



**William L. Patch.** *Christian Democratic Workers and the Forging of German Democracy, 1920-1980.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. 340 pp. \$105.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-108-42411-0.

**Reviewed by** James Chappel

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**Commissioned by** Matthew Unangst (SUNY Oneonta)

Writing now amidst the American withdrawal from Afghanistan, it is evident that policymakers and scholars still have precious little insight into how regimes, even and especially democratic ones, can be stabilized. The Federal Republic of Germany has been one of the most interesting sites of research into this question. Here, perhaps like nowhere else, a fractious and violent political system was transformed, almost overnight, into a functioning and stable democracy (even if it was one that, like all of its peers, was built on certain kinds of exclusions and inequities). How did this happen?

A number of scholars have asked questions like this as of late, plying the complex terrain that Philip Nord has called the “trans-war.” The research has not, in my view, reached a consensus, but it is at least clear that multiple factors were at work: the force of American arms and dollars, the galvanizing effect of the Cold War, the tranquilizing effect of economic expansion, and the moderating effect of Christian humanism, an intellectual tradition that emerged triumphant across the Cold War West in the 1940s. One striking characteristic of this literature is that it seldom dives into politics proper: not the space of ideology, but that of bureaucracy, interest-group formation, regional and urban electoral competition, and so on. That kind of work is challenging: it requires mastery of

the archives, and an immense patience for the bewildering number of actors and organizations that converge wherever actual power is being exercised.

William Patch is the right scholar to enter this breach. He has made a career out of subtle explorations of German political and labor history, focusing on the rise and influence of the Christian trade union movement in the Weimar Republic. He turns his attention now to the long tail of that phenomenon, asking about the impact of Christian trade unionists on German democracy between the 1930s and the 1980s (although the bulk of the book is on the 1940s and 1950s).

Patch’s new book is an attempt to leverage his unparalleled expertise in the history of Christian labor to make a sweeping argument about the rise and stability of the German democratic experiment. The title, *Christian Democratic Workers and the Forging of German Democracy*, is a bit of a misnomer. This is not really a work of labor history, in the sense that it does not explore the lives of actual workers. It is, at its core, a study of the labor wing of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), the party that boasted electoral dominance in the crucial years of Germany’s post-fascist experiment. Even more specifically, it is a study of the “Social Committees,” the organization that Catholic trade unionists and their allies founded

and which acted as a labor-friendly pressure group within the capacious CDU.

At the most basic level, it is clear that the success of German democracy had two essential domestic components: first, an attitude of compromise and negotiation between political opponents; and second, the creation of an economic and social order that met the basic needs of many Germans. The basic gambit of this book is to show that Christian workers were indispensable to each. I will consider them in turn.

Patch shows in many ways how Christian Democratic workers and the Social Committees acted as “bridge builders” between the basically conservative CDU and its more left-leaning partners: the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and Germany’s trade union confederation (the DGB). The utter fractiousness of the labor movement in the Weimar era had been, indisputably, a major reason for its collapse. And while there was a good deal of tension in the post-1945 labor movement, too, it was relatively speaking an ocean of calm. Partially, of course, this had to do with the absence of Communists. But partially, too, it had to do with the efforts of Catholic workers. Owing largely to their experience in the 1930s, Catholic workers and their leaders welcomed the founding of new, unified trade unions, where they worked together with Social Democrats. In the 1950s, though, this alliance came under assault from business interests in the CDU and from conservative Catholic leaders and clergy. For instance, in some of the more left-leaning leaders of the DGB came out against Konrad Adenauer’s plans for rearmament. This caused outrage in some Catholic circles, and provoked serious calls for a Christian labor federation to break free from the DGB. The Social Committees intervened to ensure that such a thing never happened. This story played out time and again, Catholic workers and the Social Committees engaging in complicated balancing acts to keep the CDU and the DGB in the same room, if not always on the same page.

Patch’s second major argument is that the Social Committees were successful in influencing policy, notably in the 1950s. Catholic labor activists had access to a long tradition of social and economic thinking, according to which workers ought to have both private property and some kind of co-ownership and co-management of their firms. The “German Model” enshrines both of these things, at least partially because of Catholic influence. The Social Committees faced an uphill battle, even and especially within their own party, but they were often victorious. For instance, labor supporters in the CDU ensured the parliamentary approval of parity co-determination in coal and steel in 1951, one of the most important social policy advances of the postwar period. Moreover, the same group played a large role in the passage of the dynamic pension reform of 1957, which was the grandest welfare expansion of the era. It was shepherded into law by Anton Storch, Adenauer’s long-serving minister of labor and a veteran of Christian trade unions. Moreover, Jakob Kaiser, one of the luminaries of Catholic labor and the Social Committees, helped to garner Social Democratic support for the bill, which was not obviously forthcoming given the bill’s intellectual and political provenance in conservative circles (for instance, Kaiser persuaded Adenauer to give an address to the DGB). Those two bills are well known to scholars of postwar German history, and the Catholic contribution to each has been discussed. Patch, though, goes further and shows the Christian workers’ engagement with less celebrated pieces of legislation that were also integral to the German model (the Co-Determination Law of 1976, for instance).

The book is extremely successful at making these two arguments. Patch knows the political history of this period as well as anyone, and has clearly spent years reconstructing, in painstaking detail, the world of Christian labor. The book is successful, too, at making at least one major argument about postwar German history. The standard story, in both generalist and specialist accounts, is

that the CDU gave up on its Christian socialist roots by the end of 1940s in the name of a tempered, free-market liberalism. Patch shows that this story is incorrect: it might slot neatly into a grand story of the Cold War, but it makes less sense in the world of German party politics. The CDU was not captured by its employers' wing in this period. It may have given up on "socialism" as a word, but that had less to do with an ideological *volte-face* than with the reality of politics in a divided Germany (the idea that properly socialist policies would lead the USSR to accept German reunification, for instance, became implausible). At the level of policy, the CDU remained open to workers' voices and generous welfare programs that were, by any reasonable definition, social democratic.

The big question, though, is how successfully Patch makes his grandest claim: that the Christian workers were midwives of a democratic Germany (or, to put it differently, that the two phenomena outlined above were integral to democratic functioning, and that nobody else could have done them). Here, I find Patch less persuasive, and mainly because he does not seriously attempt to pursue the argument that West German democracy would have failed without the contributions of Christian labor. This book is very much an institutional history of the Social Committees and kindred organizations. That allows one to see a great deal, but it does not allow one special insight into the success of democracy as such. For instance, Till van Rahden, in his recent *Demokratie: Eine gefährdete Lebensform* (2019), argues that new cultural norms around gender and the family were central to Germany's democratic consolidation. Konrad Jarausch, in his *After Hitler: Recivilizing Germans, 1945-1995* (2006), argues that Germans, despite the achievement of formal democracy, remained culturally ambivalent about popular sovereignty as an ideal for many years after 1945. These accounts differ from one another, and from Patch's. How does Patch deal with these arguments and others like them? It is hard to say, be-

cause he never directly addresses competing stories or explains why his own viewpoint is to be preferred. It is plausible, to be sure, that Christian workers played an important role in the "forging of German democracy," to adopt Patch's subtitle, but there is not a wide enough analytic or archival frame here to persuasively argue that point.

The book is remarkable for what it does not do, as much as for what it does. Many of the most *au courant* moves in German history make little appearance here. There is scant analysis of gender or culture, much less of race or homosexuality. In some ways, this makes for a refreshing read: the narrowness of the source base, and the questions asked, allows for a triumph of genuine empiricism, and allows Patch to genuinely answer the questions he poses. The book is a sterling example of political and institutional history, but it is also an example of how narrow an analysis can become when its purview is restricted to elite actors, and specifically to the actions of those elite actors that leave traces in the archives. The reader learns little, for instance, of what life was like for Catholic workers, or how it felt to be working alongside socialists. Little, too, is made of workers' family lives, or of the entry of women or guestworkers into the labor force.

All of this notwithstanding, the book is a massive achievement, and one that extends the analysis of Patch's previous, and rightly influential, scholarship. It is recommended reading for anyone interested in postwar German history, labor history, or the history of religion and politics.

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