

Social democracy and society

Working-class radicalism in Düsseldorf,
1890–1920

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Introduction

This book is about the formation of class consciousness, workers' culture, and social democratic organizations in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Germany. It explores the radical attitudes and actions of the working class in Düsseldorf, a major industrial center in the Lower Rhine, and the role of social democracy in reflecting and reshaping that radicalism. Beginning with the legalization of the Social Democratic Party in 1890 and concluding with the unsuccessful revolution of 1918–19, this study traces the interaction between workers and their organizations on the one hand and the structural and political factors that both fostered and limited radicalism on the other. It reconstructs the learning process through which workers and their movement went, by examining the categories they used to understand the world and the means by which they tried to change it. Although this is a case study, it raises broader questions about the relationship of social democracy and society, about religion and politics, and about workers and industrialization in an era of organized capitalism and political authoritarianism.

Class, as E. P. Thompson argued, “is a relationship and not a thing.” It “is defined by men as they live their own history.”¹ In 1890 there were workers in Düsseldorf, tens of thousands of them, ranging from skilled cabinetmakers through semiskilled metalworkers and unskilled construction helpers to female domestics. There were Catholics and Protestants, natives and migrants, permanent city dwellers and temporary peasant workers. But there was not a working class, united by shared traditions, experiences, and consciousness. In the ensuing three decades an increasingly articulate and organized working class, aware of its own interests and striving to assert them against others, emerged in Düsseldorf. How this class formed itself and was formed by the economic, social, and political relationships in which it was embedded is one of the central themes of this inquiry.

Between 1890 and 1920 Düsseldorf workers not only became a class,

but also developed a powerful and singularly radical social democratic movement. The radicalism of the working class and workers' movement was manifested in their general attitudes toward the state, society, and the economy, which they felt offered no opportunities for social integration or political reform. It was evidenced in their conviction that political equality, social recognition, and decent human treatment could be achieved only through a fundamental transformation of the existing order. As a result of their general consciousness, Düsseldorf found itself on the left wing of German social democracy. Insisting on the adherence to traditional principles, Düsseldorf's social democratic workers attacked theoretical revisionism, apolitical economism, and practical reformism, with their emphasis on the possibilities of class collaboration, political alliances, and a gradual amelioration of the ills of capitalism. They criticized as well the organizational fetishism and passivity of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), proposing instead a militant strategy, centering on the mass strike and relying on rank-and-file initiative.

As the Düsseldorf working class and workers' movement developed in the prewar years, they sought to implement a more activist and confrontational strategy on the shop floor and above all in the political arena. After 1914 they vigorously protested the war and Social Democratic support of it, leaving the SPD en masse for the Independent Social Democratic Party. In 1918–19 Düsseldorf workers enthusiastically supported not only the political revolution but also the struggle for socialism. And defeat, far from undermining their radicalism, pushed them farther left into the Communist Party. The causes, character, and limits of this radicalism is the second principal theme of this inquiry.

This study is based on certain premises about the formation of the working class and the role of workers' organizations in that process. The working class is by no means created once and for all at the beginning of industrialization. Rather, it must re-create itself at each stage of industrial capitalism, as the economy and labor force are restructured, political institutions and forms of hegemony change, and old cultural forms give way to new ones. That process of class formation is as difficult in more advanced industrial capitalist societies as in less developed ones. The diversity and divisions within the working class – be they occupational, cultural, religious, or sexual – far from diminishing, recur in ever new guises.² Proletarianization takes many forms, some of which encourage protest, others negotiated compromise, still others quiescence

and deference. Ruling elites have more experience in maintaining their position by transformations in the labor process and by astute mixtures of concessions and repression, co-option and control through the institutions of the state and civil society. As the state becomes more interventionist and the economy more organized, the power with which workers are confronted can scarcely be countered by localized protest or unstructured resistance.³

Under these circumstances, working-class parties and unions play an indispensable role in creating a working class as well as in shaping its consciousness.⁴ Although much current social history emphasizes work, community, and culture exclusively, these cannot adequately explain class formation in more advanced capitalist societies. Political institutions and ideologies cannot be dismissed as existing outside of or after the making of the working class, for they are an integral part of that process.

As this book will argue, Düsseldorf provides a clear illustration of this phenomenon. Although the economic discrimination, political powerlessness, and social isolation to which Düsseldorf workers were subjected made them critical of the dominant institutions and ideologies, these experiences created at most an amorphous discontent, which lacked structure, strategy, and goals. They led workers to criticize the Catholic and liberal political movements, but not necessarily to abandon them. They encouraged passivity as much as protest.

It was the Social Democratic Party, the free trade unions, and the cultural and service associations that mediated between the workers and their environment and transformed this inchoate radicalism into an articulate political consciousness. For the workers in Düsseldorf, who lacked an autonomous and shared culture, social homogeneity, and a dissenting political tradition, social democracy provided a vocabulary for analyzing society and a vision toward which to struggle. It offered a vehicle for coping with urban industrial society and protesting against the inequities of capitalism and political authoritarianism. In the process of filling these functions, social democracy created a political and economic movement and a new kind of workers' culture, which brought together thousands of Düsseldorf workers previously divided by skill and occupation, by religion and geographic origin, by experiences and expectations.

If it is necessary to examine the role of the party in class formation, it is equally essential to study the party in a new way. Most historians of

German social democracy, reluctant to venture beyond the familiar terrain of political and intellectual history, have analyzed the party "from above." Explicitly or implicitly they accept the argument that the SPD was highly centralized and that the leadership determined its theory and practice while the membership remained passive and receptive. Liberals, conservatives, and communists alike focus on the accessible and clear-cut disputes of intellectuals, parliamentary leaders, and upper-echelon functionaries and ignore both the working class and the broader economic and political context.⁵ Those who deemphasize differing interpretations of Marxism concentrate on social democracy's relationship with Imperial German society, arguing that social democracy became negatively integrated and in many respects the mirror image of that which it opposed.⁶ And local studies generally replicate these assumptions and methodologies.⁷ What is needed is a social history of politics on the one hand and a structural analysis of the society in which the working class and its organizations developed on the other.

Working-class institutions can scarcely be understood without a deep knowledge of workers' everyday lives, options, and aspirations. The occupational and skill structure of the working class, the sociology of labor markets, and transformations in the labor process provide the framework for such an understanding, but analysis cannot rest with economic factors. One must examine the communities in which the working class lived and their relationship to the larger urban environment in which they were situated. One must investigate the cultures from which different workers came and those they created, the expectations workers brought with them and the modifications these underwent as a result of workers' experiences on the job and off.⁸ To understand working-class politics, in short, one must seek to capture both the diversities and uniformities of working-class life. Only by exploring the interaction among work, community, and culture can we explain the character of social democracy.

The history of a political movement is thus the history of a particular social group, but as Gramsci has argued, "this group is not isolated: it has friends, kindred groups, opponents, enemies. The history of any given party can only emerge from the complex portrayal of the totality of society and the state."⁹ It is thus necessary to examine the organization and development of the economy, as well as demographic changes and social structure. Popular culture, high culture, and the role of religion must be analyzed, as must political institutions, the party system, and

their class base. And this must be done nationally as well as locally if the representativeness and uniqueness of the case study are to emerge clearly.

As will be seen, there are three sets of relationships that are of central importance for understanding Wilhelminian Düsseldorf. The economy was shaped by the highly organized, technologically advanced character of industrial capitalist development in Germany and by the close but complex ties between industry and the interventionist state. Despite certain democratic forms, the political system was authoritarian in the structure of its institutions and the content of its policies. The local ruling alliance of liberals and Catholics, like its national counterpart, discriminated against workers and effectively excluded them from any power. Finally, Catholicism, which was not merely a religion but a multi-class, mass-based social and political movement, was the dominant cultural force in the Lower Rhine region and provided the principal alternative to social democracy. The complex interaction of organized capitalism, authoritarian politics, and political Catholicism, rather than any one of them alone, set the structural and political framework within which the working class and social democracy developed. It determined the reality with which they had to contend.

If we analyze the formation of the Düsseldorf working class and the history of the social democratic movement in the ways suggested, we shall arrive at a complex explanation of their radicalism. No single factor, whether it be the structure of work, the nature of politics, or the sociology of the labor market, suffices to account for why Düsseldorf workers diverged so markedly from the prevalent image of reformist Social Democrats, integrated, if only negatively, into Imperial German society and politics.

Düsseldorf's social democratic workers became radical by virtue of who they were and what they experienced, by virtue of the diverse cultures they brought with them and the way these were remolded by an urban industrial environment and by the social democratic movement. Their relationship to capitalism and Catholicism in Düsseldorf and to the national party in Berlin pushed them to the left, as did both their numerous failures and their scattered successes. Radicalism resulted from the confrontation of Düsseldorf's working class – which was young, highly skilled, migrant and new to industry – with an environment that relegated workers to a second-class status economically, politically, and socially. Radicalism came as well from the mediation of

that confrontation by a social democratic movement that lacked entrenched leadership, close ties to the national party, or bourgeois support. It seemed the only viable response to a situation in which there were no opportunities for class collaboration, political alliances, social integration, or piecemeal reform. Radicalism emerged from the structural and political situation in Düsseldorf, was intensified by decades of frustrating political experiences, and finally resulted in revolution, for the Düsseldorf Social Democrats had learned that they must replace the existing order if they were to attain their goals.

The very factors that promoted radicalism in Düsseldorf, however, limited its effectiveness. Organized capitalism, authoritarian government, and political Catholicism precluded reformism but made organization and mobilization difficult and militant confrontation dangerous. Rapid industrialization and migration provided the movement with ready recruits but undermined organizational stability and educational work. Düsseldorf's isolation from the national movement created a critical distance in which radical ideas could develop, but also minimized Düsseldorf's influence on Berlin, limited its contacts with leftists elsewhere, and contributed significantly to the defeat of the postwar revolution.

The social democratic workers in Düsseldorf also contributed to their own failures. However much they broadened their appeal, they were unable to reach some important groups of workers. Despite their criticism of the national movement, they bowed to its decisions until forced to leave during the war. They created a strongly organized, politically oriented radicalism but ultimately became imprisoned in prefigurative institutions and preexisting patterns of behavior. In the revolution of 1918–19 the incompleteness of working-class formation, of the movement's learning process, and of its radicalism were to be fully and tragically revealed.

This book not only studies a particular group of workers whose history was previously unwritten but also, and equally important, alters our understanding of German social democracy in this period. It disputes the assumptions about the prevalence of reformism and the extent of working-class integration held by many historians. It explains the structural and political causes and the complex character of the radicalism that other historians have acknowledged but not analyzed. It challenges the assertion that the war and postwar militancy was a sort of aberration produced by wartime conditions, and argues that it was the

culmination of a long tradition of radicalism. In proposing a different approach to the study of the working class and social democracy, it suggests categories of analysis that will make it possible to compare the different consciousness that developed in various segments of the working class and the different political outcomes in the various regions of Germany.