



**Forum:
European
and Global
Perspectives
on Social
Democracy
and State
Violence**

**Edited by
James Retallack
Simone Lässig
and Swen Steinberg**



Introduction: Class, Democracy, and Violence

James Retallack

University of Toronto, Ontario

Simone Lässig

German Historical Institute Washington

Swen Steinberg

Queen's University

Two interrelated questions were posed over forty years ago: Why does social history ignore politics? And how can the history of Germany's working class be joined with the history of the Social Democratic Party (SPD)?¹ One principal aim of the May 2023 conference in Toronto – “Work, Class, and Social Democracy in the Global Age of August Bebel (1840–1913)” – from which this Forum's articles are derived was to consider how scholars have answered these questions in the intervening decades and to chart promising research paths for the future.² Although the focus falls on the pre-1914 period and on Central Europe, the contributions suggest how historians of old social movements (in the nineteenth century) can speak to those studying or participating in new ones (since 1960) from global perspectives.

¹ See Geoff Eley and Keith Nield, “Why Does Social History Ignore Politics?” *Social History* 5 (1980): 249–272.

² See the conference report by Steven McClellan in *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute* 73 (2024): 161–167.

Bulletin of the German Historical Institute 74 (Fall 2024): 33–44

© James Retallack et al. | ISSN 1048-9134

CC BY-SA 4.0

Illustrations included in this article are not covered by this license.

3 "Forum: Class in German History," *German History* 30 (2012): 429–451.

4 "Humanisierung der Arbeit." *Aufbrüche und Konflikte in der rationalisierten Arbeitswelt des 20. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Nina Kleinöder, Stefan Müller and Karsten Uhl (Bielefeld, 2019); *Industrielle Arbeitsbeziehungen in Mitteldeutschland: Zwischen Klassenkampf, Sozialpartnerschaft und Betriebsgemeinschaft (1815–2015)*, ed. Michael Schäfer, Swen Steinberg, and Veronique Töpel (Leipzig, 2018); Jürgen Schmidt, *Arbeiter in der Moderne: Arbeitsbedingungen, Lebenswelten, Organisationen* (Frankfurt/M., 2015); Karsten Uhl, *Humane Rationalisierung? Die Raumordnung der Fabrik im fordistischen Jahrhundert* (Bielefeld, 2014); *Kontrollierte Arbeit – disziplinierte Körper? Zur Sozial- und Kulturgeschichte der Industriearbeit im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Karsten Uhl and Lars Bluma (Bielefeld, 2012); Timo Luks, *Der Betrieb als Ort der Moderne. Zur Geschichte von Industriearbeit, Ordnungsdenken und Social Engineering im 20. Jahrhundert* (Bielefeld, 2010); *Die Ordnung der Moderne. Social Engineering im 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Thomas Etzemüller (Bielefeld, 2009).

The 1960s and 1970s were the heyday of labor history, and not only for historians of Germany. After 1980 there was a marked turning away from both labor history and workers' history, due in part to new interest in the German and European bourgeoisies, in part to the cultural turn, the linguistic turn, and other scholarly trends. Then came the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the decline of Marxist historiography. In 2012 a forum of scholars acknowledged that "class," as a transhistorical category of analysis, had largely lost its appeal.³ At the same time, however, research in Germany (and elsewhere) developed a new interest in the connection between economic and social history, which can be seen in historical studies on the humanization of working environments and on industrial relations.⁴ In addition, new journals were started, such as *Arbeiter Bewegung Geschichte* already in 2016.

Now we are nearly a decade further on. After focusing intensively on culture and identities, we see that social fault lines are threatening to tear our societies apart and fueling political and cultural polarization in western societies, and between these nations and countries of the so-called Global South. Moreover, histories of work, of labor movements, and of capitalism are all back "in." Histories of labor have embraced the history of capitalism, class, race, ethnicity, religion, language, migration, and locality; of gender constructions, the body, and emotions; of education, life cycles, and generations. Of particular interest to this Forum is research on the global history of work, which has increased significantly in the past two decades.⁵ The study of social democracy, more particularly, also reveals important connections between cultures of commemoration, memory studies, and the role of "citizen

5 *Handbook Global History of Work*, ed. Karin Hofmeester and Marcel van der Linden (Oldenburg, 2017); *Global Histories*

of Work, ed. Andreas Eckert (Oldenburg, 2016); Marcel van der Linden, *Workers of the World. Eine Globalgeschichte der Arbeit*

(Frankfurt/M., 2015); *Histories of Labour: National and International Perspectives*, ed. Joan Allen (Pontypool, UK, 2010).

workers” in civil society. The time seems ripe for another stocktaking of these interrelated themes, spanning history’s subfields but concentrating on specific times and places.

During the Toronto conference, an additional focus was provided by bringing the iconic figure of August Bebel into the analytical frame. Born in 1840, Bebel reached adulthood as a journeyman turner, producing doorknobs and window-pulls from buffalo horn, but at the end of his long life, in 1913, he commanded the planet’s largest and most powerful socialist party, with over 1 million members; its affiliated trade unions had over 2.5 million members. Was Bebel the *embodiment* of Social Democracy, as Lenin once claimed? Did his status as a modern celebrity, constructed and communicated through modern mass media, threaten the German state, as the sobriquet *Arbeiterkaiser* seemed to suggest? In one way, without doubt, Bebel’s career demonstrates how the cultures of physical work and political work came together, and he was uncompromising in declaring (if not always acting upon) his unwavering determination to topple the authoritarian German state. In the essays gathered in this Forum, the physicality of social democracy is confirmed not through biography but with attention to the roles of celebrity, consumption, street “muscle,” and the mass press. Within a year of his death, Bebel’s legions were marching to the front on behalf of a fatherland whose *real* Kaiser had labelled them scoundrels not worthy to call themselves Germans. The collapse of capitalist society that Bebel had predicted as early as the 1880s never occurred. Karl Kautsky, “Marxism’s Pope,” assessed the situation more realistically, though his interpretation of Marx led to later troubles: the SPD, he said, was a revolutionary but not a revolution-making party.

The contributions to this Forum also address another set of questions that featured at the Toronto conference: How useful to current research are conceptually paired categories of labor relations: independent/dependent, free/unfree, organized/unorganized, gendered/male, paid/unpaid,

regulated/unregulated, secure/precarious? Is there an inherent tension between these analytical dichotomies and the inclusive language of solidarity across classes, including terms like “comradeship” and “unity,” that emerged in the labor movement during the last third of the nineteenth century? Social Democrats (including Bebel) insisted even in the 1860s that theirs was a “people’s party”; some historians have stressed that the SPD later became a party of protest par excellence – the essays by Andrew Bonnell and Jens-Uwe Guettel confirm this, albeit with important qualifications – while others have suggested that it fell short of a true *Volkspartei*, as the 1912 Reichstag elections demonstrated. Have historians paid sufficient attention to workers who supported the SPD at the polls but did not join the party or a free trade union, who were deemed unreliable “converts” or “fellow travelers” (*Über- or Mitläufer*), or who, as women, were not represented in the party’s top ranks? In one way or another each essay in this Forum suggests that more work on such questions is needed.

More conspicuously still, all our authors focus on the violence perpetrated on bodies – human bodies as well as bodies politic – when protests against workplace exploitation, social exclusion, denial of civic rights, and loss of economic opportunity bumped up against the logic (i.e., the perceived requirements) of capitalism and state security. Mona Rudolph chronicles the brutal physicality of coerced labor in the diamond fields of German Southwest Africa (today Namibia). Touching on the “fuzzy boundaries” separating waged and slave labor, compulsion and consent, she lays bare the mutual interests of independent employers and the imperial German state in establishing, preserving, and expanding a violent system of exploitation. The commodity chain Rudolph reconstructs – the backbone of the system – ran unbroken from the desert sands of Africa, through the diamond-polishing workshops of Europe and tax regimes of the empire, to the jewelry shops of North America where (as Stephen Press has

shown) the engagement diamond purchased by prospective bridegrooms was elevated to the status of a social and cultural necessity.⁶ Yet, as Rudolph also shows, cross-national transfers modified “concepts of work,” depending in part on the dangers of mistreatment or injury in each location and in part on opportunities for agency and resistance. The global dimensions of labor, labor exploitation, and state-sanctioned violence could hardly be painted in starker hues.

Max Weber, in his lecture on “Politics as a Vocation” (1919), famously defined the state as “the *only* human community that (successfully) claims a *monopoly on legitimate physical violence* for itself, within a certain geographical territory . . . All other groups and individuals are granted the right to use physical violence only insofar as the *state* allows it.”⁷ It is commonly accepted that modern states exercise that exclusive monopoly through standing armies, the power to decide between peace and war, control over police, and systems of state-regulated incarceration. The other essays here examine how unsanctioned displays or threats of violence made the question of state security less clear than it sometimes appears. In doing so they take up lines of inquiry showing how the concept of “securitization” (*Versicherheitlichung*) can be useful to European and other historians.

Before about 2000, historians and social scientists tended to treat questions of domestic security, international security, and socio-economic security narrowly – and more or less separately. But over the last quarter-century “security” has indeed become, as its proponents in the so-called Copenhagen School announced in 1998, “a new framework for analysis.”⁸ How do security problems emerge, and why do societies perceive certain issues as relevant in terms of security? As Eckart Conze has explained, “since ideas and perceptions of security (and insecurity) change over time, securitization can be applied not only to current developments, but also to historical processes.” It can help reveal how strategies for the legitimation or destabilization of the state evolve, it can illuminate motifs

⁶ Stephen Press, *Blood and Diamonds: Germany's Imperial Ambitions in Africa* (Cambridge, MA, 2021).

⁷ Max Weber, *Charisma and Disenchantment: The Vocation Lectures*, ed. Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon (New York, 2020), 46.

⁸ Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder, CO, 1997); see also Eckart Conze, *Geschichte der Sicherheit: Entwicklung – Themen – Perspektiven* (Göttingen, 2018).

⁹ Eckart Conze, "Securitization: Gegenwartsdiagnose oder Historischer Analyseansatz?" *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 38, (2012): 453–467.

in political communication that bundle existing worries into a single, tangible threat, and it can help explain mechanisms of social integration and identity formation.⁹ In each respect, the concept has obvious relevance to the reciprocal dynamics and histories that link protest movements like Social Democracy with the myriad institutions of the state – police, local administrators, the army – that claim to provide security to its citizens.

Christine Krüger's essay in the Forum outlines the merits of this framework and demonstrates its fruitfulness in comparative studies across national lines. As she shows, it is not necessary to focus on coercive instruments of the state – although they should not fall from view – to analyze the way labor protests and threats of violence became issues of security with many overlapping dimensions. Her focus falls on bourgeois fears of social upheaval in Britain and Germany. The protests she examines, in the docklands of London and Hamburg, were instrumentalized by strikers and their employers alike. Among each country's bourgeoisie, class prejudices augmented fears of social instability in the face of protests that challenged the paradigm of single-issue industrial action. But neither side presented a wholly united front or a uniform understanding of what the threat actually was. In this way the protesters and their opponents shared many similarities with those demonstrating against or defending the status quo for other reasons. In the process of confrontations in those docklands, even when (or because) a "bystander state" remained relatively passive, Krüger notes a shift: away from a working class defined according to economic criteria and as a threat to security, and toward a "security community" in its own right.

This shift is properly acknowledged as one key to reassessing theories put forward in the 1960s and early 1970s by Guenther Roth and Dieter Groh. In Roth's view, German Social Democracy replicated certain features of German society – for

example in its cultural organizations – while contributing to its own political isolation through a dogmatic opposition to the existing state without developing a feasible alternative. He termed this process “negative integration.” The same term was used by Groh, who emphasized the party’s ideological tendency to adopt and retain a deterministic reading of Marxism. Both scholars tried to explain how practical reformism and theoretical revolutionism coexisted and how Social Democracy’s “attentism” (waiting for revolution) prevented an uprising from the Left before 1914.¹⁰ More recent scholars have questioned the thesis that Social Democracy, negatively integrated or not, was a relative failure. They prefer a picture of the party, as outlined by Andrew Bonnell, as “a self-consciously oppositional, professedly class-based movement, which pitted itself against the phenomena of economic inequality, undemocratic and authoritarian government, and militarism, and which saw itself as working towards a more democratic, egalitarian, and peaceful future.”¹¹

When conservatives and other anti-socialists equated protest with instability and subversion, security’s prominent role in domestic politics came into focus: even issues like workers’ protection, free trade, and prostitution during the Kaiserreich were transformed – rhetorically, yes, but also according to the patterns of securitization analyzed in Christine Krüger’s essay – into questions of national importance, even survival. That transformation, Tobias Bruns has suggested, contributed to Germany’s “illiberal democratization,”¹² whereby the introduction of universal male suffrage for national elections and the pluralization of the public sphere did not yield parliamentary control over a monarchical, authoritarian state.¹³ But that negative outcome should not imply system stability. The challenges of overcoming domestic unrest, on the one hand, and surviving an international threat, on the other, combined in new ways after about 1905 when Social Democracy flexed its muscle and when a world war loomed. Perceptions of “precarious security” – examined in other contexts

10 Guenther Roth, *The Social Democrats in Imperial Germany* (Totowa, NJ, 1963); Dieter Groh, *Negative Integration und revolutionärer Attentismus: Die deutsche Sozialdemokratie am Vorabend des Ersten Weltkrieges* (Frankfurt/M., 1973).

11 Andrew Bonnell, *Red Banners, Books and Beer Mugs: The Mental World of German Social Democrats, 1863–1914* (Leiden, 2021), 9.

12 Tobias Bruns, “Illiberale Demokratisierung: Eine Geschichte der Sicherheitskultur des Deutschen Kaiserreichs 1871–1914,” DPhil dissertation, University of Marburg, 2022.

13 James Retallack has suggested that while social democratization after 1871 accelerated, political democratization in Imperial Germany actually slowed down; *Red Saxony: Election Battles and the Spectre of Democracy in Germany, 1860–1918* (Oxford, UK, 2017).

14 See Amerigo Caruso and Birgit Metzger, eds., *Grenzen der Sicherheit: Unfälle, Medien und Politik im deutschen Kaiserreich* (Göttingen, 2022), in which Dagmar Ellerbrock considers a particular kind of violence, i.e., non-military shooting accidents; Jens Hua-Henning, "Incendiary Cities: Fire and Technology in Germany and the United States, 1840–1900," PhD dissertation, University of Toronto, 2022.

by recent studies of accidents, disasters, and risk in Imperial Germany – lent a special urgency to national and transnational issues of citizenship, equity, solidarity, and justice.¹⁴

Uncovering a hitherto unknown document deep in the files of Bavaria's State Archive, Amerigo Caruso expands the lens to include several major European countries. He examines the revealing processes of cross-pollination that occurred when security forces sought new means to combat subversion, terrorism, industrial action, and other perceived threats. The 1907 document in question, entitled "Fighting in Insurgent Cities," provided a blueprint for unleashing state violence against revolutionaries. At the same time, in discussing what was and was not legal in times of "siege," it made clear that police, the courts, general staffs, and ministries of the interior might react very differently and interpret the question of legality based on different premises. Focusing on state authorities' "exceptional thinking" – their ideas about emergency legislation and other means of repression – Caruso analyses a classic case of the transnational dissemination of new knowledge, not only in a climate of crisis but, significantly, long after acute threats had been met locally or regionally.

As we know from studies of Social Democracy under Bismarck's Anti-Socialist Law between 1878 and 1890, the rule of law was elastic and in flux: Caruso's study shows how the dynamism of authoritarian rule was historically significant. A perfectly legal "state of siege" (*Belagerungszustand*) could be unleashed against radicals of all kinds, but it could also be deployed by representatives of the state who were radicals themselves, in the sense used by Marx when he wrote that a radical is someone who wants to get at the root of things. Declarations of a state of siege could affirm, reaffirm, or regenerate authoritarian practices. Moreover – and here again the concept of "securitization" is central – the perception of vulnerability and a sense of crisis could be used as foundational myths to justify the radical suppression not only of "terrorists" but of others who allegedly misused civil and political rights.

As Caruso shows, the instrumentalization of crisis has a very long history. Extending beyond “mere” expulsions and deportations and the imposition of martial law during wartime, “emergency” measures could be deployed against indigenous populations like those studied by Rudolph, strikes like those studied by Krüger, and street protests like those studied by Bonnell and Guettel.

Andrew Bonnell addresses Groh’s thesis about negative integration and revolutionary attentism, and he, too, notes August Bebel’s relevance, specifically in his secret communications with the British Foreign Office to convince it to stand up to Kaiser Wilhelm II’s saber-rattling in 1911. Bonnell shows how street protests against suffrage restrictions were transformed into huge demonstrations against the coming war in July 1914. Violence was never far from the surface, whether in the form of a military communications post set up in the basement of the royal palace or when singing contests between bourgeois and workers on Unter den Linden degenerated into fistfights. Bebel’s secret talks failed, and a year after his death the SPD proved powerless to prevent war. The violence unleashed by the First World War could still have led to different outcomes: it ended in the collapse of the imperial state, but, as the General Staff officers in Caruso’s analysis hoped, it might also have yielded national integration on a new moral and political basis.

In the last contribution to this Forum, Jens-Uwe Guettel returns to “self-empowerment” as a strategy, not as it was deployed by Rudolph’s diamond polishers but by ordinary workers who did not believe the SPD was a toothless party. Painting a Kaiserreich that was less stable than historians have generally thought, Guettel reminds us how divided and inconsistent SPD leaders were in the face of rioters who refused to follow their marching orders. Those followers’ loyalties were conspicuously “brittle.” Of course, as Guettel also shows, not all violence was political; it could be economic, ideological (e.g., antisemitic), or spontaneous. Making analogies to the flash

mobs we know today, he considers the urban poor, criminal gangs, innocent bystanders, and others who, in the context of uncontrollable and “transgressive behavior,” judged issues of state security and social conflict with due attention to the ultimate arguments of fists, guns, and murder.

These essays suggest avenues of inquiry that prompt fruitful reflection on German, European, and global histories and their possible trajectories. Updating conditions of work, class relations, and democratic reform for a global age continues to this day. Hopefully our efforts to understand society, democracy, and state violence will continue as well.

Simone Lässig is full professor of Modern History at Braunschweig University (on leave) and director of the German Historical Institute Washington. Her publications include *Jüdische Wege ins Bürgertum: Kulturelles Kapital und sozialer Aufstieg im 19. Jahrhundert* (2004); *Refugee Crises, 1945–2000: Political and Societal Responses in International Comparison* (ed. with Jan Jansen, 2020); and *The World of Children: Foreign Cultures in Nineteenth-Century German Education and Entertainment* (ed. with Andreas Weiß, 2020). She is currently finishing a monograph titled *Coping with Disruptive Change: Jews, Middle-Class Culture, and Social Transformation in the German Lands (1800–1860)* and pursuing a book project on transnational families in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

James Retallack is University Professor Emeritus at the University of Toronto, associate graduate faculty at the Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy, and an elected member of the Royal Society of Canada. His recent publications include *German Social Democracy through British Eyes: A Documentary History, 1870–1914* (2022); *Das rote Sachsen: Wahlen, Wahlrecht und politische Kultur im Deutschen Kaiserreich*, trans. Manuela Thurner (2023);

and an expanded second edition of volume 4 of the GHI Washington digital primary source collection *German History in Documents and Images* (2023): <https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/forging-an-empire-bismarckian-germany-1866-1890>. He is currently writing a full-length study of August Bebel.

Swen Steinberg teaches as Assistant Professor (term adjunct) at the Department of History and the School of Religion at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, and is an affiliated researcher at the German Historical Institute Washington. His publications include *Navigating In-Betweenness: Jewish Refugees in Global Transit* (special section of *The Leo Baeck Institute Year Book*, ed. with Simone Lässig, Anna-Carolin Augustin and Carolin Liebisch-Gümisch, 2024); *Environments of Exile: Nature, Refugees, and Representations* (ed. with Helga Schreckenberger, 2024); *Max Sachs: Staatswissenschaftler – Journalist – Sozialdemokrat* (2024); *Migration und Zeitgeschichte* (special issue of *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, 2022); *Sachsen und das Rheinland: Zwei Industrieregionen im Vergleich* (ed. with Michael Schäfer and Veronique Töpel, 2021); *Refugees from Nazi-Occupied Europe in British Overseas Territories* (special issue of *Yearbook of the Research Centre for German and Austrian Exile Studies*, 2020); *Semmeln aus Sägemehl: Lebensmittelskandale und Wissensordnungen* (ed. with Frank Jacob, 2020); and *Knowledge and Young Migrants* (special issue of *KNOW: A Journal on the Formation of Knowledge*, ed. with Simone Lässig, 2019).