Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

*Dreiklassenwahlrecht und Wahlkultur in Preussen, 1867-1914: Landtagswahlen zwischen Korporativer Tradition und Politischem Massenmarkt* by Thomas Kühne

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German historians have distinguished themselves in the study of political organizations, longitudinal surveys of individual districts, and election statistics: the sentences, but not the grammar, of voter politics—to borrow a phrase from Friedrich Eberle. This splendid work redresses the balance by parsing the complicated electoral system that produced the House of Deputies in Prussia, a state that comprised 60 percent of the population and territory of the German Empire and whose institutions gave that empire its characteristically conservative and militaristic stamp. Alexis de Tocqueville (Democracy in America [New York, 1951], 1:50) was convinced that “when a nation modifies the elective qualification, . . . sooner or later that qualification will be entirely abolished. There is no more invariable rule in the history of society . . . for after each concession the strength of the democracy increases, and . . . no stop can be made short of universal suffrage.” Yet the undemocratic (indirect, public, and unequal) voting system that produced the Prussian state legislature endured, contrary to Tocqueville’s law, even after Germany had acquired in 1871 a national parliament elected by all adult males, directly, secretly, and equally. It fell only in 1918, with the fall of the German Empire itself. Kühne’s project is to explain this system’s extraordinary perdurability.

His answer is in three parts, each a fascinating book in itself. The first, following the path blazed by Norman Gash, D. C. Moore, T. J. Nossiter, and Frank O’Gorman for England, analyzes the culture of Prussia’s state elections. Pressures for conformity, horizontal as well as vertical, characterized this culture (as that of every other franchise regime), and gerrymandering, especially in urban districts, attained high levels of refinement. Liberals in the seventies wrote the book on election influence, lessons that the government borrowed in subsequent decades. Even so Kühne argues forcefully against a historiography that has used the dismissively low turnouts in these elections (33 percent as late as 1913, in contrast to 85 percent for the Reichstag) as univocal signs of the system’s illegitimacy. Radically different procedures and much larger precincts meant that the voting act itself was vastly more profligate of the rural voter’s time. Moreover, unlike election culture of the late twentieth century, which accords value to the very act of voting as conferring dignity on the citizen and legitimacy to the system (the “participation postulate”), the axioms of Prussian election culture were “economic.” When a precinct’s outcome could be foreseen, the law of parsimony suggested that the voter stay home, or that he compact with his fellows to send two or more of their number, proportionate to the local strength of each side. In the grammar of this culture, low turnouts did not necessarily mean protest, or even indifference. Kühne finds, in fact, that party-structured choices, and the organizations that drove them, were more important, at a much earlier period, than has generally been believed.

Noting that the purpose of elections is not only to award victory in competition but also to build consensus, without which representative government is impossible, Kühne’s second and even more original study brilliantly analyzes the mechanisms for inner-group and cross-group integration that this system encouraged, largely through plural-member districts. When these constituencies were the bailiwicks of rural Protestants (usually Conservatives), the desire of the party leadership for parliamentarians of stature could be balanced against parochial demands for representation by bestowing one seat upon a distinguished official or professor and the other upon a favorite son, certain to care about the nitty-gritty of local grain prices, railway branch lines, meat
inspection. In the Catholic milieu, in contrast, where social rather than local representativeness was the hot issue, plural districts were eventually used by the Centrum’s leadership to guarantee seats to groups (usually workers or Mittelstand) who could not, under the plutocratic franchise, have won places under their own steam. This corporate concept of representation, Kühne argues, originally pushed by the Centrum’s aristocratic wing to promote agrarian candidacies, was transformed under popular pressures into a truly progressive system of social “proportionality” that continues in many institutions in the Federal Republic today. Both the localist proportionality of rural Conservatives and the social proportionality of political Catholicism were made possible by the large number of safe seats these two parties had at their disposal. Liberals, socially exclusive and committed to a holistic vision of representation that denied legitimacy to any particular interest, whether of class or locality, eschewed these integrative mechanisms. (They had, it should be said, almost no safe seats to give away.) Nevertheless, in order to be elected at all, Liberals were driven to make deals that yoked them to other parties, forcing potentially antagonistic constituencies to bear responsibility for each other’s policies. This too was a form of consensus building, although one that never transcended what contemporaries called the “national”—that is, the non-working-class—Protestant milieu.

Kühne’s third study recounts the efforts to reform Prussia’s voting system. Until now we have never had the complete story, and those familiar with comparable work on England’s First and Second Reform Bills will not be surprised at its complexity. A window of opportunity opened after 1900, when Social Democrats attempted by voting en masse to make the system unworkable, National Liberals gravitated to the left, and Interior Minister Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg resolved to redress the franchise’s most blatant inequities (preferably in the form of very fancy franchises), in hopes of forcing Conservatives to modernize themselves. Understandably, every party had a different wish list. The surprise in this story is that it was an indifferent electorate and a reactionary cabinet, rather than the intransigence of Conservative politicians or even the hostile milieux of a segmented society, that eventually checkmated all proposals for reform. When Bethmann Hollweg moved to the Imperial Office of the Interior in mid-1907, the Prussian cabinet lost its strongest voice for compromise. The 1908 state elections, by routing the National Liberals, led even Bethmann to retreat. When a Center–Conservative majority introduced a bill in 1910 to grant secret voting (long a Conservative sticking point), the cabinet, panicked at this sign of creeping parliamentization, worked to bring it down. Prussia’s soi disant “government above all parties” had retreated into a government against all parties.

Kühne’s is a magnificent achievement, built on a mountain of research and studded with shrewd judgments. But Americans may become uneasy when, like most of our German colleagues, he frames his analysis around the “problem” of Germany’s modernization. “Modernity” is a moving target in a game that is never over; when are we justified in saying that a law, a system, a society, has failed to hit it? Kühne finesse the definitional issue by taking refuge in comparisons: only Prussia, among the countries that make up today’s European Community, retained indirect and open voting going into the Great War. But why compare the national electoral systems of unitary European states (most of which were considerably less democratic than Germany’s) with a state’s electoral system in the federalized Reich? The United States, which did have a federal system, required direct elections to the Senate only in 1913. Its electoral college, denounced by contemporaries as unwise, unjust, and unrepresentative, twice elected presidents who had been defeated in the popular vote—and continues to pose a threat to popular choices to this day. Defining the leading indicators of modernity is a mug’s
game. The Social Democrats, with 28 percent of the electorate, got only 2 percent of the seats in Prussia’s last unreformed legislature, while the Conservatives, with 15 percent, captured 33 percent of the seats. Unmodern? Who would have guessed that, in this year of grace 1996, more than 23 million citizens of California elect the same number of senators as the not quite five hundred thousand citizens of Wyoming?

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Social scientists have in recent decades played an important part in developing a theoretically informed historiography of the German welfare state. The volume reviewed here, a study of Prussian and German social and welfare policies during the “long nineteenth century” up to 1914 by the Chicago sociologist George Steinmetz, confirms that social theory can be linked to detailed empirical research to produce a critical and illuminating history of social policy.

The title indicates the twin concepts underpinning the author’s approach. “The social,” argues Steinmetz, was a concept which emerged in the course of the nineteenth century to denote the site of problems relating to poverty, inequality, and social and economic conflict. As such, “the social” constituted a target for “regulation,” a term adapted by Steinmetz from regulation theory to signify attempts by state authorities to “create or encourage orderly behavior” (p. 2). Using these concepts to encompass a broad range of social intervention, the author sets out to explain the emergence of different paradigms of intervention at central and local levels.

Some parts of Steinmetz’s analysis, for all the novelty of his terminology and general framework, strike a familiar chord. His distinction (in chap. 3) between the paradigm of locally administered though centrally regulated modern poor relief as it developed in Prussia from the mid-nineteenth century onward and subsequently in the Reich, and that of the “worker policy” pursued by the Reich government under Bismarck, featured prominently in the work published in the early 1980s by Christoph Sachße and Florian Tennstedt. Moreover, a reader hoping for fresh insights into the motives for Bismarck’s social insurance legislation will find in chapter 5 that the author is essentially summarizing recent findings by Hans-Peter Ullmann and others. Overall, Steinmetz’s comparison between legislation on poor relief and legislation on social insurance yields conclusions which, though plausible, are not particularly surprising. Central state intervention, he argues, was partly motivated by “social fear,” though this took different forms: the regulation of poor relief was triggered by a diffuse dread of social disorder, while worker policy was fueled by the specific fear of the Social Democratic Party (SPD). The German legacy of state intervention was an ingredient in both cases. Business interests played an important but not determining role: the “semi-autonomous” central state acted in a way which was generally congruent with the needs of an expanding industrial economy, even if its social intervention could not please all sectors of industry all of the time.

If the sections on social insurance and the central regulation of poor relief mainly synthesize and interpret recent research, chapters 6 and 7 on municipal politics and