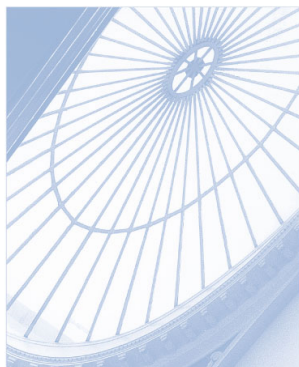


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MARK WILLOCK, *Libérale Honoratioren im politischen Massenmarkt: Parteiorganisation und Wählermobilisierung in Deutschland und Großbritannien, 1867–1914*, Bürgertum: Neue Folge, 25 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2024), 548 pp. ISBN 978 3 525 30279 8. €80.00

Mark Willock's book is one of the most important new studies of party history to be published in recent years. His methodological approach of examining liberal party formation primarily at the local level allows him to reassess the often-underestimated importance of the municipality in the process of mass politicization and democratization in Europe. The study's findings are lent further weight by its comparison between Britain and the German *Kaiserreich*, two countries that have long been viewed by scholars as paradigmatic examples of radically divergent paths into modernity. That the commonalities between the two countries in fact far outweigh the differences was demonstrated back in the 1980s by the British historians David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, in opposition to proponents of the German *Sonderweg*, or 'special path'.¹ Because Willock focuses on the liberals, the dominant political force in both states for long periods between the 1860s and 1914, his findings are of fundamental importance for any comparison between the processes of constitutional development and modernization in Britain and Germany.

After a brisk overview of the research literature in the book's introduction, chapter two describes how liberal clubs were organized in selected cities. The chosen case studies are discussed in pairs based on their shared structural socio-economic features: the port and trade cities of Hull and Bremen, as well as the industrial and administrative centres of Newcastle/Mannheim and Nottingham/Magdeburg. Willock does not simply set these cities alongside each other, but consistently compares them by applying a single catalogue of questions to similar sets of sources from both countries: reports in the local press; publications by liberally minded social, electoral, and civic clubs; and the private papers of a selection of prominent politicians provide a

Translated by Jozef van der Voort (GHIL).

¹ David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Oxford, 1984).

broad evidence base. In none of the six cities were the liberals strongly organized on a party-political basis. Only in the last few years before the First World War did local electoral clubs and associations of notables (*Honoratioren*) begin to develop into membership-based parties with financial resources and bureaucratic structures. One noteworthy difference between Britain and Germany can be found in the cooperation with large associations and social movements: British liberals enjoyed close links with Nonconformism, the Temperance movement, and for many years also the trade unions, especially miners' unions. By contrast, their German counterparts drew their support from a heterogeneous Protestant milieu and especially from individual commercial associations, such as the Hansabund, but remained closed off from the organizations of the labour movement.

Chapters three, four, and six focus on liberal MPs, their local voter base, and electoral culture. As one might expect, the social profile of the liberals was largely the same in both countries. Depending on the urban structure of a given city, the typical nominees were industrialists, businesspeople, and economically independent notables from the liberal professions—people who did not need to be paid for their parliamentary work or supported financially by political parties, and who sometimes even expressly declined any remuneration in order to demonstrate their personal independence. Kin relationships, social networks, a shared culture of sociability in urban clubs, and civic engagement in church congregations all played an important role. There were also broad overlaps between both countries in the specifically liberal understanding of politics, in which social differences were rhetorically downplayed in favour of the fictitious, but evidently potent notion of a harmonious liberal 'community' that served the 'urban common good'. As a result, until the early twentieth century, elections were largely contested between like-minded local grandees who represented different factions within the liberal milieu, but always stressed what they had in common. In Britain, the liberal elite was more socially exclusive, with its members from the municipal level right up to Parliament more closely connected to each other through kinship ties and shared academic socialization in schools and universities. British liberals were neither closer to the people nor more elitist than their German counterparts. Nonetheless, they were better able to politically integrate the workers

at the municipal level, whereas the regime of liberal notables in the *Kaiserreich* was increasingly outflanked by the Social Democrats and the Catholic Centre Party once these movements discovered the city hall as a political battlefield in the 1880s. The Centre Party played only a marginal role in the cities selected by Willock as case studies, however.

The book's most important findings are presented in chapter five, and are discussed once again in the conclusion. Here, Willock dispenses firmly with the old historiographical prejudices concerning modernization and the rise of political parties. In both Britain and Germany, he argues, the liberals successfully clung to their local autonomy and their municipal roots. Their power base was made up of local voters, whose needs defined their policies as members of the two countries' national parliaments. The 'politics of place'—the claim that they represented the community as a whole—also influenced the liberals' parliamentary politics, albeit to a different extent in each country due to the regional diversity and divisions within German liberalism. This essential connection between local base and national politics answers the core question Willock raises in this chapter about the efficiency and efficacy of party-political centralization, a question that must be approached through the unique conditions of liberal community politics: if the municipalities were 'separate spheres' within the constitutional order, did they form a kind of counter-sphere to the development of political camps at the national level? Willock's answer is shaped by the basic hypothesis on which his study is predicated—a theory I happen to disagree with. He assumes that the liberals failed to adapt their organizational structures to the political mass market and thus lost their head start against the conservatives, and above all against the social democratic and labour movements, well before the rupture of the Second World War—a trend that set in earlier and more lastingly in Germany, where the liberal movement split into two different party-political currents as early as the 1860s.

This interpretation amounts to an unintentional endorsement of the claim that liberalism failed early on in Germany, and thus indirectly supports the *Sonderweg* thesis. Willock assumes that the goal of liberal politics was the ideal of a 'well-oiled party machine' (a phrase he uses several times), with strong links between the party headquarters, the regions, and the municipalities—in other words,

an organizational structure that resembles the modern concept of a political party. In fact, however, his findings demonstrate precisely the opposite: that liberals emphasized local autonomy, especially in the nomination of candidates for parliamentary elections, as a prerequisite for successful liberal rule and thus for the viability of their political model. That being the case, why would they have centralized their party structures and thus presented themselves as a distinct force, detached from their municipal voter base? In the cities Willock examines, the liberals had 'almost overwhelming majorities' (p. 88). The expansion of local party structures and the formulation of programmatic goals were evidently seen as unproductive, as they might have posed a threat to the liberals' exclusive political mandate. Close ties between the party headquarters and their representatives among the voter base thus existed almost exclusively via the members of parliament themselves and their affiliated local press outlets.

Willock's study will stimulate new and far-reaching debates about key concepts in party-political history. How accurate is the distinction between notables and professional politicians? What specific effects did the much-cited, but generally vaguely defined 'political mass market' have on voters and candidates in the municipalities? Here, Willock's anachronistic concept of 'grass-roots democracy' (or 'grass-roots democratic socialization') gets us nowhere. In fact, the liberal elite at the municipal level had little interest in democratization, and instead depended on their social reputation and the deference (a word without a ready equivalent in German) of their local followers. When nominating candidates, liberals relied less on voting and more on the acclaim and affirmation of the audiences at their voters' assemblies.

In particular, the book opens a wide-ranging field of discussion in the history of party politics. A broader perspective needs to be applied to the theory of competing camps and their associated multi-party system (*Lagertheorie*).² If municipalities are held to be the primary field of experience and activity for liberal politics, this raises the question of how far the idea of the centrally organized party with an ideological programme is really applicable to the liberal milieu of the nineteenth

² Karl Rohe, *Wahlen und Wählertraditionen in Deutschland: Kulturelle Grundlagen deutscher Parteien und Parteiensysteme im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt am Main, 1992).

century. It is true that liberal MPs navigated between, on the one hand, the expectations of their local clientele, whom it was their primary duty to serve, and the demands of their work in the national parliament on the other, which called for programmatic principles and disciplined voting. Both of these factors—accountability to the voter base and the pressures of parliamentary factions—posed a challenge to the liberal understanding of politics, especially when they related to the much-vaunted freedom and independence of the liberals' electoral mandate. As long as their local power base remained unchallenged, there was no need to establish party structures in the municipalities that were oriented towards the headquarters in the capital. The bourgeois understanding of power was based on a liberal movement that integrated all citizens, and the appropriate organizational structure was held to be the local civic association, not a party with an ideological programme. The enduring success of the liberal political model only came to an end on the eve of the First World War, after political decision-making was nationalized and moved into parliament, the franchise was expanded, and rival movements began to compete for power in the city halls.

The liberal understanding of politics and the movement's firm foundations in the municipalities may have been the most important common features shared by the parties in Britain and Germany. The liberal theory and practice of politics diverge considerably from the idea of parliamentary representation for specific social interests, classes, and confessions in the manner of Labour, the Social Democrats, and the Catholic Centre Party, as well as (to a degree) the conservative parties in each country. There is thus much to be said for Willock's argument that political liberalism in Britain and the *Kaiserreich* relied for too long on the authority it had acquired as an emancipation movement, as well as the social prestige of its local champions. In both countries, as Willock so accurately puts it, the 'dangerous complacency of a party of notables spoiled by success' (p. 291) ultimately led to the liberals losing power, even in the municipalities.

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