Central European History (2025), 1–22
doi:10.1017/S0008938925101167

ARTICLE

Finding Meaning in the Rules of the Game? German Social Democrats and Parliamentary Debate, 1860–90

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Abstract

Although the social democrats fundamentally opposed the political order of the German Empire, they participated in parliament from the beginning. The party not only sat on the parliamentary benches, but its representatives also proved to be committed parliamentarians. Using a combination of parliamentary, party, and movement sources, this article shows that social democrats' parliamentary participation followed two lines of reasoning. First, the party admitted that parliamentary participation served publicity purposes. In fact, social democrats took the Reichstag stage to present their political project to the masses. Second, the party was less willing to admit that parliament fitted perfectly into the associational tradition of working-class culture. Orderly and fair debate had been the norm of social democratic activism long before the party was founded. It is precisely this last aspect that provides an important and previously overlooked explanation for the social democrats' surprising devotion to a political system they so deeply detested.

Keywords: cultural history; Germany; Kaiserreich; political history; politics

In 1870, the social democrat Wilhelm Liebknecht called the German parliament a stage for "comedy."[1] In his view, parliamentary rule was a sham, and parliamentary speeches were stage plays. Liebknecht's quote was programmatic for the strategy of the social democrats in the Imperial German state, which they vehemently opposed. The party believed that parliament was the obedient servant of the authoritarian government under Chancellor Otto von Bismarck. The entire legitimacy of the despised state rested on the fabricated representation of the Reichstag. Yet remarkably, this hostility against parliament did not prevent social democrats from participating in parliament. As early as the 1860s and 1870s, the first decades of parliamentary representation, social democrats—even the outspoken Liebknecht—not only decided to run for parliament and accept their mandates, but also became dedicated and proud parliamentarians who actively contributed to the parliamentary assembly. In the Reichstag, social democratic criticism of authoritarianism coexisted with the active participation in the parliamentary debate.

This double structure of aversion and dedication was not unique to Germany. Many European states witnessed the election of new parliamentarians with a similarly ambivalent relationship to parliament, especially among the parliamentarians of socialist and social

[1] "Protokoll über den ersten Congreβ der sozial-demokratischen Arbeiterpartei zu Stuttgart am 4., 5., 6. und 7. Juni 1870," in *Protokolle der sozialdemokratischen Arbeiterpartei* (1871; repr., Glashütten im Taunus: D. Auvermann, 1971), 12.

democratic origin. In Germany, the social democrats joined parliament in the constitutional assembly of 1867, establishing a permanent presence in parliament and serving as a model for many social democrats in Europe.[2] Their early success made them, their ideology, organization, and their electoral campaigns an important object in a longstanding and diverse historiography.[3] This broad history also shows how the working-class movement has become integrated into the new German state. However, as the case of Liebknecht shows, parliament was initially a problematic institution for the young party to come to terms with.

In the historiography, four levels of explanations for the party's decision to enter parliament can be discerned: political, individual, organizational, and parliamentary. The first explanation is that social democrats joined parliament because they believed that they could implement their political program in parliament. This would also explain why social democrats participated in social policy discussions in the Reichstag: they hoped to achieve results for their working-class supporters and eventually change the system. In this vision, political change was expected to take time, but it was the only legal and peaceful way to change existing conditions.[4] For instance, the famous social democratic parliamentarian August Bebel mentioned the legislative influence of the Reichstag.[5] However, as historian Effi Pracht argues in her detailed study of the social democrats in the Reichstag, such hopes had to be reconciled with the problem of operating in, and thus potentially supporting, a fundamentally unjust political system. Pracht argues that reform policy played a subordinate role until the 1880s and remained a problem for the party in the following decades.[6] Parliament was politically weak, with questionable legislative influence, especially, for small parliamentary parties, and the assembly had no control over the executive.[7] It was not until the 1890s that social democrats formally accepted parliament as the central institution of the modern nation-state. Karl Kautsky argued that parliamentarianism ultimately led to the parliamentary republic.[8]

The second explanation, which has some historical traction but is not supported by historiography, is that the social democrats had an ulterior motive for entering parliament and put aside party morality for the sake of personal gain. For instance, party historian, Franz Mehring, feared that the power of parliament would corrupt social democrats

[2] Stefan Berger, *The British Labour Party and the German Social Democrats, 1900–1931* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002).

[3] Gerhard Albert Ritter, *Die Sozialdemokratie im deutschen Kaiserreich in sozialgeschichtlicher Perspektive* (Munich: Stiftung Historisches Kolleg, 1989). Jonathan Sperber, *The Kaiser's Voters: Electors and Elections in Imperial Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); James Retallack, *Red Saxony: Election Battles and the Spectre of Democracy in Germany, 1860–1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Andrew Bonnell, *Red Banners, Books and Beer Mugs: The Mental World of German Social Democrats, 1863–1914*, vol. 220, Historical Materialism Book Series (Leiden: Brill, 2021).

[4] Wolfgang Pack, *Das parlamentarische Ringen um das Sozialistengesetz Bismarcks, 1878–1890* (Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 1961). See also East German historians who saw parliamentary participation as "revolutionary parliamentary tactic" Manfred Weien, *Der Kampf der deutschen Sozialdemokratie im Reichstag für Demokratie und gegen Militarismus 1878 bis 1884* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1971), 361.

[5] Volker Stalmann, "Das Verhältniss der Sozialdemokratie zum parlamentarischen System 1871–1890," in *SPD und Parlamentarismus: Entwicklungslinien und Problemfelder 1871–1990*, ed. Detlef Lehnert (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 2016), 60–62.

[6] Elfi Pracht, *Parlamentarismus und deutsche Sozialdemokratie 1867–1914* (Pfaffenweiler: Centaurus-Verlagsgesellschaft, 1990), 407–8.

[7] Alfred Milatz, "Reichstagswahlen und Mandatsverteilung 1871 bis 1918," in *Gesellschaft, Parlament und Regierung: zur Geschichte des Parlamentarismus in Deutschland*, ed. Gerhard A. Ritter (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1974), 207–23.

[8] Detlef Lehnert, "Sozialdemokratie und Parlamentarismus. Von der Reichsgründungszeit bis zur neuen deutschen Einheit," in *SPD und Parlamentarismus: Entwicklungslinien und Problemfelder 1871–1990*, ed. Detlef Lehnert (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 2016), 9–14.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008938925101167 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and arouse self-interest that would not serve the working class.[9] The communists and syndicalists of the early twentieth century were even more outspoken in their criticism of parliamentary participation. Rosa Luxemburg's criticism of a parliamentary course is well described in the literature.[10] Syndicalist Karl Roche implied that parliamentarians "resisted" the revolutionary masses because they were "completely incompatible with the work of the members of parliament."[11] These interpretations, however, should be read in the light of the conflict with social democrats about the mass strike and the First World War.[12]

The third type of explanation portrays the parliamentary actions of social democrats as an inevitable response to protect their movement in the difficult circumstances of the German Empire. Since the social democrats had no legal pathway to effectively oppose authoritarianism outside of parliament, the survival of their organization, and thus their movement, seemed to depend on maintaining representation in parliament. Under these circumstances, as historian Vernon Lidtke once put it, entering parliament seemed a "natural" development for German social democrats.[13] The literature on the anti-socialist laws (Sozialistengesetze) leads in this interpretation.[14] Indeed, after 1878, parliament had become the only place where social democrats could legally operate to protect their civil liberties and implement their political program.[15] This explanation is also useful because it points to the agitational function that the social democrats prescribed for the parliament as a public platform.[16] While this argument was important in shaping social democratic discourse, it cannot fully explain the social democrats' dedicated commitment from the outset to the procedures of parliament, which were, at least to some extent, incompatible with reaching a broad audience.

A fourth line of explanation emphasizes the importance of the norms, rules, and procedures of parliament in explaining the growing fascination of social democrats with parliament. The cultural turn in parliamentary studies focuses on parliament as a cultural institution that subjected its members to a specific cultural context that created a shared community.[17] Parliamentary historians have argued that parliament helped to integrate social democrats into the German political system. They also find that, despite strong anti-parliamentarism, social democratic (and conservative) parliamentarians tended to behave respectfully in the assembly.[18] In addition, historians

[9] Monika Kramme, *Franz Mehring: Theorie und Alltagsarbeit*, Campus Forschung 133 (Frankfurt (Main), 1980), 279–81.

[10] John P. Nettl, *Rosa Luxemburg* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1967).

[11] Roche wrote under the pseudonym Diogenes. Diogenes, *Die Ohnmacht der Sozialdemokratie im deutschen Reichstage. Eine Wanderung durch die Berichte der sozialdemokratischen Reichstagfraktionen* (Berlin: Fritz Kater, 1912), 11.

[12] For left-wing anti-parliamentarism in the interwar period see Riccardo Bavaj, *Von links gegen Weimar: linkes antiparlamentarisches Denken in der Weimarer Republik*, Politik- und Gesellschaftsgeschichte (Bonn: Dietz, 2005).

[13] Vernon L. Lidtke, *Outlawed Party: Social Democracy in Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), 33; Gustav Seeber, *Die deutsche Sozialdemokratie und die Entwicklung ihrer revolutionären Parlamentstaktik von 1867 bis 1893.* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1966).

[14] W. L. Guttsman, *The German Social Democratic Party, 1875–1933: From Ghetto to Government* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1981), 11; Paul Kampffmeyer, *Unter dem Sozialistengesetz* (Berlin: J. H. W. Dietz nachf., 1928); Torsten Kupfer, *Geheime Zirkel und Parteivereine: die Organisation der deutschen Sozialdemokratie zwischen Sozialistengesetz und Jahrhundertwende* (Essen: Klartext, 2003).

[15] Lidtke, *Outlawed Party*, chap. 3.

[16] Pracht, *Parlamentarismus und deutsche Sozialdemokratie*, 407.

[17] Andreas Biefang, *Die andere Seite der Macht: Reichstag und Öffentlichkeit im "System Bismarck" 1871–1890* (Droste, 2009).

[18] Andreas Biefang, "Die Sozialdemokratie im Reichstag. Das Parlament als Faktor der Integration 1871–1890," *Mitteilungsblatt des Instituts für soziale Bewegungen* (2001): 25–45; Theo Jung, "Der Feind im eigenen Hause:

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008938925101167 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of the early working-class movement have shed light on the rich associational landscape that shaped the organizational culture of the early party organizations of social democracy.[19]

Building on these existing studies, this article seeks to answer the question of why social democrats not only joined, but also actively participated in, an institution that was so crucial to the functioning and legitimacy of Germany's authoritarian system. Rather than dismissing it as lip service, the article takes seriously the party's fundamental opposition to parliament, which was particularly important in the early years when the social democrats made the decision to enter parliament in the first place. During this period, social democrats were a small group in parliament (1867–84), before doubling their mandates to twenty-four of the 397 seats in parliament.[20] As a small party under external pressure, a fundamental decision such as entering parliament had to be coupled with the norms, practices, and narratives that convinced party members to follow their leadership into this new political arena.

By analyzing the early debates and behavior of social democrats regarding parliament, the article shows that while various political, personal, and organizational factors played an important role, the agitational function of parliament was most often cited by the social democrats themselves. More importantly, however, what was not directly discussed, but was crucial to the assessment of a viable and acceptable political strategy in the new party, was the tradition of operating as a political movement that had grown out of the workers' associations. The roots of social democratic political activity lay in a rich debating culture that emphasized oratorical skills to persuade an audience within a given framework of behavior. Confronted with the new institution, procedures and customs of the Reichstag, social democratic parliamentarians drew on the norms, values, and practices that they had developed as public speakers in public assemblies. The article argues that it was the debating culture of the diverse biotope of workers' associations that created social democracy as a party and shaped the behavior of its representatives in parliament.[21] Adherence to procedures designed to ensure a fair debate played an important role in legitimizing the role of leaders and political arguments in public meetings, party conferences, and ultimately in parliament.

This article combines the behavior of the party's representatives in parliament with a close examination of the internal party discussions through the lens of the debating culture of the pre-parliamentary working-class movement. It does so by analyzing a wide range of primary sources. Parliamentary minutes, stenographically recorded and digitally available, provide a detailed account of the debates of the Reichstag.[22] Non-parliamentary primary sources of the social democratic movement outside of parliament include historical material from the party organization, namely the minutes of party congresses, brochures, and electoral manifestos. In addition, the correspondence of party leaders, electoral candidates, and the families of parliamentarians has been consulted. The party newspaper *Der*

Antiparlamentarismus im Reichstag 1867–1918," in *Parlamentarismuskritik und Antiparlamentarismus in Europa*, ed. Marie-Luise Recker and Andreas Schulz (Düsseldorf: Droste, 2018), 129–49; Pracht, *Parlamentarismus und deutsche Sozialdemokratie*.

[19] Thomas Welskopp, *Das Banner der Brüderlichkeit: die deutsche Sozialdemokratie vom Vormärz bis zum Sozialistengesetz* (Bonn: J. H. W. Dietz, 2000); Toni Offermann, *Arbeiterbewegung und liberales Bürgertum in Deutschland 1850–1863* (Bonn: Neue Gesellschaft, 1979); Karl Birker, *Die deutschen Arbeiterbildungsvereine 1840–1870*, 10 (Berlin: Colloquium Verlag, 1973).

[20] Wilhelm Heinz Schröder, *Sozialdemokratische Parlamentarier in den deutschen Reichs- und Landtagen, 1867–1933: Biographien, Chronik, Wahldokumentation* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1995), 829.

[21] Welskopp, *Das Banner der Brüderlichkeit*; Bonnell, *Red Banners, Books and Beer Mugs*.

[22] See www.reichstagsprotokolle.de.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008938925101167 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Volksstaat, recently digitized, has become another valuable source for following the party's discourses on parliament.

Connecting parliamentary, party, and movement history, this research object is of a transient nature. We might think of social democracy as a unified political party, but for nineteenth-century activists, this was a utopia at best. As part of the divided working-class movement, German social democratic organizations underwent several fundamental changes in the second half of the nineteenth century that made it more of a movement than a party organization. The early period was characterized by internal conflict and the eventual unification of a divided movement. The first workers' party in German-speaking countries was the Allgemeiner Deutscher Arbeiterverein (General German Workers' Association, ADAV), created under Ferdinand Lassalle in 1863.[23] However, the organization that provided the steppingstone for the later Social Democratic Party was its competitor, the Vereinstag Deutscher Arbeitervereine (Federation of German Workers' Associations, VDAV), founded by liberals a month later in June 1863. The social democrats August Bebel and Wilhelm Liebknecht also created the Sächsische Volkspartei (Saxon People's Party) in 1866. The two men also played a decisive role in transforming the VDAV into the Sozialdemokratische Arbeiterpartei (Social Democratic Workers' Party, SDAP) in 1869.[24] At the founding congress, the SDAP incorporated dissenting members of the ADAV, such as the former ADAV member Wilhelm Bracke. Later, the SDAP merged with the ADAV and became the Sozialistische Arbeiterpartei (Socialist Workers' Party, SAP, 1875) and Sozialdemokratische Partei (Social Democratic Party, SPD, 1890).

From this divided history, this article first discusses the reasons for social democrats to avoid the parliamentary route that was far from self-evident for social democracy. Following this, the focus is on two motives for German social democrats to overcome their concerns and ultimately join and participate in parliament: first, the publicity that parliamentary debates offered to the party, which was the primary explanation offered by the social democrats themselves; second, the values and practices of workers' associations, which have not been explored in the literature so far. In the final part, the article demonstrates that the social democrats became a contested, yet undeniable, part of the Reichstag.

Parliament as a Problem and a Reality

Social democratic parliamentarians were initially a small group in the Reichstag. While only two social democratic representatives had made it into the constitutional assembly of the North German Federation (February 1867), they won seven seats for the first regular parliament (August 1867) and two additional ones in the by-elections in 1869. In the first legislative period after unification in 1871, social democrats started with two representatives, Reinhold Schraps and August Bebel. Afterward, the party extended its numbers to nine (1874) and won twelve mandates (1877). However, the social democratic group was reduced to nine representatives in the aftermath of the dissolution of parliament in September 1878. Despite the anti-socialist laws, the social democrats still managed to succeed in elections in the following two decades, gaining twenty-four seats in 1884.[25] In 1887,

[23] Toni Offermann, *Die erste deutsche Arbeiterpartei: Materialien zur Organisation, Verbreitung und Sozialstruktur von ADAV und LADAV, 1863–1871* (Bonn: J. H. W. Dietz, 2002).

[24] Francis Ludwig Carsten, "The Arbeiterbildungsvereine and the Foundation of the Social-Democratic Workers Party in 1869," *The English Historical Review* (April 1, 1992): 361–77; Dieter Langewiesche, "Zur Frühgeschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung," *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* (1975): 301–21.

[25] Schröder, *Sozialdemokratische Parlamentarier in den deutschen Reichs- und Landtagen, 1867–1933*, 97–98.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008938925101167 Published online by Cambridge University Press

they only won eleven mandates but from 1890 their mandates increased exponentially to 110 mandates by 1912.[26]

The slow-growing success in elections did not mean that the distrust vis-à-vis the Reichstag ceased. Social democratic anger was sincere and outspoken and became an important argument of campaigning that focused on the injustice of German society and politics. This criticism was so strong that it extended from the systemic disappointment in the electoral system and parliamentary power to the outcry about the aggressive suppression of activists' political and private lives.

At first glance, the broadening of national suffrage promised to improve the situation for political newcomers. It also fitted early social democratic political thought. Social democratic icon Lassalle had demanded "universal, equal and direct" suffrage in his formative Offenes Antwortschreiben (Open Response Letter) as early as 1863.[27] When universal suffrage was introduced in 1867 (North German Confederation) and 1871 (German Empire), male citizens over the age of twenty-five could vote—a European exception in the 1870s. Among historians, the consequences of universal male suffrage for the political culture are still contested to this day. Margaret Anderson emphasized that elections became part of the political and social world of ordinary people; Germans grew accustomed to selecting their political representatives.[28] At the same time, this was a period of fierce contestation, as Retallack has argued: the old elites, "[d]emocracy's enemies," fought a bitter battle to maintain their privileges.[29]

Unsurprisingly, in the social democratic internal and external debates, electoral rights were treated as a problem rather than a solution. The prevalent fear was that elections were the instrument that legitimized authoritarianism. How could the social democrats convince their fellow Germans of radical political change if parliament was already a representative assembly? The party responded with a detailed critique of suffrage in the German Empire, being the first of ten "next demands" of the SDAP founding program two years after implementation.[30] The first concern was that suffrage exclusively applied to the national parliament. Social democrats demanded multi-level universal suffrage, including "parliaments of the individual states, the provincial and municipal councils, and all other representative bodies."[31] The second problem was the absence of remuneration for parliamentary representatives, which highlighted the inequality between parliamentarians.[32] Third, the way universal suffrage worked was insufficient from the perspective of the social democrats, who demanded "direct legislation (right of suggestion and rejection) by the people."[33] The fourth problem was the unequal distribution of voters between electoral districts. Formally

[26] Sperber, *The Kaiser's Voters*. The growth in number of Reichstag seats (but not of votes) was temporarily reversed in 1907 in the so-called "Hottentot elections," when there was a concerted mobilization of conservative and nationalist votes against the social democrats.

[27] Ferdinand Lassalle, *Offenes Antwortschreiben an das Zentral-Komitee zur Berufung eines allgemeinen deutschen Arbeiter-Kongresses in Leipzig* (Berlin: Buchhandlung Vorwärts, 1919), 31.

[28] Margaret Lavinia Anderson, *Practicing Democracy: Elections and Political Culture in Imperial Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

[29] Retallack, *Red Saxony*, 6.

[30] Programm und Statuten der Sozialdemokratischen Arbeiterpartei, beschlossen auf dem Kongress in Eisenach 1869 in Dieter Dowe and Kurt Klotzbach, *Programmatische Dokumente der deutschen Sozialdemokratie*, 2nd ed. (Berlin: J. H. W. Dietz Nachf., 1984), 160–61.

[31] Programm und Statuten, 160.

[32] For a history of remuneration in the *Reichstag*, see Hermann Butzer, *Diäten und Freifahrt im Deutschen Reichstag: der Weg zum Entschädigungsgesetz von 1906 und die Nachwirkung dieser Regelung bis in die Zeit des Grundgesetzes*, Beiträge zur Geschichte des Parlamentarismus und der politischen Parteien (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1999); Nikolaus Urban, *Die Diätenfrage: zum Abgeordnetenbild in Staatsrechtslehre und Politik 1900–1933*, Beiträge zur Rechtsgeschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003).

[33] Programm und Statuten, 161.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008938925101167 Published online by Cambridge University Press

every 100,000 voters elected one representative, but the growing population size gave urban voters a relatively low electoral weight, a particularly pressing problem for the social democrats whose electorate was clustered in the big cities.[34] As early as 1870, the party congress mentioned the unequal distribution of districts. Electoral boundaries were not reformed until 1912, leading to enormous discrepancies between the population figures of the electorate. As one of the most outspoken critics of parliament, Liebknecht attacked the composition of parliament: universal suffrage was "a bait for the thoughtless."[35] The Reichstag was a *Scheinparlament*, a parliament in appearance.[36] In fact, the new state was "twofold dangerous": while pretending to be democratic, it was in fact governed autocratically. In alarmist words, it "falsified the ideas of democracy and abused them for absolutist purposes."[37]

Social democrat Wilhelm Liebknecht also criticized the fact that parliament only had an "advisory voice."[38] The Reichstag had limited legislative powers. He was not the only critic of parliament in social democratic debates. The weak position of parliament vis-à-vis government worried the social democrats and became another reason to discuss the value of parliamentary participation. Hence, unmasking parliament for its bogus representativity manifested as a leading theme in social democratic discourses in the 1860s. In the opinion of the social democrats, parliament was nothing more than an obedient instrument of the authoritarian state.[39] At the party conference in 1870, delegate G. Werth of Barmen completely objected to electoral participation. His main argument was that "[b]y taking part in the election, one takes part in the comedy drama."[40] The reason for such principled refusal was the weakness of representative government in the Imperial German state: "[t]he parliamentary bodies are absolutely incapable of forming the basis for our struggle."[41] For political change, the social democrats had to find a different strategy. Werth's comment was taken seriously and repeated by delegate Löwenstein of Fürth.

The social democrats were also critical of parliamentary representation not preventing an entire battery of political and civic restrictions that hit their party particularly hard. These restrictions were enshrined in the constitutional design of the new state; the police, judges, and military authorities creatively bent the law to pressure the social democrats. Between 1878 and 1890, all social democratic activities, including press, organizations, and meetings were banned, which the historiography usually cites as a prime example of political suppression.[42] The anti-socialist laws were Bismarck's response to the growing popularity of the social democrats whose electoral support seemed to inexorably grow.[43] However, the decades prior to the anti-socialist laws already saw harassment, house searches, expulsion, and even arrests, albeit to a lesser extent. In fact, the experience of imprisonment was widely shared among the social democratic leaders. Particularly in the troubled times leading up to German unification, the authorities could strike at any time. In

[34] Milatz, "Reichstagswahlen und Mandatsverteilung 1871 bis 1918."

[35] "Protokoll 1870," 12.

[36] "Protokoll 1870," 12.

[37] "Protokoll über den sechsten Congress der sozial-demokratischen Arbeiterpartei abgehalten zu Coburg am 18., 19., 20. und 21. Juli 1874," in *Protokolle der sozialdemokratischen Arbeiterpartei*, reprint (Glashütten im Taunus: D. Auvermann, 1971), 12.

[38] Wilhelm Liebknecht, *Ueber die politische Stellung der Sozialdemokratie insbesondere im Bezug auf den Reichstag*, 3rd ed. (Leipzig: Druck und Verlag der Genossenschaftsdruckerei, 1874), 5.

[39] "Protokoll 1870," 13.

[40] "Protokoll 1870," 14.

[41] "Protokoll 1870," 14.

[42] Pack, *Das parlamentarische Ringen um das Sozialistengesetz Bismarcks, 1878–1890*; Lidtke, *Outlawed Party*.

[43] Sperber, *The Kaiser's Voters*.

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1870, the entire executive and some members of the control commission of the party were arrested for their support of the Paris Commune. In addition, the authorities decided to relocate the prisoners to the eastern empire in Lötzen, making visits and correspondence with family, friends, and the party especially difficult. Relocation also had an element of public humiliation. As *Der Volksstaat*, the party's newspaper, reported, the prisoners were arrested and transported "in chains."[44] Imprisonment was also a fate that the editor of the *Volksstaat*, Adolf Hepner, and the parliamentary representatives Liebknecht and Bebel experienced. In the middle of the electoral campaign in 1871, the two most promising electoral candidates were arrested for high treason, which led to two years in prison.

Prison also affected the families of social democrats, making political resistance a deeply personal matter. One particularly tragic case was the death of Ernestine Liebknecht, the first wife of Wilhelm Liebknecht. Ernestine fell sick, probably with tuberculosis, in 1867, the year of the elections for the constitutional assembly of the Reichstag and a short period of imprisonment for her husband.[45] In bitter despair, her husband wrote about revenge: "[m]ay the day of retaliation not be too long!"[46]

This experience probably shaped another Liebknecht speech in Berlin in 1869 that became famous and was published as a brochure *Über die Politische Stellung der Sozialdemokratie insbesondere mit Bezug auf dem Reichstag* (About the political position of social democracy, especially with reference to the Reichstag). Speaking to the Democratic Workers' Association, Liebknecht positioned his movement and society against the old state, saying that they stood in "unforgiving contradiction."[47] Liebknecht, an old revolutionary of 1848, believed that taking over power was the best strategy: "[w]e must therefore take control of the state."[48] A social democratic government was not a goal in itself. The purpose was the creation of an entirely new political ecosystem; the plan was to "establish a new one [state] that does not recognize class rule."[49] As Liebknecht told his audience, the Reichstag had "absolutely no power."[50] In this way, parliament did not offer a solution to the social and political problems of the time: it "can [...] not be used by democracy as the battlefield to gain power."[51] Seizure of power meant changing political institutions: "[n]ot only the content, but also the form of the state is of essential importance to us; the two cannot be separated from each other."[52] The social democrats had to look for other ways to achieve change: not participation in parliament but its abolition was the mission.

The (Public) Function of Parliament

Against the numerous obstacles, social democrats became dedicated parliamentarians from the very beginning. The party mustered considerable energies to facilitate electoral

[44] Centralkommission, "An die Parteigenossen," Der Volksstaat, September 17, 1870, 3.

[45] Wolfgang Schröder, *Ernestine: vom ungewöhnlichen Leben der ersten Frau Wilhelm Liebknechts*, 2nd ed. (Leipzig: Verlag für die Frau, 1989).

[46] Liebknecht to Metzner, June 8, 1867 in Georg Eckert, ed., *Wilhelm Liebknecht: Briefwechsel mit deutschen Sozialdemokraten*, vol. 1, Quellen und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der deutschen und österreichischen Arbeiterbewegung (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1973), 212.

[47] Liebknecht, *Ueber die politische Stellung*, 4.

[48] Liebknecht, *Ueber die politische Stellung*, 11.

[49] Liebknecht, *Ueber die politische Stellung*, 11.

[50] Liebknecht, *Ueber die politische Stellung*, 5.

[51] Liebknecht, *Ueber die politische Stellung*, 5.

[52] Liebknecht, *Ueber die politische Stellung*, 11.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008938925101167 Published online by Cambridge University Press

campaigns. When candidates won parliamentary mandates, the party welcomed its representatives with joy and pride. An entire genre of publications about parliamentary speeches emerged. Parliamentarians made their experiences in parliament the focal point of their political work.

August Bebel was the most active proponent of such a strategy and as early as 1873, he dedicated his writing to parliament. The brochure, appropriately titled *Die Parlamentarische Tätigkeit des Deutschen Reichstags und der Landtage und die Sozialdemokratie* (The parliamentary activities of the German Reichstag and the state parliaments and social democracy), laid out the purpose of the parliamentary mandate in the typical educative tone of social democracy. Accordingly, the intended audience was "[m]embers of the party" and "also to all those who are interested in the aspirations of Social Democracy."[53] A tone of bureaucracy gave the impression of systematic and reliable political work: the report was "realized on record," which made it sound more non-partisan and less agitational than it actually was.[54]

This inclusion of parliament in the social democratic repertoire was justified by the public, which social democrats called agitational, function of parliament.[55] Parliament, the party explained to its members, was the platform to reach the masses, the arena where the party could make its case and convince possible followers of its principles. The Reichstag was a forum where the social democratic parliamentarians demonstrated the inferiority of the opposition, the corruption of the system, and the inevitability of political change. This rationale was so important that it dominated the social democratic electoral considerations and overcame the principled opposition against parliament as a front of the authoritarian state.

Even Wilhelm Liebknecht, overcame his disgust of parliament for the objective of publicity. In fact, it was Liebknecht who declared that his position was one of "Nützlichkeit" (usefulness).[56] He had famously rejected participation in elections and parliamentary work but quickly abandoned his fundamental opposition when chosen as an electoral candidate for the nineteenth district in Saxony. After losing the election for the constitutional assembly in February, he was elected to the first Reichstag in August 1867. He quickly turned out to be a grudging but active participant in debates and proposed an amendment for a bill about passport legislation.[57] Liebknecht found it difficult to support Bebel in his amendment to the industrial code in 1869.[58] But even at this point, Liebknecht remained open to parliamentary work. Under closer investigation, his "purely negating position" was not as fundamental as he and Bebel made it sound.[59] Liebknecht distanced himself from his call for violent revolution, which he described as the "fall of government, which might be the result of a short street battle."[60] Rather, he promoted the idea of slow reform of institutions and society at large. As he explained, this transformation asked for a full and continuous commitment that was not bound to one insurgent moment. Revolution in this definition "also does not rest during peaceful periods."[61] By the

[53] August Bebel, *Die parlamentarische Thätigkeit des Deutschen Reichstags und der Landtage und die Sozial-Demokratie*, 2nd ed. (Leipzig: Genossenschaftsbuchdruckerei, 1873), 2.

[54] Bebel, *Die parlamentarische Thätigkeit*, 2.

[55] Pracht, *Parlamentarismus und deutsche Sozialdemokratie*, 407.

[56] Liebknecht, *Ueber die politische Stellung*, 5.

[57] Kurt Eisner, *Wilhelm Liebknecht: Sein Leben und Wirken*, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Vorwärts, 1906), 44; Wolfgang Schröder, *Wilhelm Liebknecht: Soldat der Revolution, Parteiführer, Parlamentarier: ein Fragment*, ed. Renate Dressler-Schröder and Klaus Kinner (Berlin: Karl Dietz Verlag, 2013).

[58] August Bebel, *Aus meinem Leben* (Bonn: Dietz, 1997), 297–98.

[59] Bebel, *Aus meinem Leben*, 298.

[60] Liebknecht, *Ueber die politische Stellung*, 4.

[61] Liebknecht, 4.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008938925101167 Published online by Cambridge University Press

1880s, Liebknecht was willing to publicly withdraw from his anti-parliamentary strategy. In the foreword of the re-published brochure for the Berlin speech, he explained that his former position did not apply to the political system of the German state but was drafted in response to the historical context of the North German Confederation of the late 1860s.[62]

In the following years, the social democratic leaders used every occasion to explain to their followers that they opposed the German state but needed parliamentary participation to reach the masses. In 1870, a year after Liebknecht held his angry plea against parliament, the party defined its position toward parliament at the annual congress for the first time. The idea was that the party "takes part in the Reichstag and customary parliamentary elections."[63] However, participating in parliament was "purely for agitational reasons."[64] In this way, the resolution balanced the party members who had followed Bebel's pragmatic call in favor of parliament and those who believed in Liebknecht's fundamental opposition. The behavioral code that the two representatives imposed on their parliamentary work reflected this compromise: "as far as possible" they were "to work in the interests of the working class," but "on the whole, however, to behave in a negating way."[65] The social democrats had "to use every opportunity to show the insignificance of the negotiations of the assemblies."[66] Reigniting Liebknecht's discursive theme of the stage, the purpose of parliamentary work was to "expose the comedy."[67]

The agitational stance towards parliament for the objective of publicity also shaped the relationship between the party and electoral candidates. In 1873, *Der Volksstaat* criticized the prominent party member Wilhelm Bracke for his electoral alliance with the "bourgeois" association of the Demokratischer Wahlverein (Democratic Electoral Association).[68] The joint endeavor between the social democrats and the liberals was seen as a dangerous strategy, breaking with the organizational integrity of the party was a clear provocation for the party leadership that had worked so hard to establish the social democratic movement's unified structure. Bracke had eliminated the demand for government funding for cooperatives from his electoral program, an adjustment that he did not coordinate with the party leadership.[69] Such "tactical" reasoning was dishonorable, more so as it sternly contrasted the emphasis on publicity in the parliamentary role of the party, leading to severe criticism in *Der Volksstaat*: "[w]e regret that the Braunschweig party members are founding an organization alongside the party organization."[70] In fact, the paper accused Bracke of arrogance and his hope to appeal to new voters of being "vain."[71] In social democratic circles, where respectability, honesty, and modesty were fundamental principles, this was a serious allegation.

The discussion about the Braunschweig campaign was especially remarkable given the party's support for the candidacy of the democratic liberal Johann Jacoby. Since 1848, Jacoby had been an icon of the democratic opposition; in 1872, he finally joined the party. However, this was not the reason for the party to embrace him as a candidate, only a year after opposing to Bracke's bid in Braunschweig. In 1874, Jacoby ran as a social democratic candidate in no less than fourteen districts. In the industrial city of Leipzig, Jacoby

[62] Bebel, *Aus meinem Leben*, 298–99.
[63] "Protokoll 1870," 13.
[64] "Protokoll 1870," 13.
[65] "Protokoll 1870," 13.
[66] "Protokoll 1870," 13.
[67] "Protokoll 1870," 13.
[68] "Politische Übersicht," *Der Volksstaat*, March 1, 1873, 2.
[69] Programm und Statuten, 161.
[70] "Correspondenzen," Der Volksstaat, February 15, 1873, 3.
[71] "Der Volksstaat," 3.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008938925101167 Published online by Cambridge University Press

unexpectedly managed to win the election. Even more surprising must have been Jacoby's response to his victory: he refused to accept his mandate. For Jacoby, electoral campaigning was purely an act of protest and parliamentary representations were inevitably futile. The party leadership saw this differently. Rejoicing in a rare victory, they attempted to convince Jacoby of the advantages of Reichstag membership. The social democrats were "newcomers on parliamentary territory."[72] Jacoby had to understand that his experience would help the organization: we "need [...] your support."[73] When Jacoby refused to adjust his position, the party turned away with disappointment. Perhaps most telling is the comment in *Der Volksstaat* that judged Jacoby's parliamentary abstention as "voluntarily surrender [...] to the enemy."[74]

The response of the leadership is indicative of the social democratic conception of the role of the party in parliament. In the party's political strategy, parliament was a public forum, a place where the social democrats could take their message to the general population on a national stage. It was for this purpose that the party committed to electoral campaigning and parliamentary participation. Bracke in Braunschweig challenged this strategy with his autonomous decision to cooperate with the local democratic bourgeoisie. The problem was not his candidacy. On the contrary, the party was actively working during this period to increase the number of parliamentarians. The scorn of the party stemmed from Bracke's decision to cooperate with political opponents in an open and public manner. Public opinion had become a significant battlefield for the social democrats, and parliament was the most important battleground. Social democratic victory depended on maintaining moral superiority. Compromising on the program portrayed social democrats as fickle and abandoning political principles for political gain—a charge that they leveled against their political opponents. *Der Volkststaat* even warned that social democratic parliamentarians could be accused of deceiving voters. Thus, the paper concluded: "[w]e must not win by weakening our sufficiently moderate demands."[75] After all, the party's reputation was at stake, and with it, legitimacy—the most important asset of the small party. The emphasis on adherence to principles went hand in hand with presenting the party as an honest participant in parliamentary debates. The fairness and quality of the arguments used to persuade opponents and audiences was seen as a measure of the trustworthiness of social democratic leaders.

Rules as a Social Democratic Norm and Tradition

Although the publicity function of parliament played such an important role in party discourse, there were other reasons for social democrats to make a serious attempt to participate in the debating practices of parliament. Even in the face of harsh criticism, heckling and insults, social democrats continued their speeches and reminded the assembly of their right to speak. The president of the assembly tried to restrict their right to speak and ignored them when they signaled that they wanted to participate in the discussion. Perhaps the most devastating tool against social democratic participation in the Reichstag was the motion to close the debate. The social democrats desperately tried to fight this tool until their group finally had enough members to demand a vote count, which blocked the entire legislative process of the Reichstag.[76] In particular, the restriction of speech rights has been

[72] "Julius Vahlteich to Jacoby," February 4, 1874 in Edmund Silberner, ed., *Johann Jacoby Briefwechsel. 1850–1877*, Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Sozialgeschichte Braunschweig (Bonn: Verlag Neue Gesellschaft, 1978), 618.

[73] "Vahlteich to Jacoby," February 4, 1874 in Silberner, 618.

[74] "Die Mandatsablehnung Johann Jacoby's," Der Volksstaat, February 20, 1874, 1.

[75] Der Volksstaat, February 15, 1873, 3.

[76] Pracht, *Parlamentarismus und deutsche Sozialdemokratie*, 40–49.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008938925101167 Published online by Cambridge University Press

accepted in historiography as a method of drawing attention to the injustice of the political system, but there was a more fundamental reason for social democrats to insist on their right to contribute to the debate.

Why was it so important for the German social democrats to participate in parliamentary procedures? In addition to its agitational function, the Reichstag was essentially a forum for debate, a practice that was familiar to and valued by social democrats. The legislative powers of parliament were questionable at best, but the exchange of arguments spoke to the tradition of working-class associations.[77] Debating culture and the accompanying norms had found their way into workers' assemblies at the early stages of the movement. In the 1840s and 1860s, the workers' movement was dominated by liberal bourgeoise dignitaries (Honoratioren) whose social norms shaped the assembly culture.[78]

To a considerable extent, liberal principles of fairness and justice remained ingrained in social democratic debating norms.[79] The founding conference of the SDAP began with a debate between the representatives of the two main working-class organizations, ADAV and VDAV. The main point of contention was that each delegate had to present a mandate from his local workers' association in order to gain voting rights at the assembly. These mandates were counted, and concerns were raised about the commission that was supposed to count them could actually be trusted. The main accusation against the ADAV was that "the members were merely there to be guided by the steering rope of one individual."[80] The ADAV group responded to these accusations by suggesting that the VDAV organizers of the conference were "dictatorial."[81] This emphasis on procedural fairness continued at subsequent party conferences. Unlike other early party organizations, delegates to SDAP conferences actually had the right to speak at early party conferences.[82]

Rules also protected less powerful members from the dominance of rhetorically skilled demagogues—an issue that was particularly important in the SDAP, but also members of the ADAV had experienced the debating culture of public assemblies in the 1860s.[83] For sociologist Robert Michels, social democratic leaders abused their knowledge of procedures at the cost of the participation of ordinary members.[84] But the early generation of working-class activists had a different perspective: they recognized that the formation of independent opinion created an empowered generation of workers and bound members to their cause. Before founding a national organization, speaking at public assemblies was interpreted as a test of the leader's ability of orderly conduct—a symbol of masculinity to test the ability of working-class speakers to take responsibility.[85] This tradition of participating in public debate perfectly fitted the formalized discourses in parliament.

[77] Anne Heyer, *The Making of the Democratic Party in Europe, 1860–1890* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

[78] Welskopp, *Das Banner der Brüderlichkeit*, 235–38.

[79] Toni Offermann, "Das liberale Vereinsmodell als Organisationsform der frühen deutschen Arbeiterbewegung der 1860er Jahre," in *"Der kühnen Bahn nun folgen wir..." Ursprünge, Erfolge und Grenzen der Arbeiterbewegung in Deutschland*, ed. Arno Herzig and Günter Trautmann, Entstehung und Wandel der deutschen Arbeiterbwegung 1 (Hamburg: Reidar, 1989), 39–62.

[80] "Protokoll über die Verhandlungen des Allgemeinen Deutschen sozial-demokratischen Arbeiterkongresses zu Eisenach am 7., 8. und 9. August 1869," in *Protokolle der sozialdemokratischen Arbeiterpartei*, vol. 1 (Glashütten im Taunus: Verlag Detlev Auvermann KG, 1971), 22.

[81] "Protokoll 1869," 10.

[82] Heyer, *The Making of the Democratic Party*, chaps. 4–5.

[83] Welskopp, *Das Banner der Brüderlichkeit*.

[84] Robert Michels, *Zur Soziologie des Parteiwesens in der modernen Demokratie: Untersuchungen über die oligarchischen Tendenzen des Gruppenlebens* (Leipzig: Klinkhardt, 1911), 23–40.

[85] Welskopp, *Das Banner der Brüderlichkeit*.

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August Bebel became the personification, albeit definitely not the only one, of a speaker rhetorically trained in liberal education associations and proponent of a debating culture that was both emotionally appealing and respectful of the principle of deliberation. Bebel, who had been a member of the Catholic Workers' Association during his time in Freiburg and Salzburg, had attended his first open assembly in the *Gewerbliche Bildungsverein* (Commercial Educational Workers' Association) in Leipzig in 1861. As a master turner, Bebel's political socialization was different from that of Liebknecht.[86] Before joining parliament, Bebel had shaped the new organizational circumstances as president of the VDAV. The successful president was able to cater to both worlds: the liberal culture of education associations for social improvement and the radical socialist political agenda of political change. Under Bebel's leadership, the VDAV became outspokenly political and implemented radical organizational reform that prepared the transformation into the SDAP in 1869.[87]

An early example of the social democratic commitment to debating culture occurred in April 1869, when August Bebel spoke in parliament about the industrial code in an effort to achieve legislative change. While social democrats' proposals in the 1860s and 1870s were usually swiftly rejected, Bebel managed to make a convincing case for the abolition of workbooks as an amendment to the industrial code bill. The so-called Arbeitsbücher (workbooks) were used as coercive passports for craftsmen and journeymen by the police and inhibited working-class mobility between workplaces. They were considered a serious problem by the social democrats, a "spiteful means of control," as Bebel's early biographer Klühs wrote.[88] Perhaps it was Bebel's pragmatic rhetorical style or the fact that workbooks opposed the abolition of "passport and legitimation requirement" that convinced his fellow parliamentarians.[89] To impress the assembly, Bebel held a short speech that was more sober than his usual lectures about working-class suppression. Using an argument that could sway his liberal peers, he referred to "the free agreement between worker and employer" and reminded the assembly that this was a "principle that has been cited so often on your part."[90] Eventually, the amendment was not only supported by the left-leaning liberal Eduard Lasker but also accepted by the majority of the house. This example of the industrial code demonstrates that the social democrats not only became passive members of parliament but that the party adjusted its political style to achieve legislative change—a practice that they had often questioned and denied in party discussions.

The honorary exchange of opinions fitted the social ambitions of Bebel as both an unofficial party leader and a small-scale entrepreneur. He was proud of the social validation that came with his parliamentary seat and the contributions to parliamentary debate, describing how he was recognized as a worthy colleague by the upper ranks of society in his autobiography. One cannot help but notice the pride in Bebel's account when he reported that Friedrich Otto Freiherr von Friesen of Rötha had not only read his parliamentary speech but had come to tell Bebel that he "was happy about a number of points" in his contribution to the Reichstag.[91] Bebel's experience points to the specific social context

[86] Liebknecht had not only attended the universities of Giessen, Berlin and Marburg, but also participated in an armed attempt at revolution, supporting the 1848 revolution in Baden. Eisner, *Wilhelm Liebknecht*.

[87] Ilse Fischer, *August Bebel und der Verband Deutscher Arbeitervereine 1867/68: Brieftagebuch und Dokumente*, Archiv für Sozialgeschichte, Beiheft 14 (Bonn: J. H. W. Dietz Nachf., 1994).

[88] Franz Klühs, *August Bebel: Der Mann und sein Werk.* (1923; repr., Hamburg: Severus, 2013), 127.

[89] *Stenographische Berichte über die Verhandlungen des Reichstages des Norddeutschen Bundes*, I. Legislatur-Periode, I. Session 1869. Erster Band (Berlin, 1869), 620. See also the contemporary account by Klühs, 126.

[90] *Stenographische Berichte*, 620.

[91] Bebel, *Aus meinem Leben*, 285.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008938925101167 Published online by Cambridge University Press

that parliament provided as a forum of discussion. Regardless of their social status outside of the Reichstag, all members were equal in their rights and duties when they spoke in the assembly and subject to the same rules and code of conduct. This equalizing function made the Reichstag instinctively attractive to social democrats: it allowed for the expression of political opinion in a format that was similar to the political upbringings in working-class associations.

This commitment led to the quick adaptation in the Reichstag, even though most of its members were hostile to social democratic ideology and even refused to protect them from unfair persecution. Social democrats stubbornly referred to the Geschäftsordnung (rules of procedure) to acclaim their position as members of the assembly. In a debate about petitions in 1870, Bebel used his right as a delegate to inquire with the speaker whether "under all circumstances, the rules of procedure really require that petitions [...] must be referred back to the commission"?[92] This comment showed the attempt of the new parliamentarian to grasp parliamentary procedures. It was also an indication of Bebel's willingness to operate within the existing procedures of parliament. Instead of attacking parliament and its debating rules, Bebel conceded to the speaker who insisted that, indeed, in this case, petitions could not be discussed in the assembly.

The limitations to social democratic parliamentarians' ability to operate within the existing rules are perhaps best shown with a proposal that Liebknecht introduced in parliament in November 1874. The social democrats liked to remind parliament that it had the constitutional right to temporarily release arrested parliamentarians so that they could attend the assembly.[93] But this time, Liebknecht did not ask parliament to support the three social democratic parliamentarians August Bebel, Johann Most, and Wilhelm Hasenclever. As the old revolutionary explained to parliament, he was well aware that the respective article of the constitution only allowed parliament to release its members into custody. The parliamentary right expired when the accused had been convicted, as was the case in this situation. Rather, Liebknecht preferred building a general argument against the arbitrary decisions of the court. The court had invoked "abuse of the freedom of speech" in its judgment. As Liebknecht explained, freedom of speech meant "unrestricted freedom of speech"—a principle that was not without precedent, but applied in England and America and, more importantly, was "recognized by our constitution."[94] which guaranteed "absolute freedom of speech and complete impunity" for parliament.[95] For Liebknecht, this constitutional principle applied to all assemblies that negotiated "public affairs."[96] Hence, for the social democrat, the sentence against his three fellow party members was a biased one; their charges were fabricated and their sentence was political.

A political argument in its essence, this speech was doomed for rejection. Parliament, unsurprisingly, voted against the proposal. Liebknecht had foreseen this particular outcome, stating that he had "no illusions about the destiny of the proposal."[97] Still Liebknecht, despite this imminent failure, followed the rules of the debate: the speech was about the arbitrary nature of the court's decision, but it did not question the procedural framework of the Reichstag. In contrast to the old incumbents, honest and respectable leaders of social democracy, as Liebknecht saw himself, were the true representatives of the people. In the

[92] *Stenographische Berichte über die Verhandlungen des Reichstages des Norddeutschen Bundes*, I. Außerordentliche Session 1870 (Berlin, 1869), 178.

[93] *Reichstagshandbücher*, 15, 1884, 12.

[94] *Stenographische Berichte über die Verhandlungen des Deutschen Reichstages*, II. Legislatur-Periode, II. Session 1874/5 (Berlin, 1875), 245.

[95] *Stenographische Berichte*, 245.

[96] *Stenographische Berichte*, 245.

[97] *Stenographische Berichte*, 250.

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tradition of the movement, this meant submitting oneself to an open and honest debate that allowed the audience to make its own decision. In parliament, the audiences were the parliamentary peers, but also the people at large. As Liebknecht explained at the end of his speech, the "German people's sense of justice" asked for "satisfaction."[98] If social democrats did not adhere to the law, it was because they were forced by the unfair abuse of the legal framework of the political elite. In response to prosecution, Liebknecht complained to the assembly a few years later that the German authorities had initiated a campaign whose purpose was to "put a whole party outside the law."[99]

Mutual Adjustment? Social Democracy and the Reichstag

The impact of the social democrats on parliament was small in those early decades. In 1874, the German magazine *Die Gartenlaube* kindly described the parliamentary party as "mostly young and very well-mannered people."[100] However, there was also condescending mockery: the social democrats "so far have not exactly caused fear through their speeches and especially through their historical quotations."[101] Over time, as the size of the parliamentary party grew, such statements became less valid. Historian Pracht has shown that while social democrats were the "uninvited guest" in parliament until 1878, parliament pragmatically came to terms with their presence in the following decade. Yet, it ought to be noted that this development was a slow process and should not be overestimated.[102] This, however, did not reduce the hostility of the vast majority in the assembly towards the social democrats.[103] Sharp antagonism between the social democrats and other parliamentarians became an essential part of the Reichstag routine. While the hostility was real and based on true political and personal animosity, there was also a performative element in these parliamentary clashes. Rhetorical conflict was factored into the functioning of the assembly as an arena of contestation. In this way, the social democrats became an essential part of the political culture of the Reichstag. They fulfilled the role as the antagonist villain of the assembly; but the party did so in the framework of the assembly, following working-class associational tradition and never really leaving the realms of the debating procedures.

In parliament, the presence of the social democrats forced the assembly to engage with its own role in the political system of the Imperial German state. The support for the social democrats came first and foremost from the liberal group of anti-conservative forces. Liberals were sympathetic to social democratic testimonies of suppression—the left-leaning ones were closest to acting as the political allies of social democracy. For the members of the Fortschrittspartei (Progress Party), which later merged with the pro-free-trade breakaway from the National Liberals (the so-called "Secession") to found the Deutsche Freisinnige Partei (German Free-minded Party), the protection of members of parliament was an essential component of a functioning political system. A fitting example of these considerations was provided by Albert Traeger (Fortschrittspartei), who warned the assembly in 1874, that arbitrary suppression of parliamentarians by the government and the police was dangerous: the balance of power was subject to change, and it was important to maintain the rule of law. Those formerly suppressed could become suppressors themselves. In this "question of

[98] *Stenographische Berichte*, 251.

[99] *Stenographische Berichte über die Verhandlungen des Deutschen Reichstages*, V. Legislatur-Periode, II. Session 1882/3 (Berlin, 1883), 2245.

[100] Max Ring, "Eine Sitzung des Reichstages," *Die Gartenlaube*, 1874, 18 edition, 291.

[101] Ring, "Eine Sitzung des Reichstages," 291.

[102] Pracht, *Parlamentarismus und deutsche Sozialdemokratie*, 35–63.

[103] Biefang, "Die Sozialdemokratie im Reichstag."

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power," the matter was a general one: "every member of a legislative body" had the interest to "assert or [...] extend" its influence.[104]

Such considerations became unexpectedly serious when the anti-socialist laws ruptured the evolving relationship between the assembly and its social democratic members. The first attempt at banning social democratic assemblies, publications, and associations failed spectacularly. Bismarck used the assassination attempt on Emperor Wilhelm I to initiate the legislative bill in May 1878. A majority carried by the Catholic Zentrumspartei (Centre), National Liberals, Fortschrittspartei and Volkspartei (People's Party) voted against the bill. The suggestion to refer the bill to a commission was met with "mirth."[105] Bismarck had not expected to succeed against the liberal-dominated parliament.[106] It was the second attack on the emperor in less than a month that changed the political situation. Parliament was dissolved by the government and the federal Bundesrat in June. After the election, the broad front against the anti-socialist laws crumbled. Among other things, public pressure changed the National Liberals' position and decided to vote for the bill in October.

The parliamentary concerns of the first and second bills that the anti-socialist laws would become a tool to restrict political rights were not without merit. The anti-socialist laws were broadly formulated; they targeted "associations that aim to overthrow the existing state or social order through social democratic, socialist and communist efforts."[107] In the Reichstag, members of parliament reported on their experience with the police. Julius Lenzmann, lawyer, notary, and parliamentarian (Fortschrittspartei), reported in the assembly that he was only spared from the public humiliation of a house search because he was friends with the respective judge. The reason for the intervention of the authorities was that Lenzmann was suspected of holding a copy of the social democratic paper *Der Sozialdemokrat*, a publication whose dissemination was banned under the anti-socialist laws. The appalled Lenzmann told the Reichstag that measures like these were not only degrading for a legal professional but that his wife had also been unnecessarily worried. His experience showed the ruthlessness of the police: the house search could have been avoided if the police had politely approached the parliamentarian. Anyway, as Lenzmann explained, there was no reason for such radical action. Under the current law, his subscription to *Der Sozialdemokrat* was legal. In short, the judicial authorities had lost all "impartiality and objectivity."[108] The disproportionate nature of the authorities' campaign was confirmed by parliamentarian Eugen Richter (Freisinnige Partei) who likewise reported that the home of his electoral office secretary had become the object of a house search for *Der Sozialdemokrat*.[109] Richter's speech was clear: his political orientation did not belong to the illegal organization of social democracy. The actions of the police were unwarranted. In fact, as Richter argued, his reason to read *Der Sozialdemokrat* was no different from that of Robert von Puttkamer, conservative and Prussian minister of interior: to remain informed about social democracy.

The social democrats themselves responded to the anti-socialist laws with shock and agitated anger. In the first debate on the draft, Liebknecht read a statement that such a debate

[104] *Stenographische Berichte über die Verhandlungen des Deutschen Reichstages*, II. Legislatur-Periode, II. Session 1874/5 (Berlin, 1875), 251. See also Theo Jung, "In All Seriousness: Laughter in the German Reichstag, 1871–1914," *Parliaments, Estates and Representation* (2024): 5–20.

[105] *Stenographische Berichte über die Verhandlungen des Deutschen Reichstages*, III. Legislatur-Periode, II. Session 1878 (Berlin, 1878), 1543.

[106] Pack, *Das parlamentarische Ringen um das Sozialistengesetz Bismarcks, 1878–1890*, 50.

[107] Reichsgesetzblatt of 1878, No. 34, Nr. 1271, p. 351.

[108] *Stenographische Berichte über die Verhandlungen des Deutschen Reichstages*, VI. Legislatur-Periode, I. Session 1884/5 (Berlin, 1885), 1034.

[109] *Stenographische Berichte*, 1034.

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was "incompatible with our dignity."[110] Liebknecht then announced that his party, which was abstaining from the debate, would still cast their vote, "because we believe it is our duty to do our part to prevent an unprecedented attack on popular freedom by throwing our voices into the balance."[111] Liebknecht's speech was also a comment about the exaggerated panic that the debate was conducted in the country and in parliament. He concluded that his party "looks forward to further struggles and persecutions with that confident calm that comes from the consciousness of a good and invincible cause."[112] The social democrats were ready to continue their difficult political fight with the pragmatic superiority of reason. Parliament might respond with hysterical exaggeration, but the social democrats upheld an orderly debate. Indeed, it was in the Reichstag that social democrats were able to draw back on their tradition of debating at public assemblies and associational meetings. For instance, the public debate between Bebel and Bismarck in the Reichstag in 1878 has been described as a "classic rhetorical duel" by historian Lidtke.[113]

This attitude of the party was further reflected in the parliamentary behavior of social democrats Wilhelm Hasenclever and Wilhelm Hasselmann. The two Wilhelms had acted as editors of the *Neue Sozialdemokrat*, the paper of the ADAV, and witnessed the parliamentary decision for the anti-socialist laws in the Reichstag. The conclusion that they drew for parliamentary participation was different, though.

Wilhelm Hasenclever was a dedicated Lassallean, former president of the ADAV, and author of social democratic poetry. His attitude towards parliamentary work was typical for social democrats: loud criticism, but largely committed to parliamentary work. Often his requests to speak were ignored by the speaker (Präsident). As he remarked in 1881, he had expressed "early" his desire to speak, and "this time I was cut off again."[114] This experience formed a pattern. A week later, Hasenclever commented again in the assembly that he "wanted to say for the third time today that I spoke up in a timely manner," yet the word was still not given to him.[115] Hasenclever was so appalled that he concluded with a well-dosed provocation towards the speaker: "I consider such a procedure to be terrorism."[116] Reflecting on such rough manners, Hasenclever wrote to Liebknecht that he was "really Westphalian rude" in parliament.[117]

Despite such emotional announcements, Hasenclever was a committed parliamentarian who actively tried to participate in the debate and protect his civil liberties. From the same generation as Bebel, he shared his professional background as a craftsman and the political socialization in the early workers' movement.[118] His speech about the implementation of the anti-socialist laws was crafted to appeal to parliamentary values of legality. As he explained, the authorities had moved towards attacking the "legal agitation" rather than the "unlawful actions" of the party.[119] In particular, Hasenclever argued, the authorities

[110] *Stenographische Berichte über die Verhandlungen des Deutschen Reichstages*, III. Legislatur-Periode, II. Session 1878 (Berlin, 1878), 1497.

[111] *Stenographische Berichte*, 1497.

[112] *Stenographische Berichte*, 1497.

[113] Lidtke, *Outlawed Party*, 75.

[114] *Stenographische Berichte über die Verhandlungen des Deutschen Reichstages*, IV. Legislatur-Periode, IV. Session 1881 (Berlin, 1881), 927.

[115] *Stenographische Berichte*, 1001.

[116] *Stenographische Berichte*, 1001.

[117] The original source is unknown. Quoted in Wilhelm Hasenclever, *Reden und Schriften*, ed. Ludger Heid et al., Internationale Bibliothek (Bonn: J. H. W. Dietz Nachf., 1989), 93.

[118] Ludger Heid, "Wilhelm Hasenclever-Stationen eines politischen Lebens," *Duisburger Forschungen* (1990): 81–88.

[119] *Stenographische Berichte über die Verhandlungen des Deutschen Reichstages*, V. Legislatur-Periode, I. Session 1881/2 (Berlin, 1882), 298.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008938925101167 Published online by Cambridge University Press

had targeted the electoral campaign of the party—a process that directly concerned the parliament's sphere of influence. The assembly's response was not always hostile. When Hasenclever spoke, the parliamentary record noted "mirth" in the assembly; sometimes this indicated sarcastic mockery but sometimes it can be read as sympathetic laughter.[120]

Parliament was also keen to maintain proper procedures, even regarding social democrats. When Hasenclever was interrupted by Albert Hänel (Fortschrittspartei) with the comment "outrageous," the decision of the speaker to reprimand Hänel's interjection as "unparliamentary" was met with "bravo" by the assembly.[121] Hasenclever also used his speech to distance his party from the accusation of plans for violent overthrow. When social democrats called themselves "revolutionaries" they did not refer to "direct overthrow" as the authorities and Hermann von Nostitz-Wallwitz, Saxon minister of interior affairs, had insinuated.[122] To the contrary, Hasenclever explained, in social democratic language, revolution meant the slow transformation of society through the political institutions. As Hasenclever described it, "the legal revolution, the peaceful one, said Lassalle."[123]

The allegations of violence against the party that proved especially pressing after the attacks on the emperor made such statements necessary. The two attackers had no connection to the party, but the focus of the public had moved onto the insurgent elements of the social democratic program. Thus, the party returned to emphasizing the orderly nature of its political practices as proof of its innocence and moral superiority. Distancing from violence in the aftermath of the anti-socialist laws allowed the party to build a growing electoral base outside of the small number of social democratic districts.[124] It also fitted in with earlier attempts to establish bourgeois norms of debate in the working-class associations of the 1850s and 1860s.[125] This course included the expulsion of social democrats who disturbed the moderate course of the party.

An exemplary case was the expulsion from the party of Wilhelm Hasselmann, a social democrat of the first hour. He had most likely joined the ADAV in 1866 and became an active editor and writer for the movement and the party.[126] A member of the Reichstag since 1874, he and Johann Most increasingly stood for the party's anarchist tendencies in the Reichstag.[127] The anti-socialist laws reinforced his revolutionary vision. During the discussion about the second and successful bill in October 1878, Hasselmann openly threatened "violent activities."[128] If parliament suppressed the "completely peaceful, calm agitation" of social democrats, a new course of action was inevitable: "[wh]atever will come of this in the future, gentlemen, you can then decide for yourselves."[129] He blamed the "governments," and the "violent classes" for the escalation of the conflict. Hasselmann himself saw no other option than taking the "side of the people" and committed to the ultimate

[120] For a detailed study of "mirth" (Heiterkeit) in parliament, see Jung, "In All Seriousness."

[121] *Stenographische Berichte*, 298.

[122] *Stenographische Berichte*, 305.

[123] *Stenographische Berichte*, 305.

[124] Elun T. Gabriel, *Assassins and Conspirators: Anarchism, Socialism, and Political Culture in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), chap. 2.

[125] Offermann, *Arbeiterbewegung und liberales Bürgertum in Deutschland 1850–1863*.

[126] "Wilhelm Hasselmann," in *Sozialdemokratischen Parlamentarier in den Deutschen Reichs- und Landtagen 1867–1933* (Parlamentarierportal, 2024).

[127] Alexander Sedlmaier, "The Consuming Visions of Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Anarchists: Actualising Political Violence Transnationally," *European Review of History = Revue Européene d'histoire* 1 (2007): 286–90.

[128] *Stenographische Berichte über die Verhandlungen des Deutschen Reichstages*, IV. Legislatur-Periode, I. Session 1878 (Berlin, 1878), 145.

[129] *Stenographische Berichte*, 145.

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sacrifice: "[i]f necessary, I have to shed my blood on the field of honor"![130] This speech was so aggressive in tone, that it broke with the social democratic convention of largely remaining within the rules of the debate that the speaker had to interrupt Hasselmann four times; twice the interruption was for "direct provocation to riot."[131] Violating the parliamentary code, as the speaker remarked as going "beyond the parliamentary discussion" was a sign of Hasselmann's growing distance from parliament and his social democratic peers.[132]

Parliament was not the only public arena where Hasselmann became separated from the party. His newspaper *Rote Fahne*, initially an electoral pamphlet, quickly was seen as competition for the official party newspaper *Vorwärts*.[133] At the 1880 congress of the exiled party organization in Switzerland, the delegates discussed Hasselmann's actions in detail. It was reported that Hasselmann himself had refused to explain his behavior when the party leadership invited him for a conciliatory meeting and rather spurred internal conflict among the workers.[134] In May, Hasselmann held another fiery speech that became a popular line of attack against the social democrats and was concluded by Hasselmann leaving parliament for good.[135] A few months later, at the congress, one agitated delegate remarked that the comrades in South Germany agreed: "Hasselmann is a scoundrel and Most is a fool."[136] The congress then moved to vote for excluding Hasselmann from the party. The anger about the entire affair was so strong that the congress announced a warning about Hasselmann for "all foreign comrades not to believe the pretenses of this personality, who has been exposed as a notorious slanderer."[137]

The party's response to Hasselmann was a sign of the importance that the social democrats attached to parliament, but their relationship with parliament remained ambivalent. Parliament had become the only place where social democratic activity was legal. Historian Lidtke has described in detail how the de facto leadership of the party shifted to the parliamentary group. In the early period, the contributions of social democrats to parliament were weak, with the exception of Liebknecht, Bebel, and Bracke. At the same time, parliament refused to support Bismarck's call to further restrict the freedom of speech of parliamentarians. In the years that followed, the parliamentary group remained divided into what Lidtke called radicals and moderates. While the moderates believed in achieving change through parliament, the radicals had a more ambivalent relationship to parliamentarism. Their theoretical rejection of parliamentarism was accompanied by a strong parliamentary practice.[138]

The debating culture of the early working-class associations served the central role that parliament played in the party's political survival under the anti-socialist laws. It also helped the party as it grew as a parliamentary group. While the parliamentary assembly remained suspicious, social democrats increasingly became committed parliamentarians, willing to defend parliament against government interference. In

[130] *Stenographische Berichte*, 156.

[131] *Stenographische Berichte*, 156–57.

[132] *Stenographische Berichte*, 156.

[133] Eckert, *Wilhelm Liebknecht*, 1:723, ft 1.

[134] "Protokoll des Kongresses der Deutschen Sozialdemokratie abgehalten auf Schloß Wyden in der Schweiz vom 20. bis 23. August 1880," in *Protokolle der sozialdemokratischen Arbeiterpartei*, reprint (Glashütten im Taunus: D. Auvermann, 1971), 31, 1

[135] Elun Gabriel, "Anarchism's Appeal to German Workers, 1878–1914," *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* (2011): 45.

[136] "Protokoll 1880," 25.

[137] "Protokoll 1880," 37.

[138] Lidtke, *Outlawed Party*, 82–89, 129–54.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008938925101167 Published online by Cambridge University Press

particular, the budget rights of parliament became the object of social democratic speeches in parliament. There is an entire list of social democratic interventions, often in vain, about taxation, international treaties military, and domestic spending.[139] Social democrats also started to establish a vocabulary that signaled their belonging to the community of parliament. In the beginning, they saw themselves as "representatives" (Abgeordnete) and used the term "politician" (Politiker) for others. In the 1890s, this changed and the party adopted the word "politician" for its own representatives in parliament.[140]

By the time the Reichstag abandoned the anti-socialist laws in 1890, the Social Democratic Party had become so powerful that it managed to attract more voters, even though it would only become the strongest parliamentary group in 1912. Signs of detente between the social democrats and parliament had become visible to observers at an early stage. In 1885, the renewal of the anti-socialist laws prompted another discussion about the position of the social democrats in both country and parliament. In a defense of what he admitted were "draconic regulations," Minister of Interior Affairs Puttkamer argued that electorally the law had not been successful in curtailing social democracy.[141] The strength of the anti-socialist laws lay in mitigating the "attitude" of the party and its representatives.[142] The program of social democracy might not have changed, but they observed that the party "takes part in factual debates and even comes up with initiative proposals," no longer relying on a rhetoric that was "drenched in blood" or carrying the "torch of the revolution."[143] The minister claimed the taming of social democracy as a success of the government's "educational influence."[144] On the other side of the parliamentary aisle, social democrats likewise suggested that tension had become less pronounced, but they argued that it was the government that had changed. Social democratic persistence in parliament had forced the government into alleviating the suffering of the working classes. The social reform laws served as one example of the recognition of social democratic politics by the political establishment. Rejecting the idea of the radical tone of the speeches of earlier years, Liebknecht presented the representatives of his party as constructive participants of parliamentary debate: "[w]e have not changed our tactics. The Reichstag has changed its tactics."[145] Now the assembly treated them "collegially."[146] For Liebknecht, this was only right, "as it must be by law."[147] There was a sense of reconciliation that the social democrat reluctantly admitted. When discussing the possibility that the government further tightened legal suppression, Liebknecht insisted that the party would have to return to its former call "We do not care about the law"—but this was an attitude that Liebknecht saw as "historical."[148] Although remaining in outspoken antagonism, the assembly and the party had become used to each other, accepting the inevitability of their shared existence in the political order of the Imperial German state.

[139] Pracht, *Parlamentarismus und deutsche Sozialdemokratie*, 279–99.

[140] Anne Heyer and Henk te Velde, "New and Old Professional Politicians in Britain, France, Germany and the Netherlands, 1860–1920," in *The Figure of the Politician in Modern and Contemporary Europe*, ed. Pasi Ihalainen, Rosario López, Kari Palonen and Henk te Velde (New York: Berghahn, forthcoming), 75–99.

[141] *Stenographische Berichte über die Verhandlungen des Deutschen Reichstages*, VI. Legislatur-Periode, I. Session 1884/5 (Berlin, 1885), 1019.

[142] *Stenographische Berichte*, 1019.

[143] *Stenographische Berichte*, 1019.

[144] *Stenographische Berichte*, 1018.

[145] *Stenographische Berichte*, 1033.

[146] *Stenographische Berichte*, 1033.

[147] *Stenographische Berichte*, 1033.

[148] *Stenographische Berichte*, 1033.

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Conclusion

In the 1860s and 1870s, social democrats like Wilhelm Liebknecht hesitated to accept the parliamentary mandate. The fundamental opposition to parliament was quickly abandoned, but concerns about parliamentary participation did not disappear. Until the early twentieth century, anti-parliamentarianism flared up in social democratic discussions, for instance, about revolution and mass strikes. In the first decade of the Reichstag, parliament was by no means the logical choice for the small party. Social democrats did not know about the democratization of European states in the twentieth century, nor could they have foreseen that parliament would become the central institution in these democratization processes. The main reason to participate in parliament, the institution that ascribed so much legitimacy to the despised new state, seemed to be the high profile that parliament assumed in national debates. As social democrats explained in nearly every speech, parliament gave their representatives the opportunity to proclaim their arguments against the existing order. Publicity points to the intensive hopes of mobilization attributed to the political message of the social democrats. If the party could only reach the ears of the deprived, if newspapers would only report their arguments, if the working classes could only be educated, the masses would gladly join in the struggle against exploitation and suppression.

This article has shown that the relationship between German social democrats and the Reichstag was a multi-layered one. Social democrats did neither fully engage in fundamental opposition in parliament nor were they calculating opportunists with ulterior motives. Social democrats respected the procedures of the assembly, following the parliamentary customs of debate. To some extent, this could indeed be explained with publicity: adhering to Reichstag procedures unmasked the selfish character of the political elite in the authoritarian state. But following debating rules also had a deeper meaning for social democrats. Behavior in parliament fitted with the convictions of good politics. Engaging in fair discussion was the opposite of authoritarianism. Debating procedures were deeply connected to political identity that emerged in working-class association. The workers' associations of the 1860s were the places of political awakening and training for many social democrats. On the stages of inns and the public halls, they had learned to make a substantial argument, defeat their opponents, and convince followers. The audience of these speech battles demanded a proper and fair debate. Speakers had to follow the orders of the chair of the meeting. Assembly rules were also an essential aspect of the national organizations of workers that emerged in the same period. Adherence to procedures protected the rights of individual delegates from the abuse of influential leaders.

In this sense, following parliamentary rules was a tribute to the tradition of the social democratic movement. Doing it publicly also meant instrumentalizing the public form of parliament and its legal position as an arena for civil liberties—the principles that the party had proclaimed as the purpose of its parliamentary representation. Whether this adherence to parliamentary procedures changed the party and perhaps parliament itself, is difficult to conclusively establish. Contemporaries from both sides certainly thought that this was the case. It was no coincidence that social democrats, as well as their opponents, mentioned the adjustment to Reichstag procedures as a positive development after a relatively short period of time. Both sides proudly claimed credit for the civilizing effects on each other. On the one hand, the taming of the social democrats meant that the conservative government had contained the revolutionary threat of social democracy. The social democrats, on the other hand, could demonstrate to their voters—not all of whom were loyal party members—that they had maintained their respectable behavior in the difficult environment of the hostile Reichstag. Although standing for a different future, these two antagonistic poles

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of the parliamentary assembly contributed to the integration of the social democrats. The consolidation of social democracy as a parliamentary actor did not mean the democratization of Germany. Over time and until the 1890s, the assembly accepted social democrats, not so much as equal members of the political class of parliamentarians, but as the provocative outsiders that belonged to the assembly as much as the rebellious nephew of the family.

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Cite this article: Anne Heyer, "Finding Meaning in the Rules of the Game? German Social Democrats and Parliamentary Debate, 1860–90," *Central European History* (2025): 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008938925101167.