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current research

A SOCIAL HISTORY OF THE GERMAN WORKERS OF CHICAGO

1850 - 1910

The Chicago Project, based at the America Institut of the University of Munich, has been funded by the Volkswagen Foundation for a period of three years, beginning in April, 1979. The project has two full-time staff, five part-time student workers, and several affiliated German faculty members. Some of the student workers and affiliated faculty are at the John F. Kennedy-Institute for North American Studies in Berlin. In addition to the Kennedy-Institute, the project enjoys institutional affiliation with the Newberry Library in Chicago, and it profits from a panel of consultants composed of four American and two German social historians. These consultants as well as invited guests will review the work of the project at two conferences, one in June 1980 in Munich and the other in the fall of 1981 in Chicago. Since the Chicago Project has been completely absorbed in basic research up to now, we cannot yet present results but rather will focus on goals, hypotheses, and work in progress.

I. Scope of Project and Theoretical Approach

The goal of the project is to write a social history of German immigrant workers in Chicago during the second half of the 19th century. While closely studying the changing economic and social structure of the city, the project focuses on workers' everyday experience and their social and cultural response to industrialization. We are interested in the heaviest phase of German immigration from the 1850s through 1890 and in problems of acculturation as they become apparent especially in the second generation after 1890. Not only were most of the German immigrants workers, they also contributed the largest immigrant element to the American labor force, predominating in skilled occupations and participating in labor organizations over and above their numerical proportion. In fact, they played a leading role in the formation of the modern American labor movement, especially during the period of intense industrialization after the Civil War. Contrary to the image of the Germans as settling primarily in agrarian regions, two thirds were living in urban communities in 1890. To study a segment of German immigration to the United States representative of the occupational structure and settlement distributions of the group as a whole, we have to look at German immigrant communities in industrializing urban centers.

Chicago was chosen because it provides a focal point for the inter-related processes of rapid urban growth, accelerated industrializa-

tion and multiple population increase, including immigration. In 1850 Chicago had some 30,000 inhabitants, by 1910 its population had risen to 2.1 million. With its concentration of industrial and commercial activities, Chicago became the prototype of the big American industrial city.

Germans accounted for over 5,000 of Chicago's almost 30,000 inhabitants in 1850. By the turn of the century, when the population of the city had already reached more than 1.5 million, there were over 500,000 first and second-generation German residents. Thus, they constituted the largest ethnic element in the population.

Chicago's labor force was largely recruited from among the immigrants. In 1890, only one third of the workers in manufacturing and mechanical industries were native Americans; the remaining two thirds were made up of foreign-born workers. Germans contributed 22 percent of the total work force to Chicago's industry, the largest immigrant element. The majority (i.e. 55 percent) of all gainfully employed Germans worked in the industrial sector in skilled and unskilled occupations.

We want to find out what happened to this predominantly working-class German community during a period of industrial mechanization that tended to devalue traditional skills. To what extent were German workers caught in the processes of displacement? To what extent did they acquire new skills, or to what extent were they forced into the ranks of unskilled labor? Did their personal experience of structural change lead them into active participation in labor politics? To what uses did German workers put the cultural traditions and values they brought over from Germany, and how did these change in the new social context?

In order to answer these and similar questions, the project concentrates on the following problems:

- the social stratification of the German labor force and its position within the German immigrant group;
- the position of German workers within the changing economic and occupational structure of Chicago;
- the patterns of relationship between German workers and other groups within the working-class community (native and ethnic);
- the participation of German workers in labor and urban politics, and their influence on political programs and organization;
- the continuity and transformation of German working-class culture in its conflict with the norms and values of the dominant culture.

Our theoretical approach is guided by two major hypotheses:

- 1.) In view of the predominantly ethnic composition of the American working class in the second half of the 19th century, we assume that for the bulk of the workers class conflicts

were also cultural conflicts and vice versa - a situation quite different from that in Germany. A social history of the German working class in Chicago will therefore have to consider problems of acculturation.

- 2.) German - as well as other - immigrants did not enter into a ready-made, fully developed and stable social order, but became part of a working class in the process of constituting itself - a working class whose political strategies, forms of organization and everyday life they helped to shape and transform.

In the light of these hypotheses, we can analyze class differences in life styles and recognize qualitatively divergent modes of perception and experience coexisting within a socially stratified society. Thus we assume that German immigrant workers were not merely motivated by an ideal of complete assimilation into the dominant society, but that they themselves, by the skills and ideas they brought along, actively participated in shaping their own class.

This means that we understand the cultural traditions of the German workers in their interpretative and pragmatic function, not merely as a burden or obstacle for a successful assimilation into the mainstream of American society but rather as the potential for a creative subculture with alternative ways of life and self-expression. While acknowledging the long-term dominance of middle-class norms and value, we want to avoid the bias of defining the nature and substance of the cultural resources of a minority solely in terms of the value system of the dominant culture.

Procedure

In choosing a social historical approach, we hope to go beyond predominantly quantifying or statistical studies. It is our intention to reconstruct a whole way of life as it can be extracted from numerous documents, still available, which relate to the life of German workers in Chicago.

Though our richest sources of information are newspapers and personal records, everyday working-class life can only be partially reconstructed on the basis of such qualitative data. On the other hand, exclusive application of quantitative methods cannot fully grasp the dynamics of social and cultural change. In order to understand these processes we have to know the economic and social context over a period of time as well as the people acting in it; we have to know their skills and occupations, their income, property and social status, their community and family life, their motivation for acting, their attitudes, their ways of self-perception and self-interpretation.

We will therefore extrapolate from various statistical sources a reliable frame of social data against which subjective experience - as obtained from newspaper reports, letters, contemporary observations - can be projected and interpreted.

By thus combining the analysis of social structure with the analysis

of social experience we hope to go beyond studies which, even if professing an interest in working-class culture, have tended to reduce its everyday manifestation to the mere reflection of statistical data.

Our approach will have to rely on two different kinds of sources: First, on those (to be subjected to quantitative-statistical analysis) containing important socio-structural data; second, on sources (to be evaluated hermeneutically) relating to symbolic representations and to everyday experience.

II Work in Progress

1. Census Analysis

The manuscript federal census schedules are the primary sources for the quantitative analysis of the changing occupational, family, and class structures of Germans in Chicago, as well as of their geographic concentration and movement with the city over the latter half of the 19th century. It is necessary to go back to the original forms filled out by the census takers since the categories used in the published census are often misleading and too general to answer the questions we want to ask; in addition, the published census simply did not report on all the information available to it, particularly on family structure. Since the manuscript censuses of Chicago have not yet been submitted to systematic quantitative analysis, we must first prepare the data for computer analysis, a time-consuming task.

We will analyze all the federal censuses from 1850 through 1900, except the census of 1890, which was destroyed by fire. (The 1910 census is not yet open to the public.' The 1900 census is especially significant: Since it has just recently been opened to the public, published social historical studies of specific populations do not typically go beyond 1880. Thus we have as yet no thorough information on the change in the composition and character of the German immigrant population (or, for that matter, any other group) from 1880 through the turn of the century. Also, the 1900 census contains extremely valuable information about the status of women, immigration and home ownership not asked in preceding census years.

Except for the census of 1850, where we study the total German population of Chicago, we will use samples of all German headed households (defined for 1850, 1860, and 1870 by German-born head of household, for 1880 and 1900 by German-born father of head of household). We use a coding procedure that permits us to analyze individuals as well as household units and thus to answer questions about family, occupational and class structure. Since for 1850 we are including all Germans, our data will also permit us to analyze German servants, journeymen and boarders living with non-German employers or in boarding houses, significant elements of the working population which we are anxious to study. For later census years we will take subsamples of this group of persons to overcome the bias of our samples against Germans who do not live in households headed by their countrymen.

Given our limitations of time and staff, we will concentrate on the German population, while relying on the published census and scholarly work for comparisons with other groups in the population.

Two final aspects of our census work are worthy of note - analysis of the geographical distribution of the German population and the classification of occupations. In order to do a study of German community life it is essential that we be able to define the changing German neighborhoods in Chicago. To do so we will plot on a map of the city all the German (and, for 1850, non-German) households included in our census analyses. This task is technically difficult since we have to find adequate city maps from the various periods under study and draw on them a system of small "grid squares" based on two original co-ordinates which run north/south and east/west. Since each grid square has a number, the locations of the households can then be read by a computer. The rectilinear pattern of streets in the city has aided us in this task, but the problems of drawing consistent grid square boundaries over the decades were considerable, both because of the varying quality of maps and changes in the street system. Nevertheless, particularly with the aid of the key maps to the Sanborn fire insurance maps of the city, we have developed a suitable and consistent grid square system for the whole period which permits us to locate each household in an area typically consisting of two three blocks. Using computer-drawn maps which the households placed on the grid square system, we can analyze the changing distribution and concentration of German households and neighborhoods within Chicago in the second half of the 19th century.

For the classification of occupations, we basically use the system developed by the Philadelphia Social History Project to categorize occupations in Philadelphia between 1850 and 1880. It permits both the identification of an individual occupation and its classification by status, industry, and function. (It also has some additional classifications which we have not utilized. Although the "occupational dictionary" of the PSHP contains over 18,500 individual occupations, there are still a significant number typical of Chicago (e.g. within the meat packing and slaughtering industry) which are missing. We have, however, been able to use the numbering system of the PSHP to construct new numbers for these occupations.

2. Newspaper Analysis

Because the history of the working class happened largely unnoticed and undocumented, it is the labor press both as an essential part of working-class culture and as recorder and interpreter of that culture that we have to turn to for detailed information on the immigrant working-class experience - as well as for social data which often relate to smaller social units not referred to in official statistics.

Our most important source is the Chicagoer Arbeiter-Zeitung (ChAZ) (1877-1919) and its weekly and Sunday editions, Vorbote (1874-1919) and Fackel (1879-1919). Other papers to be studied systematically include German-language trade-union journals and middle-class papers. Religious and associational papers as well as the English-language press of Chicago will provide supplementary information on specific events.

Systematic analysis of a newspaper means the thorough study of all existing issues of it according to predetermined criteria. Systematic

study is necessitated by the kind of detailed social and cultural history we want to write, and the criteria are required because of the extraordinary wealth of material found in the newspapers. From the beginning, therefore, we defined general categories of significant material pertaining to the world of work (including material on strikes, wages, working conditions, and particular trades), institutional life (including material on unions, clubs, working-class political groups, educational and cultural institutions, churches), and the structure of the German community. Other issues, like political participation, will be analyzed by defining critical points at which we can use the detailed coverage of the press as well as other sources. Similarly, everyday working-class life and culture will be studied on the basis of selected sample years. Such a procedure is justified by the relatively slow changes in these areas. Some of the sample years will be chosen to coincide with the census dates so that we can utilize the material on everyday life from the newspapers in conjunction with our census data to do detailed neighborhood studies (see below). Our general procedure is to take notes on a standard form or to make copies of particularly significant articles. Thus we are making comprehensive files defined by subject categories which will permit us to isolate material on particular questions. We are also making detailed name files of all significant participants in the organizations under study so that we can analyze the broader leadership of the German-American working class.

3. Neighborhood Studies

Neighborhood studies will be detailed analyses of the whole population of limited areas of the city during at least two different periods, such as 1880 and 1900, in order to define fundamental changes within them. Since we have not yet begun work on these studies it is only possible to describe our hypotheses and goals in carrying them out.

Neighborhood community life was the locus of ethnic working-class experience in America, and studying it will require the synthesis of traditional and quantitative sources which is one of the goals of the project. While contemporary academics quarrel over the relative value of the various sources available to them, these sources remain artifacts of a life that was experienced as a coherent whole by the people of the time. By studying neighborhoods with all the sources at our disposal we hope to add concreteness and depth to the understanding of the German ethnic and working-class experience and in the process throw new light on major historical questions such as the reason for both the vitality and failure of the socialist movement in Chicago, the effect of industrialization on traditional trades like cigarmaking or baking, and the relationship between ethnic and working-class culture in America.

The neighborhoods will be located by using geographic distributions of the census data. We intend to study both concentrated German neighborhoods containing several economic groups and ethnically mixed working-class neighborhoods with significant numbers of Germans in order to compare German community life in both contexts. Judging from preliminary samples, we think that these two types of neighborhoods represent the typical ones in which German workers lived. All inhabitants of a neighborhood will be studied whether Germans or not, so that we

can include the whole context of German ethnic life and make comparisons between Germans and other groups. In conjunction with these studies we will use our systematic newspaper analysis to help define the nature of community life; for example, the name files of significant leaders in German organizations will help define the intermediate level of leadership in the area, while the notes on organizations will permit us to locate significant meeting halls, churches, newspaper offices, etc. We will also do additional concentrated newspaper analysis to collect information on everyday life in the area, such as the most important stores, the kinds and patterns of entertainment, or the streets where most crime took place. All this information can be placed on the fire insurance maps of Chicago which we have from the 1860s, 80s, and 90s. These maps show individual buildings with detailed information about their structure and building material. They are especially useful for businesses and factories since they even show the placement of machinery as well as important divisions within the plant. This information can be supplemented by that in the manuscript schedules of the U.S. manufacturing censuses so that we can reconstruct a detailed picture of the world of work that did so much to define community life. Of course, all of this material can be supplemented by traditional sources like union histories and relevant biographies or diaries. With all this information we can reconstruct the patterns of daily life in German neighborhoods and thus come to an understanding of what shaped the lives of ordinary people.

These neighborhood studies are only a part of our whole effort, but they will give it a distinctive focus. With them we will be able to analyze not only the larger social structure of the whole German community in Chicago, the scope and pace of industrialization, or the major political conflicts of the era, but also the effect to these, as well as other larger developments, on the daily lives of ordinary German workers. Without such an understanding one cannot fully grasp either the form that these larger changes took or their ultimate results.

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