

# SUGGESTIONS AND DEBATES

## New Trends in Labour Movement Historiography: A German Perspective\*

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THREE VOICES

### I

In late 1993 the *International Review of Social History* published a supplement entitled "The End of Labour History?". In the introduction Marcel van der Linden observed that labour history was on the defensive. He attributed this to the worldwide collapse of "socialism" on the one hand and to the diminishing status of work in today's society on the other. The editor expressed the hope that the issue's collection of essays would show ways in which labour history could overcome its current crisis.

In the above-mentioned issue Carville Earle of the Department of Geography and Anthropology at Louisiana State University writes about the splintered geography of labour markets in industrializing America; this article is included to highlight the spatial dimension, traditionally neglected by labour history. Alf Lüdtke discusses "Polymorphous Synchrony: German Industrial Workers and the Politics of Everyday Life"; this is included to signal that subjective experiences should be given greater weight. Hartmut Zwahr writes on class formation and the labour movement as the subject of a dialectical historiography, in which he convincingly relates labour and bourgeois history to each other. Gottfried Korff is represented with a contribution entitled "History of Symbols as Social History", whose empirical core deals with the history of red flags since the French Revolution, the May Day festivals since 1890 and the iconography of the clenched fist. This is followed by a contribution by David Roediger on "Race and the Working-Class Past in the United States: Multiple Identities and the Future of Labour History". Sonya O. Rose writes about "Gender and Labour History: The Nineteenth-Century Legacy". And, lastly, van der Linden, the editor, seeks to connect household history with labour history ("Working-Class Consumer Power").

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The introduction to the issue identifies several other weaknesses of contemporary labour history, two in particular: as a matter for specialists, it isolates itself too much from general history; and it neglects the periphery, the Third World, the world beyond the West.

## II

In the same year (1993) there appeared a collection entitled “Rethinking Labor History: Essays on Discourse and Class Analysis”. This was edited by Lenard R. Berlanstein, a younger historian from the University of Virginia whose previous work had been on French labour history in particular. His introduction reads like the manifesto for a post-structuralist labour history. The “new labour history” of the late 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s broke away from the earlier overemphasis on factory workers, he contends, and, for the nineteenth century, put the artisan centre stage. More attention was paid to pre-industrial ways of life and mentalities, and their conflict-ridden clash with capitalist modernization moved historians critical of modernization to write sympathetic portrayals of proletarianization. The model of class formation, and hence the notions of the means and relations of production, played a significant role at that time. Even so, workers were not observed exclusively in their workplaces, but increasingly attention was paid to their family lives, leisure time and local solidarity and communications structures. Conflicts were at the core of this “new” labour history, according to Berlanstein. Sociological models played a dominant role, not only those of “class formation” and “social protest” but also concepts such as “rituals” or “rites of passage”. Leading exponents were E.P. Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm and Charles Tilly, but also Natalie Davies and the early Joan Scott, whose *The Glassworkers of Carmaux* was published in 1974 and highly praised at the time.

But in the 1980s and 1990s this paradigm found itself on the defensive. The “new labour history” of the 1960s and 1970s had become a respected but slightly stale “old labour history”. As the crisis of socialism deepened, labour history was also called into question, claims Berlanstein. The class-formation model rapidly lost credibility, not only in the history of the labour movement but also, for instance, in the history of the French Revolution. The view of the primacy of the economic base was replaced by the belief in the autonomy of culture. Moreover, the orientation on human experiences (at the workplace or in terms of social exclusion, for instance), so central to the Thompson tradition and to everyday history, was also gradually called into question, regarded as conventional and replaced by an emphasis on discourse or language – as a system of signs and meanings, constantly in turmoil, but not necessarily related to external reference points such as labour, experience or social inequality. This new linguistic/discursive leaning

in research was heavily indebted to Foucault and Derrida. Key exponents were Jacques Rancière, the Gareth Stedman Jones of the 1980s, William H. Sewell, Donald Reid, William Reddy, the later Joan Scott and (to a limited extent) Patrick Joyce. Berlanstein would surely accept the point that these post-structuralist labour historians are few in number and have their implacable critics, including towering figures like Lawrence Stone.

### III

Finally, let me mention an issue of *International Labor and Working-Class History* published in late 1994 under the theme "What Next for Labor and Working-Class History?". Its controversial state-of-research debate was launched with a wide-ranging article by Ira Katznelson, the historically oriented sociologist and editor of the widely read collection *Working-Class Formation. Nineteenth-Century Patterns in Western Europe and the United States* (1986). Labour history, he argues, is not really in a crisis. Empirically it has never been better, more broadly based and more differentiated than today. But it has lost its elan, its sense of purpose, its intellectual meaning. Committed young students are moving into other areas of research these days, such as gender history. Labour history is in danger of becoming a lament for disappointed hopes and expectations. "The cause is gone", he writes. Two factors account for this: first, the emergence of new social movements – focusing on the environment, women's rights, civil rights, etc. – which have called into question the prominence of class affiliation and class analysis and prompted the concentration on language; and second, the decline of democratic socialism and then the collapse of dictatorial communism and the consequent questioning of the traditionally influential idea of the "forward march of labour", in other words the demise of the idea of progress, which had implicitly inspired and guided a considerable part of working-class and labour history.

Katznelson does not wish to draw the post-structuralist conclusion, however, and to abandon the study of contexts in favour of language, discourse and pure meaning. Rather, he urges us to take seriously the institutions, the realm of politics and political ideas and to study the labour movement against the background of government institutions, party-political systems, the welfare state and political theories. Henry Pelling, a rather old-fashioned historian with a predilection for the institutional, is rediscovered.

Incidentally, while Katznelson calls for the rediscovery of politics and its institutions, David Brody, another grand old man of American labour history, calls for a return to industrial relations and the labour process to overcome the current crisis of labour history and of the labour movement, which in his eyes is caused by the culturalism of many historians and by neo-liberal union-bashing policies in contemporary America.

Many other voices could be quoted, but let these three examples suffice. They are not untypical of the recent stock-taking exercises and programmatic articles about working-class and labour history, at least in Western Europe and North America. Common threads are the realization of a paradigm change, a sense of crisis and a highly fragmented search for solutions, which range from post-structuralist discourse analysis to a return to conventional institutional history but share a questioning of traditional class-formation analyses. Judging at least from the basic and programmatic declarations of intent which have appeared recently, there is a sense of exhaustion, dissatisfaction with traditions and steady decline as well as a search for new alternatives.

### PRACTICAL TRENDS

In contrast, a rough survey of what is actually produced and of the long-term trends reveals a picture of considerable continuity. It has always been the case that the *Historische Zeitschrift* carried only a few articles on the working class and the labour movement in the broadest sense, while *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* carried many. In every five-year period over the last twenty-five years the former published three to six articles concerned with this field, the latter twenty to thirty. There is no clear downward trend in either publication over this period. The *American Historical Review* and the British *Past and Present* did not publish any fewer articles on the working class and the labour movement in the period 1990-1994 compared to 1970-1974. Only in the French *Annales* has labour history been further pushed aside in the last twenty years, from what was already a marginal position. The overall impression is one of long-term stability, although there are wide fluctuations in the specifics.

An analysis of the contents of two international journals devoted primarily to labour history, the *International Review of Social History* edited in Amsterdam and *International Labor and Working-Class History* published in New York shows no dramatic changes over the last decade either.

In both journals articles about the West predominate, with the accent on Western Europe in the Amsterdam journal and on North America in the New York journal. With the exception of some tentative but promising efforts in the most recent period (as in the *International Review* in 1995), the main impression is that non-European themes are rarely discussed, and articles on Eastern European themes are even declining in number. Comparative articles remain wholly peripheral, with no more than two every five years.

Two trend shifts are evident. Historical articles on everyday and cultural history are clearly on the increase from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, although the primarily political and social historical articles still account for the lion's share. In the American journal the number of gender-oriented articles has risen somewhat, but remains low. Historical articles with

linguistic, discursive or intellectual emphases remain peripheral in both journals.

At least in these respects the programmatic discussion is running well ahead of actual production, and it is by no means clear whether the latter will ever follow the former. It may be, of course, that much new research is still in progress and has not yet reached the point of publication in reputable journals. And since our categorizations and allocations are based solely on the titles of articles, they are very rough and ready. But in any case it is beyond question that the turbulent situation evident in the programmatic articles becomes considerably becalmed when actual output is taken into account. The movements which are diagnosed and debated at the theoretical level appear in weakened form in the empirical work, although they are not wholly absent. On balance the picture is very complex and difficult to reduce to a common denominator.

#### NEW EMPHASES

That is why I would like to raise several problems and developments which I consider particularly important, pressing or promising. What is both new and worth pursuing? Where should ideas and research be concentrated? Which blind alleys are best avoided? What questions for working-class and labour history arise from contemporary practical problems, especially with regard to the German experience?

The following comments are of course highly selective.

#### *I*

Of the challenges faced by traditional working-class and labour history indicated above, that posed by gender history is the most momentous. It is true that gender history sometimes makes rather absurd monopoly-like claims for itself, but I am not concerned with these here. Nor is a gender-historical revolutionization of social history either imminent or likely in the future. But the (mostly female) representatives of a sophisticated gender history confront the class-based historical approach – which I still defend – with productive challenges, prompting significant modifications of traditional ideas.

For one thing, the gender-historical perspective forces us to address those dimensions of the class-formation process that are not related to gainful employment and jobs. How does one assess the class situation of people who are not permanently engaged in gainful employment (including very many women)? How does one link the history of wage labour and households? Furthermore, a focus on the contributions made by women to the class-formation process opens up long-neglected dimensions, which in recent years have been studied to some extent in relation to the middle class but much less so in relation to the working class. I

mean here the role of kinship relations in the development of class-specific networks, the role of friendships and neighbourly relations, the nursing and passing on of “cultural capital” in the class-formation process. And finally, the gender-historical perspective exposes the labour movement as a men’s movement, which manifests itself not only in its programmes and political work, but also in its style and culture. This input helps to make the traditional view of the labour movement both more critical and more realistic. Overall, the problems arising from linking class and gender history have not yet been solved. But the work on these problems promises to produce interesting results.

## II

Less pronounced thus far has been the challenge from the linguistic turn in historical study, specifically in labour history. I shall not mourn the fact that its radical variants have hitherto barely made an impression in Germany. After all, the radical representatives of this approach demand that historical reconstruction is restricted to the study of linguistic phenomena. They dismiss the relationship between language and non-linguistic dimensions of historical reality as either illegitimate or pointless, narrow past reality down to texts, regard only the reconstruction of discourses as possible and worthwhile, and recommend the study of concepts and their meanings only in relation to other concepts and meanings and not in relation to external references. From this standpoint classes appear merely in their linguistic form, as products of discourses, in the medium of language, but not as composites of experiences, interests and structures. This boils down to idealistic reductions, which fail to grasp the past reality and until now have remained the exception even in American historical studies.

The language, rhetoric and discourses of the labour movements are of course rewarding objects of study. Anyone who might have forgotten this will be reminded of it by the representatives of the linguistic turn. It is doubtless wrong to conceive of people’s language and concepts merely as derivative variables, as reflexes or dependent manifestations of experiences, interests and underlying structures. Rather, one should acknowledge and take seriously that linguistic formulations, concepts and discourses actively form and inform experiences, that linguistic communications sustain socialization and justify power structures. It is good that linguistically inspired historians remind us of this. But this was also known from German *Begriffsgeschichte*, contrary to older reductionist views, which denied the autonomy of language and misjudged it as only a reflex, an epiphenomenon, a mere expression of non-linguistic reality.

*Begriffsgeschichte* (conceptual history) has played a fruitful role in labour history for many years. Asa Briggs in Britain and Werner Conze and Reinhart Koselleck in Germany have ensured as much, and many have followed in their footsteps. But it may be that methodological impulses



from modern linguistics will lead to further refinements. In my view at least the language of the labour movement is an as yet insufficiently ploughed field of research. Reconstructing and comparing key concepts, symbols, discourses and rhetorical instruments in the texts may be an important means of eliciting differences, similarities and changes in the experiences and expectations of the labour movement's leaders and spokespeople; of gaining a better understanding of how workers interpreted their reality; of analysing what they had in common as workers, what held them together as a labour movement, what distinguished them from other sections of society, and whom they opposed. This will benefit the study of the intellectual roots of the class-formation process. Even so, it is imperative that researchers constantly examine the dialectical relationship between the linguistic and non-linguistic dimensions of historical reality and set texts in the context of their origins and effects, which are usually not sufficiently reflected in the texts themselves.

### III

In 1980 Geoff Eley and Keith Neild published an article entitled "Why Does Social History Ignore Politics?" in the British journal *Social History*. This first raised a call (which has gradually grown louder and has now become irrepressible) to reincorporate politics, institutions and law again into social history, and hence also into working-class and labour history. What should we make of this?

For one thing, it should be noted that German social historians never marginalized the state and politics as much as their American or British counterparts. So the dramatic appeal to put politics back into history forces an open door as far as German social history as well as German working-class and labour history is concerned.

On the other hand, it must be conceded that in Germany, too, variants of social history have developed which neglect politics in the sense of institutionalized political activity. This is true of some micro-studies of everyday history, which concentrate so much on the reconstruction of experiences, observations and assimilations on the small scale that they easily lose sight of the overarching structures, including law, state and politics. But I am thinking more of several systematic socio-historical or class-historical approaches which, while typically keeping a certain distance from crude economism and teleological determinism, still stress the socio-economically defined class situation and the related experiences of work, dependency, conflict and affiliation, then proletarian living conditions (such as family or social life), and finally culture, communications and socialization, and treat the formation of trade unions, mutual-benefit associations and parties – the politics of the movement – as the last stage, more as a consequence of economics, culture and socialization and less as an autonomous dimension or a conditioning factor.

In principle I still believe this is a legitimate approach. It seems particularly important in my view to study the political ambitions, activities and institutions *in relation to* economic, social and cultural moments, that is, not in isolation and absolutely, as some people now seem to argue again. But perhaps we should be prepared to rethink the relationship, and be more open to the possibility that the political has greater autonomy and impact. In the case of early working-class and labour history this would mean interpreting the class-formation process more as one which activists always consciously intended, promoted and influenced by political means. This turns the attention on the goals and the agitation, again on language and rhetoric, on everyday work in the clubs, organizations and local party branches, on class formation as a *project* pursued by active minorities. A project which, in so far as it succeeded, could only succeed because the constellation of economic, social, political and cultural factors was “right”, but still a project, not just a process.

After all, there is much to be said for this approach. In terms of their socio-economic situations, work and life experiences, specific interests and views, wage workers within the labour movement were at all times very different, diverse and heterogeneous. What brought many of them – but always a minority – together in the labour movement was, in addition to the common interests and experiences, the purposive political work of leaders such as Bebel, Lassalle, Tölcke, Liebknecht and thousands of other less well known activists. Class formation was invariably also conscious coalition building on the basis of common goals beyond social and mental fragmentations, through the medium of political activity. The labour movement never grew like a flower out of the fertile soil of economic, social and cultural environmental factors. It was always also a construct.

Such an approach can of course easily lead to new biases, to voluntaristic or anti-structuralist exaggerations. One should guard against that. But socio-economic explanatory paradigms have become sufficiently relativized to call for the rethinking of the relationship between structure and action, and hence the role of politics, also in relation to the history of the labour movement. At least the international debate is pushing in this direction.

#### LABOUR HISTORY AFTER 1989/1990

The political and intellectual background against which labour history is written has shifted decisively in the last fifteen years or so. Gone is the mixture of radical social critique and modernization optimism typical of the 1960s and 1970s. Most people these days expect less of the aims of modernization, emancipation and state intervention than they did then. Post-modern scepticism has in many ways taken the place of modern criticism. Traditional socialist and social democratic reform strategies are



failing, it seems, in solving contemporary crises. One need only think of the global ecological crisis, mass unemployment, the resurgence of nationalism and the return of war in Europe, the indebtedness of governments and the problems of the welfare state in the face of globalization. The collapse of dictatorial communism in 1989/1990 reinforced the already existing doubts about the socialist faith. The intellectual left has major problems. What are the implications of this for labour history?

After the demise of the communist dictatorships in the East and the fading fascination of democratic socialism in the West, some labour historians have lost the orientation to which they had hitherto been explicitly or implicitly wed. In so far as interest in labour movement themes had been fuelled by a political commitment to the cause of the proletariat or socialism, to anti-capitalist reform or even revolution, it has been waning. This is noticeable from the falling number of students entering the field. This is regrettable, but at the same time it may offer new opportunities. The discipline has freed itself from its political embrace, from old and unproductive fights like the ones between West German and East German historians over Marx vs. Lassalle, "reform" vs. "revolution", the alleged "betrayal" of class interests by revisionist labour leaders, etc. There is the chance to ask new questions which were difficult or unlikely to be asked before 1989/1990. I should like to give three examples.

### I

The history of the relationship between social democracy and communism as two partly related, partly competing and partly deeply hostile branches of the labour movement seems to me a scientific problem that should be raised again in the new post-1989 constellation. Researchers should try to elucidate more clearly, on the basis of the history of experiences, mentalities and politics, the differentiation of the socialist labour movement into a democratic and a dictatorial branch. We should also pose the question why the tradition of the socialist labour movement did not contain sufficient internal safeguards against its anti-liberal and anti-democratic perversion.

In my view the history of the labour movement under the conditions of communist dictatorship is a major research problem that still awaits resolution. And this can only be properly embarked upon conceptually and empirically now that the dictatorships have collapsed. Can and should one classify the communist parties that held power until 1989 as heirs of the labour movement, as they themselves claimed? Or should they be seen as its misbegotten offspring? Did the dictatorship of the Socialist Unity Party (SED) in East Germany not explode and destroy the history of the German labour movement? That is after all how it seems at the moment, now that it is apparent how little of a real labour movement survived on the territory of the former "worker and peasant state".

## II

In the past the question was often asked why the labour movement was not more radical during specific phases of its history (such as before 1914, during the First World War or in the early Weimar Republic). Today, however, the question is often asked how the labour movement could become as radical and progressive during specific phases of its history as it actually did: a change of perspective which could prove productive.

## III

In the last two decades the project of a civil society has gained new attraction. It aims at the coexistence and co-operation of free citizens, with equal life and participation chances, under constitutional and legal guarantees, without state nannyism or repression, without violence and in emancipation. The project has its roots in eighteenth-century Enlightenment thought. It underwent deep changes in the course of the last two centuries, under the impact of socialist criticism and the quest for democratization. More recently it had to cope with the feminist critique. It must continue to change in order to survive the challenges of the present. While it is not advanced by abolishing the market, it is, in the long run, not compatible with excessive social and economic inequality. The project of a civil society has never been fully realized anywhere. Its worldwide application has only just begun and at the moment seems by no means assured. It still holds utopian implications.

It is possible to conceive the history of labour movements against the background of the unfinished history of civil society. This is of course only one perspective among others but it could help to restore relevance to labour history by connecting it with one of the pressing questions of the present time.

In the German language the concept "*Bürger*" stands for both "bourgeois" and "citizen". "Civil society" can be translated by "*Bürger-gesellschaft*". This semantic ambiguity indicates the close relationship between the history of the bourgeoisie and the history of civil society ever since the eighteenth century, a relationship which changed over time and oscillated between alliance and tension. By setting the history of labour into the context of the history of civil society, one also relates the history of the working class and the history of the bourgeoisie (*Bürgertum*) to each other. That means to re-examine the partially bourgeois (*bürgerlich*) and the inherent anti-bourgeois elements of labour movements, a mixture and balance which shifted over time and space.

Take the German case as an example. In its early phase, from the 1860s until around 1890, the anti-bourgeois features of the German labour movement were prominent not least because the bourgeoisie was weak and its impact on society limited. But in the twenty-five years preceding the First

World War, the bourgeoisification of society, culture and politics proceeded, and it went hand in hand with a certain dilution of the labour movement's anti-bourgeois features. The deep crisis of the bourgeoisie, bourgeois culture and civil society during and after the First World War, in turn went hand in hand with the radicalization of the anti-bourgeois features of considerable sections of the labour movement, in its radical socialist and then in its communist guise. The Nazi dictatorship led to the destruction both of the labour movement and of civil society. The renewed consolidation of the bourgeoisie, of bourgeois culture and of civil society since the 1950s in the western part of Germany, on the other hand, paved the way for a gradual rapprochement between the basic principles of the labour movement and the bourgeoisie.

The late Leipzig historian Manfred Kossok wrote in 1990: "It is surely no coincidence that the countries of deformed socialism did not have a successful '1789'; their people were transformed into 'comrades' without having previously been 'citoyens'." Indeed, the strength of the labour movement and the balance between social democratic and communist-dictatorial strands within the twentieth century labour movements depended, among other factors, on the extent of bourgeois penetration of the society in question, that is, on the extent and nature of bourgeois culture and hegemony, on the degree to which a civil society had emerged and been consolidated in the various countries.

It seems appropriate, on the one hand, to see the German labour movement of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as part of a society which was more bourgeois (and civil) than the societies of Eastern Europe, where the weakness and underdevelopment of bourgeois lifestyles, rights and constitutions hampered the development of the labour movement while at the same time radicalizing it and making it more anti-bourgeois; on the other hand the German labour movement was part of a society which was less bourgeois (and civil) than the societies of Western Europe, as evidenced by the authoritarian coloration of political life, the strength of pre-bourgeois elites and traditions as well as the comparatively weak impact of the bourgeoisie on the society at large. These factors explain the special characteristics of the German labour movement, such as its early separation from liberalism, its early independence and size, as well as its capacity to develop post-bourgeois goals, practices and forms of organization. The German labour movement of the nineteenth and early twentieth century reveals itself as part of a "medium-strength" bourgeois society, as it were.

On the other hand, the contribution of the social democratic – and to some extent also christian – labour movement to the gradual realization of civil society in Germany has been considerable. We should remember in this context social democracy's commitment to civil rights, democratization, parliamentarism, the constitutional state, the legal codification of social relationships, universal education and social justice. Other

contributions also deserve mention: the focus on enlightenment, the struggle against anti-Semitism and xenophobia, before 1933 the struggle against fascism in defence of the republic (for which the social democratic labour movement battled, albeit ultimately in vain, with greater commitment than most other social forces and political camps). In a country where the strength of liberalism, at least at the national level, declined early and the bourgeoisie was often only half-heartedly committed to the project of civil society, it fell to sections of the labour movement to take on their role.

### UNCERTAINTIES

It is quite clear that working-class and labour history are deeply influenced by the mood of the time, the problems of the present and the expectations one holds with respect to the future. The ups and downs, the dead ends and new opportunities in working-class and labour history are closely related to the changing intellectual and political conjunctures of one's own time.

Certainly the times continue to change. Less than a decade after the fall of communism, the victorious capitalist system seems to be heading for serious troubles. In our part of the world mass unemployment has become a major threat. The most important institution which has been developed over the last century in order to tame and stabilize the capitalist system – the welfare state – has come under severe strain. What is called globalization seems to limit and curtail nation-state-based procedures of regulation, redistribution and legitimation.

It is not yet clear what that will mean for the future shape of working-class and labour history. Maybe we should try to *get the economy back in*, which, under the impact of cultural interpretations and the anthropological turn of the last decade has lost the prominent place which it once had in labour history and other parts of social history. Maybe the *history of work* will gain new prominence, in a broadly comparative way, with respect to the question of how different societies have distributed work, how they invented work, and how they defined the relation between work and non-work. Maybe the next few years will be a good time for broad and bold international *comparisons* including non-European parts of the world. Maybe the new and imminent forms of capitalist crisis will make the anti-capitalist visions of different labour movements of the past interesting again. *Reading Marx* has not been a major source for intellectual stimulation over the last decade or so. Maybe there is something there to be rediscovered.