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An Alternative Tradition: The Nineteenth-Century German-American Socialists

The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw an unprecedented immigration of peoples from all corners of Europe to the United States. From the so-called "old" immigration of the British, Irish and Germans to the "new" immigration of the South Europeans, Slavs and East European Jews around the turn of the century, wave after wave of new arrivals faced the problems of integrating themselves into a new society and of reshaping it to suit their own needs and ideals. Of these groups, the largest non-English-speaking was made up of Germans, whose immigration reached peaks of close to one million in the decade after the 1848 revolution and almost one and one-half million in the decade 1880-1890, being given impetus by a complex of political, economic and religious reasons.

As varied as the forces behind this immigration were the forms that German responses to life in the United States took. Indeed, the history of the German-American ethnic group, like that of all immigrant groups, is a history rich in conflict, dissent, and opposing opinions and actions, both within the ethnic group itself and with respect to the larger society around it. Perhaps the prevailing image of nineteenth-century German immigrants is that they "assimilated" more or less without serious friction into American political and social life, affiliating themselves in the main with the Republican Party, serving their communities in various business, cultural, and religious capacities, or as skilled, settled tradesmen, and providing a certain joviality to a society still more than tinged with Puritanism. However, when we ask what parts of the German-American heritage have been neglected for the sake of emphasizing its more easily "assimilable" features, we find that there is indeed another rich tradition of German-American history embodied by socialist immigrants whose political, economic and cultural goals found strong resonance among German immigrant workers.[1] From forty-eighters like Friedrich Sorge, Joseph Weydemeyer, and Adolf Douai, to political emigrés fleeing the repression of Bismarck's *Sozialistengesetze*, to immigrants radicalized by their disillusionment with America, German socialists constituted by far the most significant group of

ethnic radicals in the nineteenth-century United States. Labor historians have recognized the crucial political role German immigrants played in introducing the theory of scientific socialism to the United States and helping to organize the American labor movement after the Civil War.[2]

These radicals directed their primary allegiance to workers as a class, embracing all ethnic groups, rather than to their German-language ethnic group as a whole. For this reason, they could not simply appropriate for their own use pre-existing ethnic institutions and customs, such as political affiliations, commercial organizations, the German-American press, or cultural activities. Rather, they had to create their own institutions on all these levels. This necessarily led them into conflict with other sectors of their ethnic group, but it also helped them establish contact and common goals with members of other ethnic groups sharing similar interests. The following remarks will briefly trace the German-American socialists' sometimes problematic efforts at self-definition and self-determination within their ethnic group, on the levels of political participation, trade unions, and culture.

Of all the areas in which the socialists attempted to create alternative choices for German immigrant workers, they were least successful in their political efforts in the narrow sense, that is, in running their own candidates for political office. Although they criticized the established parties and the figures in the German-American community who supported them for having the interests of capital rather than labor at heart and ran their own candidates on platforms advocating the nationalization of important industries, the establishment of cooperatives, they were never able to mount a serious electoral challenge. Strongly influenced by Ferdinand Lassalle's views on the crucial importance of electoral participation, these socialists put an enormous amount of time and effort into running local, state, and national tickets, but only achieved minimal success on the local level.[3]

It was in these attempts to participate in elections that the foreign-language composition of the socialist movement had its most deleterious effect. Plagued with the problem of effectively reaching English-speaking voters and other language groups, the success of German socialists at the ballot box was prevented by this exclusivity and the consequent difficulty of entering into public debate and by the widespread opinion that a vote for a tiny third party was a wasted vote. Even among German-speaking workers in the large industrial cities, an examination of the German-American socialist press clearly shows that far fewer workers actually voted for the socialists than supported them in other areas of their endeavors.

In spite of the insuperable difficulties encountered in running their own candidates, however, the socialists generally did not pursue the alternative of entering into coalitions with other progressive third parties which were attracting more English-speaking workers.[4] That is, these socialists usually did not attempt to adapt theories and strategies developed in Europe to the different American conditions—in particular, to the political alliances between agrarian radicals and labor which were of special importance in the United States of the nineteenth century. It was only after the turn of the century and the formation of the broader-based Socialist Party that socialists began to have any appreciable success in elections. Therefore, measured ac-

cording to the standard of electoral gains, the political achievements of the nineteenth-century German socialists were minimal, indeed.

In 1881 the National Executive Committee of the *Sozialistische Arbeiter-Partei* (SAP, founded in 1877) proudly reported that "in almost all the industrial towns of the nation" trade unions were headed by socialists.[5] Leaving some room for exaggeration, German-American socialists could rightly take credit for more successes in union organizing than in the area of electoral politics. Although many socialists questioned the limited goals of trade unionism, most recognized by the 1880s that important economic gains could be won through unionization. Accordingly, they joined and founded unions of skilled workers which concentrated on wages, working conditions, and a shortened working day, and also attempted to carry out education toward more long-range political perspectives. As Hartmut Keil has shown in a carefully researched paper, in New York City, the city with the largest number of organized German workers, "every German union and almost every other union with a predominantly German membership or a strong minority of Germans was founded by socialists who also held key positions in those unions. Examples are the furniture workers, the German-American Typographical Union, the Bakers, Brewers, and Cigarmakers."[6] These German unions formed a central trade council, the *Vereinigte deutsche Gewerkschaften*, which was represented in the Central Labor Union of New York City—in 1886 the largest central labor federation in the country with 207 unions and 150,000 members representing many different language groups.[7] This pattern of organization was typical of other industrial cities as well—most notably Chicago, but also Milwaukee, St. Louis, Philadelphia, and Newark. Often, these central labor unions dominated by Germans were able to exert a significant political influence. Their concerted actions, including strikes, boycotts, and demonstrations, and their support of political candidates sympathetic to labor frequently divided the German-American community, arraying union backers against those who supported business interests.

What circumstances made it possible for German workers to be so well-organized into unions at this time? Taking New York City as an example, the answer must be sought in the character of the German working class population and seen in the context of steadily increasing immigration from Germany which reached its peak in 1882. As Hartmut Keil has outlined, there were three characteristics of German immigrant workers which fundamentally influenced the course of development of the union and socialist organizations. First, the majority were skilled workers and artisans, from the industrial centers of Germany, and therefore—in the American context of a division of labor along ethnic lines—they predominated in occupations such as bakers, brewers, butchers, furniture workers, piano makers and cigar makers. The factor of a common language furthered organization in trades such as these, although obviously it was a hindrance in other ways. Second, many had experience in the workers' movement in Germany and continued unabatedly to carry on their organizing activities in the United States. Finally, their familiarity with the tradition of German Social Democracy led them to question the limited goals of American unionism and sometimes even to found alternative unions within certain trades. This

socialist orientation was intensified after 1878 with the arrival of Social Democrats who had been exiled under the Anti-Socialist Laws and who concentrated in the New York area. Consequently, it can be maintained that the high level of trade union organization among German workers in New York resulted from the nature of their work in the skilled trades and from their socialist perspectives and experience. If we study the involvement of German-American socialists with unionism, it becomes clear that this was one area of activity in which they effectively concentrated their efforts on bettering conditions encountered by immigrant workers, creating cross-ethnic ties based on shared interests, and thus were able to break through the boundaries of their own language group.

The areas of political participation and unionization have generally been the focal points for historians who have assessed the influence of the German-American socialists. However, for these early socialists, their movement was more than the election of candidates and the achievement of economic gains. It also included a more far-reaching vision of social cooperation, as is evident from the thriving socialist press and the vital socialist subculture which flourished in the German communities of industrialized cities.

Particularly in the late 1870s and 1880s, but in many instances continuing even up until the Second World War, the German-American socialist press thrived, and the editors of these papers were among the most articulate and influential of German-American socialists. Of these papers, the most important, in terms of circulation, editors, and content, were the *New Yorker Volkszeitung* (1878-1932, with Sunday and weekly editions and a circulation of 8,000 in 1878, 19,000 in 1890, and 23,000 in 1932), and the *Chicagoer Arbeiter-Zeitung* (1876-1919?, with Sunday and weekly editions, and a circulation of 3,000 in 1880 and 15,000 in 1895).[8] In the larger cities, it is probably accurate to say that the socialist newspapers were the institutions which did most to hold the German working-class community together, furnishing information, supporting strikes and boycotts, encouraging contributions from workers, intellectuals, and all members of the community, and sponsoring benefits, festivals and demonstrations. For example, in 1894 the *New Yorker Volkszeitung* reported that it was the official organ of more than 300 trade unions, sections of the *Sozialistische Arbeiter-Partei, Turner* societies, workers' singing societies, amateur theaters, socialist schools and labor lyceums, *Freidenker* societies, women's organizations, clubs, mutual benefit and insurance societies, and lodges.[9] This meant that all these groups published official notices and announcements of their meetings in this paper, implying that it would reach their members and that they supported the existence of this socialist paper. Thus, these papers provided an essential avenue for socialists to reach beyond the narrow circle of party affiliation into the community at large.

While the creation of an independent socialist press was certainly of inestimable value to the labor movement, it should also be seen in the context of providing alternative forums and means of communication within the German ethnic group. No more bitter enemies were to be found than the socialist press and well-established German "bourgeois" papers such as the New York *Staatszeitung* (with a circulation of 50,000 in 1880) and the Illi-

nois *Staatszeitung* (with a circulation of 8400 in 1880). On the level of content, the socialist papers provided information on local, national, and international events of interest to labor, as well as scientific, historical and literary columns reflecting a perspective not to be found elsewhere. On the level of editorial policy, of course, the socialist and non-socialist press often took diametrically opposed stands on issues facing the German-American community, for example, on strikes, endorsements for political candidates, or social welfare measures. The division of the ethnic community into classes is nowhere more clearly reflected than in the wide range of standpoints voiced through its press.

Along with their press, in many other areas of life outside the workplace these socialists created organizations designed as alternatives to others within the ethnic group and the society at large, in order to further enlightenment and cooperative social relationships. Associated with the socialist movement from its earliest days were workers' gymnastic societies *(Turner),* producers' and consumers' cooperatives, workers' sick and death benefit societies, special groups for women, and various attempts at creating educational opportunities compatible with socialist principles, including *Arbeiterbildungsvereine,* socialist schools for children and adults, and large labor lyceums. Furthermore, found in many cities around the country were socialist workers' theaters, and workers' singing societies *(Arbeitergesangvereine)* which attracted thousands to their concerts held around the country. Finally, socialist festivals, benefits, and commemorations frequently provided the occasion for manifestations of solidarity and opportunities for common leisure.

If we examine the goals of these organizations, it becomes clear that their participants conceived of them as providing alternatives to similar activities carried out by non-socialists. For example, as can be seen from the repertoire of the workers' theaters and the occasions upon which they performed, they aimed at serving both entertaining and didactic functions. With respect to providing entertainment, the majority of plays in their repertoire were the same third-rate farces and comedies that could be seen any evening in other community clubrooms (Benedix, Körner, etc.). However, this compensatory entertainment was not the main impetus behind the establishment of socialist workers' theaters. Rather, through the performance of political plays at public meetings and festivals, these groups hoped to spread fundamental ideas of socialism in an entertaining way and to offer models for action and images of a better future. They hoped to reach an audience which would be less receptive to political lectures, which perhaps did not read the socialist press, and which would be difficult to reach in other ways. This intent sets these groups apart from other *Laientheater* of the time, as well as from professional German-American theater troupes.[10]

Similarly, the workers' singing societies were formed as alternatives to the popular non-socialist groups. Although these societies were associated with the socialist movement from its beginnings, it was in 1892 that the *Arbeiter-Sängerbund der Nordöstlichen Staaten* was formed as a central organization of these societies, and it was followed in 1897 by the *Arbeiter-Sängerbund des Nordwestens,* centered in Chicago. Approximately every three years, until the Second World War, each region held a singers' festival

which could attract 3-4,000 participants and a much larger audience. During this time, these singing societies were the main channel through which socialist poetry reached its intended working class audience (aside from the socialist press), and those involved in the societies viewed both their repertoire and their close connections to the socialist political movement as necessary alternatives to what they saw as bourgeois or petty bourgeois culture and literature.[11] Fundamentally, as these socialists explained, they had two complementary purposes in view, the first being political influence and the second what might be called "die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen in der Arbeiterbewegung."[12] That is, the goals of these workers' singing societies focused on exposing social contradictions, creating feelings of solidarity, and strengthening belief in the eventual victory of socialism, on the one hand, and, on the other, towards creating esthetic sensibility in their participants through the experience of performing choral works.

One final example of these alternative opportunities for cultural expression is the mass meetings through which German-American socialists reached their greatest degree of public visibility. Frequently, there were demonstrations in support of particular demands, especially the eight-hour day. Festivals were held to commemorate important events in the international working-class movement, such as the Paris Commune, Lassalle's birth and death (around which a real cult was created), the death of Karl Marx in 1883,[13] and the execution of the Haymarket martyrs. There were also "anti-festivals" to counteract and provide alternatives to religious and patriotic holidays such as Christmas, Thanksgiving and the Fourth of July. Finally, local sections of socialist organizations, together with unions, often sponsored smaller events such as benefits or fall and spring festivals and fairs. The functions of these festivals were similar to those of the workers' theaters and singing societies. In the first place, they were a source of enjoyment, escape from the rigors of the working day, a place for a renewal of strength and courage in the company of friends, family and comrades. Also, through speeches and varied programs, these festivals were intended to endow the participants with a certain oppositional sense of history, and to create feelings of solidarity among themselves and with workers of other ethnic groups. What all of these activities had in common, therefore, was that they aimed at providing alternative opportunities for education and enlightenment, mutual help and support, and communal leisure to men, women, and children within the German-American working class community.

One more aspect of German-American socialist culture remains to be touched upon: the literature produced in connection with this political movement. It is generally unrecognized that socialist immigrant writers produced a large body of poetry, plays, and prose which they published mainly in the socialist press and which also reached the intended working class audience through the channels mentioned above of workers' theaters, workers' singing societies, and festival recitations and performances. It is only possible here to give a brief sketch of the main features of this socialist literature, but it should also be seen in the context of offering an alternative to other dominant trends in German-American literature which have tended to reflect nostalgia, a lack of concern for pressing social issues, and nation-

alistic sentiments. This early socialist literature can be characterized as "operative." In contrast to the concept of literature as a realm of esthetic expression with no extra-literary purpose, it was written with the intent of carrying out proletarian organization and enlightenment, and of creating cultural identity in its audience.[14] The problematic nature of these operative goals can be more precisely determined by making the methodological distinction between form, content, and functional context.[15] On the level of form, there is little innovation, but rather there is generally an arbitrary reutilization of traditional techniques. In particular, the use of allegory sustains the image of the process of socialism as a natural development in which the role of the human subject is of unclear significance. (Examples are the portrayals of social conflict as allegorical struggles between winter and spring, darkness and light). Also, the use of rhetorical forms of appeal, exhortation and command *(Wollt Ihr nicht frei sein? Sei ein Mann! Einigt Euch!)* presupposes a model in which it is the task of the writer to instruct the recipient and create positive models for him to identify with and follow, rather than encouraging him to interpret both the literary work and his own experience. On the level of content, while there are some works (especially reportage sketches) which deal with concrete aspects of the immigrant worker's experience in America, there is a general tendency towards abstraction. Particularly in the poetry, the genre best represented, there is a preoccupation with invoking stages in the development of socialism, from the misery of the present and the contrast between rich and poor, to calls to organize and unite, to assurance of the inevitable utopian socialist future. The repetition of that progression makes such literature seem like part of a ritual expression removed from reality. However, it was in the context of socialist gatherings and group activity that this literature was able at least in part to fulfill the functions of organization and to create cultural identity. Here, participants could sense that they possessed their own writers, their own literature, and their own performing groups, and that they were able to sustain all of these independently.

The communal visions of the nineteenth-century socialists and their political and cultural forms of organization cannot serve us as direct models for social change today, in an age of mass media and communications. At one time, however, up until the Second World War in both Germany and the United States, the labor movement also encompassed a cultural movement, with a broader scope to its efforts which extended into many spheres of life. In the United States, with the growth of the "pure and simple" unionism of the American Federation of Labor, the organized workers' movement became less and less concerned with cooperative cultural ventures, and similarly, trade unions in the Federal Republic of Germany have hardly been concerned with developing spheres of activity outside economic issues. The earlier workers' movement developed alternative means of communication and opportunities for group interaction. It will remain to be seen how present-day movements for social change will integrate these political, economic and cultural aspects of societal transformation into their efforts.

In such a brief overview, it has been impossible to do more than touch upon some of the most significant activities of the German-American socialists. It is important to note that the diversity which we encounter in

the German-American community also held true for other ethnic groups, and that common interests and ideals often served to unite immigrants across barriers of language and ethnicity. Accordingly, the study of one ethnic group always leads beyond the boundaries of one language and one discipline. Certainly, the field of German-American studies can have much to contribute to our knowledge and reception of these dynamic historical processes.

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Notes

1. For a detailed study of the German-American socialist tradition, see my dissertation on "German-American Socialist Literature in the Late Nineteenth Century," University of Wisconsin-Madison 1979 (to appear under the title *German-American Socialist Literature, 1865-1900* [Bern: Lang, 1982]). The second volume of this dissertation is an anthology of German-American socialist literature.

2. A few of the most thorough treatments by labor historians of German immigrant socialists which place them in the context of the labor movement as a whole are: Robert Bruce, *1877: Year of Violence* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1959); Henry David, *The History of the Haymarket Affair* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1936); Philip Foner, *The Great Labor Uprising of 1877* (New York: Monad, 1977); David Herreshoff, *The Origins of American Marxism* (New York: Monad, 1973); Ira Kipnis, *The American Socialist Movement, 1897-1912* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952); John Laslett, *Labor and the Left* (New York: Basic Books, 1970); Karl Obermann, *Joseph Weydemeyer* (New York: International, 1947); Hermann Schlüter, *Die Anfänge der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung in Amerika* (Stuttgart: Dietz, 1907); Hermann Schlüter, *Die Internationale in Amerika* (Chicago: Deutsche Sprachgruppe der Sozialistischen Partei, 1918). For an extensive bibliography, see my dissertation.

3. German-American socialists scored their first surprising electoral successes after the general strikes of 1877, in which they came to public attention. These local successes in towns such as Louisville were short-lived, however.

4. One election in which the German-American socialists did enter into a coalition was the Henry George campaign for mayor of New York City in 1886. Running a strong second, his ideas of land reform received wide publicity. However, this strong local coalition soon disintegrated, and he was never able to attain office.

5. Hartmut Keil, "The New Unions: German and American Workers in New York City, 1870-1885," unpublished manuscript. The following discussion of German-American unionism is based primarily on this paper by Keil. Cf. also John Laslett, *Labor and the Left*, on the influence of socialists within unions (New York: Basic Books, 1970).

6. Keil, "The New Unions."

7. See Philip Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States* (New York: International, 1947), II, 33.

8. Karl J. R. Arndt and May Olson, *German-American Newspapers and Periodicals, 1732-1955* (Heidelberg: Quelle & Meyer, 1965), 2nd ed. For a bibliography of German-American socialist newspapers, see the appendix to my dissertation.

9. *New Yorker Volkszeitung*, 2 June 1894, p. 1.

10. For documentation and analyses of socialist workers' theaters in Germany in the nineteenth century see: Friedrich Knilli and Ursula Münchow, *Frühes sozialistisches Arbeitertheater, 1847-1918* (Munich: Hanser, 1970); Peter von Rüden, *Sozialdemokratisches Arbeitertheater, 1848-1914* (Frankfurt: Athenäum, 1973); and the relevant volumes in: Zentralinstitut für Literaturgeschichte der Akademie der Wissenschaften der DDR (Ursula Münchow, ed.), *Textausgaben zur frühen sozialistischen Literatur in Deutschland* (Berlin: Akademie, 1964 ff.).

11. For example, writing in a *Festzeitung* for a singers' festival, Eduard Deuß explained the difference between the workers' groups and other groups in the following manner:

> Letztere verherrlichen in ihren Gesängen alles das, was wir als vernunftwidrig, nebensächlich und kriecherisch ansehen. Sie singen darin einer vernunftwidrigen Gottheit ihr Hosiannah; sie beweihräuchern darin ein königliches Gottesgnadenthum und ergeben sich in Bücklingen und Rückgratkrümmungen vor Dingen und

> Menschen, denen wir unsere Reverenz versagen müssen, während sie das Arbeiterlied in Acht und Bann thun. Dieses geschieht, wie die Anhänger dieser Gesangvereine behaupten, im Interesse der Kunst des Gesanges; der Realismus im Gesang wird verpönt, weil die Kunst darüber erhaben sein soll. (*Festzeitung des Arbeiter-Sängerbundes des Nordwestens*, Davenport, Iowa, No. 1, June 1906, p. 9.)

12. Cf. Peter Brückner and Gabriele Ricke, "Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen in der Arbeiterbewegung," in: Brückner et al., eds., *Das Unvermögen der Realität* (Berlin: Wagenbach, 1974), pp. 37-68.

13. See the reports in the *New Yorker Volkszeitung* before and after March 20, 1883.

14. For a discussion of this concept which is useful, though somewhat undifferentiated, see Gerald Stieg and Bernd Witte, *Abriß einer Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterliteratur* (Stuttgart: Klett, 1973).

15. The distinction between form, content, and context is developed most convincingly by Jürgen Kocka in his article "Arbeiterkultur als Forschungsthema," *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 5, No. 1 (1979), 5-12.