

# **Wilhelminism and Its Legacies: German Modernities, Imperialism, and the Meanings of Reform, 1890-1930**

**Geoff Eley and James Retallack, editors**

## **Opinion**

However well intended and affectionately meant, a *Festschrift* can be a rather dodgy undertaking; the end result may not really come together as a satisfying whole but rather remain a fragmented record of excellent work. This is emphatically and delightfully not the case with *Wilhelminism and Its Legacies*, published in honor of long-time Oxford professor Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann. Indeed, this book's plan embraces the cooperative and differentiated, the multifaceted and multilateral, and as such it works perfectly as a collection of essays rather than a monograph and, moreover, stands as a true-to-life representation of Pogge von Strandmann's own writings as well as his students' scholarship.

The collection ends with an essay by James Retallack, who elegantly, but stubbornly, refuses to sum up what has gone before. Instead, he notes the elements of stasis (the federal system and the dominance of Prussia) and modes of continuity (political alignments and style), while also suggesting that we need to consider that stasis and continuity must have suited many, including those conventionally assumed to have been reformers.

What makes this collection so useful is not so much that these essays tackle their subjects in startlingly new ways, but rather their refusal, both individually and collectively, to give in to the temptation to fall back on the old dichotomies. Instead, each essay makes the Wilhelmine era messier and yet more resonant. Retallack concludes this book with the hope that we will begin listening for the resounding measures of Wilhelmine history with the political silences that also existed (249). The new harmonics he alludes to should remind us that not all final chords are consonant; there is great worth in dissonance as well.

Margaret Eleanor Menninger, Texas State University San Marcos,  
in *The Germanic Review* 81, no. 2 (Spring 2006): 182-6.

This book offers a thought-provoking exploration of the major characteristics of the Wilhelmine era. The chapters explore diverse, and often uncharted territories. This volume breaks new ground in forcing us to reconsider the relationship between modernity and conservatism in Wilhelmine Germany. This point is addressed most perceptively in the editors' own contributions to the volume. This volume challenges through its individual contributions and its overall themes. Wilhelminism emerges here as a productive forum for debate on the relationship between stasis and reform in diverse cultural, social and political contexts. In producing such a fine, coherent and impressively-argued book, the authors and editors have done justice to a scholar [Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann] whose research and teaching has had an inestimable impact.

Jan Palmowski, Kings College London,  
in the *English Historical Review* 120, no. 486 (2005): 545-6.

Some *Festschriften* are collections of widely disparate papers, on an almost random range of topics. In the case of this volume, in a gratifying contrast to such publications, the editors can be congratulated on achieving their goal of producing a coherent and cohesive volume of essays. One of the editors, James Retallack, adds a chapter on stasis and blockages in Wilhelmine Germany, which provides some needed counterbalance to the emphasis of other chapters on the successful and modern aspects of the *Kaiserreich*. There is, however, a wealth of new research in this volume, which should be of value to anyone interested in Imperial Germany.

Andrew G. Bonnell, University of Queensland,  
in the *Australian Journal of Politics & History* 50, no. 3 (2005): 454-5.

This book begins with a caveat: it is not a traditional *Festschrift* with the typical hodgepodge of essays by friends of the honouree, but a collection organized around a common theme and all written by students who passed through his hands. Pogge's products turn out to be an impressive bunch, and the editors introduce the collection as an opportunity to reflect anew on the modernness of the Wilhelmine state and the implications for the history of Germany in the last century.

In his concluding essay, Retallack strikes a provocative note by resuscitating 1871 and 1918 as more significant historical markers and admitting abundant evidence of stasis between these years. He points out that many actions, such as gaining a university education or deciding to marry, took longer than before, that mainstream artistic tastes continued to be conservative, and that social-moral milieus remained largely intact over the course of the imperial era. Retallack then charms himself back into the collective of contributors by arguing that the very stability of the Wilhelmine state drove some citizens to demand change, albeit moderate in scope. As he puts it in a refreshing note of caution: the quest for emancipation often falls short of the act of rebellion, and . . . bodies gradually become less vital with the passage of time (236).

The contributors are to be congratulated on a volume that challenges historians to re-evaluate their criteria for change and continuity, to rethink the value of modernity as a measure of German historical development and to allow for apparent inconsistencies in the historical actors whom they study.

Róisín Healy, National University of Ireland Galway,  
in *European History Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (Oct. 2006): 614-6.

This important collection of essays seeks to offer new ways of understanding the social and political dynamics of early twentieth-century Germany. Its point of departure is the current post-*Sonderweg* landscape of German historiography. Wilhelminism marked a space of reform which celebrated industrialization and the existing state but also called for social improvement, national efficiency and colonial expansion. Opposed to both traditional conservatism and social democracy, Wilhelminism represented a self-consciously modern vision of limited socio-political reform that embraced the status quo of the nineteenth century but also defined itself as dynamic, unfolding, and unequivocally oriented toward the twentieth (9).

James Retallack offers some thoughtful reflections on the persistence of political structures over the course of the imperial period and the hesitancy of reformers to embrace fundamental change. The reformist impulse revealed in the efforts of liberals, and Walther Rathenau in particular, according to Retallack, amounted to a reluctant response to stasis, which was no longer capable of accommodating social and political change after 1900, rather than a ringing endorsement of change (237).

The authors have pushed the debates over imperial German political culture in fascinating new directions and historians must surely grapple with their compelling arguments and conclusions.

Dennis Sweeney, University of Alberta, in *Social History* 30, no. 4 (2005): 518-20.

Pogge's former students explore Wilhelminism along an appropriately diverse array of themes, promising to provide firmer conceptual form to a Wilhelmine era hitherto conventionally but diffusely characterized by the Imperial states structural backwardness, Weltpolitik and social imperialism, and popular political mobilization leading to a politics in a new key between 1890-1914.

...

Eley and Retallack expand upon these themes in a pair of thoughtful essays that serve as bookends to the collection. These essays effectively conceptualize and articulate the macro-level issues at hand. ...

Eley depicts German nation-building as a process of constant motion – the only constancy in the new societal circumstances of Wilhelmine Germany, he writes, came from the drama of unceasing pressures of change (p. 31). In conscious contrast, Retallack focuses on stasis, even cramping and constipation as metaphors for the dysfunctional quality of both middle-class lifestyles and political process in the Wilhelmine era (p. 238). More conciliatory to the Bielefeld school than Eley, Retallack notes how pressures for stasis dominated in the economic dominance of banks, cartels, and corporatism; in political structures, including Prussian dominance within the Empire, the lack of electoral and suffrage reform, and Germany's classic division into social-moral milieus; and culturally, as radical expressionism generated a backlash of traditional values (pp. 238-241). Such was the context for liberalism's drift into pragmatism and avoidance of decisive decisions for political reform (read parliamentary democracy) as exemplified by Walther Rathenau's personal waffling between theoretical systemic critiques and his refusal to make concrete proposals for change, even when requested by Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg (pp. 240-243). Political Wilhelminism in this light looks less like the deeds of an activist citizenry, more like a melancholy mixture of lingering regrets (p. 236), timid overtures, and reform as a reluctant response to stasis rather than a ringing endorsement of change (p. 237). Still, Retallack's ultimate point is that stasis *did* beget reform, especially after 1900, when Wilhelminians began to feel that political stasis was itself a destabilizing factor in their lives (p. 246). The result was a clearer, more hard-nosed vision of the future, a new political dialectic between stasis and reform

evidenced in cleavages between urban and rural sectors, producers and consumers, and in heated debates over civil liberties (pp. 247-248). In short, Retallack argues 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.

As a Festschrift for a beloved leading scholar of the field, the text triumphs in showcasing the fruits of Hartmut Pogge's mentorship, as his students develop innovative and insightful approaches to the problems posed by modern German historiography in general and Wilhelmine scholarship in particular. Reconsidering definitions of the political and modernity, uncoupling the notions of modernity and progressive politics, and becoming mindful of the cultural processes of mediation and negotiation that shape the construction of national identity and perspective represents a real advance in how historians can comprehend the intertwining of continuity and change, stasis and reform. The publication of a paperback edition in fall 2004 testifies to the broad, long-term impact this book will have in shaping the contours of *Kaiserreich* studies.

Raymond C. Sun, Washington State University,  
in *H-German, H-Net Reviews* (July 2005)

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