

EIDEN-OFFE, PATRICK. *Die Poesie der Klasse. Romantischer Antikapitalismus und die Erfindung des Proletariats*. Matthes und Seitz, Berlin 2017. 460 pp. € 30.00.

The author of this well-written book intends to contribute to literary history as social history. This is not to be confused with the social history of literature, which was especially popular in the 1970s. Eiden-Offe's claim is more ambitious than that, but also methodologically more problematic. He talks about a "poesy of class" (p. 16) in order to separate the class question from a paradigm of penury. This is motivated by "an amazement about the prodigal wealth of social, cultural and literary forms in which human beings engaged and fought these problems historically" (p. 16). This explains the author's sympathy for the classical representatives of English labour history, Eric Hobsbawm and E.P. Thompson in particular, whom he cherishes because of their interest in "blind alleys [and] lost causes" (p. 32). And it signals that romantic anti-capitalism is not only the object of the study, but at the same time something representing a romantic longing on the author's side. Analytically, romantic anti-capitalism is understood as a critique of capitalism in the name of the past, a critique always in danger of nostalgia but not necessarily the victim of it. Pointing to the open and positive acknowledgement of a link between romantic literature and anti-capitalism in England and France, Eiden-Offe proposes searching for related connections in the German case. And he maintains that there are "commonalities e.g. between late romantic texts by Ludwig Tieck and the social criticism of early socialist authors like Georg Weerth or Ernst Dronke" (p. 30). While he extends this line to the theory formation of Wilhelm Weitling, Moses Heß, Friedrich Engels, and Karl Marx, he seems to think that his search for pertinent motives in the texts of the authors mentioned can do without more direct reference to the experience of artisans and early factory workers commented upon in these texts (and so dear to Thompson). Instead, these experiences are assumed as somehow being represented in the texts analysed: thus, "the texts are read as embodiments of an imaginary proletarian class consciousness [...] manifestations and arrangements of collectively shared experiences" (p. 24). This rather loose way of attributing is mirrored by the use of the historical literature. Hobsbawm and Thompson, Rancière and Sewell, although describing English and French constellations respectively, are frequent witnesses. German historians like Jürgen Kocka, who tend to stress English-German differences, are not taken seriously; others, like Thomas Welskopp, are ignored completely (even when addressing the anti-feminism of the labour movement).

The approach thus runs into difficulties when put into practice. On the one hand, it leaves far-reaching assertions about today's relevance of the themes unaddressed and without solid foundation. If today's talk of a "return of class society" (p. 36) makes Eiden-Offe search for a historical model, it is – a reference to Jacques Rancière (p. 36) notwithstanding – by no means obvious why he sees it "in pre-March times rather than in the time separating us from then" (p. 37). The analogies he is pointing to – unregulated labour relations, structural overqualification, and systematic overexploitation – remain completely elusive for the early twenty-first century, whose precarious masses are seemingly quietist consumers and paupers at the same time. On the other hand, and already pointed out above, the approach evades the question of why a few literary texts should offer privileged access to the manifold ways in which working people of the first half of the nineteenth century confronted the changes of early industrialization. Take the 1836 novel of Ludwig Tieck discussed at length in the first chapter of the book as an example. Organized around the fate of the young master joiner Leonhard, it certainly qualifies as a model of romantic anti-capitalism and argues (among other things) for the need for guild representation as the source of respect and an ever more urgent need for compensation for the increased division of labour and

heightened profit orientation. Tieck's thinking about craftsmanship and art is presented in long conversations between Leonhard and his friend Baron Elsheim. That such a friendship is a far cry from the social relations typical of the vast majority of German artisans in the 1830s and 1840s does not prevent Eiden-Offe from giving the nostalgia for guilds highlighted in Tieck's novel a prominent place in artisanal self-conceptions and from postulating a projective potential for it. But contrary to the work e.g. of William Sewell, who carefully analysed the future possibilities of traditional guild semantics in working-class utterances and practices, artisans and workers do not have a voice in Eiden-Offe's book. While there may be an "irreducible moment of the imaginary" (p. 320) present in social reality, it is hard to see why the way to find out more about that moment is to re-read novels.

In turning to Eiden-Offe's second main example, Ernst Willkomm's 1845 novel *Weisse Sklaven* (white slaves), we basically encounter the same problem. One of the main themes of this obviously involuted novel is machine breaking. And we are offered a convincing interpretation of both Willkomm's fictional account and an extensive summary of Eric Hobsbawm's well-known essay on the phenomenon, the latter being used as the foil against which Willkomm's misunderstandings are made clear. Whether that is an adequate procedure or not, the overall exercise adds nothing new to what we know about the agency of historical Luddites and the meaning of their actions. In the end, we are confronted with a kind of circular argument: It takes the understandable sympathy for "primitive rebels" to lend the propositions about the proletarian imaginary some plausibility, which is then linked to the history of the other, the dissident labour movement. And as a reconsideration of pre-March class relations claims to tell us much about our present situation, the implication seems to be that the time to exhaust the potential of the imaginary informing that other, the dissident labour movement, may finally have come.

To say that the main argument is unconvincing is not to deny that the book does have some strengths. Among these is the re-reading of the whole genre of pre-March social criticism. It cannot be said that Weitling and Weerth, Dronke und Heß, not to mention Marx and Engels, have been neglected. But it is certainly worthwhile reconsidering their writings – and their narrative strategies – in the light of the conception of romantic anti-capitalism. And if the book should contribute to reopening the debate between social and literary history that would be welcome too.

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In preparation for the centenary of the German Revolution of 1918/19, the Historical Commissions of the German Länder made a concerted effort to broaden and solidify the