What is modernity? What cultural and political assumptions have historians placed upon this concept? And how might it be fruitfully applied to Wilhelmine Germany? Such are the leading questions behind this Festschrift for Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann, the noted Oxford historian of the Kaiserreich. Pogge’s lifetime of scholarship spans an extraordinarily broad range of topics, including German colonial policy and European imperialism; German liberalism; the nexus of German industry and politics, embodied in his studies of Walther Rathenau; German foreign policy, especially pre-World War I British-German relations and post-war German-Soviet ties; and the German Revolution. In Pogge’s own work, these diverse themes coalesce in the concept of “Wilhelminism,” an overarching analytical construct inspired by his study of Rathenau: “embracing both the national state and the new industrial-capitalist economy,” “Wilhelminism” celebrated the creative and healing powers of industrial technology while recognizing the urgency of political and social reform, rejecting the poles of both Conservatism and Social Democracy (pp. 8-9). In the present volume, Pogge’s former students explore “Wilhelminism” along an appropriately diverse array of themes, promising to provide “ firmer conceptual form” to a Wilhelmine era hitherto conventionally but diffusely characterized by “the Imperial state’s structural backwardness,” “Weltpolitik” and “social imperialism,” and popular political mobilization leading to a “politics in a new key” between 1890-1914 (pp. 6-7). Invoking Pogge’s spirit as an early challenger of the Bielefeld “new orthodoxy” of the 1970s, a Querdenker who “consistently challenged his students to consider all that changed, rather than all that remained the same, during the reign of Wilhelm II” (p. 13), the present volume takes aim at the remaining bastion of the Sonderweg paradigm, the commanding heights of political history.

Despite a quarter-century of scholarly assaults on the Bielefeld school’s model of Germany’s deviant course of development, and major concessions in the realms of social and cultural history that highlight the emergence of an active, self-confident civil society, editors Geoff Eley and James Retallack argue that “little seems to have changed in the analysis of the Kaiserreich’s political history more narrowly conceived.... Most ... accounts ... still insist on the backwardness of the Imperial state, the petrification of its central political institutions, and the unreformability of its practices” (p. 4). But, they point out, such interpretations assume an innate linkage between political modernity and liberal-democratic outcomes. In a theoretical manifesto, they protest that “there is no inherent reason why ‘modernizing’ initiatives in one area should reinforce the interests of ‘modernization’ in another. One of the pressing needs of Wilhelmine historiography ... is to deconstruct the long-established dichotomous framework of ‘modernizing economy’ and ‘backward political culture’ in order to open up the interesting and unexplored spaces in between.... If we take a broader view of ‘political modernization,’ carefully uncoupled from the usual assumptions about stronger forms of liberal democracy and parliamentary control, and more keyed theoretically to aspects of efficiency, state intervention, and governmentality, then the two decades before World War I begin to coalesce rather differently ... the Wilhelmine polity does not look very ‘backward’ at all.... Arguably, we need to rethink the category of the modern altogether” (pp. 6, 8).
pair of thoughtful essays that serve as bookends to
the collection. These essays effectively conceptualize and
articulate the macro-level issues at hand. Eley’s chapter
on “Making a Place in the Nation: Meanings of ‘Citizen-
ship’ in Wilhelmine Germany” challenges the Son-
derweg paradigm’s dismissive characterization of Wil-
helmine nationalism as an anti-modern melange of irra-
tionalism, romanticism, and racialism (p. 19). Instead,
by focusing on the dialectic behind the construction of
“the nation as a discursive formation” (p. 18) and the
interplay between political elites and civic culture and
society, Eley argues that notions of citizenship were dis-
cussed and debated “within the framework of modernity
rather than as resistances against it.” (19, original empha-
sis). Eley draws heavily on Celia Applegate’s research
showing how, far from being a hindrance to the creation
of national identity, the idealization of Heimat served to
bridge, negotiate, and fuse the differences between local
and national, traditional and modern in the process of
forging a nation out of provincials (pp. 21-23). Eley em-
phasizes the importance of civic agency in the language
and imagery of national identity, whether through the ef-
forts of middle-class voluntary associations or the per-
formance of nationalist ideology in popular culture. Above
all, civil society played an autonomous, indispensable
role in the invention of the German nation, forcing a re-
jection of simplistic notions of top-down, state-centered
manipulation (pp. 24-25). Even radical nationalism, he
argues, was an intensely modern phenomenon, embrac-
ing industrial civilization, the modern state, and the goal
of national efficiency. Again, Eley asserts the necessity of
divorcing our conception of modernity from a liberal-
democratic agenda: “Being an extreme modernist ... was
no hindrance to a variety of racist, anti-democratic,
and otherwise right-wing beliefs” (p. 28). Eley portrays
Wilhelmine politics very much in the active voice: “Ger-
mans made themselves into citizens by actively claiming
a place in the nation” (p. 30).

Eley depicts German nation-building as a process of
constant motion—“the only constancy in the new soci-
etal circumstances of Wilhelmine Germany,” he writes,
“came from the drama of unceasing pressures of change”
(p. 31). In conscious contrast, Retallack focuses on “sta-
sis,” even “cramping and constipation” as metaphors for
the dysfunctional quality of both middle-class lifestyles
and political process in the Wilhelmine era (p. 238). More
conciliatory to the Bielefeld school than Eley, Retallack
notes how pressures for stasis dominated in the economic
dominance of banks, cartels, and corporatism; in political
structures, including Prussian dominance within the Em-
pire, the lack of electoral and suffrage reform, and Ger-
many’s classic division into social-moral milieus; and cul-
turally, as radical expressionism generated a backlash of
traditional values (pp. 239-241).

Such was the context for liberalism’s drift into prag-
matism and avoidance of decisive decisions for political
reform (read parliamentary democracy) as exemplified by
Walther Rathenau’s personal waffling between theo-
etical systemic critiques and his refusal to make concrete
proposals for change, even when requested by Chan-
cellor Bethmann-Hollweg (pp. 240-243). Political Wil-
helminism in this light looks less like the deeds of an ac-
vivist citizenry, more like a melancholy mixture of “lin-
gering regrets” (p. 236), timid overtures, and “reform as
a reluctant response to stasis rather than a ringing en-
dorsement of change” (p. 237). Still, Retallack’s ultimate
point is that stasis did beget reform, especially after 1900,
when “Wilhelminians began to feel that political stasis
was itself a destabilizing factor in their lives” (p. 246).
The result was “a clearer, more hard-nosed vision of the
future,” “a new political dialectic between stasis and re-
form” evidenced in cleavages between urban and rural
sectors, producers and consumers, and in heated debates
over civil liberties (pp. 247-248). In short, Retallack ar-
gues “that a careful attempt to balance elements of re-
form and stasis, of progressivism and traditionalism, can
recover important aspects of Kaiserreich history that may
have had their historiographical heyday in the 1970s but
do not deserve to be disregarded today.” Ignoring the di-
agnostic “presents the sound of only one hand clapping–
a non-event that provides neither confirmation of what
came before nor transition to something new” (p. 249).

Following the lead set by Eley and Retallack, a num-
ber of case studies explore the question of Wilhelmine
modernity from the political, cultural, and economic per-
spectives. Most compelling is Brett Fairbairn’s contribu-
tion, “Membership, Organization, and Wilhelmine Mod-
ernism: Constructing Economic Democracy through Co-
operation.” Fairbairn challenges received views of the co-
operative movement, the world’s largest at the time, as an
“inherently anti-democratic” reaction of traditional-
ist agricultural interests against modernity (p. 35). In-
stead, Fairbairn portrays the cooperative movement as a
study “framework” for democracy in that the prac-
tices and procedures of cooperatives—equal voting, equal
membership—embodied democratic norms in rural soci-
ety, winning legitimacy for these values through mate-
rial success. The vitality of the cooperative movement
is thus indicative of a long-term cultural shift toward
democracy, which is to be understood as an ongoing pro-
cess, always "partial, contingent, and contextual" (p. 35). Members of cooperatives were shaped to become "modern individuals" (rational, autonomous agents with relation to the market and the state). Cooperatives also aided the formation of regional and national perspectives and identities rooted in the locale, a forceful example of the bridging and negotiating processes identified by Eley as central to the forging of a nationalist discourse (pp. 41-46).

Other essays of interest include Oliver Grant’s empirical study of the modernization of East Elbian agriculture, in which he demonstrates that, at least in the economic sector, East Elbian landowners proved more than capable of timely adaptation and modernization in communication, technology, and intensive agriculture. Grant thus forces historians to question the convenient assumptions equating reactionary politics with economic rigidity. Mark Hewitson’s analysis of "German Debates about Modern Nation States" takes an internationalist approach, showing how contemporary comparisons with Great Britain and France validated the Wilhelmine nation-state as a “legitimate and modern regime in its own right.” In spite of widespread criticism of the temperamental Wilhelm II, German intellectuals and social reformers, when confronted with the alleged material and moral deficiencies of western parliamentary regimes (materialism, corruption, political division, and military weakness), refrained from rejecting the Wilhelmine system as such. "Wilhelminism … had been dissociated in the minds of critics from Wilhelm himself. Such persistent support for the system in the crisis-ridden years between 1905 and 1914 derived in large part from the common belief that it had served Germany better than a parliamentary state had served Britain or France" (p. 87). Finally, in "Lebensreform: A Middle-Class Antidote to Wilhelminism?,” Matthew Jeffries offers a fascinating discussion of how vegetarianism, homeopathic medicine, nudist culture, and a solar cult ought not be caricatured as the cranky enthusiasms of apolitical middle-class Germans. Rather, they represented legitimate, if failed, attempts to confront the multiple problems of modern culture (social fragmentation, anomie, alienation, environmental destruction). Frequently criticized for being overly individualistic and aesthetic in their approaches, advocates of Lebensreform ultimately addressed fundamental social values that defined the quality of public life. In this, and through overtly political activity in attempting to spread their varied gospels and reshape society, reformers offered an alternative vision of modernity that reflects significant engagement in grappling with the perceived material and cultural excesses of the Wilhelmine era.

The other major grouping of essays is devoted to issues of German colonialism and foreign policy. The contributions vary considerably with regard to how effectively the authors tie their findings to the unifying themes of this collection. While Erik Grimmer-Solem, Paul Probert, and Willem Alexander van’t Padje deliver competent exercises on the topics of Weltpolitik and Anglo-German relations, the most interesting and creative scholarship appears in the chapters by Arne Perras, Nils Ole Oermann, and Niall Ferguson. In "Colonial Agitation and the Bismarckian State: The Case of Carl Peters," Perras attacks Hans Ulrich-Wehler’s "social imperialism" thesis as an explanatory model for German colonial policy in the 1880s. Building off the findings of Geoff Eley and Marilyn Shevin Coetzee on the ideology and agency of right-wing pressure groups in the Wilhelmine era, Perras explores the rhetoric and ideas of Carl Peters, the leading colonial agitator of the period. Perras argues that it was Peters’s ultra-nationalist, pan-Germanist, Social Darwinist ideology which provided the driving force behind the colonial movement, forcing Bismarck to endorse an active colonial policy (pp. 160-165). By recasting the core of German national identity in terms of an expanded concept of national interest, Peters thus foreshadowed the radical right-wing groups of the 1890s and 1900s. "But how 'new' was this radical Wilhelmine right, if we look at its ideology? Is it really sufficiently explained within a framework that limits itself to the time after 1890? “ (p. 166). Perras’s research thus suggests the need to expand our temporal understanding of radical German nationalism, and to consider lines of continuity as much as change in its study. Nils Oermann’s essay on "The Law and the Colonial State" develops the relationship between national identity and colonialism by highlighting the discrepancies between the formal German legal code and its interpretation by colonial administrators in German Southwest Africa, especially after the genocide of the Herero and Nama peoples. Oermann’s findings on the economic and political rationales behind the extreme application of the law in cases of corporal punishment and mixed-race marriages, often in defiance of strong popular and political criticism in Germany, reveal powerful tensions between core and periphery in German imperialism, and expose the convergence of economic, political, and racial factors in the formation and practice of a new colonial identity among ruling elites. Lastly, Ferguson’s case study of the Hamburg banker and financier Max Warburg clearly delineates the limits of fi-
nancial power in influencing Wilhelmine foreign policy. A “cosmopolitan nationalist,” Warburg played a leading role in the German financial world and actively worked to extend Germany’s economic reach overseas. His failure to gain credence for his sober warnings that an inadequate tax base and insufficient exports made Germany economically vulnerable in a conflict with Great Britain demonstrates the limits of outside elite influence on the traditional centers of power and illuminates the absence of a holistic modern understanding of strategic issues.

Two essays by Conan Fischer and Katiana Orluc close out the volume by attempting to draw out the continuities and legacies of Wilhelminism in the post-war period. Fischer’s is the more successful venture, focusing on the openness to pragmatic cooperation on the part of organized labor and many industrial elites as a potential line of continuity, both to the late Wilhelmine era, with its hesitant moves toward industrial cooperation, and especially toward 1949 and the post-WWII economic settlement. He identifies the turning point of Weimar democracy in the downfall of the second Stresemann cabinet in November 1923, a crisis precipitated by the government’s military intervention in Saxony but in fact rooted in a unilateral abrogation of limits on working hours by mine owners which destroyed industrial relations for the duration of the Republic. His arguments underscore the contingency of the Nazi triumph of 1933, thus restoring the Kaiserreich and Wilhelminism as subjects worthy of study independent of deterministic continuities to Nazism. In contrast, Orluc’s examination of Count Richard Coudenhouve-Kalergi, whom she represents as a “Wilhelmine European” as the leader of the Pan-European movement (1924-1933), is perhaps most useful in exposing the muddled legacy of Wilhelminism as a basis for political and social reform. Orluc is probably correct in identifying Coudenhouve-Kalergi’s faith in the perfectibility of society through technology, ethics, and an interventionist state as an attempt to adapt key elements of Wilhelmine reformism to overcome the perceived “decline of the West.” But apart from winning hefty donations from a few wealthy patrons (including Max Warburg), Orluc gives little reason to believe that Coudenhouve-Kalergi had significant political or cultural impact, an outcome that undercuts the broader utility of her study.

Wilhelminism and its Legacies is a theoretically and thematically complex book, making any evaluation of its overall worth as multifaceted as its topic. Simple editing changes would have made the overall argument of the collection more accessible: linking the numerous essays together more explicitly in the Introduction, for example, or grouping chapters under headings (“Politics,” “Economics,” “Imperialism and Foreign Policy”), would help to connect the contributed writings to the summation of Hartmut Pogge’s scholarly corpus at the end of the book.

More substantively: at one level, as a Festschrift for a beloved leading scholar of the field, the text triumphs in showcasing the fruits of Hartmut Pogge’s mentorship, as his students develop innovative and insightful approaches to the problems posed by modern German historiography in general and Wilhelmine scholarship in particular. Reconsidering definitions of the political and modernity, uncoupling the notions of modernity and progressive politics, and becoming mindful of the cultural processes of mediation and negotiation that shape the construction of national identity and perspective represents a real advance in how historians can comprehend the intertwining of continuity and change, stasis and reform. The publication of a paperback edition in fall 2004 testifies to the broad, long-term impact this book will have in shaping the contours of Kaiserreich studies.

Still, after fourteen essays and 250 pages of text, I am nonetheless inclined to agree with Matthew Jeffries’ wry comment: “As a scholarly term ‘Wilhelminism’ leaves much to be desired. Its meaning is vague; its usage, inconsistent” (p. 91). Much work remains to be done in clarifying both the meaning and application of the concept. Expanding future studies to move away from a top-heavy emphasis on elites, political theory, and institutions, in ways illustrated by Jeffries and Fairbairn, would seem a natural and necessary step. Opening research topics to include issues of religion, gender, and class within the analytical paradigm of Wilhelminism would be especially fruitful.

Eley and Retallack’s opening salvo in the assault on the Sonderweg’s final stronghold over the political history of the Kaiserreich has battered the walls and created some breaches. It remains to be seen how rapidly the champions of Wilhelminism will reload and with what scholarly ammunition they will renew the offensive. Also yet to be determined is how the defenders will respond: through counterattacks, hand-to-hand combat, asymmetrical warfare, or quiet resignation. The choices made will reveal much about the current mood and the future direction of Kaiserreich historiography.