Margaret Lavinia Anderson, Review of

The Kaiser's Voters. Electors and elections in Imperial Germany.

For more than a century scholars have argued about the social bases of German electoral politics. In the 1905 Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik Robert Blank dropped a statistical bombshell with his claim to have proven that a significant proportion of Socialist voters in recent elections must be coming from the middle class. Though Blank's findings gave ammunition both to Bernsteinians then and Bolsheviks later (albeit for different reasons), scholars--beginning with Max Weber's instant rebuttal in the same issue--decided overwhelmingly against him. Now here comes Jonathan Sperber with his computer and argues that Blank's challenge to Marxist orthodoxy was too modest. Although our view of the SPD electorate as largely urban and Protestant survives Sperber's ecological regressions, the picture of the SPD as a labor party does not. The Social Democrats after 1900 won nearly as many of their voters from the middle as from the working classes: perhaps as much as forty-five percent. And if the middle classes voted socialist, a fairly constant thirty-five percent of Protestant workers after 1890 voted conservative or (increasingly over time) liberal. Sperber makes short work of
the notion "of a golden age of class consciousness: a time, sometime before the First World War, or perhaps the Second, when workers were workers, the bourgeoisie were the bourgeoisie, and classes knew where they stood" (327). Class's golden age--in Britain and France, as well as Germany, he suggests--came, if it did come, only after 1945.

If class gets its statistically-driven comeuppance in Sperber's study, the cultural alternative--that is, the picture of a polity divided among four more or less impermeable "social-moral milieux"--fares no better. Offered by M. Rainer Lepsius in 1966 as a way of linking the social system with the party system, the existence of conservative, liberal, Catholic, and socialist subcultures was invoked to explain why Germany was so slow to democratize and why, when it did, that democracy was so unsuccessful. Its fundamental insight, that cultural (or, in Lepsius's terminology, "socio-moral") identities play a fundamental role in election decisions, challenged both class and rational choice models of voting behavior. Although Lepsius's milieu was probably never meant to be more than a heuristic device, a way of thinking about German politics that transcended the conventional watersheds of regime and the nitty-gritty of party history, "milieu" soon functioned as a paradigm in the Kuhnian sense, proving an immensely fruitful stimulus to "ordinary science," as a wealth of articles and books attest, not least those by Sperber himself. The shadow side of the milieu paradigm's regime-transcending thrust, however, was its static picture of political identity. That paradigm has now received the coup de grace. Living within a social-moral milieu
might well describe those who took the step of joining a particular party, Sperber concedes, but it cannot begin to capture their fickle electorates. In fact, when Sperber compares German with American voting behavior for this period, he finds voting in the U.S. far more segmentary. Only in the 1928 (Al Smith) election did Americans switch parties as much as their Wilhelmine counterparts.

The insufficiencies of the milieu paradigm become especially clear in Part II, which examines voter movements from election to election. The 1890 election, especially, brought "large-scale vote switching, carried out across the entire party spectrum" (41). For the SPD, the switchers--whom it drew from every party throughout the decade--were far more important for its victories than the support of voters who had previously abstained (according to Sperber, the wrong, though reigning, explanation for the SPD's success). Nevertheless, after 1900 the SPD lost more votes to liberals than it gained from them, turning the liberal parties after 1900 into very different animals.

More is at stake here than the history of the Kaiserreich. Sperber is also challenging a central finding of Jürgen Falter, a man famous for having driven the last stake through the heart of the venerable Nazi-electorate-as-lower-middle-class thesis. Armed with his own computers and a team of assistants, Falter has argued that the secret of the NSDAP's triumph lay in its unprecedented ability to recruit from three of Germany's four milieux, making it the country's first catch-all Volkspartei. Sperber drastically relativizes the drama of this finding. Both
liberals and conservatives, he maintains, had attracted at various times in the Kaiserreich "an equivalent measure of both Protestant working class and Catholic support" (318). The liberal electorate, "comprising a respectable 21% of eligible voters" in the last three imperial elections (316), enjoyed roughly the same social composition as the NSDAP, while its National Liberal sub-set actually cut across all four milieus, drawing (unlike the Nazis) a surprising twenty-five percent from Catholics. Even the electorate of the prewar SPD, although sociologically not the same as the NSDAP's, was just as varied, coming "within a hair's breadth of being the majority party of German Protestants" (58). At its 1932 peak, the NSDAP bested the SPD's 1912 share of eligible voters by a mere two percentage points.

Ecological regression is the magic wand with which Sperber conjures these new realities out of old hats, but he tests them against an "experience" (350) informed by an impressive command of the massive secondary literature on parties, localities, and campaigns. As a self-confessed "student of a student of a student of Friedrich Meinecke" (25), he is not afraid, when his mathematics doesn't jibe with his judgment, to drop the math. He is also, however, a splitter rather than a lumper, and his findings can get very complicated. I confess that I could not figure out all of his tables. The verbal explanations in the text and in the technical appendix are clear, but accompanied with distinctions that are sometimes sliced very thin. Apparent paradoxes, like the proportion of the electorate consisting of party switchers reaching an all time high simultaneously with
the growth of party loyalty; or the question whether Catholic workers were the most faithful sons of the Center, were leaving the party, or were (until 1912) increasing their support beyond that of any other group: these issues set traps for the note-taker, whose short summarizing sentence slips easily into error. But as Wittgenstein (I'm told) once said, Words cannot be clearer than the world.

Is Sperber right? As someone for whom the term "math anxiety" might have been coined, I leave the adjudication of his debate with Falter to my colleagues with higher GREs. Nevertheless, I wonder about some of Sperber's categories. "Farmer," for example, apparently includes both estate-owning peers and their wage-earning ploughmen. And the census records on which Sperber relies for his middle classes count as "rentiers" those masses of Old Age and Accident Fund recipients who, in their working days, were clearly proletarians. Do categories like these vitiate findings about social composition? One might respond that all statisticians have to make tough choices, that Sperber's are intelligently defended, and that even if his choices lead to blurring at the margins, we can accept the central tendency of his findings. But the heart of quantitative history's claim on our attention is its promise of precision. And precision--the sole advantage of numbers over words--is at war with allowances at the margins.

A more fundamental question is one that neither Sperber nor anyone else can answer. Voting statistics rely for their interest on our assumption that they tell us something about peoples' opinions and desires. Can we make that assumption
during the Kaiserreich? Sperber is aware that the secrecy of the ballot was often only notional, that voting frequently took place in situations of intense pressure, yet he cannot avoid describing his outcomes in language that evokes inner states: affiliation, loyalty, defection, desertion, attraction, lure, appeal, choice. But how much election behavior, including turnout, was voluntary? Post-election challenges never fell below twelve percent of the Reichstag's seats and exceeded twenty percent as late as 1912. Between 1893-1898 one out of every thirty victories was overturned. Such observations suggest that the movement from countryside to city may have derived its greatest effects less from its impact on interest and opinion than from the removal of voters from the direct surveillance of their masters.

The question of whether outcomes reflect choice or pressure affects some of Sperber's most controversial revisions and seems especially pressing in Part III, when he makes his very interesting comparisons across regimes. Though he warns that parameters change with the lowering of voting age, the inclusion of women, and with different methods of voting, and he concedes the leakiness of his categories (when the word "worker," for example, describes someone who in 1900 inhabited a two-room flat without toilet and in 1990 enjoyed annual vacations in Majorca), the no less fundamental distinction between outcomes freely chosen and outcomes that may have been coerced is one that must elude the most sophisticated statistician. Yet might not this distinction undercut the significance of Sperber's finding that there was not nearly so much movement from labor to the Right
between 1928-30 (Falterm's showpiece) as in the elections of 1887 and 1907? Are the liberals really a *Volkspartei* in 1887 or 1907, if their working-class supporters had been marched by employers to the polls?

Sperber's disarming avowal that "a study that is primarily an analysis of election returns and a commentary on theories explaining them is simply not going to be a thriller" (25) is too modest. Anyone not determined in advance to be bored by computer-driven results will find *The Kaiser's Voters* absorbing reading. It offers a powerfully argued, revisionist account of the imperial electorate and its behavior that combines analytical rigor with unpretentious clarity. Sperber does more than revise party histories that misunderstand the sources of SPD growth, that announce prematurely Catholic defection from the Center, that--by equating liberals with the Protestant Bürgertum--are too certain of liberal decline. He has shown us an electorate that was much more volatile, a society that was much less segmentary, and consequently a public that far more open to possibilities of all sorts than we might have believed; yet one with powerful long-term continuities, the most important of which was undoubtedly the confessional marker, which has not disappeared even today.

Margaret Lavinia Anderson

University of California - Berkeley