
Do the so-called ‘Hottentot elections’ of 1907 represent that moment when Namibia, historically entwined with German colonial power since the 1880s, decisively altered the course of events in the metropole, suddenly reversing the flow of influence through the force of anti-colonial revolt? Frank Sobich, in his latest work, “Schwarze Bestien, rote Gefahr”: Rassismus und Antisozialismus im deutschen Kaiserreich (“black beasts, red danger”: racism and anti-socialism in the German empire), suggests otherwise. The dissolution of the Reichstag in 1906 came about following the refusal of the Social Democratic and Centre parties to accept a request by the government for more funds for the ongoing war in Southwest Africa. However, the reasons for the dissolution lay not in events in the colony, Sobich observes, but in the political constellation in Germany, as the colonial wars had, to all intents, already been concluded. It is perhaps in a much larger, more thoroughgoing sense that armed Namibian resistance, due to the way it was perceived in the metropole, affected the course of German history. The elections, Sobich argues, mark the pivotal moment in the dissemination of racism in German society and its fusion with national chauvinism and anti-socialist ideologies into a powerful new strand of politics on the German right. This is certainly the most comprehensive and compelling history to date of the elections, of the “racist, nationalist and anti-socialist campaign” (225) from December 1906 through January 1907, but the author’s intentions are far more wide-ranging. Sobich reconstructs a multidimensional convergence of distinct actors and forces, a short-term political conjuncture with long-term implications for Germany. He aims to show how, in the public discourse on the Herero and Nama uprisings of 1904-1906, the “image of ‘black’ people in Germany changed, how this transformed image was made useful in a certain political situation, namely the so-called ‘Hottentot elections’, how this image was merged with the image of the revolutionary proletariat and the threat of foreign enemies in a powerfully nationalist and racist campaign, and what effects this had on both the German empire and its alternative society, the workers’ movement.” (10f.) He carefully links the colonial wars and mixed-marriage debate in Namibia with the elections and with the fierce divisions and conflicts within Wilhelmine society, bringing colonialism and class politics into intimate configuration.

Prior to the Herero revolt in 1904 Sobich argues, neither the colonies nor the colonized played an important role in the “public consciousness of the German empire.”(11) While recent research suggests otherwise, what is key here is the shift in the portrayal of black Africans beginning that year. The press and Reichstag debates began to register the mutation of the simple ‘primitive’, the black ‘child of nature’ in want of civilizing, into a fiendish beast. The Herero appear as a “threatening mass,” as bands or hordes of savages,
beasts, murderers, dogs (83). They are "bloodthirsty," "black devils", "jackals", "brutes", "animals", "bestial", infamous for rape, gratuitous mutilation, destruction through fire — the qualities of the eponymous "black beast" (139). At the core of this dehumanization in the context of colonial violence was a "trend toward the biologization and bestialization of the 'blacks' over the last two decades of the Kaiserreich" (125), a trend with long-term implications for both German conceptions of race and its political culture in the twentieth century.

The real significance of this new image, however, comes only with the elections themselves. Only "through its national mobilization in the 'Hottentot elections' could the new image of 'blacks' achieve its powerful effectiveness and clarity." (19) The elections provided a context and dynamic in which the image could form a constellation with other foreign and domestic threats — internationalist, anti-colonial Social Democracy and the encirclement of Germany by dangerous Great Powers — and thereby achieve a new currency and potency. And the logic of this association long predated 1904 insofar as, according to Sobich, all substantial markers of race began in descriptions of the lower classes. What Rosa Luxemburg described as the "pogrom atmosphere" of the campaign, realized with a giant machinery of ideological mobilization, made it possible to accuse social democrats of undermining Germany, to neutralize their moral criticism of the atrocities and greed of colonialism, and to link them with the vicious enemies of the fatherland — the ‘black beast’ — in the name of pernicious internationalism and, ultimately, revolution.

Sobich emphasizes the political and social dimensions of the discursive formation of race and nation — this is as much a story of politics and class as of colonial discourse — but for all his insistence on the centrality of the working classes, the ‘red danger’, there is no real evidence of how workers or ‘ordinary’ people of any sort engaged with politics or colonial discourse in everyday life. The work is, as Sobich himself puts it, “substantially a study in the history of ideology” (15) — and definitely not a social history. Indeed, the centrality of ‘discourse’ notwithstanding, the book is in many respects straightforward political history, a history of party politics and political discourse at the highest levels, its principal sources consisting of Reichstag debates, newspapers and political propaganda like flyers and pamphlets. Here the concept of discursive mutation and saturation yields a conventional model of racial theories disseminated from ‘above’ to the undifferentiated masses ‘below’: from books and university lectures to schoolbooks and schoolrooms and ultimately to ethnographic shows, postcards, posters, novels, songs, jokes and exhibitions. Nor is there any empirical examination of that process, any critical analysis of its reception in material or social contexts. Ultimately, a more concrete, nuanced approach — specifically to the social history of colonialist mass politics — would suggest certain qualifications of Sobich’s thesis about the rupture and transformation which took place in 1907. And he himself acknowledges the
problem of conflating public with published opinion, but it seems a price he is willing to pay in order to tell the particular story he has set out to tell. And that is an important story, with far-reaching consequences. Among the effects of the elections, the colonial administration was modernized, the colonies fixed in the national consciousness — and likewise the expanding colonial discourse that structured the growing consciousness of race. Nor were the broad political results unimportant: “the integration of the larger part of the liberals, the disciplining of the Center and the beginning of the domestication of Social Democracy” (13). Revising and refining the traditional ‘social imperialist’ model of manipulation and distraction, of which Sobich is clearly skeptical, he nevertheless emphasizes above all the power of the new configuration to neutralize dissent, to integrate differing views. The history of the elections, he asserts early on, “should be concerned with how, in a colonial context, a reformulated racist ideology managed to break through as national consensus into which oppositional groups also integrated over the long term” (26). The acquiescence of German Social Democracy in 1914, as the World War began, and its passivity in 1918-1919, as the Weimar Republic took shape, contrast sharply with its earlier radicalism, and, according to Sobich, the explanation for this lies in 1907. Despite winning more votes than any other party, the Social Democrats experienced the elections as a terrible defeat, thanks to an unfair system that reduced their parliamentary party by half. (Although the extraordinary victory of the SPD in 1912 calls into question any simple continuity of self-doubt and retreat.) This “traumatization of the workers’ movement” (346) fueled its colonial revisionism and growing passivity before nationalist chauvinism — even as parts of the party became more radicalized. As the ‘red danger’ fractured and receded somewhat, the ‘bestial’ Herero returned again and again in different forms during the First World War and after. Ultimately, argues Sobich, the demons of race and socialism diverged. If the “images of ‘subversive proletariat’ and of the ‘black beast’ had, as a result of their origins and their content, a high potential for linkage,” their eventual “development, which in 1906-07 so to speak intersected, ran in opposite directions: the ‘blacks’ were ever more racialized, German workers as workers ‘deracialized’ and nationalized as German” (12). And the racial danger expressed in the ‘black beast’ became ever more sexualized — and pervasive. (This is virtually the only point in the book where gender becomes significant to the analysis.) If images of sexual danger were barely present in 1907, the mixed-marriage debate, especially in the context of the Namibian wars, had already begun the sexualization of blacks that would develop so powerfully with the ‘black danger’ of French colonial troops in the First World War and then the ‘black shame’ attributed to those same troops during the postwar occupation, extending the discourse on black sexuality into the 1930s and the Third Reich. Thus Sobich supplies a substantial — if partial — genealogy of race in twentieth-century Germany, one
that insists on the significance of the brief colonial period and integrates it carefully into the history of a political culture whose contours traced the deep fractures of class.

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