

## Conference Report: ITH Conference 2012

### “Interventions: The Impact of Labour Movements on Social and Cultural Development”

48<sup>th</sup> Linz Conference, 13 – 16 September 2012

‘The Impact of Labour Movements on Social and Cultural Development’ was the theme of this year’s Linz conference of the *International Conference of Labour and Social History* (ITH) held in co-operation with the Upper Austrian Chamber of Labour. It was coordinated by Jürgen Mittag (Bochum and Cologne). It was to conclude a three-year conference cycle of the ITH whose objective was to examine the contribution of the Labour Movement to the societal and social process understood as *Development* and *Progress*. It was preceded by conferences on ‘The Memory of Labour’ (2010); and ‘Practices of *International Development* and of *International Solidarity*’ as forms of International Cooperation of the Labour Movement (2011). It was important for the organizers to examine norms and notions as well as the actual social practices.

**Stefan Berger** (Bochum) in his opening lecture surveyed the ‘achievements’ of the Labour Movement in the social and cultural fields. Finding that the thematic field of education was not sufficiently considered, Berger compared the fields of the social and welfare state, on the one hand, and the field of educational expansion, on the other, and deemed it to be a Labour Movement achievement on an equal footing.

In the course of the first section concerning contributions to the development of the welfare state, **Uwe Fuhrmann** (Berlin) looked at the industrial actions taken around the currency reform in post-war Germany and described the change-over from the model of market economy to that of ‘social market economy’ as a process generally characterized by strong trade union mobilization. He illustrated this by referring to the critical moment of the politically motivated general strike in Stuttgart in November 1948. He considered the industrial action activities and the discursive change linked to it as a political process within which the demarcation lines of what could be said were negotiated for.

**Jörg Roesler** (Berlin) shed light on the contradictory tensions between the commandments of a proletarian work ethic and the demands of a socialist performance society within the framework of conflict and conflict resolution during the four and a half decades of the existence of the GDR (including the period of occupation). He demonstrates how, on the basis of the decisions of the post-war reconstruction phase when workers had overcome capitalist piece work systems, elements of a socialist performance society were implemented. He related this to several reform phases, but also to aggravated conflicts like the events of 17 June 1953.

**Patricia Toucas** (Paris) shed light on the links between the foundation of Mutual-Aid Societies (*mutualités*) and the development of the welfare system in France from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century up to 1914. The evolution of cooperative welfare structures in the *Second Empire* led to the early steps of health insurance schemes and preventative health care. Following their legalization in 1864, Trade unions took a critical stance towards the reformist nature of Mutualism. In the course of the following years, the Insurance Funds and the trade unions complemented each other in the struggle for social rights and in the field of management of Industrial Injury Insurance. Both were convinced that social rights should be based on *solidarity*.

**Touraj Atabaki** (Amsterdam) shed light on the relationship between work, the social-democratic Labour Movement and its impact on the restructuring of civil society discourse in Iran during the inter-war years. With this purpose in mind, he described the development of various trade unions in Iran in the years following the First World War; he placed them in the context of the formation of new political institutions. Originally, the urban working class took the lead in this process. The inter-war years saw the most important Labour Movement of the Near- and Mid-East developing in Iran. By reconstructing the events set in motion by this movement, Atabaki supplemented the prevailing interpretation of developments during the years between the two World Wars as a phase of authoritarian modernization with moments of self-organization and their impact on the changes in the discourse of civil society.

Finally, **Bruno Groppo** (Paris) in his lecture examined the contribution made by the Latin American Labour Movements to the construction of the welfare state in their respective countries, particularly during the rule of populist regimes like Peronism in Argentina; Cardenism in Mexico; and Vargasism in Brazil. Whereas welfare state systems did not exist in the countries in question prior to these forms of

government, the populist governments introduced social welfare and health insurance in a rudimentary form for the first time.

In his interim report, **David Mayer** (Vienna) summarized the discussions of the first conference day. He described a spectrum of detailed individual studies covering the relationship between the Labour Movements on the one hand, and the welfare state, social security, and civil liberty, on the other. The welfare state in the case studies under consideration functioned as an instrument of co-operation, integration, and social security, but also contained elements of social control characterized by the co-existence of inclusion and exclusion so that the integrative effects of the welfare state also bore witness to intensified societal segmentation. In addition, the welfare state was a medium for nationalizing welfare which went against the grain of the internationalist discourse of the Labour Movement. Mayer characterized as an unresolved issue the question of the global challenge to the welfare state whose reverse side is the often invoked phenomenon of Social Imperialism.

In the course of the evening programme for the conference, a film produced in the 1950s in the USA, characterized by a somehow unexpected class-struggle stance, was shown following an introduction by **Joachim Schätz** (Vienna): Titled 'Salt of the Earth' by Herbert J. Biberman, the film demonstrates the value of solidarity, taking as an example a miners' strike. Especially the cinematic treatment of gender relations renders the film interesting as we watch the wives of the miners, who initially stay passively at home, but as the strike progresses, take an active part, eventually forming picket-lines when a court order bans the men from maintaining the picket-line themselves.

On the second day of the conference, **H. Shelton Stromquist** (Iowa) explained the importance of municipal socialism between 1890 and 1920 – presently a phenomenon of increasing interest to researchers. He described the success of the social-democratic policies as a trans-local phenomenon which can be observed in the most disparate societies in which these politicians increasingly involved themselves in the arenas of the struggle for the local institutions and policies for supplying gas, water, electricity, etc. During the years under survey, it is possible to observe the growing success of local social-democratic policies which complemented national parliamentary strategies in a meaningful way at grass-root level.

Cultural developments sparked by the Labour Movement were often committed to social utopian projects. **Helmut Weihsmann** (Vienna) explained how the social utopian project of new types of constructing housing connected with new ways of living together was pragmatically broken down to solve housing problems in Vienna. He analyzed the impact of a planning policy inspired by socialist ideas for the design of working-class neighbourhoods in *Red Vienna* of the 1920s and early '30s. In a presentation relating to architecture and design, he described the influence of grouping housing blocks around courtyards in combination with urban architectural design which can still be seen today in such housing estates as the *Karl-Marx-Hof* in Vienna.

While the other presentations explored developments attributable to the Labour Movement which are still seen as *progressive*, the subject of the presentation made by **Eszter Varsa** (Budapest) were trends harking back to socialist based utopian notions as demonstrated in her study of the institutionalization of children in early state socialist Hungary. She showed that proletarian educational policy did indeed include features belonging to the authoritarian ideas of the inter-war years particularly in objectifying Roma children, stigmatized as alien. In this case, a socialist work ethos went hand in hand with a social security regime.

**Stefan Moitra** (Bochum) explored a specific body of working-class culture source material by taking a comparative look at trade-union film policy in West Germany and Britain; the issue raised in this context was to see if such a policy had made a contribution to worker education and working-class culture. With this in mind, he analyzed the cultural policy discussions in the miners' trade unions under examination. Whereas the German *IG Bergbau* (Industrial Miners' Union) established a film lending programme for 16 mm films, the *National Union of Mine Workers* in South Wales staked on *Miners' Institutes* as proper cinemas where films were shown. This difference in cinematic policy could also be attributed to a difference in interpretation of the dangers associated with the consumption of cultural products: while in Germany the discourse was inclined to a critical stance towards the culture industry, in South Wales a pragmatic cinematic policy aligned with this industry had taken root. This was the reason why the choice of offered films was different.

**Christian Chevandier** (Le Havre) examined French trade union libraries as emancipatory tools to be used by the French trade unions by looking at selected cases. The holdings of the French trade union libraries under examination in the main consisted of political and scientific works even beyond of the more narrowly defined realm of trade union policy. Thus, in the libraries, literature concerning the

Third World and Development Policy, concerning psychology, psychiatry and criticism thereof as well as the classics in the field of sociology, history, and political thought; but also the canon of recent French intellectuals has found its way into trade union libraries. Indeed, literary fiction constitutes one quarter of the holdings examined if such sub-categories as comics and cartoons are included. Books were important in the life of, especially militant, trade unions whose keenness to encourage autodidactic educational activities Chevandier estimated as considerable.

By taking as an example the cultural development of the early Soviet Union, **Derek Weber** (Vienna) shed light on the different phases in Soviet cultural policy and its impact on the actions of the cultural avant-garde in the wake of the October Revolution as well as its rollback as a result of advancing Stalinization in the Soviet Union. Weber supplied numerous examples of avantgarde and experimental cultural productions and compositions in the early years of the Soviet Union and demonstrated the open-minded attitudes taken by Soviet cultural policy to the cultural avant-garde. This attitude changed with the change-over to the *New Economic Policy* and the change of direction in Soviet cultural policy. Nevertheless, composers like Dimitrij Shostakovich managed to maintain their prominent positions even under a restrictive cultural policy, although in his case it did require a great deal of adaptability.

**Andreas Diers** (Hannover) in his presentation paid tribute to Wolfgang Abendroth for the role he played in the debate concerning the Works Constitution Act (*Betriebsverfassungsgesetz*). As an example he pointed to his Report and Opinion concerning the problem of the political strike in support of the demand for a Works Constitution. Abendroth did not view the political strike as a means of enforcement – which was the verdict arrived at by conservative labour law experts – but as an instrument legitimately used by workers and employees for expressing their opinion through industrial action to show strength and voice grievances as part of political debate.

In the last lecture, **Kelvin J. Callahan** (Hartford/Connecticut) considered the possibility of a new *Labour History* following the culturalist turn. He estimated that *cultural studies* in the field of Labour Movement History were still not widespread, whereas political biography, research into the history of ideas, and that of labour organizations were frequent topics. Using the *Second International* as his point of departure, Callahan elucidated the scope for taking a cultural-history based approach to research. To do so, he analyzed a case study of the depiction of the *Second International* in the contemporary political press of the German Empire.

The exemplary cases presented and discussed threw light on processes of social and cultural development actively engendered by Labour Movements. In this context, internationally comparative perspectives, micro-historical case studies, the history of ideas and of discourse and social history approaches complemented each other. The case studies dealt with a wide gamut of the many different practice fields of Labour policy, albeit with a disparate scope of impact for the respective findings. Interestingly, the field of educational policy was missing from the list of cultural development brought about by the Labour Movement, except that it was treated as a central feature in the opening presentation. There is no doubt, that this is a field in which reformers of the Labour Movements were highly active and which deserves further exploration.

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- **Conference Programme:** [http://www.ith.or.at/konf\\_e/zeitpl\\_2012\\_e.htm](http://www.ith.or.at/konf_e/zeitpl_2012_e.htm)