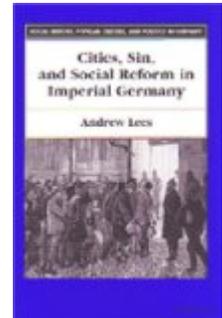




**Andrew Lees.** *Cities, Sin, and Social Reform in Imperial Germany.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002. 432 S. + 8 Zeichn. + 2 Abb. \$85.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-472-11258-6.



**Reviewed by** Julia Bruggemann

**Published on** H-German (July, 2004)

Growing cities in Imperial Germany elicited strong reactions from contemporaries. Some saw them as centers for political upheaval and breeding grounds for immorality, crime, and disease. Others embraced their potential to transform German society, politics, economics, and morality for the better. In his latest book, *Cities, Sin, and Social Reform in Imperial Germany*, Andrew Lees takes up these diverse ideas about Imperial German cities and continues his examination of urban life begun in *Cities Perceived* (1991) some decades ago. More specifically, the new book examines how "criticism of immorality and crime eventuated not only in antiurbanism and conservative repressiveness, but also in more pragmatic efforts to counteract deviancy in ways that did not entail either antiurban or illiberal outcomes" (p. 1). To this end, Lees "considers a wide range of intellectual, emotional, ideological, legal, and practical responses to urbanization" in nineteenth-century Germany (p. 3), many of which, he argues, represented progressive efforts at volunteer-based middle-class moral and social reform.

The main argument of the book is cast to refute the *Sonderweg* interpretation of German history which has been under attack for several decades. Rather than the authoritarian Germany of old, what emerges from Lees's analysis is one of "progressive modernity" (p. 5), where urbanites thrived on a clash of ideas and embraced the challenges posed by growing cities. In fact, Lees argues that looking through the lens of social history and the history of social reform points to "similarities between Germans and people who lived in other countries," thus rebutting the idea that Germany developed along a special, deviant historical path (p. 13).

Although the book is primarily based on published sources, it provides a deep and extensive summary and analysis of a broad variety of contemporary discourses about immorality, cities, and urban reform. Some of the material included here has appeared elsewhere, but the book creates a framework and narrative structure which underscores Lees's larger argument that Imperial Germany sustained a vital civil society where or-

dinary (middle class) citizens developed ideas and actively pursued their interests (p. 396).

The book is divided into four sections, each of which (separated into several chapters) can stand alone but contributes to the overall analysis and strengthens Lees's argument. The first section of the book tackles diverse views contemporaries held about urban life. It is followed by a section on the perceptions of deviant behavior associated with cities. In a third section, Lees turns to a discussion of proposals and programs by specific individuals, which is followed by a final section about reformist institutions and government intervention in urban life in Imperial Germany. The chapters in each section build on concepts introduced earlier and make for a coherent narrative, even though they treat quite distinct themes. The staging of the book makes not only for a compelling read, but also serves to deepen Lees's analysis of Imperial Germany as a society which embraced rather than rejected the economic, social, political, and aesthetic potential of its modern large cities.

In order to set the intellectual context in which urban reformers developed their ideas, Lees dedicates the first section of the book to an overview of the ways Germans thought about their cities. His analysis in chapter 1 includes both anti-urbanists and urban reformers. Lees's examination of anti-urbanism starts with Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl, who initially articulated his ideas in the mid-1800s. A second wave of anti-urbanist sentiment surfaced around the turn of the century. These "city haters" built on Riehl's ideas and further developed them to include a biologically based anti-urbanism as well as moral, cultural, and political criticisms of city life (p. 28). Ultimately, these social critics "desired a return to smaller and simpler communities in which traditional and supposedly more virtuous ways of living might be protected from the harmful influences of the modern metropolis" (p. 38). In contrast to writers who wanted to halt or even reverse the

growth of cities, Lees found ample evidence of critics who, though critical of its negative effects, embraced urban life and sought ways to improve it. Architects and city planners brought their expertise to bear and developed "ways of harmonizing the ideals of urban beauty they found in the past with the practical imperatives that stemmed from urban growth in the present" (p. 41). Several professional economists (and socialists) embraced the potential of cities, and developed constructive and pragmatic ideas for specific urban problems including public housing, public transportation, publicly supported insurance plans, etc. Although they often disagreed on specific ideas, these urban reformers all "shared a common commitment to making the city work" (p. 47).

In chapter 2 Lees discusses authors who not only thought about how to make cities work, but who expressed pride and hope for city life. These pro-urban commentators saw cities as centers for progressive thought, technological innovation, economic opportunity, etc. Moreover, they associated cities with enhanced individual liberty, especially for other members of the middle classes. "Their outlook reflected the prejudices as well as the hopes of most members of the social sectors from which they came, in which, although there was a sympathy for individual self-realization, there was much less desire for democracy than for efficient management" (p. 69). Indeed, Lees states that the German urban reformers he examines shared much in common with their British, French, and American counterparts, although he does not provide a thorough comparative analysis.

In the second section of his book, Lees provides an analysis of contemporary perceptions of deviant behavior in the urban context. Chapter 3 tackles discourses about immorality and moral degeneration. Lees focuses on conservative, mostly Protestant men who dominated discussions about immorality and identified cities with a series of behaviors "to which they objected primari-

ly on ethical rather than legal grounds" (p. 75). These men, often members of the Protestant clergy, developed elaborate critiques of excessive alcohol consumption, prostitution, illegitimacy, pornography, etc. and saw themselves as "chief custodians of their country's moral compass" (p. 77). They were powerful advocates of a repressive "Victorian" morality and, although they differed somewhat in their specific interpretations, many of them, including Alexander von Oettingen, Adolf Stoecker, Ludwig Weber, and others, based their activism on conservative religious ideas which all too often were also anti-Semitic and anti-Socialist. They developed activities and organizations such as the Inner Mission, the General Conference of German Morality Leagues, etc., which gave them the opportunity to preach and publish their ideas and thus "not only to communicate with one another, but also to reach larger audiences of outsiders" (p. 85). Rather than defining them as anti-urbanites, Lees sees these Protestant moralists as reformers who did not reject city life but wanted to modify it to fit into their world view. Other writers and activists such as Friedrich Naumann, Adolf von Harnack, and Martin Rade made up a less conservative and more flexible strand in the Protestant reform community, though their voices added to a growing chorus bemoaning the perceived ill-effects of urban centers on morality. Although conservative Protestant moralists dominated the public discussions about cities and immorality, "Protestants and Catholics, men and women, and various specialists in either education or other aspects of cultural life had all contributed to an intellectual and political climate characterized by greatly heightened sensitivity to moral concerns" (p. 131).

In chapter 4, Lees turns to a discussion of contemporary discourses about crime, its causes, and ideas for prevention which were dominated by scientists, not theologians, and were motivated by a "sense of urgency" (p. 136). Criminologists pointed to rising incidences of prostitution, theft, crime among young people, etc.--a crime wave, which

they linked to the growth of cities. Initially focusing on the freedom of choice of the individual to become a criminal as the main causes of crime, which could be punished and deterred by retributive justice and increased moral education, with time criminologists began to pay closer attention to ideas of biological determinism (following the ideas of Cesare Lombroso and others) and ultimately social/environmental factors, which came to dominate their thinking. Franz von Liszt and other German theoreticians embraced the idea of sociological jurisprudence which was based on the contention that "increases in crime had resulted from specific changes in society's organization" (p. 161). Tackling the social and economic causes of criminal behavior thus became imperative and increasingly began to include "a broader agenda of social reform" (p. 172). Pedagogical and prison reforms, for example, were logical outgrowths of this criminological thinking and "even though the criminologists themselves were not social reformers, what many of them said was quite congruent with ideas and activities expressed and carried out by a wide range of other individuals" (p. 188).

Section three turns to an analysis of some of these urban reformers in a series of case studies, examining the individual's visions and activities. Lees selects Victor Böhmert, Johannes Tews, Walther Classen, and Alice Salomon. Each represents a different type of reformer and anchor Lees's larger argument about urban activism, reformism, and positive outlook in a specific context.

Böhmert (chapter 5) was a journalist, academic, civil servant, and reformist activist who, according to Lees, exemplified a commitment to public affairs and private volunteerism. He was a liberal free trader, but showed some interest in government intervention on behalf of workers. He was a classical and progressive liberal and activist, but a committed anti-Socialist and moral conservative. Throughout his activism, he remained concerned with deviance and immorality

including alcoholism and prostitution, indigence and begging. Such immorality, he believed, hindered economic and social progress and only effective reform would transform the social environment and the individual. Although a believer in the disciplinary institutions and the "Elberfeld System" of poor relief, he nevertheless advocated for the establishment of institutions which emphasized reform over repression such as employment agencies, savings banks, recreation centers, etc. In fact, together with other reformers, Böhmert developed the concept of *Volksheime* or "people's houses" which functioned as recreational and education centers (p. 212). Böhmert, who believed that the road to a "better society lay less in what government could do for its citizens than in what citizens could do for themselves through a process of collective self help" (p. 220). Lees's analysis of Böhmert's activities builds on ideas introduced earlier in the book while underscoring the vitality and complexities of middle-class urban reform.

Lees next turns his attention to Johannes Tews (chapter 6), who believed in human educability and the possibilities of the urban milieu. As a progressive urban reformer he championed both elementary schooling in the *Volksschule* and adult education (*Volksbildung*). Indeed, he saw big cities as "arena[s] for organized education as well as for informal learning" (p. 230). He had ideas for improving primary education (including such concepts as coeducation, active learning, and academic freedom), but was even more interested in adult and mass education which took place outside institutional boundaries and would foster an ability to think for oneself by providing reading help, lectures, and cultural activities and making learning fun. "Tews insisted that the key to economic advancement lay in an educated workforce" (p. 232). Although Tews primarily relied on voluntary associations to put his ideas into practice, he grew to realize the importance of government support for his initiatives. Lees shows that other writers and activists (including Catholics

and Socialists) supported Tews and continued to develop and articulate the need for adult and mass education. Germans of various backgrounds thus shared a commitment to education in their cities that shows not only that they believed that all "were educable" but also that this was the path to--in Lees words--a more "harmonious society--indeed a more civil society" (p. 254).

Walther Classen's (chapter 7) activism concerned urban youth. Like many of his contemporaries, Classen was unsettled by the behavior he saw among urban youth which he saw as dangerous and a threat to the status quo. In a mix of "backward-looking criticism of urban modernity and a willingness to confront urban problems via city-centered reforms," Classen developed a series of youth-oriented programs at the Hamburg *Volksheim* which were modeled on similar organizations in England (p. 262). The settlement houses which relied on middle-class support did not have a large reach in Hamburg, but garnered attention on the national stage. Classen's anti-Socialist traditionalist ideas seemed increasingly paternalistic and outdated, and received competition from churches and working class organizations, but Lees argues that "the campaigns to rescue German youth constituted a common thread that linked Germans who worried about urban problems and sought to ameliorate them" (p. 286).

The final case study included in this section of the book examines the reformist legacy of Alice Salomon (chapter 8). One of the founders of social work as a profession for women, Salomon was dismayed by the influence of cities on public morality and the turn away from religion and compassion. She identified "urban-industrial competitiveness," but also "upper-class heartlessness" and individualism as culprits (p. 292). As a *bürgerlich* traditionalist in class and gender questions, Salomon was a strong advocate of the institution of marriage, saw work settings as detrimental to women and had an awareness of the dangers faced by working-class youth. Her views were

based on the belief that women were fundamentally different from men and that women should fulfill different roles than men. In fact, she argued that feminine virtues were particularly suited to social work. Initially she was active in institutions which matched her outlook, but at the height of her career, Salomon established a school which trained women for social work. Influenced by Jane Addams in the United States, Salomon herself became an inspiration to others, and while she remained a middle-class traditionalist, she was devoted to women's and children's issues and was a committed advocate of governmental measures to improve working class life.

In the fourth and final section of the book, Lees turns from individual writers and activists to institutional and governmental reform. It is in these last chapters that his thesis deepens as he examines some of the contacts made between individual reformers. "In so doing, they contributed to the creation of a broad network of interrelated institutions that helped to constitute a *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* (civil society) between the individual and the state" (p. 321). In order to explore the connections between individual reformers, Lees foregrounds an examination of the Center for Popular Welfare (Zentralstelle für Volkswohlfahrt) which, he argues, has not received due attention from scholars. This umbrella organization for social reform functioned as a clearinghouse for the exchange of information and reached a large audience. It grew from a small information center to include the participation of government ministries and private associations. Although originally a clearly paternalistic organization, Lees argues that it developed new strategies to overcome the mistrust of the working classes by using welfare officials as mediators, encouraging leisure and education activities (including libraries, lectures, museum visits, concerts). The Center also began to pay closer attention to the needs of the urban youth and especially young women as perceived by the middle-class activists. Many of these programs, however, retained their original purpose,

which was to rid urban society of corrosive influences, which included not only immorality, but also Social Democracy. Lees acknowledges that the activists behind the Centers "were by no means activists," but he insists that "they cannot simply be dismissed as defenders of the status quo" (p. 353). While it is surely true that these middle-class activists "engaged in voluntary action whose further spread they sought to encourage" (p. 354), they had specific socio-political goals in mind. Their volunteerism was limited to activities which did not endanger the fundamentals of the political and social system.

The final chapter of the book turns to a survey of some of the governmental efforts towards urban reform which complemented the private and voluntary activism examined above, including a discussion of Bismarck's social insurance system. Indeed, governmental and private middle-class pursuits were motivated by similar concerns: the fear of moral and physical disorder, and the rise of Social Democracy. This confluence of interests between the government and middle-class reformers somewhat undercuts Lees's argument that the reformers did not want to defend the status quo.

Lees concludes his book by restating his main argumentative threads, and highlights "the way in which dialogue and contestation eventuated in essentially positive and constructive ways of facing urban problems" (p. 391). Indeed, his emphasis on "positive modernity" is one of the most intriguing conclusions, especially because it stands in some tension to the importance middle-class urban reformers gave to activities that were geared toward social control.

Although each section (indeed most chapters) of the book can stand alone, this is a case where the whole is larger than the sum of its individual parts. The various chapters provide in-depth analyses of specific themes, individuals, or institutions, which will surely be useful to scholars interested in pursuing work in those areas, but the

book as a whole provides a powerful illustration of bourgeois German society as a vibrant "community of discourse[s]," where middle-class urbanites were not passive subjects duped by politically savvy, yet anachronistic landed elites, but instead masters of their cities (p. 401). What we do not find out from this book is how all this volunteerism and activism was received by the people (women, men, children and youth of the working classes) at whom it was targeted and, indeed, how much, if at all, it transformed their lives and gave them access to the emerging middle-class civil society described so convincingly by Lees. Indeed, Lees's analysis makes clear just how much we have yet to find out about urban life (both middle class and working class) in Imperial Germany.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

**Citation:** Julia Bruggemann. Review of Lees, Andrew. *Cities, Sin, and Social Reform in Imperial Germany*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. July, 2004.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9593>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.