese langjähriger Forschung oder eine luzide Darstellung der politischen wie sozialen Geschichte Sachsens im Deutschen Kaiserreich. Das Buch ist vielmehr auch ein überzeugendes Plädoyer für den Erklärungswert regionaler Zugriffe unter Einbindung lokaler Perspektiven, für deren zwingend gebotene interregionale sowie spätestens ab dem 19. Jahrhundert auch transnationale Kontextualisierung James Retallack einen neuen Maßstab definiert hat.

— Swen Steinberg, *Neues Archiv für Sächsische Geschichte* 88 (2017): 314-17.

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