

James Retallack, *Red Saxony: Election Battles and the Spectre of Democracy in Germany, 1860-1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

Recent scholarship on the Kaiserreich has largely rejected the old Sonderweg argument, portraying German society in the grip of a preindustrial feudal elite and thus lacking many characteristics of the more “modern” West. Over the past few decades scholars have emphasized the bourgeois, modern and, to some extent, democratic nature of the Kaiserreich. Universal suffrage, in particular, allowed Germans to “practice democracy” (Margaret Anderson) and to develop a robust democratic political culture, despite constitutional roadblocks to democracy that remained until the 1918 revolution. Jim Retallack’s *Red Saxony* builds on this revisionist work, while also significantly expanding upon it and refining it. 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.

*Red Saxony* persuasively challenges both the traditional Sonderweg view and more recent historiography by emphasizing anti-democratic forces within a modern and broadly democratizing society. Retallack’s anti-democrats are not only aristocratic Junkers. His focus is rather on those powerful conservative elements, bourgeois as well as aristocratic, who viewed democracy as something to be feared and resisted even while they operated within a modern democratic system. They worked together to curtail voting rights, intimidate political opponents, limit the freedom of the press, and subvert the power of elected bodies.

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. All of these actors proved willing to betray liberal democratic principles of electoral fairness, civil rights, and the rule of law in order to forestall Socialist victory at the ballot box. 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. The appearance of this book within the current global political moment, as long-held democratic commitments are increasingly under attack, makes *Red Saxony* a work as timely as it is erudite.

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