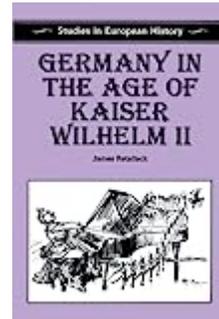


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**James Retallack.** *Germany in the Age of Kaiser Wilhelm II.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996. xv + 133 pp. \$10.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-312-16031-9.



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Back in the 1970s and very early '80s a student entering a graduate program in modern German history was likely to conclude that the most promising research opportunities lay in the area of Imperial Germany. Still under the sway of the persuasive paradigm erected by the Bielefeld school, many graduate students picked dissertation topics that would fill in the still-existing gaps in this research agenda, pursuing something akin to what Thomas Kuhn called "normal" science. Two events changed this pattern. First came the publication of David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley's *The Peculiarities of German History*, which, by summing up and condensing a growing discontent with the prevailing orthodoxy, threw doubt on some of the central tenets of the Bielefeld school, among them the thesis of the feudalization of the German middle classes and the consequences of Germany's "failed" bourgeois revolution. Yet, although Blackbourn and Eley succeeded in overthrowing the reigning paradigm, it is safe to argue that they did not replace it (perhaps that was not their intention). As a result, the field has entered the crisis stage Kuhn describes as the precondition for the emergence of a new paradigm, only plagued by the nagging thought that, in James Retallack's words, "there is little likelihood that a more systematic research agenda will emerge" (p. 15).

The other event was the collapse of East Germany,

which by providing an emphatic closure to the postwar period—and by opening vast archival sources—has served to energize this field of history. Judging by the recent spate of books, articles, and dissertations, postwar German history has now taken the pride of place once enjoyed by the history of Imperial Germany.

James Retallack's essay, part of the "Studies in European History" series published by Macmillan and distributed in the United States by St. Martin's Press, aims in part to revitalize the interest of students in Imperial Germany. While acknowledging several times that students may become bewildered by "a sometimes dizzying array of historical viewpoints, where the interpretative 'switches' seem to be reversed every few years," Retallack insists that "this situation need not induce panic or resignation" (p. 7). Rather, students and scholars should view the multiplicity of viewpoints and the "partial answers and unresolved paradoxes" (p. 7) as a sign of the vitality and excitement in a field that is making progress. Such determined optimism seems to cloak an underlying fear that scholars investigating Imperial Germany might lose out to more trendy fields in the struggle over the ever-diminishing institutional support for historical research.

As with the other volumes in this series, *Germany in the Age of Kaiser Wilhelm* provides its readers with a his-

toriological essay and a synoptic view of the current “state of debate.” A numbered bibliography of three hundred articles and books accompanies the text, giving both students and professors a very useful indication of who lines up where in the various debates. Not the least of the merits of Retallack’s bibliography is that, while not neglecting the hoary old standbys, it is very much *au courant*, listing many works that were still in manuscript form at the time of publication. In keeping with the editorial policy of the series editor, Retallack does not hesitate to offer his own judgments on various historical controversies, although he is always fair to the opposition.

The main thrust of his argument, not surprisingly, is to assert that “whereas the *Sonderweg* concept once had heuristic value, its time has passed” (p. 111). On the way to dismantling the Bielefeld paradigm, the author points out that the current consensus of opinion among historians now discounts the political significance of the “Great Depression of 1873-1896” and is especially skeptical of the thesis that “social imperialism” was a counter-cyclical strategy (pp. 20-21).

He also points out that industrialization, far from homogenizing a motley traditional society, actually increased regional disparities (p. 28). On the debate over whether Wilhelmine society was becoming more militaristic or more democratic over time, Retallack suggests that recent research indicates that “the defenders of the ‘people’s rights’ were clearly more numerous and more powerful than scholars once believed” (p. 42). In general he takes pains to rescue Wilhelmine history from the determinism of the Bielefeld model, and to emphasize its open-endedness. Along the way he strews a number of smaller judgments, such as the suggestion that studies of Wilhelmine foreign policy have generated “less innovative scholarship” than those on domestic policy (p. 6).

Experts in various fields may, of course, disagree with some of these assessments. In his discussion of Wilhelmine culture, for example, the author asserts that “ALL the issues examined here were about power in one sense or another. Domination and deviance, negotiation and resistance—these provide the underlying pattern to our analysis of economics, society, and politics” (p. 72). When, one wonders, will the kind of galloping reductionism exemplified here, and first promulgated by Foucault and his epigones, be finally laid to rest? But inciting fruitful controversy is surely one of the author’s intentions. Occasionally one runs across a clunky metaphor—the comparison of Wilhelmine political culture to a car’s automatic transmission, for example. For the sake of students, the centrality of the three-tiered Prussian franchise could have been given more emphasis. Although Retallack seems to hold a Popperian view of how history advances (p. 7), in his ecumenical haste to embrace all varieties of history, he endorses, rather too uncritically in this reviewer’s opinion, the contributions of postmodernists, which would, if taken seriously, explode any notion of progress in history.

These quibbles aside, Retallack’s essay succeeds admirably in its goal of providing a thoughtful and stimulating introduction to the historiography of Imperial Germany. Graduate students but also scholars in the field will find it a very helpful guide, and will be convinced by the author’s conviction that “the Wilhelmine era remains a frontier where critically important insights into other periods of German history remain to be discovered” (p. 15).

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