

Original citation:

Ross, Anna (2018) On unsettled democratization : history and political science in conversation. German History . ghy016. doi:10.1093/gerhis/ghy016

Permanent WRAP URL:

<http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/99441>

Copyright and reuse:

The Warwick Research Archive Portal (WRAP) makes this work by researchers of the University of Warwick available open access under the following conditions. Copyright © and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable the material made available in WRAP has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for profit purposes without prior permission or charge. Provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

Publisher's statement:

This is a pre-copyedited, author-produced version of an article accepted for publication in German History following peer review. The version of record Anna Ross; On Unsettled Democratization: History and Political Science in Conversation, German History, ghy016, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gerhis/ghy016> is available online at:

<https://doi.org/10.1093/gerhis/ghy016>

A note on versions:

The version presented here may differ from the published version or, version of record, if you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the 'permanent WRAP url' above for details on accessing the published version and note that access may require a subscription.

For more information, please contact the WRAP Team at: wrap@warwick.ac.uk

On Unsettled Democratization: History and Political Science in Conversation

***Conservative Parties and the Birth of Democracy in Europe.* By Daniel Ziblatt. Cambridge: CUP. 2017. 433 pp. £26.99 (paperback).**

***Red Saxony: Election Battles and the Spectre of Democracy in Germany, 1860-1918.* By James Retallack. Oxford: OUP. 2017. 698 pp. £95.00 (hardback).**

This summer, two books both exploring democratization came across my desk. The first was Daniel Ziblatt's *Conservative Parties and the Birth of Democracy in Europe*, a sophisticated piece of political science that contrasts conservative party development in Britain and Germany over the period 1848 to 1950. The second book was James Retallack's tome, *Red Saxony: Election Battles and the Spectre of Democracy in Germany, 1860-1918*. Retallack's magnificent study explores what seems to be, on first appearances, a very different influence on democratization to the conservative parties analysed by Ziblatt. Rather than focusing on parties, Retallack sees 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. Upon reading both monographs, it quickly became clear that the first and most basic recommendation of this review is that historians of modern Germany will delight in reading these works. But I want to suggest something more here: that it is worth reading these books together because in conversation, they force us to think about democratization in exciting ways that transcend disciplinary boundaries.

Both Ziblatt and Retallack directly address democratization but there are important differences in their structures that are worth drawing attention to from the outset. The first is timeframes. Ziblatt opens his work in 1848 with what he sees as the beginnings of democratization in Europe. He argues for the importance of conservative party-building in these years before the introduction of universal manhood suffrage, exploring the opportunities for such activity in Germany. Of note in this respect is Chapter 6, which includes a welcome discussion of the 1850s and the attempts of conservatives like the Gerlach brothers in Prussia to create a strong party. Ziblatt's observations on the post-1848 period chime with recent historical research on state-building in the aftermath of revolutions, suggesting that state ministries were not willing to narrow their agendas to the wishes of ultra-conservative elites but preferred to learn lessons from their experiences of upheaval.¹ This meant that conservatives more than ever needed to organize themselves into

¹ For the European case see, Christopher Clark, 'After 1848: The European Revolution in Government', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 22 (2012), 171-197. On Prussia see: Anna Ross, 'Post-Revolutionary Politics: The Case of the Prussian Ministry of State', in Gareth Stedman Jones and Douglas Moggach (eds.), *1848 as a Turning Point in Political Thought* (Cambridge: CUP, 2018); David E. Barclay, *Frederick William IV and the Prussian Monarchy, 1840-1861* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995). On Austria see: John Deak, *Forging a Multinational State: State Making in Imperial Austria from the Enlightenment to the First World War* (Stanford University Press, 2015); R.J.W. Evans, 'From Confederation to Compromise: The Austrian Experiment, 1849-1867', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 87 (1994), 135-167. On Saxony see: Abigail Green, *Fatherlands: State-Building and Nationhood in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Richard J. Bazillion, *Modernizing Germany: Karl Biedermann's Career in the Kingdom of Saxony, 1835-1901* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989).

parliamentary groupings after 1848, develop party programmes, and design strategies to influence in the press, even if the results were disappointing.

By way of contrast, Retallack begins his work in the 1860s. Although, as he makes clear, a larger picture of democratization in Germany started with 1848, Saxony only became drawn into this landscape a decade or so later. It was with Bismarck's decision to grant universal manhood suffrage for elections to the Reichstag (1866-7) that election battles in Saxony took hold, helped along by ensuing party formation. Both books also end at different points. For Ziblatt, the Second World War brings this window of democratization to an end and in Germany's case, it is the successful centre-right party-building of the German Christian Democratic Union (CDU) in West Germany that signifies the centre-right finally making peace with democracy. For Retallack, by way of contrast, the First World War marks the end of his study. Retallack's end point is entirely understandable for his focus on suffrage, nevertheless, the larger time frame present by Ziblatt does seem more convincing for examining democratization as a holistic process.

Both books also diverge in their scales of analysis. At its core, Ziblatt's work compares British and German conservative party dynamics at a national level, the former as part of a case study of settled democratization and the latter as a case study of unsettled democratization. He then concludes the work with a consideration of greater European trends, including to this reviewer's delight an extended discussion of Spain as part of the unsettled landscape. Retallack, on the other hand, eschews the national frame for an analysis of sub-national politics. By examining election battles in Saxony, he seeks to give due attention to a state that does not fit the ascendant interpretive paradigm of German history—a paradigm, as he puts it, 'that ascribes more liberal and "modern" political cultures to those regions lying west of the Elbe River or south of the Main River' (p. 13). In doing so, he sees an opportunity to correct larger interpretations about the course of democratization in Germany as a whole.

Of course, it is open to debate as to which level of analysis offers the greater explanatory power but what both books do well is to recognize the fundamental importance of situating their investigation amongst other scales of analysis, paying attention to the interplay of local, regional, and national politics. For example, Retallack moves with ease between state and federal elections, and in Chapter 9, even takes us into the transnational conversations in which electoral reform took place. Likewise, Ziblatt in Chapter 7 makes excellent use of Prussian dynamics to help explain apparent contradictions at the national level. What this approach does, especially when Germany is placed in a European or transnational context, is to continue to breakdown any sense of its peculiarity, but without overlooking, as in Ziblatt's case, the weakness of its conservative parties or in Retallack's case, the bourgeois face of authoritarianism in Saxony.

Despite these structural differences, the two books form a dynamic conversation that will be of interest to a wide range of specialists. In the first instance, this is because both books show what various disciplines can bring to a study of democratization. In Ziblatt's case, political scientists will surely appreciate the mix of qualitative and quantitative data he deploys, as well as the stunning logic he uses to make a case for elites as being decisive for democratic success or failure. Ziblatt is, of course, not the first to focus attention on elite incumbents but his argument is novel in seeing conservative political parties as a 'variable that shapes democratization' (p. 20). This stands against existing studies that have emphasized the importance of structural conditions in explaining democratization: economic

development, the role of the middle-classes as the champions of democratic demands, and/or the success of working-class movements, for example.²

In Retallack's case, historians will be impressed by his breath-taking 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.³ This in turn builds on a robust field of studies probing the experiences of elections and voting behaviours.⁴ 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. That is, he examines election battles in Saxony to show 'how Germans thought they could combine democratic and undemocratic aspects in a single political system' (p. 5) and 'why so many Germanys were persuaded to accept suffrages that were not democratic' (p. 6).

More importantly though, both books transcend their fields and draw us into conversation because they regard democratization as a process. Ziblatt shows this perhaps best. He approaches the phenomenon 'neither as singular moments of "democratic breakthrough" nor as definable periods of "democratic breakdown"' (p. 12). Rather, his analysis of the period 1848 to 1950 encompasses both, generating support for the historical turn in political science.⁵ Retallack extends such thinking in a slightly different direction by separating out what he terms 'social democratization' and 'political democratization' in the larger schema. Political democratization, as with Ziblatt, 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).

Patterns too are essential to both Ziblatt and Retallack. In *Conservative Parties*, Ziblatt constantly seeks to move away from the 'noise' of his historical material and abstract it into a simple, but elegant explanation that remains continuous over time and place. In doing so, what he finds is that political parties, especially 'those parties that originated as defenders

² See amongst others: Carles Boix, *Democracy and Redistribution* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003); Barrington Moore, *The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966); Ben Ansell and David Samuels, *Inequality and Democratization: An Elite-Competition Approach* (New York, NY: CUP, 2014); Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Evelyn Huber, and John Stephens, *Capitalist Development and Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

³ In particular, see the works of Thomas Kühne: *Dreiklassenwahlrecht und Wahlkultur in Preussen 1867-1914. Landtagswahlen zwischen korporativer Tradition und politischem Massenmarkt* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1994); 'Political Culture and Democratization', in James Retallack (ed.) *Imperial Germany 1871-1918* (Oxford and New York: OUP, 2008), 174-95.

⁴ The classic studies being that of Margaret Lavinia Anderson, *Practicing Democracy: Elections and Political Culture in Imperial Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000) and Stanley Suval, *Electoral Politics in Wilhelmine Germany* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985). On voting behaviours see Jonathan Sperber, *The Kaiser's Voters: Electors and Elections in Imperial Germany* (Cambridge: CUP, 1997).

⁵ See Giovanni Capoccia and Daniel Ziblatt, 'The historical Turn in Democratization Studies,' *Comparative Political Studies*, 43(2010), 931-68.

of the old order' (pp. 20-1) had an important effect on democratic development. Their ability to control candidate selection, campaign financing, district-level agitation, and much more had serious implications beyond local arenas. For the period up to 1914, this meant that the creation of institutionalized party structures on the part of conservatives was essential. Yet as he puts it, 'Germany's landed elite, despite efforts to build party organization during the Imperial period, remained represented by an organizationally weak political party of notables ... unable to forge a territorially integrated, nationally encompassing center-right defense of the old regime, and as a result was profoundly frightened of democracy' (p. 173). This is by no means news to historians but his argument works well in support of the weight he gives to parties as shapers of democratization.⁶ He continues that, the 'absence of a strongly organized pre-1918 conservative party meant that the interwar electoral right lacked organizational resources,' making it unable to counter the radical right-wing influences that eventually eroded democracy (p. 339). Of course, no form of radical takeover was inevitable. As Ziblatt goes on to explain, effective subterranean strategies also had to be developed by conservative radicals for democratic breakdown. In short, in 'what would turn out to be the most destructive instance of democratic collapse in the twentieth century, the fate of democracy in Germany was in the hands of conservatives; and the fundamental impetus driving events – in January 1933 – was not their strength, but rather their weakness (p. 333).'

Patterns are also important to Retallack but if Ziblatt constantly moves away from the 'noise' of his historical material to show this, Retallack enjoys listening to it. For him, focusing on electoral competition in all its complexity illuminates party formation processes. Indeed, Retallack mobilizes a career of thinking about conservative politics in doing so, thus presenting an analysis that is far more compatible with Ziblatt's than first appearances suggest.⁷ He shows that election battles were an important stimulus for party formation amongst both the parties of order and the party of revolution. Moreover, he casts light not only on the continuities created by strong and weak parties over time, but also their relationship to changing political conditions. 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).

The arguments both books formulate encourage further conversation. The real gem in Ziblatt's project is his uncompromising claim that, 'no matter the level of socioeconomic development or the structure of the institutions of any state, *conservative political parties* that originated representing old regime elites are key shapers of the process of democratization'

⁶ This is by no means news to historians. See: Thomas Nipperdey, *Die Organisation der deutschen Parteien vor 1918* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1961); Geoff Eley in *Reshaping of the German Right: Radical Nationalism and Political Change after Bismarck* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1980); James Retallack, *Notables of the Right: The Conservative Party and Political Mobilization in Germany, 1876-1918* (Boston and London: Unwin Hyman, 1988).

⁷ See amongst others: James Retallack, *The German Right, 1860-1920: Political Limits of the Authoritarian Imagination* (Toronto and London: University of Toronto Press, 2006); Larry Eugene Jones and James Retallack (eds.), *Between Reform, Reaction, and Resistance: Studies in the History of German Conservatism from 1789 to 1945* (Oxford and Providence, RI: Berg, 1993); James Retallack, *Notables of the Right: The Conservative Party and Political Mobilization in Germany, 1876-1918* (Boston and London: Unwin Hyman, 1988).

(p. 21). This means that, as Ziblatt argues, those conservative parties that ‘gradually developed the novel response of an organizational infrastructure for political parties before universal male suffrage [and] absent a “contagion from the left”’ (p. 36) became strong parties, less fearful of democratic futures. But for those countries’ whose parties, ‘facing expanded suffrage, followed another path altogether using new techniques of electoral manipulation and collusion, and continued to use outdated “suboptimal” forms even in some cases after universal male suffrage and the rise of socialist political parties’ (p. 36) became weak parties, fearful of democracy and unable to defend it from outside interest groups. Ziblatt of course makes the empirical case for this in his book, including an analysis of the German Conservative Party (*Deutschkonservative Partei*, or DKP), the German Empire Party (*Reichspartei*), and later *Deutschnationale Volkspartei* or DNVP, but the exercise of attempting to reconcile Ziblatt’s ideas with historical research conducted by Retallack only strengthens the reader’s sense of conviction. Yet, this is no mere process of subordinating historical knowledge to the proofing political-science models as Retallack advances his own interpretation that takes us in a slightly different direction. 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 other words, he shows what happens when conservative party building remains weak, even as social democratization unfolds. 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 (see Retallack p. 14 and Ziblatt p. 182).

The result of these arguments is that both works offer areas of overlap that force us to think hard in the abstract. This includes a focus on the conditions for strong/weak political party formation, and attached to it, the formation of anti-socialist cross-party elite coalitions as a substitute for party organization. While Ziblatt makes explicit the conditions for strong political party formation – absence of state resources, access to societal resources, and the absence of confessional divides (or an ability to overcome them) – Retallack consistently shows how it was not only the situation in Saxony but also the leaders of political parties, civil servants, and state ministers that stifled such activity. He also fleshes out a vivid analysis of the anti-socialist coalition building that took place in Saxony during the latter nineteenth century – a symptom of weak parties.

Furthermore, while Ziblatt alludes to the contrasting success of party building on the part of the SPD, Retallack elucidates this at length throughout his book, showing the remarkable emergence of a socialist organisation at the grass-roots level in Saxony. For both authors, this raises the issue of feelings of security (or lack thereof) in the process of political democratization. As Retallack explains, parties of order had, by 1877, ‘developed the habit of citing constituency contests and voting returns as reliable indicators of the size, strength, and future prospects of the Social Democratic movement.’ (p. 129). This habit would continue throughout the period, raising fears amongst the parties of order as the SPD grew in popularity. In addition, these feelings were exacerbated by suffrage reforms that failed to alleviate the concerns of conservatives. The experimentation with plural suffrage in Saxony, for instance, raised anxieties within the Prussian state ministry, which dropped its plans for a plural suffrage after the result of the Saxon 1909 election. Ziblatt, too, is aware of such feelings amongst conservatives, including beyond World War One in the environment of democratic breakdown. Here, his central premise reinforces ‘the basic insight that elite self-confidence is vital for democratic transition and consolidation (p. 366).’ In other words, for their period of overlap in the second half of the nineteenth century, both works serve to provide an image of a poorly institutionalized conservative party in Germany at the national

and sub-national levels, fearful of the SPD and its frightening potential to win election battles.

In sum, that the historian and political scientist have much to discuss and learn from one another is not news to either of these authors. To be sure, a superficial glance at their footnotes and bibliographies tells us this. It is also not news to the academy. But what I hope reviewing these two books together does is to remind us of the dividends of speaking to one another across the disciplinary divide. Both books offer arguments that demand a response from the other, historical patterns that prove essential to both analyses, and common themes that will enrich further thinking in the field. They stretch us to think in ways that are not always intuitive to our disciplines but which offer substantial rewards.

Anna Ross
University of Warwick