

Social Democracy and the Working Class

in Nineteenth and Twentieth
Century Germany

Stefan Berger

Themes In Modern German History



Social Democracy and the Working Class

THEMES IN MODERN GERMAN HISTORY SERIES

The first book to be published in this series is:

Social Democracy and the Working Class
in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Germany

Stefan Berger

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STEFAN BERGER

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Contents

| | |
|---|-----|
| <i>List of Abbreviations</i> | x |
| <i>Author's Acknowledgements</i> | xii |
| | |
| 1. <i>Introduction</i> | 1 |
| Structure of the book | 2 |
| The bringing together of labour movement and working-class history | 7 |
| The development of the SPD in the context of European Social Democracy | 10 |
| GDR and FRG historiography: trapped by finalistic narratives | 12 |
| The demise of Communism and the triumphalism of liberal capitalism | 14 |
| The labour movement and the project of capitalist modernisation | 16 |
| | |
| 2. <i>The Origins of Social Democratic Identity, 1789–1875</i> | 19 |
| Industrialisation and the origins of wage labour | 22 |
| Nineteenth-Century working-class lives | 25 |
| Early forms of working-class protest | 27 |
| Working-class women | 29 |
| Attempts to organise workers: insurrections, journeymen's organisations and workers' educational associations | 33 |
| 1848, the Brotherhood of Workers and middle-class anxieties | 39 |
| Liberals, Christians, Conservatives and Socialists | 42 |
| The crisis of German Lib-Labism in the 1860s | 46 |
| Social Democratic working-class parties and the beginnings of trade unionism | 48 |

| | | |
|----|--|-----|
| 3. | <i>Between Isolation and Integration, 1871–1918</i> | 54 |
| | Industrialisation and the continued heterogeneity of working-class lives | 56 |
| | Women at work and in politics | 63 |
| | The ‘born proletariat’ and the diversity of working-class identities: <i>Eigen-Sinn</i> , Christianity and ethnicity | 66 |
| | The Anti-Socialist Law and its consequences | 72 |
| | Labour movement culture | 76 |
| | The SPD between isolation and integration | 79 |
| | Social Democratic internationalism and the First World War | 88 |
| 4. | <i>In Defence of the Republican State, 1918–1933</i> | 94 |
| | The revolution of 1918–19 | 94 |
| | The labour movement divided: Communists and Social Democrats | 102 |
| | The heyday of anarcho-syndicalism | 112 |
| | The Catholic labour movement | 115 |
| | Stumbling stones on the SPD’s road towards becoming a catch-all party | 116 |
| | Social Democracy and the ‘woman question’ | 121 |
| | Corporatism, Fordism and economic democracy | 124 |
| | Social Democracy and the rise of Nazism | 130 |
| 5. | <i>Social Democracy under Conditions of Illegality, 1933–1989</i> | 136 |
| | Resistance to National Socialism | 138 |
| | Workers and the Nazi state | 142 |
| | Exile politics | 151 |
| | Communists and Social Democrats after 1945 | 154 |
| | SED and workers in the socialist state | 162 |
| | From campaigns against Social Democracy to the Social Democratisation of the SED | 169 |
| | The rebirth of Social Democracy from among the citizens’ movement | 172 |
| | The Party of Democratic Socialism | 175 |
| 6. | <i>From Golden Age to the End of Social Democracy? The FRG, 1945–1998</i> | 178 |
| | Social Democracy and the German Left after the war: continuities and discontinuities | 180 |

| | |
|--|---------|
| Remaking the SPD in the long years of opposition, 1949–1966 | 185 |
| The deproletarianisation of West German society | 190 |
| The Grand Coalition, 1966–1969 | 195 |
| The social-liberal coalition, 1969–1982 | 198 |
| New converts? The SPD, the middle classes and organised religion | 202 |
| Social Democracy and the challenge of the Green Party | 205 |
| Intra-party divisions and the struggle between modernisers and traditionalists in the SPD | 207 |
| Social Democracy and the challenges of neo-liberalism | 212 |
| Social Democracy and the reunification of Germany | 216 |
| 1998: towards a renaissance of Social Democracy? | 217 |
| 7. <i>Conclusion</i> | 219 |
| Social Democracy and the nation state | 219 |
| Social Democracy as party of government and as social movement | 223 |
| The German labour movement and its Western European context | 225 |
| Remaking Social Democracy in the 1990s | 227 |
| Social Democracy and the ‘woman question’ | 229 |
| <i>Select Bibliographical Essay</i> | 233 |
| <i>Maps</i> | 251 |
| <i>Index</i> | 256 |

List of Abbreviations

| | |
|-------|--|
| AAUD | General Workers' Union of Germany |
| ADAV | General German Workers' Association |
| ADGB | General German Trade Union Federation |
| AfA | Committee for Employees' Problems in the SPD |
| AFD | Anarchist Federation of Germany |
| AfS | <i>Archiv für Sozialgeschichte</i> |
| APO | Extra-Parliamentary Opposition |
| ASF | Association of Social Democratic Women |
| BzG | <i>Beiträge zur Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung</i> |
| CDU | Christian Democratic Union |
| CEH | <i>Central European History</i> |
| CGT | Confédération Générale du Travail |
| CSU | Christian Social Union (Bavaria) |
| DA | <i>Deutschland-Archiv</i> |
| DAF | German Labour Front |
| DGB | German Trade Union Federation |
| DKP | German Communist Party, refounded in 1968 |
| EU | European Union |
| FAUD | Free Workers' Party of Germany |
| FDGB | Free German Trade Union Federation |
| FDP | Free Democratic Party |
| FRG | Federal Republic of Germany |
| GDR | German Democratic Republic |
| GG | <i>Geschichte und Gesellschaft</i> |
| GNP | Gross National Product |
| GWU | <i>Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht</i> |
| HJ | Hitler Youth |
| HWJ | <i>History Workshop Journal</i> |
| ILWCH | <i>International Labor and Working-Class History</i> |
| IRSH | <i>International Review of Social History</i> |
| IWW | Industrial Workers of the World |
| JMH | <i>Journal of Modern History</i> |
| KAPD | Communist Workers' Party of Germany |

| | |
|------------|---|
| KdF | Strength through Joy |
| KPD | Communist Party of Germany |
| KPO | Communist Party of Germany – Opposition |
| MSPD | Majority Social Democratic Party of Germany |
| <i>NLR</i> | <i>New Left Review</i> |
| NPD | National Democratic Party of Germany |
| NSBO | National Socialist Factory Cells |
| NSDAP | National Socialist German Workers' Party |
| PDS | Party of Democratic Socialism |
| <i>PP</i> | <i>Past & Present</i> |
| PSOE | Partido Socialista Obrero Española |
| PSI | Italian Socialist Party |
| REFA | Reichsausschuß für Arbeitsstudien |
| SA | Stormtroopers |
| SAJ | Socialist Workers' Youth |
| SAP | Socialist Workers' Party |
| SAPD | Socialist Workers' Party of Germany |
| SAPMO | Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR |
| SDAP | Social Democratic Workers' Party |
| SED | Socialist Unity Party of Germany |
| SFIO | Section Française de l'Internationale, Ouvrière |
| SI | Socialist International |
| SMA | Soviet Military Administration |
| SOPADE | Social Democratic Party in Exile |
| SPD | Social Democratic Party of Germany |
| SPÖ | Socialist Party of Austria |
| SPS | Socialist Party of Switzerland |
| SS | Schutzstaffel |
| USA | United States of America |
| USPD | Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany |
| VDAV | Federation of German Workers' Associations |
| <i>VfZ</i> | <i>Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte</i> |
| WEA | Workers' Educational Association |
| <i>WEP</i> | <i>West European Politics</i> |
| ZA | Berlin Central Committee of the SPD |

Author's Acknowledgements

Social Democracy is dead – long live Social Democracy! Histories of Social Democracy have been written from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards. Anyone attempting to narrate the story of its many ups and downs therefore is indebted to a long list of distinguished socialists and historians who have written on the subject. For too long, they have written their story in terms of organisation, ideology and leadership personalities – an approach which has been rightly criticised by many more recent historians for at least the past three decades. Teaching courses on comparative and national labour history at the University of Wales, Cardiff both at undergraduate and postgraduate level, I felt that most general books on the subject of German Social Democracy still followed the older approach of a narrow party history with scant regard to the world of workers, to the developments which lay beyond national boundaries and to the alternative working-class identities which rivalled the Social Democratic ethos. Hence I have undertaken this attempt to retell the story of German Social Democracy by putting it into its proper context of diverse working-class milieux and the European dimension. It is meant primarily as an introduction to the subject for the undergraduate and postgraduate student as well as for the lay reader with an interest in the subject.

In the writing and rewriting of this book, no one had more impact than the students who have opted for my courses and modules on labour history. I have valued their criticisms and advice and hope that other students will find that their Cardiff colleagues have made the following clearer, more digestible and less weighed down with academic jargon. A very special thanks is due to Kathryn Jones, who graduated from Cardiff University in 1998 with flying colours, and who went through the manuscript with a fine toothcomb and an eagle's eye. Harald Leppler, who spent a year at Cardiff as a Socrates exchange student from the Technical University, Berlin, in 1997–8, has also commented perceptively on various aspects of the manuscript.

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This book is dedicated to my two young daughters, Kristina and Vanessa, in the hope that when they grow up, they will find the values and sentiments expressed by European Social Democracy over almost two centuries as challenging and enticing and worthy of both utmost respect and sharpest criticism as their father's family has found them to be for at least three generations.

S.B., Cardiff – June 1999



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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

At the end of the twentieth century German Social Democracy can safely be counted amongst the victors in history, so much so, one might argue, that – its historic mission having been fulfilled – it has lost both purpose and direction.¹ From its earliest beginnings in the nineteenth century, Social Democracy's central concern has been for the political, economic and social emancipation of working people. Over more than one hundred and thirty years the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), like its sister parties in the Socialist International, has stood for the rights of democratic freedom, the demands for social justice and the ideas of collective solidarity.² Many sections of German society had been opposed to those values over vast periods of modern German history. Hence, the story of Social Democracy is one of struggle and defeat, of persecution and repression, of piecemeal progress and promising beginnings which often ended in renewed setbacks and disappointment. Only after 1949, and then only in the Federal Republic of Germany, did there emerge a kind of Social Democratic consensus which was underwritten – no doubt with very different emphasis – by both major political parties: the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the SPD. When the Federal Republic celebrates its fiftieth birthday in 1999 it would appear that, for the first time in German history, Germany has settled for a stable state in which working people have attained a hitherto unprecedented degree of

1. Ralf Dahrendorf, 'Das Elend der Sozialdemokratie', *Merkur* 41, no. 12 (1987), pp. 1021–38.

2. Susanne Miller, 'Grundwerte in der Geschichte der deutschen Sozialdemokratie', *aus politik und zeitgeschichte* 11 (1976), pp. 16–31. It should be noted right from the start that the meaning of these basic values and sentiments were understood and interpreted in a variety of diverse ways by Social Democrats. The meaning of democracy, social justice and solidarity has been forever contested and shifting.

equality as political citizens and a considerable amount of social justice.

And yet, book titles such as 'Farewell to the Working Class', 'The Crisis of Socialism', 'The Future of Labour Movements' and 'Beyond Left and Right' indicate a widespread feeling that labour movements today resemble political dinosaurs left over from an industrial age which came to an end in the 1980s.³ Such a contemporary crisis, however real it may be, should not detract from the fact that German Social Democracy – throughout its long and complex history – has made a significant contribution to shaping the outlook and self-perception of contemporary Germany. For this reason alone, it remains important to study its history. And, even more important than historical reflections on the importance of the German labour movement, there remain in Germany today, as in all contemporary capitalist societies, basic social and political injustices which need to be addressed urgently. The distribution of wealth, education and opportunities generally remain fundamentally unequal. Even in our postmodern day and age, as Geoff Eley and Keith Nield have recently reminded us, 'capitalism continues to make many people poor'.⁴ After almost two centuries of struggle, socialism's great objective and promise of a free society in which all would enjoy equal opportunities remains largely unfulfilled. Analysing the achievements and failures of the German labour movement which, for a long time, was at the core of that emancipatory struggle, will provide a meaningful background against which contemporary struggles for more just societies can be carried out.

Structure of the book

This book is divided into five broadly chronological chapters. The manifold and marked ruptures in German history provide the historian with convenient starting and end points. Germany had not been a unified nation state until 1871. The first nation state, Imperial Germany, collapsed in 1918 amidst military defeat and revolution.

3. Andre Gorz, *Farewell to the Working Class: an Essay on Postindustrial Socialism* (London, 1982); Christiane Lemke and Gary Marks, eds, *The Crisis of Socialism in Europe* (Durham, 1992); Marino Regini, ed., *The Future of Labour Movements* (London, 1992); Anthony Giddens, *Beyond Left and Right. The Future of Radical Politics* (Cambridge, 1994), p. 52 speaks of the necessity for 'burying socialism'.

4. Geoff Eley and Keith Nield, 'Starting Over: the Present, the Post-Modern and the Moment of Social History', in: *Social History* 20 (1995), p. 359.

The monarchy was replaced by a republican system, the Weimar Republic, which lasted for only fourteen years. Between 1933 and 1945 the Nazi dictatorship immersed Germany and the European continent in acts of hitherto unknown barbarity. Four years after the end of the Second World War, in 1949, Germany was divided. Whilst in the German Democratic Republic a Communist regime was established, the Federal Republic saw the restoration of liberal capitalism and parliamentary democracy. The Bonn republic was more fortunate than its Weimar predecessor, and it outlived its Eastern rival. When the Communist regime of the GDR collapsed in 1989 in the face of a citizens' movement demanding first internal reform and later reunification, the FRG's government acted quickly to ensure the restitution of a united Germany.

The second chapter of the book will address the pre-history of Social Democracy from the aftermath of the French revolution of 1789 to the setting up of the first workers' parties in the 1860s. It will look in particular at the extraordinarily heterogeneous living conditions of workers in different regions and occupations and discuss the emergence of a new type of worker from the nineteenth-century processes of industrialisation. Around the mid-nineteenth century the 'social question' began to take centre stage in public discussions. Early industrialisation caused a whole range of social problems which, by the 1830s, engendered a widespread search for remedies among intellectuals, civil servants and the worried middle classes more generally. The range of organisational and ideological responses to this 'social question' included Protestant and Catholic social teachings and liberal-dominated workers' educational associations as well as the first stirrings of a Social Democratic movement.

The third chapter will take the story further to the struggles of Social Democracy in Imperial Germany. The rapid industrialisation and urbanisation of the unified country led to massive social transformation. Workers remained a very heterogeneous group, divided according to occupation, income, housing, gender and generational experience, and a Social Democratic identity remained only one amongst several diverse and often overlapping working-class identities, e.g. religious and ethnic identities or notions of autonomy which went beyond clear-cut political affiliations. The Social Democratic 'milieu'⁵ was characterised in particular by the fact that it was

5. Rainer Maria Lepsius, 'Parteiensystem und Sozialstruktur. Zum Problem der Demokratisierung der deutschen Gesellschaft', in: Gerhard A. Ritter (ed.), *Deutsche Parteien vor 1918* (Cologne, 1973), pp. 56–80, was the first to introduce the notion

both attracted to and repelled by a middle-class sense of a bourgeois lifestyle (*Bürgerlichkeit*). Repressed and persecuted by the state in the 1880s, the SPD began a process of ideological reorientation which was to lead to the adoption of a Marxist programme in 1891. Some of its organisational features, such as the mass membership party, the use of the strike weapon and the attempt to occupy public spaces (largely through street demonstrations) in an attempt to exert public pressure, were new and often adopted by bourgeois organisations only at a later stage. Whilst Social Democratic reformism came to be characterised by non-revolutionary involvement in day-to-day policy making at different political levels, revolutionary Social Democrats rejected anything short of the abolition of capitalism. In the war, such tensions – exacerbated by the debate surrounding the continued support for the German war effort – led to Social Democracy splitting into the minority Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD) and the pro-war Majority Social Democratic Party (MSPD).

When the Kaiser had to abdicate at the end of the First World War and the Imperial German state edifice collapsed around him, the MSPD was crucial in channelling the German revolution of 1918 into the making of a democratic republic. Yet the legacy of the revolution was disastrous for Social Democracy. Millions of its loyal supporters among the working classes turned their backs on the MSPD as the latter, afraid of any radicalisation of the revolution, formed an alliance with sections of the old Imperial elite. To many workers this was a betrayal of their revolutionary expectations, all the more so as the emerging republic was unable to satisfy working-class demands for at least a bare minimum of social justice. Many turned to the more radical USPD, to revolutionary syndicalism and to the newly founded Communist Party (KPD). The ultimately futile attempt of the Social Democrats to democratise politics, society and the economy in the Weimar Republic will be the focus of attention in Chapter Four. As the implementation of the Social Democratic ideal of a welfare state was severely restricted by economic crises, the party found itself trapped between its desire to transform itself into a modern catch-all party which would be able to recruit support from all social strata, and the realities of the class state, in which any concessions to the bourgeois centre parties risked the loss of working-class support to the more radical KPD. Thus

that political parties in Germany were tightly linked to fairly homogeneous groups which shared economic, social, regional and religious identities. He termed those complex configurations 'milieux'.

caught between Scylla and Charybdis, Social Democracy at the end of the Weimar Republic looked increasingly immobile, withdrawing into its own organisational world and constructing inward-looking 'communities of solidarity'.⁶

The advent of the Nazi dictatorship in 1933 marked the end of any independent labour movement. Many of its leaders and rank-and-file members were brutally murdered, many more were imprisoned in concentration camps and Nazi torture chambers. Whilst most Social Democrats withdrew from politics and, at best, attempted to remain in touch with old comrades, a minority opted for active resistance to the Nazi tyranny. The party-in-exile was disappointed by the absence of politically motivated mass working-class resistance to the Nazi regime. The stick of terroristic oppression and the carrot of a variety of symbolical and material offerings constrained most workers to remain silent. Chapter Five analyses Social Democratic attempts to survive the twelve darkest years of German history, and goes on to discuss the enforced merger between SPD and KPD and subsequent renewed repression of Social Democracy in the German Democratic Republic. When the Social Democratic leadership in the Soviet zone of occupation finally gave in to Communist pressure and the Socialist Unity Party (SED) was created in April 1946, it marked the end of the Social Democratic Party in the Soviet zone/GDR for the next 43 years. Yet, not unlike the Nazi dictatorship, the Communists never really managed to secure a strong commitment of workers to the self-proclaimed 'workers' and farmers' state'. A defining moment in the relationship between Communist government and workers had been reached on 17 June 1953, when workers' protests in Berlin against rising output targets got out of hand and developed into a full-blown protest against the SED regime in all major towns and cities of the GDR. The insurrection was swiftly dealt with by Soviet tanks, but henceforth the regime did everything it could to placate working-class demands – even to the detriment of the GDR economy. It was only when the GDR began to collapse in 1989 that a Social Democratic Party was re-founded – initially without support from the West. It was substantially different from the Social Democratic Party which had existed there before 1933, and those differences partly explain its difficulties in establishing a mass membership and regaining its erstwhile electoral strength. Socialist ideals, in so far as they still existed in a society traumatised by forty years of 'really existing socialism', have often

6. For the notion of the SPD as 'community of solidarity' (*Solidargemeinschaft*) see Peter Lösche and Franz Walter, *Die SPD. Klassenpartei – Volkspartei – Quotenpartei* (Darmstadt, 1992).

translated themselves into support for the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), the official successor to the SED and home to many of the SED's old cadres.

The penultimate chapter will explore the development of the SPD in West Germany since 1945. The party consciously attempted to overcome its old confinement to a specific working-class milieu and decided against the resurrection of its manifold ancillary organisations. Yet the SPD's economic and foreign policies proved unpopular with the majority of the electorate, and it also failed, by and large, to escape from its shrinking working-class ghetto. Its long period in opposition from 1949 to 1966 condemned the SPD, at least at the national level, to watch from the sidelines as its main rival, Christian Democracy, shaped the institutions and the self-understanding of the second German republic. However, following a process of organisational and programmatic renewal in the second half of the 1950s, the Social Democratic Party made electoral advances in the 1960s leading up to the FRG's first SPD-led governments under Willy Brandt and Helmut Schmidt which lasted from 1969 to 1982. While in government, the SPD was sharply divided over which direction the party should take. Some of its leading politicians, including Karl Schiller and Helmut Schmidt, stood for a technocratic vision of a modern industrial society and a historic alliance between industrial workers and the middle classes. Yet the majority of the party's rank-and-file were intrigued by the rise of the Green Party in the early 1980s and the much-vaunted emergence of a postmaterialist electorate which would increasingly question the growth-orientation of industrial societies. And from 1982, when the party entered another long phase of opposition, to 1998, when it won a resounding election victory, the SPD has had to come to terms with a whole variety of new policy issues and organisational intra-party problems. To all intents and purposes the SPD has shed its former nature as a working-class party and increasingly resembles a 'loosely connected anarchy'⁷ in which diverse interests are engaged in almost permanent battle with other interests for domination of the party machine. The narrative ends with a brief analysis of the SPD's 1998 election victory. Events since then, in particular the loss of the government's majority in the Bundesrat, Oskar Lafontaine's dramatic departure from the government, the war in Kosovo and the rather lacklustre performance of the government in its first months in office will not form part of this book's remit.

7. This is the term employed by Peter Lösche and Franz Walter, *Die SPD*.

The last chapter will discuss some of the major long-term characteristics of German Social Democracy. Whilst references in the text are kept to the bare minimum, the bibliographical essay at the end of the book will provide the reader with an introduction to some of the most important literature on the history of the German labour movement. It should be added that each chapter will start with one particular event or narrative which aims to illustrate some of the core characteristics and key problems of Social Democracy during that period. This might take the form of an extended passage from the autobiography of a Social Democratic worker, as in Chapter 2, or a brief account of the revolutionary turmoil which swept through Germany between October 1918 and January 1919, as in Chapter 4. In each case, the narrative is meant to draw the reader into the chapter and arouse their curiosity about the underlying motives for and causes of particular developments and processes which will then be analysed in the remainder of the chapter.

The bringing together of labour movement and working-class history

A history of German Social Democracy cannot be the history of the party alone. The history of working-class parties has been written in terms of their organisational and programmatic development and their leadership personnel for far too long – not only in Germany but across Europe. Early labour historians tended to come from within the labour movement rather than from academic quarters, and their political attachment was reflected in their historical writing. Thus Franz Mehring published a two-volume *History of German Social Democracy* in 1898, and Eduard Bernstein followed suit with his three-volume *History of the Berlin Labour Movement* published between 1907 and 1910. In Imperial Germany socialists were forbidden to teach at schools and universities. It is characteristic of the contempt with which mainstream professional historians have looked down on labour studies that Gustav Mayer, who did more than anyone else to establish labour studies in Germany, was unable to secure an academic position in Imperial Germany – despite the fact that he never joined the SPD.⁸ Yet, whilst the origins of labour

8. Mayer wrote a two-volume biography of Friedrich Engels, edited the letters and writings of Ferdinand Lasalle and published a study of Johann Baptist von Schweitzer and the early German labour movement. See also his interesting autobiography *Erinnerungen: Vom Journalisten zum Historiker der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung* (Munich, 1949).

history are rooted firmly in the party itself, the SPD did not develop in a societal and organisational vacuum. Hence I have attempted to write a history of the SPD which will locate it within the overall development of capitalist society and the everyday experience of workers. For a long period, urban industrial blue-collar male and Protestant workers formed the backbone of Social Democratic organisations. Such a characterisation already indicates that the working class never was homogeneous. Once again historians have for too long taken the working class almost as a collective personality writ large, and it is only more recently that their full attention has been focused on the many differences which have always characterised it. Whilst the structural social history of the 1950s and 1960s tended to homogenise class experiences, the micro-historical perspectives which emerged with the history of everyday life in the 1970s and 1980s drew attention to the much more fragmented and divided nature of working-class experiences.⁹

Indeed, some historians have gone as far as dismissing 'class' altogether as a helpful term. In recent years, the 'linguistic turn' in history has done much to highlight the unduly homogenising and totalising effects of concepts such as 'class'.¹⁰ The word 'classturbation' might indeed be an accurate expression of the obsessive concern of past generations of historians with class.¹¹ Other identities such as religion, region and gender have all too often either been ignored or treated as an insignificant side-show. Some groups of workers were often completely written out of the history of class formation. This has been particularly true for women workers. In the past, labour historians have either ignored women workers as

9. A key example of structural social history is provided by Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte 1700–1949*, 4 vols. (Munich, 1987 ff.). For perspectives 'from the bottom-up' see Alf Lüdtke (ed.), *The History of Everyday Life: Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Ways of Life* (Princeton, 1995) and Hans Medick, *Weben und Überleben in Laichingen, 1650–1900*, 2nd edn (Göttingen, 1997). Oral history perspectives have also done much to show up the many fissures characterising working-class lives in all eras of German history. For a prime example see Lutz Niethammer and Alexander von Plato, eds, *Lebensgeschichte und Sozialkultur im Ruhrgebiet 1930 bis 1960s*, 3 vols (Berlin, 1983–1985).

10. The term 'linguistic turn' is used to denote the fact that language does not merely reflect social reality but that it constitutes that reality. For the new emphasis on language and discourse in labour history see Lenard Berlanstein (ed.), *Rethinking Labor History: Essays on Discourse and Class Analysis* (Urbana, 1993). See also Geoff Eley, 'Is all the World a Text? From Social History to the History of Society Two Decades Later', in: Terence J. McDonald (ed.), *The Historic Turn in the Human Sciences* (Ann Arbor, 1996), pp. 193–244; Neville Kirk, 'History, Language, Ideas and Postmodernism: a Materialist View', *Social History* 19 (1994), pp. 221–38; Raphael Samuel, 'Reading the Signs', *HWJ* 32 (1991), pp. 88–109 and 33 (1992), pp. 220–51.

11. Michael Mann, 'Sources of Variation in Working-Class Movements in Twentieth-Century Europe', *NLR* 212 (1995), p. 53.

historical actors or at best restricted their remarks to explaining why women's work was not constitutive for class formation or why they in fact often formed an obstacle to the efficient trade unionisation and politicisation of the male workforce. Thus, (mostly male) labour historians continued to transport the prejudices of male labour leaders into the present time. The image and rhetoric of the male breadwinner was as pervasive and strong in labour circles as it was in society more generally. Most male labour leaders had clear ideas about which values and norms should be attached to notions of femininity and masculinity and their fears of the dissolution of the traditional sexual order and hierarchies were as strong as they were in society generally. As historians such as Kathleen Canning have reminded us in recent years, all concepts of class have always been gendered.¹² Hence any analysis of class and class-based parties has to take into account the gender dimension.

It is crucial to recognise that there always were many working-class identities and that different workers positioned themselves differently vis-à-vis the Social Democratic movement. This does not mean that the importance of class can easily be dismissed. Over certain periods, in particular locations and amongst specific workers, class, or better workers' perceptions of class (arising from specific material experiences), did matter. In my opinion it would be facile to conclude – in the light of 1989 and the breakdown of Communism in Eastern Europe – that the concept of class has to be downgraded in historical analysis. It would be just as absurd as arguing that 1989 should necessarily lead to a renaissance of the concept of 'nation' in historical analysis.¹³ If class remains a central concept of historical analysis then it is crucial to recognise that many workers did not choose to identify with the SPD and that there were alternative working-class identities which need to be considered, not least because they often contributed to the outlook and orientation of Social Democrats. Weimar Social Democracy would have had a different character had it not been for the mass Communist party and the millions of workers identifying with the KPD rather than the SPD.

Anarcho-syndicalists always formed a distinct minority within the German labour movement, yet during the early years of the Weimar Republic they also had a mass following. In those years of social

12. Kathleen Canning, *Languages of Labor and Gender: Female Factory Work in Germany 1850–1914* (Ithaca, 1996). See also Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, 1988).

13. For the unwelcome renationalisation of German historiography in the wake of 1989 see Stefan Berger, *The Search for Normality. National Identity and Historical Consciousness in Germany Since 1800* (Oxford, 1997).

unrest anarcho-syndicalists successfully tapped in to working-class traditions of *Eigen-Sinn*. The latter concept, which has been introduced into labour history by Alf Lüdtke, means, in a nutshell, that workers tended to translate a sense of alienation at the workplace and elsewhere into a series of social actions by which workers asserted their interests and which were attempts to mark out a space of their own.¹⁴ Furthermore, Catholic workers always distanced themselves from the world of organised Social Democracy, and the rapprochement of the late 1960s and early 1970s was to be only short-lived. Until long after the end of the Second World War the collar-line (*Kragenlinie*) was of crucial importance for political identifications in Germany, as most white-collar workers refused to be identified with a largely blue-collar SPD. However, from the 1950s to the 1980s, while the industrial society of West Germany underwent profound economic and social change, workers ceased to be the dominant source of electoral support for Social Democrats. They became a minority within the party. Furthermore, within society more generally, many wage earners ceased to see themselves as workers. Hence, as Klaus Tenfelde has recently pointed out, the 'history of workers' (*Arbeitergeschichte*) has begun to change and historians have to reflect this change by widening their subject matter, perhaps to the 'history of employees' (*Arbeitnehmergeschichte*).¹⁵

The development of the SPD in the context of European Social Democracy

If it is crucial to locate the history of the SPD within the history of the German working classes and to recognise that Social Democracy was only one part of a wider labour movement, then it seems at least equally important to place it within the history of European Social Democracy. In the course of the nineteenth century, as historical professions throughout Europe came to constitute themselves within national boundaries, national histories abounded and, for too long, the national perspective held sway.¹⁶ Decades of labour

14. The most detailed explication of this concept can be found in Alf Lüdtke, *Eigen-Sinn. Fabrikalltag, Arbeitererfahrungen und Politik vom Kaiserreich bis in den Faschismus* (Hamburg, 1993).

15. Klaus Tenfelde, 'Die Arbeiterbewegung in der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft', *Mitteilungsblatt des Instituts zur Erforschung der europäischen Arbeiterbewegung (IGA)* 18 (1997), p. 185.

16. See Stefan Berger, Mark Donovan and Kevin Passmore (eds), *Writing National Histories: Western Europe Since 1800* (London, 1999).

historians have speculated about the impact of 'national character' on the outlook of national labour movements.¹⁷ They could refer back to the authority of no lesser figure than Karl Marx: 'the German proletariat is the theoretician of the European proletariat, just as the English proletariat is the economist, and the French proletariat its politician.'¹⁸ Ever since, this kind of essentialising of alleged national characteristics could be found in abundance in labour history. Whilst British workers were supposed to be pragmatic, tolerant, non-violent and satisfied with piecemeal parliamentary reforms, French workers were purportedly undisciplined, violent, patriotic and anti-Catholic, and German workers allegedly had a unique talent for efficient organisation. Their work ethic and docility was, according to this view, matched only by their authoritarianism which led to the adoption of a rather dogmatic Marxism. National essences were created to provide monocausal explanations of contingent political and social phenomena and actions. Workers' lives were shaped by many factors which transcended national boundaries, such as experiences of rapid industrialisation, the introduction of new technology at the workplace, unemployment, new methods of work supervision, occupational and gender identities, housing patterns, and everyday family life. Industrial societies tended to subject workers to similar experiences in the process of industrialisation. As Eric Hobsbawm and Joan W. Scott have shown, the political identity of shoemakers in Europe knew few national boundaries.¹⁹

For decades, nationally-oriented European labour historians have channelled an enormous amount of energy into defining and explaining why the history of their national labour movement was exceptional. British Labour's exceptionalism was often connected to the early integration of the labour movement into the state, and the high dependency of the Labour Party on powerful trade unions. French Labour's peculiarity was allegedly rooted in its precocious winning of universal male suffrage in February 1848 combined with its continued social and political exclusion. Spanish Labour was held to be exceptional because of the strength of anarchism and the long reign of fascism. Whilst the 'subversivism' of the Italian

17. The fallacies of such thinking have already been problematised in Peter N. Stearns, 'National Character and European Labor History', *Journal for Social History* 4 (1970-71), pp. 95-124.

18. Karl Marx, 'Critical Marginal Notes on the Article "The King of Prussia and Social Reform. By a Prussian"', in: *Collected Works* (New York, 1975), vol. 3, p. 204.

19. Eric Hobsbawm and Joan W. Scott, 'Political Shoemakers', *PP* 89 (1980), reprinted in Eric Hobsbawm, *Worlds of Labour. Further Studies in the History of Labour* (London, 1984), pp. 103-30.

working class set Italy apart from other West European countries, in the Netherlands it was the 'pillarisation' of Dutch society (i.e. its social structuring along the lines of vertical 'pillars' of religion and class) which was responsible for the particular development of its labour movement. The exceptionalism of the Swedish Social Democrats was grounded in the unique attempt to create 'socialism in one country' as an almost permanent party of government from the 1930s to the 1980s. And the 'special path' (*Sonderweg*) of the German labour movement was allegedly characterised by the lack of political and social integration. Yet it is only really through genuinely transnational comparative work that such theories of exceptionalism can be tested. Hence I have attempted to incorporate at least some of the results of the growing body of comparative studies into this history of German Social Democracy. Set in its proper European context, the history of the SPD does not appear anywhere near as peculiar or exceptional as decades of labour historians chose to suggest.²⁰

GDR and FRG historiography: trapped by finalistic narratives

Labour historians not only neglected the history of workers and they were not only handicapped by their nationally-tinted spectacles. They also often followed specific finalistic narratives, the most common of which assumed the form of an alleged 'forward march of labour'.²¹ That notion had a reformist and a revolutionary variant. In German labour history, the two German states which existed between 1949 and 1990 represented each one of these two alternative versions. GDR labour history sided with the revolutionary, anti-capitalist tradition. It drew a red line from the social revolutionaries of 1848 to the left wing of the SPD in Imperial Germany to the foundation of the Communist Party in 1918–19 and beyond then to

20. Stefan Berger, 'European Labour Movements and the European Working Class in Comparative Perspective', in: Stefan Berger and David Broughton (eds), *The Force of Labour. The Western European Labour Movement and the Working Class in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 245–61. Also: James E. Cronin, 'Neither Exceptional nor Peculiar. Towards the Comparative Study of Labor in Advanced Society', *IRSH* 38 (1993), pp. 59–74.

21. The term is taken from Eric Hobsbawm, *The Forward March of Labour Halted?* (London, 1981); for a critical commentary on the notion of a 'forward march' see David Howell, 'When was "the Forward March of Labour"?', in: *Llafur. Journal of Welsh Labour History* 5 (1990), pp. 57–70.

the SED. Furthermore, labour historians claimed that the GDR as a socialist 'workers' state' represented the apogee of the struggles of the class-conscious proletariat. Here, they stressed, the building of a truly just and equal Communist society was in the making. Unsurprisingly, labour studies (of the right sort!) were generously funded and supported by the Communist state. After 1955 Leo Stern and a group of historians working at the University of Halle published prolifically on the emergence of the industrial world in the nineteenth century and the rise of the labour movement.²² In September 1958, the leadership of the SED commissioned an eight-volume *History of the German Labour Movement* which was eventually published in 1966. One of the doyens of GDR historiography, Jürgen Kuczynski, who had returned from exile to settle in the GDR, wrote a stream of monographs on German and international labour history.²³ Stern and Kuczynski had been socialised and trained during the Weimar Republic, but the GDR was to produce its own labour historians such as Dieter Fricke, Horst Groschopp, Werner Kowalski, Annelies Laschitzka, Jutta Seidel and Hartmut Zwahr, who all produced important works on German labour history.

Labour history in the Federal Republic of Germany had far greater difficulties in getting established due to the overwhelming continuities in the historical profession beyond the watershed of 1945. The conservative establishment around historians such as Gerhard Ritter and Hans Rothfels called the shots and continued to marginalise labour studies as a subject not worthy of serious academic study. From the late 1950s onwards, however, Werner Conze edited a series under the title *The Industrial World* which included a number of important social and economic studies of nineteenth-century working-class life and the labour movement. The breakthrough then came in the 1960s with a range of pioneering studies by historians such as Gerhard A. Ritter, Eberhard Kolb, Hans Mommsen, Helga Grebing, Hans-Ulrich Wehler and Hedwig Wachenheim. Most West German labour historians were anti-Communist and sided with the reformist Social Democratic tradition.²⁴ Once again, one could often

22. See the series published under the general direction of Leo Stern and entitled *Archivalische Forschungen zur Geschichte der Deutschen Arbeiterbewegung* (Berlin, 1955 ff.). See also the series published later on under the general direction of Werner Kowalski entitled *Hallesche Studien zur Geschichte der Sozialdemokratie* (Halle, 1977 ff.).

23. See especially Jürgen Kuczynski, *Die Geschichte der Lage der Arbeiter unter dem Kapitalismus*, 38 vols (Berlin, 1961–1972).

24. A good example of the West German variant of a reformist teleology is provided by Heinrich August Winkler, 'Der Weg der deutschen Sozialdemokratie im 20. Jahrhundert', *GWU* 36 (1985), pp. 814–30.

detect a red line which went from the reformist practice of Imperial German Social Democracy to the parliamentarism and republicanism of the Weimar SPD and culminated in the foundation of the Federal Republic which was perceived as the best framework in which the political and social emancipation of the working classes could be achieved. Equal citizenship, a strong welfare state, Keynesian management of the economy²⁵ and economic codetermination and policy concertation²⁶ were regarded as the vehicles which ensured the happiness of the greatest possible number of people. The particular type of welfare capitalism which emerged in Western Europe after 1945 achieved much in the way of humanising capitalism, but it should not deflect from the fact that the Social Democratic project over vast periods of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had cast its net much wider and had included ambitions which aimed at transforming and abolishing rather than reforming capitalism. Social Democracy incorporated a genuinely revolutionary potential which surfaced in a variety of European states in the years 1917–23, 1934–35, and 1943–47. Such attempts by revolutionary Social Democrats to find a third way between Western capitalism and Eastern state-Communism are often unjustly forgotten by a post-Bad Godesberg SPD historiography intent on providing legitimacy for an existing political party.

The demise of Communism and the triumphalism of liberal capitalism

In 1989, one of the two teleologies mentioned above, the Communist one, came to a crushing halt. Many observers have interpreted the demise of Communism across Eastern Europe as victory for the Western path of capitalist modernisation combined with liberal parliamentary political systems.²⁷ When the Berlin Wall came down

25. This was in the form of anti-cyclical economic policies which foresee heavy state expenditure on job creation programmes in times of economic crisis so as to stimulate the domestic economy.

26. In other words, giving workers' representatives a say in the management of individual companies as well as on macro-economic policy making.

27. The most widely discussed analysis in this respect was that of Francis Fukuyama, 'The End of History?', *The National Interest*, summer 1989, pp. 3–18. Far less triumphalist but equally adamant that the revolutions in Eastern Europe were in fact only endorsing the Western societies was Jürgen Habermas, *Die nachholende Revolution* (Frankfurt am Main, 1990) who interpreted them as 'catching-up revolutions' (*nachholende Revolutionen*).

on 9 November 1989, the civil societies of Western Europe allegedly proved their superiority over the Communist dictatorships in the East. Furthermore, the collapse of Communism led to widespread attacks on the German labour movement as a whole which was castigated for its authoritarianism, its anti-pluralism and its utopianism. With regard to the latter, it was frequently asserted that, following the events of 1989, there was no longer any basis for 'third ways'. By implication, the Social Democratic variant of the labour movement in the West had to drop once and for all any ideas that the capitalist system of production could be replaced by another mode of production of another quality of social wealth. At the very most, historians argued that Social Democracy's real task is to defend and extend the achievements of a Western-style civil society, in particular the welfare state, and prevent the erosion of social provisions for the weakest sections of society.²⁸

The triumphalist rhetoric of the apologists of Western-style capitalism is unconvincing on at least three accounts. First, they unduly homogenise the history of the German labour movement so as to beat Social Democracy with a stick that should be reserved for others. Any history of Social Democracy must emphasise the fact that there have always been several distinct traditions within the German labour movement. Whilst some of them, including Marxism-Leninism and the Communist diversion since 1917 were authoritarian, others were not. Social Democrats, more than any other faction in the labour movement, can lay claim to a democratic socialism which inherited many of the radical-democratic traditions of 1848 and was committed to installing liberal-democratic procedures on all levels of public life. Secondly, Western triumphalism in the wake of 1989 was itself based on a teleology: that of liberal Western capitalism as the apogee of world history. Yet even if we accept the complete moral and intellectual bankruptcy of the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe, it is still immediately obvious that liberal capitalism is neither perfect nor inherently stable. In Marxist language, it continues to reproduce its own contradictions which will lead to further injustice and social unrest. Capitalism and its accompanying culture of greed permanently need to be

28. Jürgen Kocka, 'Arbeiterbewegung in der Bürgergesellschaft. Überlegungen zum deutschen Fall', *GG* 20 (1994), pp. 487–96. Also Bernd Faulenbach, 'Zur Bedeutung der Umwälzungen in Mittel- und Osteuropa für das Geschichtsverständnis der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung', *BzG* 34 (1992), pp. 35–42; Rudolf Ardel, 'Perspektiven der Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung – oder: Der "enge Blick" und die "Wende"', *BzG* 37 (1995), pp. 49–55.