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MODERNIZATION IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The Case of Imperial Germany

By SHERI E. BERMAN*

THANKS to the global spread of free markets and the third wave of democratization, the connection between economic and political development is once again attracting attention. Trying to sell better economic relations with China, for example, President Bill Clinton had declared that “as China’s people become more mobile, prosperous, and aware of alternative ways of life, they will seek greater say in the decisions that affect their lives.”¹ President George W. Bush agreed: “It is important for us to trade with China to encourage the growth of an entrepreneurial class,” because if we do “you’ll be amazed at how soon democracy will come.”² Among the policy elite, clearly, modernization theory—the belief that industrialization and economic development lead directly to positive social and political change—is back in vogue.

A loose or weak version of the long-derided theory, moreover, is experiencing a revival inside the academy as well. Few scholars these days deny that economic and political development are linked, although they continue to debate precisely how, as well as the degree to which, political liberalization can be forestalled or reversed by elites determined to preserve an authoritarian status quo. What has been less appreciated is that hypotheses in this area can be refined and tested by looking at historical cases in addition to contemporary ones, not least because there the linkages at issue can be studied with the benefit of fuller documentation and greater perspective. Recent historiographical developments, for example, suggest that a case that played a critical role in original modernization theory discussions—Imperial Germany—was miscoded as a dramatic failure when in fact it should be seen as a partial success.

* I would like to thank Jeff Herbst, Andrew Janos, Jeffrey Kopstein, Michael Bernhard, three anonymous *World Politics* reviewers, and Gideon Rose for helpful comments on this article.

¹ “Letter from the president to the speaker of the House of Representatives and the president of the Senate,” White House Press Office, January 24, 2000.

² GOP presidential candidates debate in Phoenix, Arizona, December 7, 1999.

As modernization theory was being formulated in the decades after the Second World War, German history presented an obvious challenge to the notion that economic development drove political development inexorably onward and upward: one of the world's most economically advanced countries, after all, had just descended into barbarism.³ The explanation for this apparent anomaly, many historians and social scientists agreed, was that German history had followed an unusual and pathological course because of a critical disjuncture between its economic and political maturation. "Despite the imposing strengths of the German capitalist economy," the argument ran, "by the start of the twentieth century . . . there was no corresponding 'modernization' of the political system. . . . [The] failure to extirpate the power of 'pre-industrial' traditions at the center of the state vitiated any progress towards liberal democracy before 1914 and undermined the foundations of the Weimar Republic."⁴

Recent research on popular mobilization and political behavior during the imperial era tells a different story, however, one that dovetails well with current thinking on democratic transitions and political development more generally. Unfortunately, because historians shy away from broad cross-national and intertemporal comparisons while political scientists often ignore the past, the possibilities for intellectual cross-fertilization between these literatures have not been tapped.⁵ This essay is an attempt to bridge the gap, showing how the work of historians and that of political scientists can enrich each other. In particular, I will argue that from a contemporary perspective Imperial Germany appears less a gross deviation from a benign historical pattern than an early sojourner on the path many rapidly developing countries are treading today. Several features of Germany's past that were previously

³ The example has even been raised as a charge against today's neomodernizationists: "American foreign policy is now anchored in a peculiarly ahistorical syllogism that assumes industrial capitalism leads eventually to civil democracy (never mind Nazi Germany and other unfortunate exceptions)." William Greider, "Ambassador Babbitt," *Nation* (May 8, 2000), 8.

⁴ Geoff Eley, *From Unification to Nazism* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 2.

⁵ Important recent exceptions to this generalization about political scientists include Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Evelyn Huber Stephens, and John Stephens, *Capitalist Development and Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); and Ruth Berins Collier, *Paths towards Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Tom Ertman has also recently reexamined German political history from a broad comparative perspective, but he has come to conclusions that differ from the ones presented here. Ertman, "Liberalization and Democratization in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Germany in Comparative Perspective," in Carl Lankowski, ed., *Breakdown, Breakup, Breakthrough: Germany's Difficult Passage to Modernity* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2000). See also Sheri Berman, *The Social Democratic Moment: Ideas and Politics in the Making of Interwar Europe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

considered abnormal or pathological can be found elsewhere, I argue, and while economic development may not have brought about a full transition to democracy before the First World War, it did influence German political development in relatively clear and predictable ways. In short, where Imperial Germany used to be considered an exception to modernization theory, it now appears to provide important insights into just how that theory's key variables are linked in practice.

A reexamination of Imperial Germany that draws on the research and insights of both historians and political scientists has much to offer scholars from both fields. For historians, the exercise provides a fresh perspective on the purported distinctiveness of the country's political system and the relationship between its economic and political development. For political scientists, the German case has important lessons to teach about the role of structure versus agency in driving political liberalization, the time frame necessary for genuine political development to occur, and the role of war and the nature of the international system as wild cards in changing the outcome of the game. Most interestingly, perhaps, it also shows that a weak version of modernization theory holds true, namely, that it is simply not possible *over the long term* for a simple authoritarian regime to maintain control over an increasingly economically developed society.

TO MODERNITY AND BEYOND

When social scientists tried to make sense of the world in the wake of World War II, one of the chief puzzles they grappled with was how to explain the trajectory of political development in different countries. Why, they asked, were so many members of the advanced industrial West democracies? What would the future hold for the dozens of new nations created by war and decolonization? These questions spawned a growth industry in modernization studies, and from the 1940s through the 1960s a host of scholars studied patterns of political development, focusing in particular on the connections between economic development and political, social, and cultural change. Reflecting the spirit of the American polity and academy during this time, many advanced a relatively simple and bold version of modernization theory—that democracy rested on a set of social and cultural conditions that were themselves the product of industrialization and economic growth. As Seymour Martin Lipset put it, “All the various aspects of economic development—industrialization, urbanization, wealth, and education—

are so closely interrelated as to form one major factor which has the political correlate of democracy.”⁶

During the 1960s a backlash began to mount, arguing that such theorizing was too focused on the Western experience, too teleological and mechanistic, and too linear.⁷ Although the critics may have exaggerated the crudity and homogeneity of the earlier generation of research,⁸ they scored enough points that by the 1970s cutting-edge scholarship focused less on the benefits of industrialization and economic development than on their pathologies and problems. This new literature argued that there was no necessary progression from economic to political development and that under certain conditions industrialization could even lead to antidemocratic political outcomes such as bureaucratic authoritarianism. Some went still further and questioned the concept of economic development itself, contending that for countries at the periphery of the global capitalist system the future held not growth and autonomy but poverty and dependency.⁹ The combination of such critiques and the apparent failure of global politics to conform to the predictions of modernization theory dealt it a heavy blow, and by the late 1970s its fortunes had reached a nadir.

It was precisely then, however, that what has become known as the third wave of global democratization began to gather force, sweeping across continents to topple authoritarian regimes and raise up democracies in their place. Wherever one looked—from southern Europe to

⁶ Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Man* (New York: Anchor Books, 1963), 41. See also Robert Packenham, *Liberal America and the Third World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973); Walt W. Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960); idem, *Politics and the Stages of Growth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971); A. F. K. Organski, *The Stages of Political Development* (New York: Knopf, 1965); David Apter, *The Politics of Modernization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965); Daniel Lerner, *The Passing of Traditional Society* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1958). A good review of this literature is Samuel Huntington and Jorge Domínguez, “Political Development,” in Fred Greenstein and Nelson Polsby, eds., *Handbook of Political Science*, vol. 3 (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1975).

⁷ Mark Kesselman, “Order or Movement? The Literature of Political Development as Ideology,” *World Politics* 26 (October 1973); Ronald Chilcote and Joel Edelstein, *Latin America: The Struggle with Development and Beyond* (New York: Halstad Press, 1974); Andre Gunder Frank, *Latin America: Underdevelopment or Revolution* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1969); Samuel Valenzuela and Arturo Valenzuela, “Modernization and Dependency,” *Comparative Politics* 10 (July 1978); Joel Migdal, “Studying the Politics of Development and Change,” in Ada Finifter, ed., *Political Science: The State of the Discipline* (Washington, D.C.: American Political Science Association, 1983); and Tony Smith, “The Underdevelopment of the Development Literature: The Case of Dependency Theory,” *World Politics* 31 (January 1979).

⁸ Gabriel Almond, “The Development of Political Development,” in Myron Weiner and Samuel P. Huntington, eds., *Understanding Political Development* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1987).

⁹ Gunder Frank (fn. 7); David Collier, ed., *The New Authoritarianism in Latin America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979); Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Enzo Faletto, *Dependency and Development in Latin America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979); Osvaldo Sunkel, “Transnational Capitalism and National Disintegration in Latin America,” *Social and Economic Studies* 22 (March 1973). See also fn. 7.

East Asia, from Latin America to the Soviet Union—it seemed as if transitions were the order of the day. In many cases, furthermore, the transitions seemed to follow impressive periods of economic development or correlate with a shift to a free-market economy. The result has been an unexpected revival of some of the chief propositions of modernization theory, albeit in a more nuanced and chastened form. Thus Ronald Inglehart has recently argued on the basis of a massive cross-national survey of various economic, cultural, and political indicators that “economic development, cultural change, and political change are linked in coherent and even, to some extent, predictable patterns. Some trajectories of change are more probable than others because certain configurations of values and beliefs, and political and economic institutions, are mutually supportive—while others are not.”¹⁰

As modernization theory was rising and falling and rising again, interpretations of German political development were in flux as well. The central issue related to Hitler and the Nazis: was the emergence of such a radically evil regime primarily the result of contingent events and factors, or was it instead the inevitable result of deep-rooted historical forces? During the Second World War and sometimes after, the latter argument was often expressed in terms of national character or political culture, as if there were something about “the Germans” that predisposed them to do terrible things.¹¹ Other theories placed responsibility on Germany’s exposed geopolitical position, which supposedly led the country to develop a strong state and an aggressive posture.¹²

¹⁰ Ronald Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization: Cultural, Economic, and Political Change in Forty-three Societies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 8.

¹¹ For citations to such arguments, see Richard J. Evans, *Rethinking German History* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1987), 50 n. 4. Even quite sophisticated observers have been partial to such explanations. Late in his life, for example, A. J. P. Taylor remarked that “for years after the Second World War I continued to believe that there would be another German bid for European supremacy and that we must take precautions against it. Events have proved me totally wrong. I tried to learn lessons from history, which is always a mistake. The Germans have changed their national character.” Taylor, “London Diary,” *New Statesman* (June 4, 1976), quoted in Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 187 fn.

¹² Leopold von Ranke, “A Dialogue on Politics,” reprinted in Theodore H. von Laue, *Leopold Ranke: The Formative Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), 152–80, esp. 167–68; Otto Hintze, “Military Organization and the Organization of the State,” in Felix Gilbert, ed., *The Historical Essays of Otto Hintze* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 183 (Hintze, however, gave up this perspective after 1918); A. J. P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War* (London: Atheneum, 1961); and D. P. Calleo, *The German Problem Reconsidered* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978). A more subtle and sophisticated variant of this perspective is Brian Downing, *The Military Revolution and Political Change: Origins of Democracy and Autocracy in Early Modern Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992). For a general argument about how systemic pressures can shape domestic institutions and policy, see Peter Gourevitch, “The Second Image Reversed: The International Sources of Domestic Politics,” *International Organization* 32 (Autumn 1978); for a review of the “second image reversed” literature on the German case, see George Iggers, *The German Conception of History* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1983).

Many scholars, however, favored a sophisticated structural determinism that located the problem in an alleged disjuncture between Germany's economic and political development. According to this view, Germany had managed to develop an advanced, dynamic economy while retaining an authoritarian political system and a backward social structure. Having undergone a capitalist revolution but not a political or social one, it swerved onto a special path, or *Sonderweg*, that led to its collapse into barbarism during the 1930s. "There can be no . . . doubt that Germany's deviation from the secular and normative process of democratization," wrote Heinrich August Winkler, "is at the bottom of the catastrophes of the 20th century."¹³ Germany's "partial or unsuccessful modernization," according to Ralf Dahrendorf, placed it on a "fascist track" to modernity.¹⁴

But the *Sonderweg* thesis came under attack in the 1980s, particularly in the writings of David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, who argued that Germany's development had not been as perverted or illiberal as the regnant historical theories suggested.¹⁵ They suggested that analyses

Andrew Janos has suggested another way in which the international system and military competition in particular affected German political development. Janos argues that Germany faced a choice between competing economically or militarily with rival states and chose the latter largely because it would have fewer social and political consequences. This argument is somewhat similar to those that will be discussed later in the article regarding the intentionality of the First World War. Janos, "The Rise and Fall of Militarized Societies: Germany and Russia as Great Powers, 1890–1990," *German Politics and Society* 14 (Spring 1996); and idem, "Paradigms Revisited: Productionism, Globality, and Postmodernity in Comparative Politics," *World Politics* 50 (October 1997).

¹³ Winkler, "Bürgerliche Emanzipation und nationale Einigung," in H. Böhme, ed., *Probleme der Reichsgründungszeit, 1848–1879* (Berlin: Kiepenheuer und Witsch 1968), 237. See also Margaret Anderson, *Practicing Democracy: Elections and Political Culture in Imperial Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 8.

¹⁴ Dahrendorf, *Society and Democracy in Germany* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1969). The "bourgeois revolution" approach probably began with Karl Marx; see, for example, Marx, "The Bourgeoisie and the Counter-Revolution," *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, December 14, 1848, in Karl Marx, *The Revolutions of 1848* (London: Harmondsworth, 1973); and idem, "A Radical German Revolution," in "Toward the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law: Introduction," *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher* (1844), reprinted in Saul K. Padover, *Karl Marx on Revolution* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971), 422–26. References to works in this genre will be sprinkled throughout the article, but some well-known statements include Fritz Fischer, *From Kaiserreich to Third Reich* (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1986); Talcott Parsons, "Democracy and Social Structure in Pre-Nazi Germany," in Parsons, *Essays in Sociological Theory* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1954); and Taylor, *The Course of German History* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1962). A nuanced discussion of this type of argument is Thomas Nipperdey, "1933 und die Kontinuität der deutschen Geschichte," in Nipperdey, *Nachdenken über die deutsche Geschichte* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1986). For good overviews of this literature, see Richard Evans, "The Myth of Germany's Missing Revolution," in Evans (fn. 11); Gordon Martel, ed., *Modern Germany Reconsidered* (New York: Routledge, 1992), chaps. 1–3; and Geoff Eley, *From Unification to Nazism* (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1986).

¹⁵ Blackbourn and Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984). See also Eley (fn. 14); Evans (fn. 11); Robert G. Moeller, "The Kaiserreich Recast?" *Journal of Social History* 17 (Summer 1984); Roger Fletcher, "Recent Developments in German Historiography," *German Studies Review* 7 (October 1984). My concentration on Blackbourn and Eley is not meant to suggest that they were the only scholars questioning the *Sonderweg* thesis but only that they were

of Germany had been distorted by comparisons with idealized versions of English and French history. Not only had political development in these countries been much more contested and difficult and much less dependent on conscious "bourgeois revolutions" than many previous scholars had recognized, but the German bourgeoisie had in fact managed to achieve a number of important victories in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Blackbourn and Eley's revisionist work catalyzed a younger generation of German historians to reexamine not only the national politics of the Second Reich but also local politics and social phenomena. From this research, in turn, has emerged a different and more complex picture of Imperial Germany. But because historians tend to shy away from cross-regional and intertemporal comparisons, they have not seen the full implications of this new work. If we integrate recent research on the imperial era with the contemporary political science literature on political development, however, our understanding of the German case changes dramatically. No longer can the imperial era be seen as merely a footnote to centuries past or a prelude to a preordained fascist outcome. Instead, we find that Germany during this period resembles nothing so much as one of today's rapidly developing countries, experiencing industrialization and increasing mass political participation, led by authoritarian elites uncertain whether to repress, adapt, or pass from the scene. Indeed, this new picture of Imperial Germany provides us with a critical case study of just how economic and political variables are connected on the ground.

THE IMPERIAL CONSTITUTION

When the German empire emerged in 1871 out of a series of wars of unification, it faced a number of political problems, including the fact that significant groups within the Kaiserreich were less than fully content with the outcome. Many Catholics, for example, would have preferred a unified Germany that included Austria, while many Poles, Danes, and Alsatians retained strong ties to their home countries. Furthermore, several German states were suspicious of Prussia and its centralizing ambitions. Like many developing countries today, therefore, the new entity had to integrate somewhat restive and disgruntled groups into a single political unit.

particularly influential, especially among English speakers. See also Nipperdey (fn. 14, *Nachdenken*); and idem, "Wehler's Kaiserreich," in Nipperdey, *Gesellschaft, Kultur, Theorie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1976).

The brunt of the task fell primarily on the country's powerful chancellor, Otto von Bismarck. In addition to appeasing groups suspicious of the center, Bismarck recognized that he had to provide some avenues for popular participation while simultaneously placating conservative elites who wanted to hold on to their prerogatives. He therefore constructed a delicately balanced constitution, blending monarchical, democratic, and federal elements. Scholars have long debated the significance of this constitution for German political development. Some argue that the political system created in 1871 was "an autocratic semi-absolutist sham constitutionalism" that sustained a traditional absolutist regime hidden behind a more liberal facade.¹⁶ Others contend that Bismarck "made Germany a constitutional country. Not only was the franchise the widest in Europe, with the only effective secret ballot. The parliament [also] possessed every essential function. It was the seat of power."¹⁷ Although both assessments capture important aspects of the German political system, they oversimplify its nature and implications. Perhaps Carl Schmitt captured its essence best in describing the new constitution as a "dilatory compromise between monarchism and parliamentarism."¹⁸ Today we might characterize the system as "soft authoritarian," since it featured a mixture of an insulated executive, limited popular participation, and an economic model that allowed for a strong state. Because the Bismarckian system provided the context within which German political development unfolded, it is worth sketching out its most important features.

Imperial Germany was composed of twenty-five states of varying sizes and political leanings that were represented at the national level in the Bundesrat. Many matters affecting the everyday lives of German citizens—including education, police, and health—were left to state and local governments. Perhaps the most important power reserved for the states (at least originally) was the right to levy direct taxes. The national government relied on tariffs, fees from postal and telegraph services, and whatever indirect taxes on consumption could be agreed upon by the legislature. As we will see, this limited the ability of the national government to grow and perform the functions associated with a powerful industrialized nation and became an important source of political and social conflict in the early twentieth century.

¹⁶ Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *The German Empire, 1871–1918* (New York: Berg Publishers, 1985), 55.

¹⁷ A. J. P. Taylor, *Bismarck: The Man and the Statesman* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), 98.

¹⁸ Schmitt, *Staatsgefüge und Zusammenbruch des Zweiten Reiches* (1934), quoted in Dieter Grosser, *Vom monarchischen Konstitutionalismus zur parlamentarischen Demokratie* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1970), 3.

At the national level the government featured an executive branch (including the kaiser, his chancellor, and their staffs), a federal council composed of delegations from the states (the Bundesrat), and a national parliament (the Reichstag). The kaiser was given sole control over foreign policy. He was the supreme commander of the military and the ultimate war-making authority. His power was enhanced by the fact that he was also the king of Prussia, the largest and most powerful German state. In the domestic sphere, however, executive authority was more circumscribed, since bills required the assent of both the Bundesrat and the Reichstag in order to pass into law. In case of a legislative deadlock, the kaiser could dissolve the Reichstag in hopes of gaining a more compliant majority later on. But he could not dissolve it permanently and was required to set a date for new elections upon its dissolution. The kaiser's influence over the German political system was not direct, moreover, but rather was exerted through a chancellor. The chancellor was ultimately dependent on the kaiser, who could appoint and dismiss him, yet he was rarely a mere puppet and in fact often managed the everyday affairs of state. During Bismarck's twenty-eight-year tenure, for example, he was without question the key figure shaping the country's course both at home and abroad.

Of the two legislative bodies created by the constitution, one had a distinctly conservative tinge and the other was more representative. The upper house, the Bundesrat, was composed of delegations from the states, elected on the basis of local suffrage systems that ranged from relatively liberal in the southern and southwestern states to highly undemocratic in Prussia. Since Prussia controlled seventeen of the Bundesrat's fifty-eight votes, the result was that the conservative Prussian elite could essentially block proposed national legislation that ran contrary to its interests.¹⁹ Meanwhile, the lower house, the Reichstag, was elected by universal manhood suffrage and was granted important powers that remained largely unexploited, at least initially. Its assent was required for all legislation (including all budgets, even those for the military), and it could amend, delay, or defeat any bill it disliked. The Reichstag could not select or dismiss the chancellor, but it could force him to explain and justify his policies and actions, criticize him freely, and refuse to cooperate with him. Even Bismarck, a master at manipulating the Reichstag and its parties, soon realized that he could not rule

¹⁹ On Prussia and federalism, see Manfred Rauh, *Föderalismus und Parlamentarismus im Wilhelminischen Reich* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1973); Elmar M. Hucko, ed., *The Democratic Tradition: Four German Constitutions* (New York: Berg, 1987), 29–30; and Nipperdey, "Der Föderalismus in der deutschen Geschichte," in Nipperdey (fn. 14, *Nachdenken*).

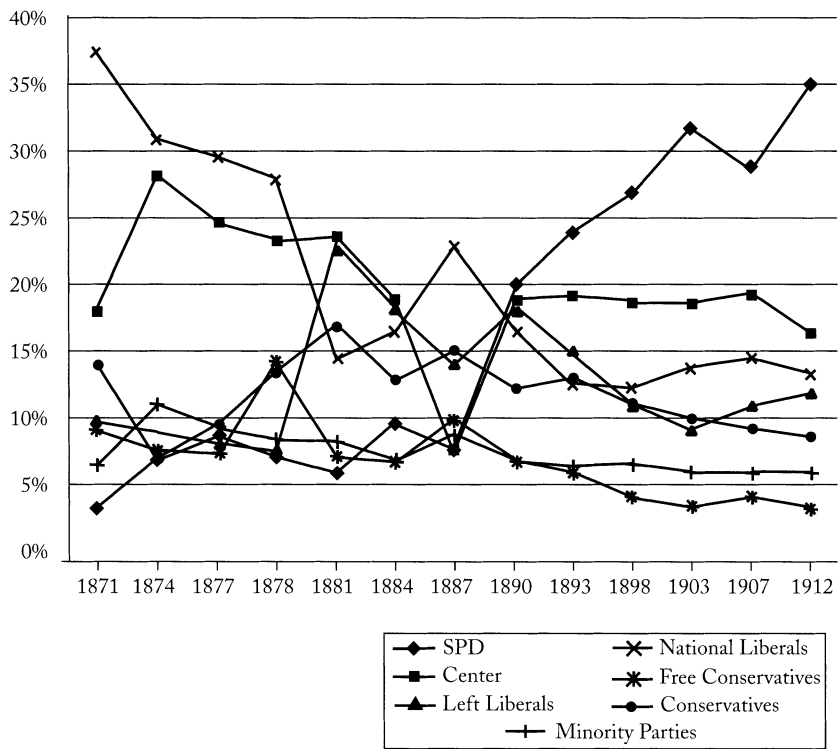


FIGURE 1
REICHSTAG ELECTIONS

without it. During the Iron Chancellor’s tenure in office, observers have noted, “almost all the significant pieces of legislation that were enacted . . . [were] modified by varying constellations of votes in Parliament, sometimes to such an extent that the original intentions of Bismarck and his colleagues were no longer recognizable.”²⁰

Much to Bismarck’s chagrin, it was clear almost from the outset that the system he had designed would not work as he had hoped. He had counted on having a free hand politically, thanks to support from a stable conservative coalition built around the Junkers and other sectors of the upper and middle classes; he had also assumed that “nine tenths of the people [would be] loyal to the King” and thus act as a conservative force.²¹ Over time, however, both assumptions proved incorrect. The

²⁰ Wolfgang Mommsen, *Imperial Germany, 1867–1918* (London: Arnold Publishing, 1995), 199; and John Snell, *The Democratic Movement in Germany, 1789–1914* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1976).
²¹ In 1866 Bismarck argued that “in a country with monarchist traditions and a loyal mentality universal suffrage, by removing the influence of the liberal bourgeoisie, will result in monarchical

TABLE 1
REICHSTAG ELECTION RESULTS^a
(% OF TOTAL)

	1871	1874	1877	1878	1881	1884	1887	1890	1893	1898	1903	1907	1912
SPD	3.2	6.8	9.1	7.5	6.1	9.7	7.1	19.7	23.3	27.1	31.7	28.9	35
Center	18.6	27.8	24.8	23.1	23.2	22.6	7.1	18.6	19.0	18.8	18.8	19.4	16.4
Left													
Liberals	9.3	9.0	8.5	7.8	23.1	19.3	14.1	18	14.8	11.1	9.2	11	12.3
National													
Liberals	37.2	30.7	29.7	28.5	14.6	17.6	22.3	16.3	13	12.5	13.9	14.5	13.6
Free													
Conservatives	8.9	7.2	8	13.6	7.4	6.8	9.8	6.7	5.7	4.4	3.5	4.2	3
Conservatives	14.1	6.9	9.7	13	16.3	15.2	15.2	12.4	13.5	11.1	9.9	9.4	9.2
Minority													
Parties	6.6	10.5	9.6	8.7	8.3	8.5	7.6	6.6	6	6	5.8	5.8	5.8

^aNumbers do not add up to 100 due to small splinter parties.

growing working class increasingly threw its support to the social democrats (SPD), while economic development began to drive a wedge between business and agricultural interests and hence between liberals and conservatives. Bismarck therefore had to resort to various ploys to hold a progovernment alliance together.

He first launched a *Kulturkampf* against “enemies of the Reich,” groups against which a conservative coalition could be mobilized. But discriminatory legislation and practices against socialists and Catholics (as well as against smaller groups such as Jews and Poles) did not achieve the intended results. The SPD in particular emerged from the antisocialist laws stronger than before. Government repression meant that “the workers had more reason than ever to view the socialists as their true defenders,”²² and between the 1887 and 1890 elections the party’s share of the vote almost tripled (see Figure 1 and Table 1). Repression also forced a number of critical changes in the Catholic Zentrum. As Catholics recognized their vulnerability, they increased their rates of political participation and activity and strengthened and modernized the Zentrum’s organizational infrastructure. Furthermore, attacks on Catholics pushed the Zentrum into defending voting, the

elections, just as anarchism is the outcome of elections in countries where the masses harbour revolutionary sentiments. However, in Prussia, nine-tenths of the people are loyal to the King; it is only through the artificial mechanism of a [restricted] suffrage that they are being prevented from expressing their opinions.” Quoted in Hucko (fn. 19), 33–34. See also Klaus Erich Pollman, *Parlamentarismus in Norddeutschen Bund, 1867–1870* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1985).

²² Vernon Lidtke, *The Outlawed Party: Social Democracy in Germany, 1878–1890* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), 81.

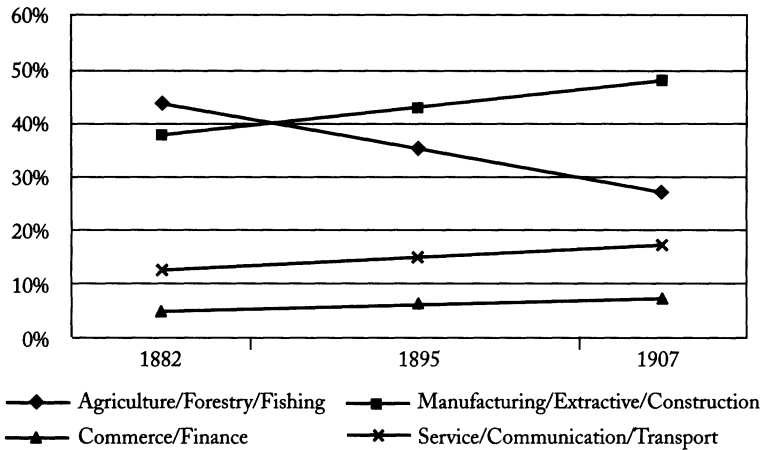


FIGURE 2
SHARE OF EMPLOYMENT BY SECTOR

“common man,” and parliamentary principles. “In defending [themselves] against the charges of clerical influence, the Zentrum’s deputies found themselves pushed into a championship of the ordinary voter and his franchise.” The Zentrum began to emphasize “the people,’ a Volk . . . whose homespun virtues . . . qualified them for the responsibility of the franchise.”²³ Hence, both the antisocialist laws and the *Kulturkampf* ended up strengthening rather than weakening the very forces that Bismarck had viewed as threats to his system.

A second ploy was Bismarck’s (in)famous policy of “iron and rye,” his attempt to lock in a coalition between the Junker elite and segments of heavy industry by providing protective tariffs for each. Yet this policy too was not entirely successful over the long term, since the inexorable realities of economic development gradually undermined its logic. By the end of the nineteenth century it was becoming increasingly clear that agriculture’s share of the German economy was in secular decline whereas the industrial, commercial, and service sectors were growing steadily. Not surprisingly, the latter grew increasingly frustrated at having to endure sacrifices in order to protect the Junkers’ economic and political prerogatives. (See Figure 2.)

²³ Anderson (fn. 13), 86. See also idem, “Piety and Politics: Recent Work on German Catholics,” *Journal of Modern History* 63 (December 1991); idem, *Windthorst: A Political Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981); Ronald Ross, “Enforcing the Kulturkampf in the Bismarckian State and the Limits of Coercion in Imperial Germany,” *Journal of Modern History* 56 (September 1984); and Jonathan Sperber, *Popular Catholicism in Nineteenth Century Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

One way out of the political impasse would have been for Bismarck to pull off what today would be called an “autogolpe” (*Staatsstreich*, in the German parlance)—using his powers and the support of the army to revise the constitution and strengthen the chancellorship while eviscerating the Reichstag. He toyed with the idea but ultimately rejected it.²⁴ Another way out would have been to allow Germany’s rising middle and perhaps even working classes a greater say in the system, accepting a shift in power toward the Reichstag and gradual parliamentarization.²⁵ This would have required, however, not only the emergence of a powerful and stable coalition pressing for such changes but also the defeat or acquiescence of conservative elites. As neither occurred, the regime stumbled on unchanged. But in the years after Bismarck’s 1890 dismissal, Germany’s continued socioeconomic development helped push the political system ever closer to its breaking point.

ELECTIONS AND PARTIES IN IMPERIAL GERMANY

National elections were a key indicator of the political participation that economic development helped produce. Indeed, with regard to elections alone, Germany was more advanced than either England or the United States at the time²⁶—though the fact that Imperial Germany had universal male suffrage and relatively free and fair elections still comes as a surprise to many. The difference between Germany and the Anglo-Saxon countries came not in the elections themselves but in the mechanisms that effectively insulated the German government from the results of those elections. In retrospect, the extent to which Germans voted seems remarkable. (See Figure 3.) As one scholar notes, “It was an extraordinary feat, but Wilhelmine Germany was on its way to making nonvoting unusual. In 1871, 52 percent of those eligible

²⁴ For cites on Bismarck’s calculations, see Anderson (fn. 13), 246 n. 22; but see also Michael Stürmer, ed., *Bismarck und die preussisch-deutsche Politik, 1871–1890* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch, 1970); and idem, “Staatsstreichgedanken im Bismarckreich,” *Historische Zeitschrift* 209 (December 1969).

²⁵ On the troubles of the Bismarckian system and the debate over different political options, see John Breuilly, *Labour and Liberalism in Nineteenth Century Europe* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992); Geoff Eley, *Reshaping the German Right* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991); Volker Berghahn, *Imperial Germany, 1871–1914* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1994); J. C. G. Rohl, *Germany without Bismarck* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967); Mommsen (fn. 20); Snell (fn. 20); Rauh (fn. 19).

²⁶ In England property restrictions disenfranchised at least one-third of all male voters, while in the United States voluntary registration lowered turnout and most African Americans were effectively barred from meaningful political participation. For a discussion of voting requirements in Germany and comparisons with other countries, see Stanley Suval, *Electoral Politics in Wilhelmine Germany* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985); and Jonathan Sperber, *The Kaiser’s Voters* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

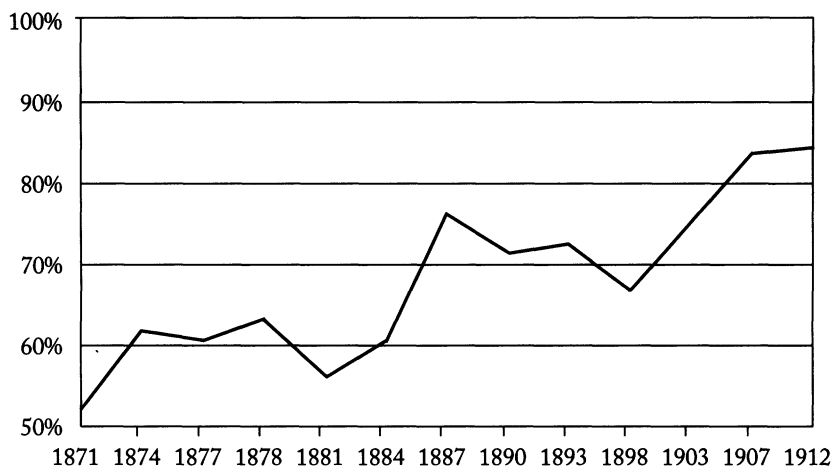


FIGURE 3
TURNOUT IN REICHSTAG ELECTIONS

voted. In both 1907 and 1912, the last two imperial elections, the figure was about 85 percent.” Furthermore,

massive turnouts substantially reduced, if not eliminated the different rates of voting due to class, status, occupation, urbanization and region or residence. Moreover, the higher turnout rates were matched by corresponding rises in the more intensive forms of participation that required a greater expenditure of time, money and energy. There was a substantial increase in the membership of political and parapolitical organizations, in the distribution of printed campaign materials, in campaign activities of all kinds, including rallies and personal solicitations, in the numbers of party workers active on election day, and in the amounts of individual contributions to parties and candidates.²⁷

Other indicators of political participation, including membership in political parties and civil society organizations, also rose to very high levels. Some scholars discount Imperial Germany’s high rates of voting since the fate of the chancellor was not directly dependent upon it.²⁸ Yet if elections had truly been seen as meaningless, then German citizens would not have bothered to participate in such droves. And if governments could ignore popular will with impunity, they would hardly have spent increasing time and effort trying to influence the outcome of the voting.

[The] increasing involvement of governments manifested itself in the choosing of candidates, the distribution of campaign funds and propaganda materials. Yet

²⁷ Suval (fn. 26), 21, 17.

²⁸ Dahrendorf (fn. 14); and Wehler (fn. 16).

the government also remained the chief protection for the freedom of the vote and the ability to campaign. In that curious *Wilhelmine* mix, voting was one of the most sheltered areas in the *Rechtsstaat*, where laws took precedence over the whims of man. Even at the height of the anti-Socialist policies between 1878 and 1890, socialist candidates were allowed to campaign relatively freely. After 1890, the government routinely protected freedom of speech during elections and effectively supervised a permanent registration system and an honest count.²⁹

By the last decade of the century Bismarck had been dismissed, the antisocialist laws and the *Kulturkampf* were history, and political participation was growing and expanding into new areas. Campaigns and elections also contributed to a growing “nationalization” of the German electorate: many political parties developed national-level organizations, support for separatist parties representing national minorities began to drop as their constituents moved into more mainstream parties, and voters began to shift from voting on the basis of region, ethnicity, and even to some extent religion (still Germany’s most powerful electoral cleavage) toward voting based on socioeconomic conflicts³⁰—a pattern characteristic of many other developing, industrializing societies.³¹ In general, particularism and regionalism decreased and national-level government and institutions increased in importance during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.³²

During this period, furthermore, the Germany party system underwent profound changes, as the more modern Catholic and socialist parties gained ground at the expense of their liberal and conservative rivals. As the SPD was permitted to compete more freely, its impressive organization combined with the growth in its natural constituency produced by Germany’s continued economic development improved its fortunes throughout the imperial era; indeed with only one exception its share of the vote increased in every German election between 1890 and 1912. (See Figure 1 and Table 1.) Taking a page from the SPD, meanwhile, during the 1890s the Zentrum began to spin off a wide range of ancillary organizations designed to “immunise Catholics

²⁹ Suval (fn. 26), 11.

³⁰ Brett Fairbairn, “Interpreting Wilhelmine Elections: National Issues, Fairness Issues, and Electoral Mobilization,” in Larry Eugene Jones and James Retallack, *Elections, Mass Politics and Social Change in Modern Germany* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 25; David Blackbourn, *Class, Religion and Local Politics in Wilhelmine Germany* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), esp. 9ff.; Brett Fairbairn, *Democracy in the Undemocratic State: The German Reichstag Elections of 1898 and 1903* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997); Sperber (fn. 26), esp. 76ff.; and Suval (fn. 26).

³¹ See, for example, the classic article by Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan, “Cleavage Structures, Party Systems, and Voter Alignments,” in Lipset and Rokkan, eds., *Party Systems and Voter Alignments* (New York: Free Press, 1967).

³² Nipperdey (fn. 19).

against 'materialism' in general and the blandishments of proletarian, petty-bourgeois and agrarian 'sectional' interests in particular. This institutional and organizational density, in fact, became a hallmark of the Zentrum as much as of the SPD."³³ In addition, the party leadership began to change, as some of the clergy and old notables were gradually pushed aside in order to make room for a more secular and professional leadership.³⁴ This was in keeping with a general trend, particularly evident within the SPD and Zentrum, toward a professionalization of the political class. Over time more and more M.P.s became full-time politicians, which served to increase their attachment to parliament and suffrage. One manifestation of this was the SPD's and Zentrum's consistent defense of parliamentary and electoral procedures.

While the SPD and Zentrum were thriving, Germany's liberal and conservative parties were floundering. As one scholar notes, "The 1890s were a disaster for the liberal parties, when their support among eligible voters declined to one-third below the level of 1887."³⁵ The liberal parties were losing their hold over their natural constituency, the Protestant middle classes, while the conservatives had trouble attracting new voters—at least partially because economic development was sending rural labor fleeing to the cities for better-paying jobs and eroding the relative power and import of the Junkers in the German economy. Development also helped to erode the everyday political power of the Junkers and other elites, while urbanization and increasing labor mobility allowed workers to gradually escape the political and social pressure that their "superiors" had long exerted over them.³⁶ (See Figure 4).

Perhaps even more important, however, was the difficulty the liberal and conservative parties had in adjusting to the age of modern mass politics. For the most part their internal organizations remained underdeveloped, their permanent political staff sparse, and their planning for modern electoral campaigns rudimentary. Not surprisingly, therefore, these parties lost voters to their better institutionalized, more modern counterparts, as well as to the rapidly growing parapolitical and civil society spheres. Indeed, it was precisely the failure of liberal and conservative parties to attract and hold on to the middle classes and peasantry that helped fuel the

³³ Blackbourn (fn. 30), 12.

³⁴ Margaret Lavinia Anderson, "The Kulturkampf and the Course of German History," *Central European History* 19 (March 1986); and idem (fn. 13), chap. 5.

³⁵ Sperber (fn. 26), 123. See also James Sheehan, *German Liberalism in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

³⁶ Estimates of the German unemployment rate at the turn of the century are as low as 2.7 percent and wages were also creeping up during this era. Such figures show just how tight the labor market was, giving German workers some flexibility.

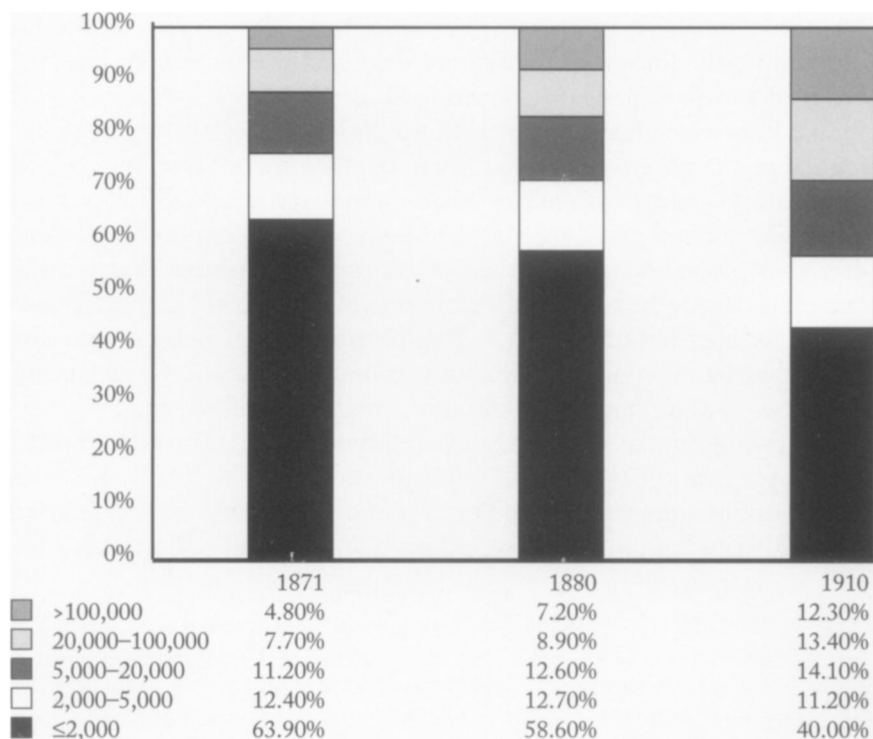


FIGURE 4
POPULATION OF COMMUNITIES BY SIZE

rapid growth of bourgeois, right-wing, and nationalist associations in Germany during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.³⁷

As a result of these trends, the Bismarckian bloc in the Reichstag suffered a relentless erosion. By the end of the nineteenth century the conservative parties (Free Conservatives and Conservatives) and the National Liberals could no longer command a national majority: their share of seats in the Reichstag peaked at 34 percent in 1890 and declined steadily thereafter. This meant that the government needed a new partner in order to pass its bills. It considered both the SPD and the Left Liberals unacceptable, because both would demand significant changes in the existing system. This left the Zentrum the only remaining major party, and so the Catholic party was duly integrated, albeit

³⁷ Among the best discussions of this development is Eley (fn. 25). For an analysis of the implications of this phenomenon, see Sheri Berman, "Civil Society and the Collapse of the Weimar Republic," *World Politics* 49 (April 1997).

somewhat uneasily, into a new governing bloc³⁸—a sign of how far Germany had come since the days of the *Kulturkampf* (and of how the government's pragmatism now trumped its prejudices).

To address its vulnerability within the Reichstag and among the public at large, the government also turned to a strategy of *Sammlungspolitik*, the "politics of rallying together," that emphasized nationalist and social imperialist themes. This approach, though partly successful for a while, ultimately proved no cure for the system's structural problems. Electoral studies, for example, reveal that "German voters were not aroused by social-imperialist nationalism. . . . The parties they supported were the anti-militarist SPD and the sometimes-populist Catholic Center party, which posed as an honest broker and a moderator of government policies."³⁹ Paying for rising military expenditures in particular created difficulties for the government, because only the National Liberals unequivocally supported them. The parties of the left vigorously opposed increased spending on the army and navy, and even the Zentrum

took pains to show itself, not as the party instrumental in improving the fleet, but rather as the party that had forced the government to scale down its excessive projects. As the national election platform put it, the Center stood for "prudent thrift in all areas of the Reich budget, particularly with the army and navy." . . . The "important principle" in relation to the fleet was that new taxes not rest "on the consumption of the broad masses . . . on the shoulders of the weak."⁴⁰

In fact, even conservatives were hesitant on this issue since they feared, correctly, that any increases in government spending would raise questions about taxation and the financial prerogatives they enjoyed under the current system.

By the 1890s, therefore, the situation facing the government and the ruling elite was growing increasingly problematic. The "outsider" parties—the SPD and the Zentrum—had become modern and highly institutionalized, with impressive voter and membership bases. The traditional government parties, by contrast—the conservatives and National Liberals—were in decline, having proved unwilling or unable to adjust their organizations and messages to meet the demands of a new era. Furthermore, Germany's citizens were becoming more active and better informed, while many of the government's policies—in particu-

³⁸ On conflicts within this new progovernment bloc, see Snell (fn. 20), esp. 173ff.; and Fairbairn (fn. 30, 1997), 62.

³⁹ Fairbairn (fn. 30, 1997), xi; Fairbairn (fn. 30, 1992). But see also Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Bismarck und der Imperialismus* (Berlin: Kippenheuer und Witsch, 1969).

⁴⁰ Fairbairn (fn. 30, 1997), 62; and Margaret Lavinia Anderson, "Voter, Junker, Landrat, Priest: The Old Authorities and the New Franchise in Imperial Germany," *American Historical Review* 98 (December 1993).

lar, rising military expenditures and the budgetary strains they were helping to create—were deepening societal divisions and making the country more difficult to govern.

THE STALEMATE OF THE GERMAN POLITICAL SYSTEM

Over the course of the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth, tensions within the German political system were growing as labor conflict increased and conservatives feared the worst. Rather than pushing political development backward, however, these tensions propelled it forward. As rumors of a possible *Staatsstreich* spread during the 1890s, important segments of the middle classes rallied against regressive constitutional revisions in general and further antisocialist legislation in particular. In 1895 a sedition bill (*Umsturzvorlage*) that would have made it possible to prosecute those hostile to the existing order was squashed, as was a “Little Socialist Law” in 1897. The government refrained from embarking on a *Staatsstreich*, however, because

the adventurism and illegality implied in such plans were abhorrent to all those who conceived of themselves as sensible men. Here is the reaction of the Prussian cabinet, reported by General von Waldersee, a principal figure in the intrigues, when William II opened his mind to them about a possible *Staatsstreich*: “You should have just seen the faces of the gentlemen: I thought they would sink to the earth.” No clear-headed, responsible minister, however dissatisfied with the existing state of affairs, could have been pleased at the idea of discarding legal procedures and turning decision-making powers over to a cabal beholden only to “William the Sudden.” Energetic opposition was also expressed by the governments of the federated states, whose cooperation would have been essential for any such venture. Even the Conservative deputies, when sounded out, opposed a departure from constitutional paths.⁴¹

Instead of a crackdown, a number of reforms championed by the social democrats and the Zentrum were passed. These reforms protecting the secrecy of the ballot and the sanctity of elections, along with the increasing mobilization of voters—particularly those cool to the government—forced the chancellor to campaign actively to try to win over public opinion. This represented, it has been noted, “a giant step toward legitimizing the breakdown of that constitutional dualism that had isolated the executive from the consequences of elections and that kept the Reichstag sealed as a conduit to executive power.”⁴²

⁴¹ Anderson (fn. 13), 247–48.

⁴² Ibid., 256–57.

Wilhelm II's erratic and irresponsible behavior during these years raised questions about the viability of personalistic rule in a modern state. In 1897 the editor of the Catholic *Kölnische Volkszeitung* had argued in vain that "everyone now realizes that the Kaiser's personality and intervention lie at the root of our present crisis. . . . Someone in the Reichstag should say very plainly indeed how perturbed the people are at this excess of imperial initiative; how urgently they desire that the monarch take more notice of the *realities of political life* and especially of the intelligence of the people."⁴³ By the 1908 *Daily Telegraph* affair, however, Wilhelm's foibles could no longer be brushed aside. When his off-the-cuff remarks on foreign policy caused a full-fledged domestic crisis and strong Reichstag condemnation, even Chancellor Bülow had to insist that he refrain from further pronouncements, and Wilhelm had to release a statement saying that in the future he would "ensure the stability of Imperial policy by respecting his constitutional obligations."⁴⁴

The next year a budget crisis exposed other weaknesses in the system. With the growth of the national government and especially military spending, the Reich increasingly found itself short of funds.⁴⁵ (As noted above, the national government originally had limited means of raising revenue.) To raise some money, therefore, in 1909 Chancellor Bernhard von Bülow proposed a substantial tax increase, including the introduction of an inheritance tax. Conservatives firmly rejected such an idea: with a democratically elected Reichstag, they argued, the move would be a slippery slope threatening all private property. They were also opposed to direct taxation in general, since they feared that a shift away from indirect taxes (hitherto the norm for the national government) would increase pressures for more popular say in policy-making. Defying the government's wishes and their liberal allies, therefore, the conservatives refused to support the bill and joined with the Zentrum to put forward alternative legislation based on indirect taxes on mass-consumption items and business-related expenses—which of course only emphasized the divergence of interests between conservatives and middle- and working-class groups.

The Conservatives claimed that the taxes they passed against Bülow's wishes were fair and provided the necessary added revenue. The liberals claimed with

⁴³ Quoted in J. C. G. Röhl, *Germany without Bismarck* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 216.

⁴⁴ Arthur Rosenberg, *Imperial Germany: The Birth of the German Republic, 1871–1918* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 52–53.

⁴⁵ On the increasing role of the national government, see Nipperdey, *Deutsche Geschichte, 1866–1918*, vol. 2 (Munich: Beck, 1992), sec. 4.

more justification that the Conservatives had refused any significant self-sacrifice for the national good because they had defeated an inheritance tax on estates; instead, the Junkers had placed the increased fiscal burden of indirect taxation on the shoulders of less prosperous consumers. Thus the finance reform of 1909 came to symbolize the refusal of Germany's aristocracy to recognize and accept the consequences of economic decline.⁴⁶

With his tax plan rejected, Bülow resigned and was replaced by Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg. Reflecting upon the unfolding events, the Bavarian ambassador Lerchenfeld wrote: "I am witnessing my fourth chancellor crisis. . . . Three crises came from above, this one from below. We have come one step closer to a parliamentary regime in Germany."⁴⁷

A step, to be sure, but only one. It was still the kaiser and his advisers, and not the Reichstag parties, who chose the new chancellor. Nonetheless, the tax crisis seemed to augur an important political realignment. The National Liberals found themselves estranged from their erstwhile conservative allies and increasingly aware that the interests of agrarian and industrial groups were becoming ever more difficult to reconcile. They were also forced to recognize that they had at least some important overlapping interests with the Progressive People's Party (essentially the old left liberals) and the SPD. This, in turn, raised the specter of the conservatives' and government's worst nightmare: the feared "Grand Bloc," a majority coalition that would stretch from the SPD on the left to the National Liberals on the center right.⁴⁸

Desperately seeking to avoid pushing the Grand Bloc parties closer together, Bethmann-Hollweg sought conservative acceptance of some direct taxation while simultaneously trying to placate the left with some social legislation and political reform. But the conservatives remained intransigent, refusing to budge on taxation and also rejecting the chan-

⁴⁶ James Retallack, "The Road to Philippi," in Larry Eugene Jones and James Retallack, *Between Reform, Reaction and Resistance: Studies in the History of German Conservatism from 1789 to 1945* (Providence, R.I.: Berg, 1993). On the finance controversy more generally, see P.-C. Witt, *Die Finanzpolitik des deutschen Reiches von 1903 bis 1913* (Hamburg: Matthiesen, 1970); Katharine Lerman, *The Chancellor as Courtier: Bernhard von Bülow and the Governance of Germany, 1900-1909* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Sperber (fn. 26), 255ff.; Snell (fn. 20), 350ff.; Grosser (fn. 18), 8ff.; and Beverly Heckert, *From Basserman to Bebel: The Grand Bloc's Quest for Reform in the Kaiserreich, 1900-1914* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 79ff.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Rauh (fn. 19), 245. Bülow later wrote of this period that he feared that it was "the starting point of a trend that creates embittered party conflicts, brings forth unnatural party groupings, and is detrimental to the welfare of the nation." To the Conservatives he declared: "We will see each other at Philippi." Quoted in Retallack (fn. 46), 268.

⁴⁸ On the struggle and failure to put together such a coalition, see Heckert (fn. 46). Indeed such coalitions appeared in a number of the more liberal states, further increasing the apprehension of conservatives (and radicals within the SPD).

cellor's half-hearted attempt to reform the Prussian voting system in a more democratic manner. This in turn led groups on the left, including the SPD, to stage the largest demonstrations for political reform ever seen in Germany.

Bethmann recognized . . . that the franchise reform debate had widened "the chasm between Conservatives and National Liberals" and driven the latter further to the left. More pointedly he observed that the Conservatives, "with their personal, social, religious, and political hubris and intolerance . . . have succeeded in focusing everyone's disgust and dissatisfaction on the three-class suffrage, which is generally seen as an expression of Junker predominance."⁴⁹

It was against this background of political stalemate and frustration that voters went to the polls in 1912. The elections were a disaster for the government and the conservatives, as the main winners were the parties of the left, particularly the social democrats. In fact, the SPD emerged from the 1912 election as the most popular national party by far, with twice as many votes as its closest competitor.

Breaking down the numbers, the implication of forward-looking voting trends was even more important: the SPD's dominance of urban areas continued to grow (it won over 50 percent of the votes in areas with a population of one hundred thousand or more, to the conservatives' 2.2 percent) and it made some inroads into the Catholic electorate. Furthermore, the SPD ran a pragmatic campaign, focusing on issues with wide appeal, such as the inequities of the government's taxation policies, the need for democratization of the government and army, and social reforms. This pragmatism even carried over into electoral agreements with the Progressives to ensure that their candidates would not run against each other in the second round.⁵⁰ By contrast, the National Liberals and conservatives could only look upon the electoral outcome with dismay as their vote totals continued to stagnate and even decline, leaving them wondering how to deal with the rising red tide.

Yet despite the election's clear rejection of the government parties and policies and the emergence of an overwhelming, if latent, antigovernment majority, critical divisions remaining within German society hindered the formation of a progressive coalition capable of devising and pressing for a common reform agenda. The SPD refused to recognize that, as the largest party by far and the one with greatest stake in de-

⁴⁹ Retallack (fn. 46), 271.

⁵⁰ On the SPD and the 1912 election, see Berman (fn. 5), 128–30. On the election in general, see Jürgen Bertram, *Die Wahlen zum Deutschen Reichstag von Jahre 1912* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1964). On growing tensions between conservatives and liberals at the regional level, see James Retallack, "What Is to Be Done? The Red Specter, Franchise Questions, and the Crisis of Conservative Hegemony in Saxony, 1896–1909," *Central European History* 23 (December 1990).

mocratization, it would have to moderate its rhetoric and make important tactical concessions in order to be able to lead the charge for parliamentarization and full democratization.⁵¹ The Progressives, despite their alliances with the SPD, remained suspicious of the socialists (and vice versa). The Zentrum, despite an internal realignment that brought working-class leader Matthias Erzberger onto the party's executive committee, could not bring itself to explicitly join with "antireligious" parties of the left. The National Liberals were pulled in two directions by their commitment to increased military spending, on the one hand, and their recognition that the conservatives would not back the fiscal measures necessary to support it, on the other. And the conservatives grew even more intransigent in defeat. This left Bethmann-Hollweg in an extremely difficult position. As Volker Berghahn notes: "After 1912 it was not only the finances of the Reich and the Federal Government that were coming apart at the seams, but the political system in general."⁵²

The government's situation continued to worsen throughout 1913. After a dispute broke out between soldiers and civilians in the small Alsatian town of Zabern, the colonel of the local regiment gave orders to confine some of the demonstrators to the barracks for the night. Since the colonel had no jurisdiction over civilians, he was clearly overstepping his authority, and the public was enraged by this arbitrary exercise of power. A storm broke out in the Reichstag, and on December 4, 1913, the overwhelming majority of delegates joined together to pass a vote of no confidence in the government. The chancellor was still formally accountable to the kaiser alone and so had no legal obligation to resign, but the "incident neatly separated those Germans who were inflexibly hostile to any change in the status quo from those who called ever more insistently for fundamental reforms of existing political conditions."⁵³

A renewed debate on the army and finance bills only exacerbated the growing tension. Although it was clear that the government's budget targets could not be met by indirect taxation and state contributions alone, the conservatives still bitterly opposed a move to direct taxation. Bethmann came up with a compromise whereby funds would be raised through a onetime "patriotic contribution," but the conservatives balked even at this. Desperate for funding, Bethmann-Hollweg allowed his onetime contribution to be passed against their votes, with support from the Zentrum and even some social democrats. He realized, however, that if allowed to solidify further such an alliance would threaten

⁵¹ For an explanation of why the party failed to make this shift, see Berman (fn. 5), chaps. 4, 6.

⁵² Berghahn (fn. 25), 274.

⁵³ Ibid., 275.

the structure of the entire political system, and so he never repeated the move and was thus afterward unable to pass any major legislation. Bethmann-Hollweg would later write of this period: "While the storm clouds gathered ever more heavily on the world horizon, an almost inexplicable pressure weighed on the political life of Germany. . . . The word '*Reichsverdrossenheit*' [dissatisfaction with the Reich] rose up out of the darkness."⁵⁴

By 1914, therefore, Germany had clearly reached a critical juncture, quite apart from the start of the war. A soft authoritarian political system designed to safeguard the power of traditional elites simply could no longer be reconciled with the increasing middle- and working-class political participation and the demands generated by economic development. The government was becoming paralyzed and desperate, tensions between agrarian and industrial interests and between conservatives and liberals were exacerbated, popular frustration and extraparlimentary mobilization was on the rise, and the SPD—the party most opposed to the existing system—sailed from triumph to triumph. National leaders faced the same basic options as they had a generation earlier, but it was becoming increasingly difficult to put off choosing between them. On the one hand, they could opt for repression, trying to unilaterally revise the constitution with the support of the military.⁵⁵ On the other, they could slowly pull back from the conservatives and permit gradual political reforms that would eventually lead to full parliamentarization and democratization.

We will never know which of these two options would actually have prevailed, since the war intervened and stopped German political development in its tracks. Indeed, many have argued that this was exactly its intended purpose: that plunging Germany into a military conflict represented less an inevitable response to a threatening international system than a third option designed to divert the public and forestall impending domestic political change.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg, *Betrachtungen zum Weltkrieg*, vol. 1 (Berlin: R. Hubbing, 1919–21).

⁵⁵ V. R. Berghahn, *Germany and the Approach of War in 1914* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973), esp. 22ff. and 162ff.

⁵⁶ Among the most influential examples of such argumentation are Fritz Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1967); idem, *War of Illusions* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975); Eckert Kehr, *Battleship Building and Party Politics in Germany, 1894–1901* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); Gordon Craig, ed., *Economic Interest, Militarism and Foreign Policy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977); and Wehler (fn. 16). On the controversy over this thesis, see John A. Moses, *The Politics of Illusion* (London: George Prior, 1975).

For a somewhat different perspective on the endogeneity and inevitability of the war, see Janos (fn. 12, 1996).

CONCLUSIONS

A reexamination of the imperial era that combines the insights of both historians and comparative political scientists has much to offer. For historians, perhaps the most striking finding is how familiar Germany's political system and development now looks. For example, from a comparative perspective the notion that Imperial Germany was unusually repressive and autocratic is problematic. Particularly when compared with various modern regimes, Germany's authoritarianism seems soft indeed: elections were reasonably free and fair, voting was widespread, civil society was allowed to develop relatively unhindered, the level of internal political violence was comparatively low, and the rule of law was largely respected. In comparison with third-wave (rather than first-wave) cases, moreover, Imperial Germany's political and social development does not seem particularly backward or even very distinctive either. Many of the social and cultural characteristics of Imperial Germany that historians and social scientists previously identified as abnormal or pathological—a business class dependent on the state, a reactionary elite hell-bent on preserving its economic and political prerogatives, a politically conservative and powerful military, the persistence of predemocratic mentalities, and an anti-Western bias (particularly among elites)—can be found in many developing and even many newly democratic countries in Southeast Asia, Latin America, and East Asia.

Another lesson offered by a reexamination of Imperial Germany's political development is that despite all that has been written about the supposed disjuncture between its economic and political development, the two actually seem to have been linked in relatively typical and predictable ways. Throughout the late nineteenth century economic development gradually eroded the power of landowning elites (the main bulwark of the conservative status quo), increased the number and importance of business groups and middle- and working-class groups, and created tensions between the former and the latter—with important consequences for the stability of the political system. Economic development also helped create an increasingly assertive and well-informed population. But not only did Germans become more politically active during the imperial era; they also became less deferential. They began to vote against the government and the traditional ruling parties (the government parties' share of the vote fell from 57 percent in 1871 to 25 percent in 1912) and began to reject old-style elitist structures that provided few outlets for meaningful participation and influence. These are the types of trends that political scientists who study modernization in

other contexts would expect. Indeed, since the combination of popular participation, limited popular control, and economic modernization is quite common in the contemporary developing world, the consequences of this mixture in the German case—essentially, destabilization of the existing regime—should be of some interest to students of political development more generally.

In addition, new historical research combined with a broad comparative perspective on German political development leads us to question several still widely held views about the imperial era. For example, the image of the “unpolitical” German that has dominated thinking about the imperial era from Thomas Mann onward simply cannot be sustained; as discussed above, if anything, during these years Germans developed many of the habits and mores that are now thought by political scientists to augur healthy political development.⁵⁷ As Margaret Anderson has put it, beneath the relatively calm institutional surface of the imperial era Germans were “practicing democracy.” Indeed, the case seems to indicate that experience with the procedures and practices of democracy, even within the confines of soft authoritarianism, can over time help generate aspects of a democratic political culture. The German imperial experience now appears, in other words, to support the arguments of those like Dankwart Rustow who argue that democratic cultures are as much a product of, as a precondition for, democratic institutions and practices.⁵⁸

Furthermore, in light of recent historical and political science research, the *Sonderweg* view of German history looks increasingly problematic. As noted above, during much of the postwar era a view of German political development as being fatally distorted by an alleged disjuncture between economic and political development dominated much of the historical and social scientific literature. Extrapolating back from the collapse of the Weimar Republic and the rise of Nazism and with English, French, and American cases as their (often implicit) referents, students of German history argued that the country had traversed a distinctive and horribly flawed political path that led directly to its collapse into barbarism during the 1930s. Blackbourn and Eley’s *Peculiarities of German History* chipped away at many of the long-held

⁵⁷ Nipperdey has an interesting analysis of this point, using the work of Heinrich rather than Thomas Mann as his starting point. “War die Wilhelminische Gesellschaft eine Untertanen-Gesellschaft,” in Nipperdey (fn. 14, *Nachdenken*).

⁵⁸ Rustow, “Transitions to Democracy: Toward a Dynamic Model,” *Comparative Politics* 2 (April 1970). Anderson (fn. 13), in fact, makes excellent use of the work of Rustow and other comparative political scientists in her analysis of the imperial era.

tenets of this *Sonderweg* “school,” and recent research has revealed a much more dynamic and complex side to the imperial era. But because historians tend to resist broad cross-regional and intertemporal comparisons, the full implications of this research have remained unexplored. However, once the new picture of the imperial era is combined with what we now know about the nature and problems of late-twentieth-century democratizers, many claims of German uniqueness or distinctiveness become very difficult to defend. In fact, to many students of the third wave, the trajectory of pre-1914 Germany probably looks much more familiar than do the paths traversed by the supposedly paradigmatic English, French, and American cases. The insights and research of contemporary political science can therefore offer a counterweight to the overly negative and teleological view of German history presented in much of the earlier literature.

Political scientists also have other reasons for finding the new picture of Imperial Germany interesting. For one thing, the old, distorted picture had been a critical reference point for earlier theoretical discussions—as a powerful example of how a country could undergo impressive economic modernization without experiencing concomitant political and social modernization. But this view is no longer tenable, and in fact the new picture provides strong support for a more moderate version of modernization theory that seems to be gaining acceptance. The case shows that “economic development, cultural change and political change are linked in coherent and even, to some extent, predictable patterns”⁵⁹ and that even during an era when democracy was the exception and not the rule, and even in a country with no previous democratic experience, an authoritarian regime will have a great deal of trouble controlling an increasingly prosperous, educated, and well-informed population over the long run.

The case also seems to indicate that the softer an authoritarian system is, the greater the difficulty it might have in maintaining its grip on power, particularly once pressures start to build. Many contemporary authoritarian regimes have left open some avenues of political participation as they seek a veneer of legitimacy and/or to placate public opinion at home or abroad. The case of Imperial Germany shows that citizens, *especially* those in relatively highly developed societies, are likely to exploit such avenues of participation to their fullest and put conservative elites under increasing pressure over time. For example, in Serbia and Iran, Zimbabwe and Peru, even flawed elections have re-

⁵⁹ See Inglehart (fn. 10).

cently allowed rising popular discontent to erode and in some cases topple authoritarian elites.

As with many contemporary transitional countries, however, within Imperial Germany not all trends pointed in a positive direction. At the same time that the public was becoming more demanding and politically active, for example, the government and conservative elites proved unable or unwilling to adjust to changing realities. As a result, the state grew increasingly estranged from ever larger sections of society,⁶⁰ while the failure of liberal and conservative parties to adapt to an era of mass politics left much of their potential constituency, particularly rural and middle-class groups, searching for other ways to satisfy their aspirations—which they often found in the growing number of parapolitical and civil society organizations that sprang up to appeal to the disaffected.⁶¹ As Samuel Huntington argued, societies with highly active and mobilized publics that lack strong political institutions to channel and respond to demands often find themselves on a path to instability, disorder, and even violence.⁶² In retrospect, it is not surprising that the groups left high and dry by the liberals and conservatives at the turn of the century provided a disproportionate share of the vote for the Nazis a generation later.

It remains true, of course, that even though the Bismarckian coalition ran into problems early on and opposition parties eventually recognized some overlapping interests, full democratization did not occur in Germany before the First World War. The imperial constitution might indeed have been a “dilatory compromise” between the forces of change and reaction, but it lasted almost half a century without its basic contradictions ever being resolved. Another lesson emerging from the German case, therefore, is that although pressures resulting from economic development will increasingly strain authoritarian regimes, full transitions to democracy require both structure *and* agency. In contrast to the picture painted by an earlier generation of scholars, it now seems that the tragic failure of democracy in Germany cannot be reduced to the absence of the “correct” prerequisites. Indeed, as this article has pointed out, economic development did create many of the prerequisites or structural preconditions that are often seen as auguring democratization: conservative elites were weakened; business, middle, and

⁶⁰ For a theoretical and comparative analysis of this issue, see Joel Migdal, Atul Kohli, and Vivienne Shue, eds., *State Power and Social Forces* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

⁶¹ Berman (fn. 37); and idem, “Civil Society and Political Institutionalization,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 40 (March–April 1997).

⁶² Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968).

working classes were strengthened; and individuals became more politically active and aware. Yet without actors willing and able to spearhead dramatic political change, the preconditions alone were not enough. The ball was there, one might say, but no one ran with it.⁶³ In particular, Germany's center and left political parties remained divided and unwilling to accept the compromises and responsibilities that forcing a regime shift would have entailed.⁶⁴ The SPD remained hesitant and unsure of its role in German society; the liberal (particularly left liberal) parties were suspicious of the SPD (and vice versa) and had in any case grown weaker over time; and the Zentrum, despite its commitment to universal suffrage and parliamentary integrity, had trouble aligning itself explicitly with those who had long criticized its religious nature and practices. Although these parties did eventually come together at the end of the First World War to lead Germany's transition to democracy, they were unable to overcome their differences until the system was already collapsing.

In the wake of the third wave, it has been noted, "the manner in which theorists of comparative politics have sought to understand democracy has changed as the once-dominant search for prerequisites of democracy has given way to a more process-oriented emphasis on contingent choice."⁶⁵ Yet rather than think of structural factors and political agency as competing explanations for a single dependent variable of "democratization," the case of Imperial Germany confirms that both should be viewed as factors in a two-stage story of political development. Structural developments may be necessary to create an environment favorable to democratization and eventual consolidation, but unless powerful and determined local actors step up to lead the way,

⁶³ About 1910 the leader of the conservatives was purported to have told a left-liberal parliamentarian: "The future does indeed belong to you, the mass will assert itself and deprive the aristocrats of their influence. A strong statesman may stem this tide, but only for awhile. We will not, however, abandon our position at our own free will. Nevertheless, if you force us to, then you will have what you want." Retallack (fn. 46), citing a passage in H. Pachnicke, *Führende Männer im alten und im neuen Reich* (Berlin, 1930), 296 fn. 100. See also Nipperdey (fn. 57), 184.

⁶⁴ Some might argue that this was itself a consequence of structural factors—that the forces in Germany one would expect to have pushed for further liberalization were unable or uninterested in doing so because their actions and preferences were themselves conditioned by the historical, social, and political context within which they operated. Devising appropriate methodological tests for such reflexive hypotheses is extremely difficult. Nevertheless, as this article has tried to argue, current understandings of Imperial Germany emphasize not the strength and constraining effect of the historical context but rather its fluidity and development over time. Moreover, dramatic examples of successful political reform elsewhere driven by actors operating under similar structural constraints further suggest that for the SPD and other German progressives, the fault lay to a large extent not in the stars but in themselves. See Berman (fn. 5).

⁶⁵ Terry Lynn Karl, "Dilemmas of Democratization in Latin America," *Comparative Politics* 23 (October 1990), 1.

even weakened authoritarian regimes may find themselves with an extended lease on life.

EPILOGUE: ALTERNATIVE FUTURES FOR GERMANY

Is it possible to go beyond the analysis above to get at some sense of what the prospects for the full democratization of Imperial Germany would have been had the war not broken out when it did? Perhaps. Counterfactuals are risky business, but applied carefully they can help assess how political outcomes would be different if a particular variable (or set of variables) were removed from the picture, thereby helping to evaluate the validity of different causal hypotheses.⁶⁶ As mentioned above, by the 1910s the social and political changes caused by economic development had brought Germany's political system to a critical juncture. Within a relatively short period of time, the evidence suggests, the political system would have to move in one of two directions: either gradually "decompress" and democratize (following the path of, say, Mexico today or Brazil in the 1970s, another soft authoritarian political regime with a powerful military), or experience some kind of "auto-golpe" or Tiananmen Square-style crackdown.⁶⁷ Although it is impossible to say with certainty which would have happened, from a comparative perspective, the evidence suggests that the first outcome appears to be much more likely than most German historians have been ready to admit. When the political system seemed to have reached a similar critical juncture during the 1890s, the government considered a crackdown and rejected it; following twenty-five additional years of modernization a *Staatsstreich* would have been even more problematic.

The more developed a society, research shows, the less likely are coups to be attempted—and if attempted, the less likely they are to succeed.⁶⁸ The reasons for this are clear: in an economically advanced country where citizens are politically active, educated, and well informed, the costs of such an attempt (and of its potential failure) are very high. By 1914 Germans were highly mobilized, the SPD was at the peak of its power, discontent with the government was widespread, and

⁶⁶ James D. Fearon, "Counterfactuals and Hypothesis Testing in Political Science," *World Politics* 43 (January 1991); Philip E. Tetlock and Aaron Belkin, eds., *Counterfactual Thought Experiments in World Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Robert Cowley, ed., *What If? The World's Foremost Military Historians Imagine What Might Have Been* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1999); and Niall Ferguson, *Virtual History* (London: Picador, 1997).

⁶⁷ For a remarkable behind-the-scenes glimpse of how authoritarian elites grapple with such questions, see "The Tiananmen Papers," *Foreign Affairs* 80 (January–February 2001).

⁶⁸ Adam Przeworski and Fernando Limongi, "Modernization: Theories and Facts," *World Politics* 49 (January 1997).

the conservatives were increasingly isolated. Any attempt at an authoritarian revision of the constitution in such a context would probably have called forth an immense popular reaction (not only by workers), thereby potentially requiring a significant amount of political violence; it also might have even raised questions about the willingness of the Reich's constituent states to follow Prussia's lead. Failure would almost certainly have put on the agenda not only parliamentarization and democratization but republicanism as well, and it would have damaged the chances for the kaiser and conservative elites to guarantee special protections for themselves under a new order. Given all this, it is doubtful that the kaiser or many conservatives would have been willing to take such a gamble.

The wild card here, of course, was the international situation. Imperial Germany was a great power in a highly competitive multipolar international system where war was considered a relatively normal act, and some contend that this gave German elites a third option—starting a diversionary conflict to forestall demands for political change. Whether or not the kaiser and conservative elites took their country to war as a way out of their domestic dilemma remains hotly disputed.⁶⁹ One can say at the least that they were less likely to oppose war once it seemed imminent, since the conflict could be seen to offer domestic benefits as well as geopolitical ones. Here, too, the German case may have important lessons for contemporary scholars and policymakers: one way an authoritarian regime might try to forestall political change is by creating (or at least not actively working to prevent) a diversionary international conflict. One contemporary case that does bear some similarity to Imperial Germany in its international power position is the People's Republic of China. To the extent that such similarities exist, the conundrum would thus be how to foster continued economic development and modernization while guarding against the possibility of Chinese elites exporting the problems that such modernization causes them at home.

But *even if* one believes that the outbreak of war in 1914 was endogenous to the dynamics of the German case rather than exogenous to it, for theoretical reasons it is still worth pondering what might have happened had German political development continued unbroken—since many other countries face similar domestic situations but lack the freedom of action internationally to consider such an option. Without the war, it would appear, the chances for democratization in Germany

⁶⁹ See fn. 56; and Janos (fn. 12).

would have been relatively high. And if Germany had indeed embarked on a gradual liberalization in 1914 instead of war, there could have been a transition to democracy unburdened by the humiliation of a lost war and the stab-in-the-back legend and by a ruined economy. Further, the democratic and pragmatic tendencies of many of its major parties would have been strengthened by being allowed to participate in the process of political change. The odds of success for Germany's first democratic experiment would therefore have increased greatly, and in the end European and world history would have looked very different indeed.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ One recent attempt at counterfactual history also considers the possibility of Imperial Germany's making a successful transition to democracy; see Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War* (New York: Basic Books, 1999). Ferguson argues, however, that this would have occurred not if Germany had avoided the war but rather if it had won it. A quick victory by Germany, he claims, would have avoided most of the horrible bloodshed, allowed the kaiser to claim an impressive success, and left ex-corporal Adolf Hitler permanently on the sidelines of history. What Ferguson fails to consider, however, is that such a victorious campaign would have strengthened the kaiser and conservative elites, forestalled a National Liberal move to the left, and alienated the SPD further from its potential coalition partners. The most likely result would therefore have been, indeed, eventual further liberalization, but under the leadership of a revived conservative coalition that would have been reluctant to go all the way to a full democratic regime.