

# H-Net Reviews

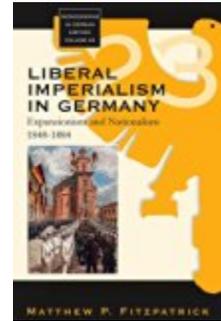
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Matthew P. Fitzpatrick. *Liberal Imperialism in Germany: Expansionism and Nationalism, 1848-1884*. Berghahn Books, 2008. 248 pp. \$99.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84545-520-0.

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## German Liberals and the Dream of Empire

Studies of Germany's overseas empire have long been shaped by the incongruence between the country's meager colonial footprint and a sense of the colonies' more momentous significance at home. Thus, while many historians wonder whether German colonial history warrants the tremendous scholarly attention it has received in recent years, others continue to be drawn to the ways in which the colonial experience transcended the material reality of Germany's empire. Mary Evelyn Townsend recognized this situation as early as 1930, when she proclaimed that Germany possessed a "rich colonial tradition," despite its short-lived lease on territories abroad.[1] And for Hans-Ulrich Wehler, colonial ventures were central to domestic politics, informing notions of "social imperialism" that have since lain at the heart of key historiographical debates on the *Kaiserreich*.<sup>[2]</sup> Add to these names that of Matthew P. Fitzpatrick, whose work scarcely leaves German shores to find the intersection of German imperialism and national liberalism. National liberals, of course, have long been recognized as supporters of German colonization, but Fitzpatrick wants us to understand just how deep the attachment to imperialism ran. What is unique about this approach is that it seeks connections in the years before 1884, when the German state first staked an imperial claim. This approach is a rather interesting departure from other studies, which have looked no further than the founding of the German Empire in 1871 for the origins of German colonialism. It also launches Fitzpatrick into key debates on the strength of the bourgeois liberal movement in the years after 1848. While Fitzpatrick's book is rough around the edges and

falls far short of a comprehensive analysis, it nevertheless makes a compelling case for the intimate connections between liberalism and imperialism in Germany and the power of both in shaping German national identity.

Fitzpatrick's study begins with the Revolution of 1848, when liberal musings on imperialism crystallized into a coherent program. Here he identifies the key elements that feature prominently in liberal imperial discourse, including the role of colonies in increasing the commercial power of the German nation, the need for a robust navy to protect maritime commerce, and the potential for using settler colonies to facilitate emigration and ease Germany's transition to an industrial power. Liberal revolutionaries established a vision of colonization as a benchmark of national power, and in so doing made the issue inseparable from the question of national unification. In the subsequent decades, these views proliferated in various genres of popular and academic literature. Fitzpatrick reveals this "mythopoesis" (p. 50) of liberal imperialism through the writings of leading contemporary proponents of empire, including Friedrich List, Hermann Blumenau, and Friedrich Fabri. Through a brief survey of anthropological and geographical writing, he shows the links between colonialism's appeal to both the commercial *Wirtschaftsbürgertum* (the bourgeoisie affiliated most closely with economic interests) and the scholarly bourgeoisie, *Bildungsbürgertum*. In another chapter, Fitzpatrick traces the appearance of the liberal vision of empire in popular novels and in the family journal, *Die Gartenlaube*, building nicely on Kirsten

Belgum's work.[3] Finally, Fitzpatrick offers examples from private attempts at colonialism before the advent of the *Kaiserreich*, where debates over location and implementation borrowed heavily from well-worn liberal tropes. The result, he argues, was the emergence of a pervasive discourse of imperialism spread through middle-class media and informed by liberal values. "As such," he writes, "far from an 1880s Bismarckian *Kolonialpolitik*, German imperialism is best seen as a product of liberal civil society—an imperialism from below that was viewed as intrinsic to the ascendancy of the bourgeoisie" (p. 77).

Such a perspective moves us well beyond Wolfgang Mommsen's understanding of colonialism as anathema to liberalism and offers a serious challenge to Wehler's notion of "social imperialism." Indeed, Fitzpatrick is skeptical that concerns about socialism greatly influenced the colonial initiatives of either Bismarck or the liberals. In explaining Bismarck, Fitzpatrick sides with those who ascribe the chancellor's motives to the split within the liberal movement. "Plainly put," he explains, "Bismarck's problem post-1881 was one of liberalism—how to revive the nationalist-liberals and contain the progressives" (p. 121). For national liberals, colonialism was also more than a means of stemming the power of Social Democrats. Rather, it was aimed at genuinely solving a broader *Sozialfrage* (societal question) in pursuit of "the consolidation of Germany and, in the process, the betterment of the material conditions of those classes worst afflicted by the changes heralded by modernity" (p. 60). Less effective is his attack on the distinctions drawn by Woodruff Smith between overseas empire and "inner colonization" in eastern Europe. Despite Fitzpatrick's best efforts, his liberals seem lukewarm about continental expansion, focusing instead on the virtues of navies and looking to Britain as a model imperial power. Their consistent focus on migration, however, allows Fitzpatrick to undermine Smith's tidy dichotomy between the concepts of *Weltpolitik* (global politics) and *Lebensraum*.

Although many of Fitzpatrick's claims are convincing, I think his account is heavy on analysis at the expense of narrative. He alludes to major events in colonial history, including the Samoa Crisis of 1880 and the Blumenau-Sturz debates over Brazil, but he would do well to give his readers a fuller account. Not only would this have made the book more engaging, but it would have aided those readers who might wish to use the book

in a seminar. Moreover, Fitzpatrick's way of structuring his argument is confusing. Above all, the chapters lack clear chronological or thematic coherence. Fitzpatrick interrupts his discussion on the spread of liberal discourse for a re-evaluation of Bismarck's turn to colonial policy in 1884, which many readers might expect to mark the end of the study. Even more frustrating is the absence of dates for much of his evidence, which at times obscures deficiencies in his argument. In the second chapter, for instance, Fitzpatrick argues for the growing strength of liberal imperialist tropes in the 1850s, but then appears to use as support a number of texts written before or during the Revolution. Doing so belies a moment of empirical weakness and neglects to assess adequately the "mythopoesis" of liberal imperialism as a historical process. It might have been more useful to extend the analysis into the 1840s, when the texts of figures like Friedrich List, who died in 1846, could help explain how and why imperial tropes developed before they became a part of the liberal program at the Frankfurt Parliament.

For that matter, Fitzpatrick might have cast his gaze a few years beyond the end of his study to ask how idealized notions of liberal imperialism informed the actual colonial policies of the German Empire. Or he might have explained why the grandiose visions of liberal imperialism failed to materialize after 1884. That he neglects to do either denies us that last bit of evidence proving the hegemony of liberal notions of empire. More importantly, it perpetuates the essential disconnect between vision and reality in German imperialism studies. Perhaps we are thus better served to see Fitzpatrick's book as primarily a contribution to the history of German liberalism. In either case, he has much to offer for both, even if he has not put to rest completely the question of the links between the two.

#### Notes

[1]. Mary Evelyn Townsend, *The Rise and Fall of Germany's Colonial Empire, 1884-1918*, (New York: Macmillan, 1930), 3.

[2]. Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Notizen zur deutschen Geschichte* (Munich: Beck, 2007).

[3]. Kirsten Belgum, *Popularizing the Nation: Audience, Representation, and the Production of Identity in Die Gartenlaube, 1853-1900* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998).

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