

A Social History of the German Workers of Chicago, 1850-1910

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An interdisciplinary team of social and cultural historians at the America Institute of the University of Munich has begun work for a research project on the social history of German workers in Chicago from 1850 to 1910. Funded by the Volkswagen foundation, this is the largest American studies research project in the Federal Republic of Germany to date. It will run over a period of three years (from April 1979 to March 1982). Under the direction of Dr. Hartmut Keil, the Munich project will cooperate with the John F. Kennedy Institute for American Studies in Berlin, and it has the support of the Newberry Library in Chicago and of a number of consulting social historians in both Germany and the United States.

The project aims at reconstructing the German working-class community in Chicago during the second half of the 19th century. Germans, as has often been forgotten, constituted the largest of all immigrant groups. Not only were most of them workers, they also formed the major immigrant element within the American labor force, predominating in artisan and specific skilled occupations, and participating in labor organizations well over their numerical proportions. Contrary to the image of the Germans as settling primarily in agrarian regions, two thirds were living in urban communities by 1890. Chicago—besides providing a focal point for the interrelated processes of rapid urban growth, accelerated industrialization, and multiple population increase, including immigration—was chosen because it became the center of German urban settlement in the Midwest, when that region emerged as the major destination of German immigrants after 1850.

The project will analyze the development of the German working-class community within the framework of the changing economic and social structure of Chicago. It will also focus on German workers' everyday experience and on their social and cultural response to industrialization in a new urban environment. Studying social structure and social behavior during different stages of the industrialization process, research will concentrate on the following areas:

- 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 organizations;
- the continuity and transformation of German working-class culture in its conflict with the norms and values of the dominant culture.

In trying to grasp the dynamics of social and cultural change, the project will make use of quantitative as well as qualitative material and will combine methods of the "new social history" with a more traditional hermeneutical approach. It intends to correlate the analysis of social structure with the analysis of social experience, thus hoping to go beyond some recent quantitative studies of working classes, which while professing an interest in working-class culture have tended to reduce its everyday manifestations to the reflection of statistical data. The Munich team will try to reconstruct a whole way of life as it can be extracted from the numerous documents still available (or to be recovered) on the life of German workers in Chicago. After extrapolating from various statistical sources (manuscript schedules, census on population and on manufactures, labor bureau reports, etc.) a reliable frame of social data, qualitative material (such as newspapers, personal and associational records) will be interpreted and projected against the quantitative socio-structural background.

The Munich project hopes to fill one of the gaps in American social and labor history which up to now has concentrated mainly on the analysis of the working-class community in medium-sized industrial towns, with a marked preference for the earlier phase of industrialization (1840-1880). While there are a handful of studies on German immigrant communities of the mid-nineteenth century and several valuable analyses of other immigrant groups in the new urban centers during the second half of the nineteenth century, we have as yet no adequate treatment of the German workers' experience for Chicago or any other city in the United States in this formative period of industrial America.

The analysis of the German working class in Chicago will provide comprehensive material on occupational and social conditions within this group and will thus lay the ground for more extended comparative studies. In particular, it will open possibilities for comparative research of German working-class life and institutions in the different social and cultural contexts of Germany and the United States. It can also be expected to throw light on the formation and the specific character of the modern American working class, as distinguished from European working classes by its tendency to split along ethnic, racial and regional lines. It will furthermore touch upon the integration of radical working-class organizations into the emergent system of corporate capitalism and upon the transformation of alternative working-class cultures into ethnically oriented subcultures of the present day.