



**Michaela Bachem-Rehm.** *Die katholischen Arbeitervereine im Ruhrgebiet 1870-1914: Katholisches Arbeitermilieu Zwischen Tradition und Emanzipation.* Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2004. 280 pp. EUR 30.00 (paper), ISBN 978-3-17-018365-0.



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## **Casting Aspersions (and Beer Mugs) at Priests in the Catholic Milieu**

It has been almost twenty-five years since Wilfried Loth published his major work on the social cleavages that undermined Catholic politics in the German Empire.[1] Now Michaela Bachem-Rehm, who studied under Loth's direction, has published a comprehensively informed study of the conflicts that shaped the experience of Catholic workers in the Ruhr. Anchoring the work is the spatial metaphor of a confessional *Teilmilieu*, advanced most prominently by Olaf Blaschke and Frank-Michael Kuhlemann, which describes subgroups within German Catholicism on which unique requirements of identity, belonging and public action impinged.[2] Bachem-Rehm argues that the Catholic *Teilmilieu* in the Ruhr developed in response not only to the intolerable conditions of industrial labor in the area but to persistent threats to worker self-consciousness emanating from a number of disaffirming interests: hostile Protestant officials in the Prussian state bureaucracy, socialists agitating for support in Catholic communities, bourgeois *Honoratioren* determined to compel obedience among upstart laborers and, perhaps most importantly, overbearing clergy at both the diocesan and parish levels, whose claims to supervision of the worker movement

were increasingly refused by a male laity committed to achieving reforms without asking permission to do so. Exploiting the latest scholarship on German social and confessional history and utilizing an array of documentary evidence, including such diverse sources as police reports, contemporary press accounts, parish records and private correspondence, Bachem-Rehm tells a fascinating emancipation story from the "bottom up." In this story, Catholic workers broke free from state repression and several forms of paternalistic tutelage in order to address their economic needs, dispense suspicions of their cultural "backwardness" and project a distinctive political voice all their own.

This study expands upon existing literature by analyzing the vast network of worker activities in the Ruhr in their structural interconnectivity and ideological coherence. Bachem-Rehm argues that the basic features of the workers' movement depended on the multifarious *Arbeitervereine*, which numbered over 300 and organized some 70,000 individuals in 1912. These associations supplied members to larger and more resonant worker concerns, such as the massive *Volksverein fuer*

*das katholische Deutschland* and the many trade unions that blossomed in the 1890s for miners as well as workers employed in metals, textiles and construction. The *Arbeitervereine* also provided testing grounds for novel mobilization schemes and innovative political rhetoric later employed by the movement's most effective leaders. In insightful vignettes distributed throughout the study, Bachem-Rehm describes the extensive influence of men like Gerhard Stoetzel, the first Catholic worker elected to the Reichstag, August Brust, the president of the Christian Miners Trade Union, who sought to professionalize worker agency, and the irrepressible Franz Wieber, who founded the Christian Metalworkers Union and asserted the freedom of Catholics to agitate for the satisfaction of their demands with or without the approval of the clergy. These individuals cut their teeth in the *Arbeitervereine*, whose progressive agendas provided the essential energy behind the *Modernisierungsschub* identified by Thomas Nipperdey as the primary impact of organized Catholicism in the German Empire.[3]

The great value of the book lies in Bachem-Rehm's fluent elaboration of the contexts of conflict and coexistence in which this modernizing tendency developed. One of these contexts was confessional interaction. The many mixed communities in the Ruhr and the shared experience of industrial suffering brought Protestants and Catholics together in worker outreach, although concerns about intermarriage among Protestants and doctrinal slippage among Catholics tended to encourage purely confessional associations. A more important impetus to worker activity, Bachem-Rehm rightly observes, was the terrifying pressure exerted on Catholic workers by Prussia's cadre of Protestant state bureaucrats, whose pathological anti-Catholicism Roisin Healy and Michael Gross have recently described so well.[4] The *Kulturkampf* state's paranoia that whenever Catholic workers discussed social issues they necessarily threatened insurrection led to many regrettable excesses. These included acute police surveillance of the activities of the *Arbeitervereine* and the seizure of membership rolls, which Protestant industrial captains scrutinized with police collaboration in order to identify and blacklist ultramontane subversives. This dirty and, in the end, illegal business could neither survive judicial review nor thwart the upward momentum of the Catholic workers movement over the long term. Workers themselves, Bachem-Rehm suggests, took the initiative in overcoming official mistrust by enrolling in educational programs to improve their cultural profile and by professing a robust nationalism on which the kaiser and the General Staff could depend

in 1914.

Socialist pressure on Catholic workers in the Ruhr was no less pervasive. While Bachem-Rehm might have consulted a broader range of sources describing socialists' recruitment strategies in Catholic neighborhoods, she successfully conveys a sense of the zero-sum competition between the *Arbeitervereine* and socialist worker associations for adherents. Catholics understood the social problem less as a matter of abstract theoretical reflection than as a concrete human situation. Still, more than a few Catholics hoped to present a common front against exploitative employers. From the 1870s onward, socialists' insults of priests, and of organized religion more generally, which many interpreted as gratuitous and "repulsive," turned otherwise sympathetic Catholics away from their natural allies in the struggle for better working and living conditions (p. 143). However, the abiding estrangement, which intensified after the socialists' "breakthrough" in the Ruhr in the 1903 elections, encouraged Catholic workers to develop their own identity. This process included the streamlining of organizational structure to systematize apologetics and the establishment of secretariats under lay authority to control propaganda. The *Arbeitervereine* felt this competition only more keenly as the war approached, for their ability to secure the allegiance of the young diminished as leisure culture in Wilhelmine Germany opened up its wide and colorful spectrum of tantalizing alternatives to faith-based sociability.

Bachem-Rehm's study makes clear, however, that the most important context determining the movement's programmatic drive was the field of Catholic interplay itself, in which workers, bourgeois elites and priests negotiated the limits and possibilities of acceptable public action. Catholic workers were increasingly intolerant of their bourgeois co-religionists, whose paternalism barely concealed liberal disdain for popular emancipation and for the "red priests" guilty of inciting it. Even *Arbeiterwohl*, the omnibus concern established by prominent leaders in the Center Party to inoculate Catholics from the socialist pox, did not envision workers pressing their interests on their own. To many workers, this heavy hand among fellow Catholics was akin to the *Herr-im-Haus-Standpunkt* of the most forbidding Ruhr industrialists. Bachem-Rehm's evidence bears out that they could not count on bourgeois support. Moreover, while the upper clergy scolded the Catholic bourgeoisie for insouciance toward popular suffering, their own support for an emancipated worker movement, which implied the legitimacy of strike activity and an acceptance of inde-

pendent political action, was similarly compromised by self-interest. The bishops and vicars general held on tenaciously to the idea of dominating the Catholic workers' movement, but those who comprised it accepted clerical involvement only if priests led them where they already wanted to go. According to Bachem-Rehm, the effective marginalization of the upper clergy was glaringly apparent in the internecine struggle over interconfessional trade unions or *Gewerkschaftsstreit*, which ended with workers interpreting even papal pronouncements as retrospective endorsement of their own position in the case.

Bachem-Rehm's most important analytical contribution concerns the worker-priest relationship at the parish level. Here her scholarship both enlightens and provokes. Although numerous, especially younger, priests advanced worker interests with determined skill, priests were not always the movement's reliable allies. Priests might be more devoted to spiritual concerns, skeptical of lay agency in the public sphere, or just too exhausted to care about presiding over one more *Verein*, especially an *Arbeiterverein*, whose effective administration demanded the imposing talents of organizational ability, intellectual acumen and a deft touch with the angry and disaffected. Moreover, those priests who did come forward were not always embraced, for workers did not suffer with equanimity the insufficiently committed, the awkwardly versed or the furtively authoritarian. Even if deeply pious, they did not hesitate to denounce meddling priests either in public discourse or in secret letters of complaint to diocesan authorities. They might even react with violence. Bachem-Rehm relates the shocking

fate of Father von Bockum-Dolffs of Saint Joseph's parish in Duisburg, who in November 1898 was struck in the head with a beer glass after he most imprudently cut off the lights of a meeting hall in order to break up an assembly of workers protesting limits on their political action plans (pp. 148-155). Bachem-Rehm concludes from such evidence as this that the notion of a milieu Catholicism tightly controlled by clerical "managers" has been overdrawn and needs to be revised.[5] Her cleanly argued study is a positive step toward this correction.

#### Notes

[1]. Wilfried Loth, *Katholiken im Kaiserreich. Der politische Katholizismus in der Krise des wilhelminischen Deutschlands* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1984).

[2]. Olaf Blaschke and Frank-Michael Kuhlemann, eds., *Religion im Kaiserreich: Milieu-Mentalität und Krisen* (Göttersloh: Göttersloher Verlagshaus, 1996).

[3]. Thomas Nipperdey, *Religion im Umbruch. Deutschland 1870-1918* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1988).

[4]. Roisin Healy, *The Jesuit Specter in Imperial Germany* (Boston: Brill, 2003) and Michael B. Gross, *The War Against Catholicism: Liberalism and the Anti-Catholic Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004).

[5]. See, for example, Olaf Blaschke, "Die Kolonialisierung der Laienwelt. Priester als Milieumanager und die Kanäle klerikaler Kuratel," in *Religion im Kaiserreich*, eds. Blaschke and Kuhlemann, 93-135.

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