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Studies of Growth and Decline: New Books on the History of the Western Working Class

Nancy Isenberg: *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America*, London: Atlantic Books, 2017, 480 pp., ISBN 978-1-78649-300-2 (paperback).

William A. Pelz: *A People's History of Modern Europe*, London: Pluto Press, 2016, 288 pp., ISBN 978-0-7453-3245-1 (paperback).

Selina Todd: *The People: The Rise and Fall of the Working Class*, London: John Murray, 2015, 512 pp., ISBN 978-1-84854-882-4.

Jürgen Kocka, with cooperation of Jürgen Schmidt, *Arbeiterleben und Arbeiterkultur: Die Entstehung einer sozialen Klasse*, Bonn: J.H.W. Dietz Nachf., 2015, 512 pp., ISBN 978-3-8012-5040-9.

Jürgen Schmidt: *Arbeiter in der Moderne: Arbeitsbedingungen, Lebenswelten, Organisationen,* Frankfurt/New York: Campus, 2015, 285 pp., ISBN 978-3-593-50340-0.

Labour and working-class history has experienced a striking revival over the past one and a half decades. Largely considered dead during the 1990s, the discipline today seems well and alive.[1] This is to a considerable degree the result of new approaches and critical interventions which emphasised that working-class experiences were much more diverse than historical research often implied. These critics have argued that many of the established concepts in labour history—from free wage labour to formalised collective bargaining—fail to appreciate the complex nature of labour and

1 Katrina Navickas: What Happened to Class? New Histories of Labour and Collective Action in Britain, in: Social History 36:2 (2011), pp. 192–204; Kim Christian Priemel: Heaps of Work: The Ways of Labour History, in: H-Soz-Kult, 23 February 2014, at: www.hsozkult.de/literaturereview/id/forschungsberichte-1223 (accessed on 27 December 2018); Dietmar Süß: A scheene Leich? Stand und Perspektiven der westdeutschen Arbeitergeschichte nach 1945, in: Mitteilungsblatt des Instituts für soziale Bewegungen 34 (2005), pp. 51–76. Also available online at https://moving-the-social.ub.rub.de/index.php/MTS/article/view/7764/6936 (last accessed 29 January 2020).

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class in the past. Proponents of a Global Labour History, for instance, stressed that informal and unfree labour determined employment relations well into the twentieth century. Focusing on Latin America, Africa, and Asia, they have thus provided a much-needed change of perspective for a discipline long dominated by research on Europe and North America.[2] Among other things, these interventions have culminated in the launch of a vast research network that studies the transnational history of coercion in work.[3] What has received less attention, however, is that this critique has also influenced labour historians studying places like Germany, Great Britain or the U.S. The following pages explore to what extent recent historical redefinitions of the Western working class helped invigorate the field; but they also ask what repercussions or risks these redefinitions entail.

In *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America*, Nancy Isenberg explores the making of the American lower class from the colonial era to the present. According to Isenberg, the outcome of the 2016 presidential election, which took many pundits and most Democrats by surprise, was a powerful sign that contemporary America is still heavily divided by class. In voting for Trump, a predominantly rural or suburban white working class expressed deep resentment against liberal elites that supposedly cater to minority interests while utterly neglecting the material well-being and value systems of working-class whites. Against this backdrop, Isenberg explores how white, lower-class Americans have been insulted, exploited, and manipulated over four centuries. In so doing, the author reveals a strikingly persistent continuum of state and elite responses towards the white poor. On the one end of the spectrum, Americans labelled “white trash” have regularly been victims of aggressive rhetoric—and often equally aggressive policy—aiming at behavioural correction or social exclusion. On the other end of the spectrum, however, the white lower classes have repeatedly taken centre stage in populist movements over the course of the past two centuries. The numerous pieces comparing Donald Trump to Andrew Jackson that have appeared since the former’s inauguration speak for themselves in this respect.[4]

2 Andreas Eckert (ed.): Global Histories of Work, Berlin 2018; Marcel van der Linden: Workers of the World: Essays toward a Global Labor History, Leiden 2008.

3 See the COST Action “Worlds of Related Coercions in Work”, https://www.worck.eu/ (last accessed 29 January 2020).

4 Peter Baker: Jackson and Trump: How two Populist Presidents Compare, in: The New York Times, 15 March 2017, at: https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/15/us/politics/donald-trump-andrew-jackson.html (accessed on 2 July 2018); Linda J. Killian: The New Old Hickory, in: U.S. News, 13 February 2017, at: https://www.usnews.com/opinion/op-ed/articles/2017-02-13/beware-the-similarities-between-donald-trump-and-andrew-jackson (accessed on 2 July 2018).

Isenberg, a historian at Louisiana State University, begins her study with a detailed discussion of colonial and early republican notions of social hierarchy that elites brought forward in defence of political and economic inequality. Exploring a wide array of letters, memoires, treatises, and similar material, the author traces how lower-class whites were characterised as dirty and idle by the powers that be. According to prominent voices in politics and the economy, it was these personal traits rather than the miserable working and living conditions that were responsible for their poor, "trashy" state. In the following chapters, Isenberg argues that the nineteenth century in no way put an end to this. Although politicians started to appeal to lower-class voters by presenting themselves as poor whites, the century in fact witnessed a growing division between powerful elites and the dispossessed masses. Neither Jacksonian Democracy, which centred on the expansion of lower-class whites' political rights, nor the short-lived Confederacy, which had been built on the promise of protecting white labour, significantly altered this dynamic. As the century drew to a close, the eugenic movement began to depict "white trash" as a sort of hereditary condition which had to be eradicated for the benefit of the nation. Making use of quickly developing mass media, eugenic campaigns were often framed in aggressive rhetoric. Isenberg carefully analyses this rhetoric by studying photos, speeches, and pamphlets that presented lower-class whites as an infested and degenerate breed beyond hope of improvement. Over the coming decades, such class prejudice led many middle-class Americans to angrily oppose New Deal programs which supposedly benefited a feckless and underserving white underclass. Discussion about who deserved public assistance and who did not also had a strong impact on welfare debates in the second half of the twentieth century. In the final chapters of the book, Isenberg argues that disparaging representations of "white trash" in popular culture continue to determine class division and discrimination to the present day.

Isenberg has been praised widely for her narrative style and meticulous research. While the book indeed is well written, it does not provide, however, "the 400-year untold history of class in America", the subtitle suggests. First, the story portrayed here is anything but "untold". There is nothing new, for instance, about the fact that England used the new colonies to dispose of its surplus population of idle poor who, if they survived the passage, were introduced to a brutal system of class rule. Second, and much more importantly, the book does not provide a thorough study of class. Isenberg treats class as an all-encompassing term for dispossessed whites. This conceptual ambiguity has far reaching consequences for her analysis. Although "white trash" seems to be, first and foremost, a phenomenon of the rural South, we also meet textile workers in mill towns and even skilled urban workers or residents of shantytowns in Northern cities hit by the Great Depression. It is thus not clear what distinguishes "white trash" from the white working class as such. But the subject of the book not only remains vaguely defined; it also lacks historical agency. The author seems to agree with E. P. Thompson that class is not simply a structural phenomenon or abstract cat-

egory that can be studied empirically, but something that is actively made. Yet unlike Thompson, Isenberg is not interested in the role that working-class people played in the making of their own class. In a radically constructionist approach, Isenberg seems to understand class as the exclusive product of elitist rhetoric, government policy, and state repression. We learn virtually nothing about how everyday working and living experiences influence class identity or collective behaviour. "White trash", the author implies, has never been anything but a pawn in the hands of the powerful.

This, then, serves the main argument of the book, namely, that class has always been an important yet often concealed social marker in America. *White Trash* is meant to debunk the exceptionalist myth of a republic of unlimited social mobility. Far from exceptional, Isenberg argues, the rigid class hierarchy of the U.S. was never that different from class rule in England. Thereby, the author throws the baby out with the bath water. There is no doubt that American society was—and still is—organised along class lines. Yet insisting in overall similarities blinds us to the far more interesting question why the American working class in fact evolved very differently from its English or (Western) European counterparts. Isenberg shows how leading figures in U.S. history, from Benjamin Franklin to Abraham Lincoln to Richard Nixon, have cemented class hierarchies precisely by insisting that the American Republic was the land of opportunity where social advancement was not dependent on pedigree and wealth but on effort and talent. Thus, American elites created a powerful ideology that helped justify socio-economic difference as an inevitable consequence of a meritocratic system rather than a harsh reality of class rule. Yet the modest social background—real or imagined—of many of the influential people Isenberg portrays provides a striking counter-argument to her own. Take the chapter on the Civil War. Isenberg shows that leading Confederates fuelled the war rhetoric by ridiculing Andrew Johnson as "white trash" unfit for office. And yet, this unschooled tailor eventually became the 17th President of the United States of America. At that time, tailors in England, France or the German States would have been amused by the idea that one of them ever took office.

These European artisans, workers, and peasants stand at the centre of *A People's History of Modern Europe*. In this book, the late William A. Pelz sets out to do for Europe what Howard Zinn has done for the U.S., namely, to rewrite the history of the continent form below. Pelz, who headed the Institute of Working-Class History in Chicago, died in late 2017. *A People's History of Modern Europe* is in many ways the culmination of a life-long commitment to transnational workers' history. As Pelz stresses in the Introduction, the book caters primarily to the student and general reader new to the field of social history. As a result, the events and movements selected by the author produce a rather conventional narrative with few surprises. The first two chapters portray the commoners who joined the ranks of radical reform and revolting peasantry amidst post-feudal transformation. Against this backdrop, chapters three and four highlight that ordinary Englishmen and Frenchmen participated greatly in the Glorious Revolution and the French Revolution respectively, and that they were strongly influenced

by popular concepts of equality and justice. Chapters five to seven show how Industrialisation and the emergence of machinery produced a new form of collective uprising that eventually led to the modern labour movement of the late nineteenth century. In the following four chapters, Pelz argues that despite economic crisis, the rise of fascism, and the carnage of war, ordinary Europeans continued to challenge established power both peacefully at the ballot box and violently by means of riots, strikes or mutinies. Chapters 12 to 15 discuss the (re)building of the welfare state and the growing social unrest that eventually gave birth to the new social movements that shook the foundations of Eastern and Western Europe alike. In the final, rather gloomy chapter of the book, Pelz covers Europe's fall into the twenty-first century. The dismantling of the welfare state together with the disastrous repercussion of the financial crisis further eroded the power and well-being of lower-class Europeans. Pelz hopes that the present book will provide readers with an antidote to the hegemonic ideology of neoliberalism. For it shows, the author maintains, that change is possible if the people choose to act.

A People's History of Modern Europe provides an impressive overview of half a millennium of European social history from below. Throughout the book, Pelz shows that lower-class Europeans have been exploited, mislead, marginalised, and brutalised not only by the forces of power and wealth but also by the very movements and parties that had claimed to defend their interest. Pelz's writing is vivid and well-paced, often covering plenty of ground on just a few pages. Yet several problems remain. Similar to Isenberg's *White Trash*, what irritates when reading *A People's History of Modern Europe* is the repeated call to novelty. At last, readers are being told, here is a book that provides the history of all those forgotten or ignored in mainstream historiography. Yet the 1960s have long passed. Very little that is presented here qualifies as forgotten or neglected history. Although Pelz warns of the dangers of oversimplification, he occasionally cannot resist making general claims or moral assessments not based on evidence provided in the book. Stating, for instance, that Stalinism and National Socialism both were "evil" provides as little—if not less—analytical insight as the claim that both were "identical", no matter how morally misguided one might find the latter claim.[5] The book also relies entirely on literature in English, and much of it is rather dated. This obviously has an effect on the arguments presented. When Pelz claims, for instance, that German workers were immune to Hitler,[6] he ignores three decades of critical scholarship suggesting that despite its largely middle-class base, the Nazi movement did enjoy support also from working-class voters and activists.[7] Most importantly, however, it is one thing to argue that the degree of freedom and protection working-class Europeans

5 William A. Pelz: A People's History of Modern Europe, p. 151.

6 Ibid., p. 139.

7 Richard J. Evans: "Arbeiterklasse und Volksgemeinschaft": Zur Diskussion um Anpassung und Widerstand in der deutschen Arbeiterschaft 1933–1945, in: Gesprächskreis Geschichte 84 (2010); Jürgen Falter: Hitlers Wähler, Munich 1991.

enjoy today is the result of centuries of commitment and struggle by ordinary people. It is quite another thing, however, to suggests that "[i]f the average European worker or farmer lives a significantly better life than others around the planet, it is in large matter because they have fought".[8] There are many explanations for why people in the Global South often lack similar levels of social security, political freedom or consumption; failure "to fight" is surely not one of them. Despite the brief discussion of racism in the Introduction, Pelz's assessment is symptomatic for the striking absence of non-Europeans in the book. British, German or French workers not only fought for liberty, self-determination, and solidarity. They also manned the slave ships of the Atlantic, guarded the forced labourers of the colonies, and fought the great wars of conquest and plunder.[9] In so doing, working-class Europeans helped reproduce racist ideologies that stabilised class rule at home by granting modest material and significant psychological privilege.[10] At the same time, they closely tied the fate of millions of non-Europeans to modern Europe. Especially in the light of the recent turn toward Global Labour History, it is puzzling that they were virtually left out by Pelz.

Unlike the authors discussed so far, British historian Selina Todd offers a clear definition of class in her celebrated *The People: The Rise and Fall of the Working Class*. As Todd argues throughout the book, class is not merely a question of income or identity. Rather, it is a relational category expressing political and economic power—or a lack of it. Being part of the British working class in the twentieth century meant being part of a large group of people who found themselves in a constant struggle for recognition at the polls, in the market, and on the shop floor. At its heart, class was—and still is—defined by everyday experiences and relationships "that are primarily though not entirely shaped by whether or not we have to work for a living".[11] In *The People*, Todd tells the story of all those Britons who relied on their own labour, and she does so with great sophistication. The book is divided into three large parts, the first of which traces the growth and decline of domestic service. By 1910, servants comprised the largest group of workers in Britain. Yet unlike their Victorian predecessors, this new generation of servants no longer exhibited the deference their masters had been accustomed to. Servants increasingly conceived of themselves as workers with rights to privacy and autonomy which, daily experience showed, their masters were unwilling to respect. Female servants were particularly eager to leave service behind for factory labour which offered better pay, shorter hours, and greater social esteem. While many female workers were being pushed back into domestic service in the aftermath of the First

8 William A. Pelz: A People's History of Modern Europe, p. 217.

9 For a recent study of Europeans and the ocean, see Jürgen Elvert: Europa, das Meer und die Welt: Eine maritime Geschichte der Neuzeit, Munich 2018.

10 As they did in the U.S.; see David R. Roediger: The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class, London and New York 1991.

11 Selina Todd: The People: The Rise and Fall of the Working Class, p. 401.

World War, they continued to regard it as unfree and oppressive, and they did what they could to avoid it. As the economic crisis eased in the late 1930s and employment increased in the light industries in particular, the former servants had become manual workers and lower grade clerical workers, who are the main protagonists of Part Two. As Todd argues convincingly, in the period between the late 1930s and late 1960s workers were no longer portrayed in media and politics as menacing or underserving minorities but as the backbone of the nation. In light of the enormous sacrifices at the front lines of war and in the blitzed cities at home, their interests had become "synonymous with those of the country".[12] The working class, in other words, had finally become *the people*. And the people not only provided the Labour Party with a landslide victory in 1945 but also with the mandate to establish a modern welfare state. But despite the introduction of free education, health care, and comprehensive social security, the post-war decades, Todd reminds us, were not "golden" for all. Gross inequalities in income and education continued to determine class hierarchies in British society. Contrary to the political mantra of meritocracy, social mobility and individual prosperity remained heavily dependent on family background. Working women and migrants learnt that they still had to fight hard for economic advancement.

In one of the strongest chapters of the book, Todd analyses how being working-class became fashionable in the early 1960s. If, as she argues, the twentieth century was the century of the worker, then the 1960s were its heydays. British workers not only participated in economic growth but they also left an imprint on the culture of the 1960s, from fashion to music, from television to literature. Todd acknowledges that celebrations of working-class authenticity also served to whitewash inequality. But for a brief moment in time, there emerged a working-class identity that openly challenged the dominant notion that refinement could be achieved only by adopting middle class choices and life styles. It was this proud and assertive working-class culture that, in addition to very material deprivation and loss, suffered such a devastating blow during the closing decades of the twentieth century, which Todd explores in Part Three of the book. According to the author, there were two watershed moments in twentieth-century history that determined the fate of the British working class. The first was the Second World War that heralded a phase of greater participation and prosperity. The second was the election of Margaret Thatcher to government in 1979. Amidst rampant unemployment and severe industrial strife, Thatcher famously implemented far-reaching economic reform. Todd leaves no doubt that, in her eyes, the following waves of privatisation, deindustrialisation, and the dismantling of both organised labour and the welfare state ushered in a period of decline that the British working class has yet to recover from: "In 1979 the bargain that had been struck during the Second World War between the people and their politicians—hard work in exchange for a living wage and

12 Ibid., p. 121.

a welfare safety net—came to an end".[13] Yet Todd also shows that Thatcherism had an often neglected prehistory that dates back to the late 1960s (and that was embraced by Conservatives and many Labour leaders alike). Similarly, the author demonstrates that economic and labour reforms were eagerly continued by New Labour during the 1990s and 2000s. This long perspective which continues into the present is one of the reasons that make *The People* such a compelling read.

In a radically different approach, Jürgen Kocka and Jürgen Schmidt offer an almost encyclopaedic account of the German working-class in the nineteenth and twentieth century. While *Arbeiterleben und Arbeiterkultur: Die Entstehung einer sozialen Klasse* is authored by Kocka in cooperation with Schmidt, the latter is the sole author of *Arbeiter in der Moderne: Arbeitsbedingungen, Lebenswelten, Organisationen*. Kocka's *Arbeiterleben und Arbeiterkultur* appeared as volume three of the J.H.W. Dietz series "Geschichte der Arbeiter und Arbeiterbewegung in Deutschland seit dem Ende des 18. Jahrhunderts". Conceived of in the 1970s by Gerhard A. Ritter, the series provides a comprehensive overview of German working-class history from the late eighteenth century until German reunification. As the title indicates, Kocka's *Arbeiterleben und Arbeiterkultur* portrays everyday experiences of German workers in the second half of the nineteenth century. It draws heavily on the author's earlier work, in particular his acclaimed *Arbeitsverhältnisse und Arbeiterexistenzen* which appeared three decades ago.[14] The book follows workers from the shop floor to the living room; it analyses family structure and patterns of migration; it studies the relationship of wage work and poverty; and it explores the emergence of a distinct working-class culture that was deeply rooted in everyday life. As Kocka explains in the Introduction, he focuses on, roughly, the 1840s to 1870s because these were the decades that witnessed the breakthrough of industrial capitalism, bourgeois culture, and the nation state in Germany. According to the author, it is only when considered against this historical context that we can hope to make sense of the rapid growth of the German working class.

In the first chapter, Kocka argues that despite the spread of wage labour, working experiences continued to be heavily fragmented. Often, workers or working-class families combined subsistence farming, home production, and sporadic or permanent work for wages. And yet, the author stresses, free wage labour was on a steady rise even in rural areas where domestic servants and farmhands were liberated from traditional subservience. The following chapter discusses the relationship between poverty and work in mid-nineteenth-century Germany. In contrast to Engels and other social critics of the time, Kocka argues that the notorious pauperism of the 1840s and 1850s was not the product of industrial capitalism—although changes in production

13 Ibid., p. 318.

14 Jürgen Kocka: Arbeitsverhältnisse und Arbeiterexistenzen: Grundlagen der Klassenbildung im 19. Jahrhundert, Bonn 1990.

initially exacerbated the negative effects of rapid population growth on employment and wages in the rural putting-out system in particular. The author concludes that, quite to the contrary, it was the expansion of wage work in centralised production that slowly started to reduce extreme poverty among workers. The aforementioned diversity of work experience is further explored in chapter three, which shows that the same worker often went through very distinct forms of employment over the course of his or her life. The chapter vividly portrays that workers' well-being remained heavily dependent not only on age, gender, and form of employment but also on family patterns and the economic cycle. Factory workers tended to earn most during their 20s and 30s before entering a period of decline which usually meant poverty in old age. Where home production remained widespread, starting a family eventually increased income. But especially when young children or old relatives were present, it also put enormous pressure on the family's budget. Regularly housing lodgers or more distant relatives, the working-class family thus constituted an intermediate stage between the extended and generally open family of the early modern period and the self-contained, nuclear family of the bourgeois age. Kocka points to the fact that also among factory workers, all family members had to contribute to the family's income. But in contrast to the family workshop, they did so by combining (usually male) factory labour with (usually female) contracted work or subsistence farming and a great variety of (usually underage) service or informal work that ranged from rag picking to digging up potatoes on stubble fields. The nascent proletarian family thus ceased to be a productive unit. This unsteadiness, volatility, and the constant threat of personal or economic crisis made workers a highly mobile class. In chapter four Kocka analyses local, regional, and transnational forms of migration and stresses that, in local and regional migration at least, mobility war rarely a one-way street, as workers often went on and on, or back and forth over the course of their lives. Similar to the overall positive impact of wage labour on working-class poverty, Kocka argues that social mobility started to increase toward the end of the century—albeit slowly and almost exclusively for children of skilled workers. Up to this point, Kocka has focused mostly on how German workers adapted to economic transformation through migration, changes in employment, or new strategies in coping with scarcity. The last two chapters explore under what conditions and to what extent these experiences influenced everyday culture and workers' associational life. Here, Kocka shows how notions of childhood and education changed over time and how working-class movements emerged in conflict with but often also by drawing on strategies and discourses employed by bourgeois associations.

In a sense, Schmidt's *Arbeiter in der Moderne* continues Kocka's account into the twentieth century.[15] But with roughly half the size of *Arbeiterleben und Arbeiterkultur*,

15 Schmidt's actual sequel to Kocka's book, which appeared in 2018 as volume four of said Dietz series, will not be reviewed here because it focuses on the Workers' Movement rather

the book provides an introduction to the historical study of workers in the modern era rather than an in-depth treatment of the topic. The introductory character also results from the fact that despite the book's main focus on nineteenth and twentieth-century Germany, international developments feature prominently. Following the first chapter, which presents some key concepts and recent trends in labour history, chapter two explores the emergence of distinct life worlds and working-class milieus. Schmidt stresses that although workers shared certain experiences which fuelled the birth of a new class, they were also embedded in tight networks of family, friendship or faith which sometimes enforced, sometimes mitigated the process of class formation. Geographical as well as social mobility, for instance, could impede the making of class. Yet, in fact, migration and extended contact into non-working-class milieus often helped generalise experiences across spatial and social distance. The letters that German workers in the U.S. sent back home to relatives and friends helped create such entangled spaces. While personal reports of social advancement and political freedom might have encouraged recipients to leave Germany (and thus destabilise domestic class formation), more often they provoked indignation about low wages or disrespectful treatment at home (and therewith increased the likelihood of collective action). In chapter three, Schmidt explores the changing meaning of work itself. He stresses that although perceptions of work have become less one-dimensional through time, labour never fully lost its ancient connotation of hardship. At the same time, the author argues that, generally speaking, labour relations tended to be the more conflictual (and even violent) the more tightly controlled labour was and the less workers were able to participate in economic decision making. Against this backdrop, the following chapter explores the birth of distinct working-class cultures. The latter, Schmidt argues, were closely related to the peculiar spaces, rhythms, and symbolic representations of work. Dangerous or risky work environments, for instance, gave birth to occupational cultures emphasising courage and defiance. Spaces of work, in other words, had a significant impact on broader cultural attributions or value systems, such as notions of masculinity and femininity. The slow increase of free time had a similar effect. Working-class cultures were thus shaped not only by everyday work experiences but also by a variety of places of leisure—from the pub to the church, from the allotment garden to the trade union hall. The author here shows that while working-class associational cultures—which were part of but not congruent with broader workers' culture—emerged in conflict with middle-class political organising, they also drew on bourgeois movements and associations in rhetoric and performance. Having portrayed transformations in employment, mobility, and everyday culture, chapter five finally explores the political and economic organisations that together

than the working class; cf. Jürgen Schmidt: Brüder, Bürger und Genossen: Die deutsche Arbeiterbewegung zwischen Klassenkampf und Bürgergesellschaft, 1830–1870, Bonn 2018.

constituted what is commonly referred to as the Labour Movement. Exploring the triad of cooperative, union, and party, the chapter provides a short overview of the organisational history of the German working class in particular. The author emphasises that although large numbers of workers stayed away from working-class organisations and parties, the latter contributed significantly to the modernisation of politics and the economy alike. Working-class organisations enabled marginalised citizens to formulate grievances and demands; they pooled and amplified struggles for greater participation; and they helped mediate structural conflicts between capital and labour. They did so in constant tension between defending the narrow interest of their constituencies and promoting democratic ideals or political values more universally. This tension was clearly reflected in the ideological diversity—and bitter rivalry—that fuelled the movement throughout the twentieth century.

Arbeiter in der Moderne is an ambitious book. After all, it covers working-class formation (and its dissolution) in Germany and beyond over the course of two centuries. For the greater part, the book provides a vivid and helpful overview of what bound workers together as a class—and what eventually made this class disintegrate. The book is particularly strong where it traces structural changes through time and space. Schmidt succeeds in showing how central working-class experiences—such as informal labour or housing in urban slums—have disappeared in the West only to re-emerge elsewhere. Likewise, the author shows that some historical realities of production and mechanisms of work organisation resurfaced recently, while others never really disappeared. As the author shows in chapter three in particular, permanent wage labour in centralised production, for instance, is increasingly making room for various forms of freelancing, contract labour or working from home. Yet it is precisely the dichotomy of change and persistence that could have been elucidated more thoroughly. Is there a reason why some organising principles are currently experiencing a revival while others do not? What were the causes of this comprehensive transformation of labour relations? And do these changes necessarily undermine the collective power of workers? Though Schmidt does not provide answers to all of these questions, the book deserves praise for raising them.

A comparative reading of recent Western labour historiography shows that understandings of class continue to differ, as Kocka puts it in the Introduction to *Arbeiterleben und Arbeiterkultur*, according to the theoretical background on which they draw. Although Marxist and Weberian approaches disagree on whether class is forged in the factory or in the market place, they are shaped by a strong emphasis on socio-economic structure. This stands in sharp contrast to approaches following E. P. Thompson or Howard Zinn which study the impact of tradition, folk culture or language on the making of the working class. While, in other words, Marxist and Weberian approaches see class as the product of structural force (such as the exploitation inherent in wage labor), to the Thompsonian mind class is being made by the repeated violation of values and expectations held by workers. Interestingly, this conceptual divide also

applies to the books discussed here. While Todd defines the working class as that part of society that has to work for a living and that is shaped by a continuous clash with norms and realities of a powerful antagonistic class, Pelz and, to a lesser degree, Isenberg imply that the working class is that group of people that lacks sufficient capital or property to live from rents or returns only. Kocka, on the other hand, concedes that wage labour was embedded in or constrained by other systems of employment throughout the nineteenth century, often resulting in heavily intertwined work realities combining some kind of farming, contracted labour, wage work, and actual self-employment. However, he stresses that by the end of the century, wage labour had become *the* central factor in the making of the working class. Such differences in how class is defined obviously influence narratives and analysis alike. Together with a historically grounded distrust in "the people", adherence to the concept of free wage labour might in fact be one of the reasons why history books on German labour tend to be much less accessible to a general readership, especially in comparison to works of Anglo-American origin. Like many important studies of German labour that have appeared over the past decades, the books by Kocka and Schmidt discussed here are essential reference works for scholars in the field. They are not, however, popular narratives exploring what bound "the people" together as a social force. It is, differently put, no coincidence that *The Making of the German Working Class* and *A People's History of Germany* are yet to be written.[16]

Yet differences in how we define class also influence how we interpret historical findings. Isenberg, Pelz, and Todd embrace broader definitions of class in what appears to be an effort to appeal to present-day readers and contemporary social movements. This might make it easier to present the history of the working class as a sort of "popular history of the 99 percent". But it fails to appreciate the fundamental historical transformation that the rise (and possible decline) of wage work meant. Schmidt is right to argue that labour historians must not, for fear of being eurocentrist, refrain from emphasising the singularities that characterised the socio-political life of workers in European history.[17] Thanks to critiques emphasising non-Western experience, today we have a much more nuanced understanding of what work meant, of who qualified as worker (and who supposedly did not), of how work was organised, and of how this organisation influenced new working-class cultures. This made us see more clearly that, for instance, not all manual workers in mid-twentieth century Germany, Great Britain or the U.S. were wage workers in large factories, and that collective action or

16 The English translation of Antonio Ramos Oliveira's study, which appeared in 1942, constitutes a very different approach; see Antonio Ramos Oliveira: A People's History of Germany, London 1942. Richard J. Evans probably came closest to a "Making of the German Working Class"; see Richard J. Evans, Proletarian and Politics: Socialism, Protest, and the Working Class in Germany before the First World War, New York 1990.

17 Jürgen Schmidt: Arbeiter in der Moderne, p. 163.

cultural expression also happened beyond the enclosed worlds of trade unions or socialist gymnastics clubs. And yet, formally free wage labour *was* an essential organising structure of modern Western societies, and so were efforts to build strong, formalised mass organisations which aimed at—and often succeeded at—homogenising working-class experiences both at the work place and beyond. If we abandon the structural forces that forged this class in the West, we will end up knowing less, not only about how this class came into being but, more importantly, also about what made the Western industrial age so different from both its pre-industrial predecessor and its post-industrial successor. It will, in other words, blind us not only to historical trajectories but also to changes in contemporary capitalism.

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