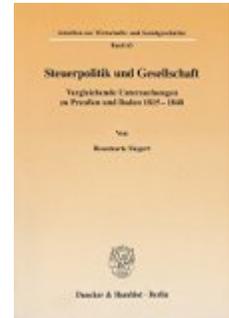


Rosemarie Siegert. *Steuerpolitik und Gesellschaft: Vergleichende Untersuchungen zu Preussen und Baden 1815-1848.* Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2001. 458 S. EUR 99.00, gebunden, ISBN 978-3-428-10035-4.



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The history of taxation policy might have the attraction of checkbook balancing for historians more socially or culturally inclined. Nonetheless, taxation is as much a point of state-individual interaction as parliamentarization, suffrage, or the judicial system. It also involves defining the size and authority of the state, and so tax policy often has been a forum for struggles among philosophies, court factions, or social classes. Rosemarie Siegert's comparative study of taxation (based on her 1999 FU Berlin dissertation under Jürgen Kocka) in *Vormärz* Baden and Prussia proves a useful start in showing how and why these policies unfolded as they did.

In this work, however, one will find less coverage of the social impact of taxation, or on the potential for the extension and centralization of the state's power. Rather, since Siegert uses modernization theory as her approach, she emphasizes policy-making and implementation. This approach also informs her related emphasis on the standardization and rationalization of tax codes, assuming equal, universal, and transparent application as an ideal-type of rationality and stan-

dardization. Siegert thereby shows that both Prussia and Baden had quite far to go in 1800. Town tax structures, for example, relied on *Ertragssteuer* (a tax on potentially revenue-yielding property, regardless of whether it actually was producing revenue), consumption taxes, and *Stand*-based taxation. Likewise, aristocrats enjoyed exemptions, with peasants shouldering the extra burden rurally, especially through taxes on milling and slaughtering. Ultimately, "rationality" and "standardization" would require replacing this patchwork of local, feudally based tax codes (reflecting caste, vocation, place of residence, and consumption) with more unified systems based more neutrally on property and income (such taxes presumably acting as a truer measure of a society's accessible resources).

Indeed, much of Siegert's work reinforces the more conventional "modernization" paradigm with respect to German history. Siegert shows that tax reform, like other contemporary reforms, was another *Vormärz* administrative "revolution from above", inspired by Badenese and Prussian fiscal needs, rather than by popular demand. In this re-

gard, then, the timing of tax reforms paralleled that of other contemporary reforms. The Napoleonic intrusion provided the impetus toward rationalization, with 1808-1810 as a turning point (not because taxation had changed so fundamentally already, but because tax-reform efforts at least began).

At the risk of oversimplifying an impressive, often daunting level of documentation of myriad policy shifts in both states regarding forms of taxation, conflicts between state and local taxation, and the logistics of implementation, this reviewer will concentrate on three themes especially related to modernization: the role of the aristocracy, the interaction of tax reform and suffrage reform, and the relationship of tax reform to 1848.

The standard "modernization" approach has been to stress the German aristocracy's critical role in obstructing modernization generally. Indeed, Siegert's evidence supports this view. Because of its weaker aristocracy, Baden could undertake earlier and more thorough reforms in the *Vormärz* than could Prussia. In 1810, Baden already had simplified the property tax, and in 1818 even abolished the aristocracy's tax exemption (Prussia did not until 1861). As a means of eliminating contentious consumption taxes, which especially burdened the poor, Baden also implemented a *Klassensteuer* in 1837, and standardized the *Ertragsteuer*, eliminating local differences. In contrast, Prussia clung to a medieval-era urban-rural distinction until 1872, with a class-based tax system for town residents, and a tax on milling and slaughtering in the countryside. Property taxation lacked a unitary system, continuing to reflect each province's differences rooted in medieval origins.

Likewise, the modernization approach has stressed suffrage reform as part of democratization. Siegert stresses suffrage reform as part of tax reform in the *Vormärz*. Tax reforms never occurred in a policy vacuum but reflected other reform efforts and interventions by vested interests,

all of which generated unexpected conflicts. In both states, for example, new civic regulations (*Gemeindeordnungen*) reduced legal distinctions and restrictions among classes of *Bürger* in the towns and eliminated medieval restrictions on residence and admission. However, neither state addressed the differences between urban and rural tax structures (the former relying on an excise tax, the latter still relying on a milling and slaughtering tax). Savvy entrepreneurs thus would establish new businesses just beyond city limits, enjoying access to the town's markets, but paying lower taxes because the countryside codes classified their businesses differently. Consequently, such businesses grew, as did the sense of grievance among more heavily burdened town businesses, but tax revenues did not. Baden eliminated urban-rural tax differences and further systematized its income- and property-based taxation through introducing three-class voting suffrage in 1821. (Cities could still levy further taxation, but this now had more to do with specific civic needs than feudal distinctions between city and country.) Prussia made little headway until after the 1848 revolutions with either tax reform or parliamentarization, because aristocrats opposed any measures which might reduce their tax exemptions. In 1849, Prussia extended three-class voting suffrage from the Rhineland. Until then, administrators tried to ameliorate rather than eliminate urban-rural distinctions, bypassing rather than replacing urban excise taxes (*Gewerbesteuer*) and rural property taxes through more general application of property taxes (*Grundsteuer*) and class taxes (*Klassensteuer*). Ironically, as Siegert notes, while Baden's introduction of such suffrage was actually a step forward in the 1820s, by 1849 Prussia was introducing such suffrage measures and tax reform as a dam against still more comprehensive suffrage and tax reforms.

Siegert notes that taxation issues did play a role in 1848: complaints about the injustice of existing systems abounded, as did demands for the

implementation of income tax as a more just system. Curiously, tax systems actually changed little: while everyone favored more equitable system taxation, one could not reach consensus about that system. The idea of an income tax, widely advocated, encountered bourgeois resistance for its intrusiveness, and opposition among bureaucrats who lacked the resources to implement such a tax. Siegert concludes that 1848 did far less to shift tax burdens than did further industrialization. The *Vormärz* period, then, ended with unfinished business here, as well, along with German unification and democratization. Yet Siegert does not refer to the *Vormärz* and 1848 as modernizing failures because they did not reach their pinnacle in an income-tax basis for state funding. Rather, she argues, the pre-1848 efforts to systematize and rationalize tax policy provided an "irreplaceable basis" for the state in later years. It is hard to imagine, she argues, how these states might have existed without such reforms (p. 424).

In all, Siegert has thoroughly documented an overlooked side of modernization. Yet she has de-emphasized some potentially rich theoretical issues in examining procedural changes. The question of how much tax reform related to the cultural and social context, for example, is given less weight than it deserves. Making taxation simpler and more just was certainly in the air after the Enlightenment, and Siegert does assure us that the Enlightenment, with its universalist notions of justice, was ever-present in the background. But, as she concedes, it is impossible to determine what degree its influence actually had on policy-makers, at least in the early 1800s, since the policy-makers mention philosophical issues or concerns about justice so rarely. One must wonder, then, about the degree to which Enlightenment concerns of justice and rationality actually played a role among officials, in contrast to mere revenue enhancement.

Similarly, the cultural context plays less of a role in discussing general attitudes, as well, in dis-

cussing taxation as a "reform from above"; one gets less sense of the degree of pressure from "below." How much did an Enlightenment-inspired sense of injustice among the taxed themselves play a role? She assures us that these issues came to the fore during crises, as evidenced in the myriad pamphlets and tracts published around 1848. Nonetheless, it would be of interest to see how or when the pressure "from below" changed over time in the years prior, or--of just as much interest--to see that taxation was little on the minds of the taxed.

Second, the question of "pressure from below" leads one to ask about Siegert's periodization as well. Starting with the Napoleonic period as the beginning of departure from feudal taxation makes eminent sense; however, 1848 as a cusp-point is less convincing, since the conventional political periodization does not match the data well. Siegert often alludes to the fact that many reforms took place after 1848, or even after 1870. It is not obvious why one should see 1848 as a decisive break; even the ultimate "destination" of tax modernization, the income tax, is still only alluded to in Baden's and Prussia's three-class suffrage systems. The book's silence on this topic is all the more curious because in one sense 1848 indeed was a turning point. Though the revolutions did not mark the decisive completion of state consolidation or tax reform for either Prussia or Baden, one could argue that, with the post-1848 constitutions, pressure "from below" for the first time could exert as much influence on taxation policy as the bureaucratic measures "from above." Put differently: one could have argued that 1848 was a turning point because of a new connection to a different form of "modernization," that of parliamentarization. Such an argument would be a powerful approach, also creating historiographic links with studies of later tax politics. (One thinks of Peter-Christian Witt's *Die Finanzpolitik des Deutschen Reiches von 1905 bis 1913* (1970), for example.)

Finally, one might quibble with the author's means of defining "modern" taxation: few would challenge the notions of legal transparency or of universal implementation, but plenty of room remains to discuss the meaning of "equal" implementation of taxation. Defined by ability to pay, for example, or by portion of one's income? Perhaps the discussion of the modernization of taxation will not be closed until we close discussion on what we mean by "modern" taxation.

In all, Siegert has written an admirably thorough work here. Those working on bureaucratic histories of *Vormärz* Germany will find it indispensable for comparison with their own states and periods. Yet one wonders whether Siegert, in attempting to capture every surge and flow of policy debates and implementation efforts, has overlooked other potentially productive aspects of her topic. Her book is not the last word on the topic, but the last word will have to rely on it.

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