

Progress Report of the Chicago Project

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The Chicago Project, based at the American Institute of the University of Munich, has been funded by the Volkswagen Foundation for a period of four years, beginning in April 1979. The project, working with two full-time staff, five part-time student workers, and several affiliated German faculty members, is associated with the John F. Kennedy Institute for North American Studies in Berlin and 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 have reviewed the work of the project at two conferences, one in June 1980 in Munich and the other in the fall of 1981 in Chicago. Selected papers of the latter conference will be published in the winter of 1983 by the Northern Illinois University Press. The Chicago Project will also publish an anthology of documents of German working-class culture in Chicago from 1850 to 1910 and finally the main result of its work, a comprehensive social history of German immigrant workers in Chicago during the second half of the nineteenth century. All three books will appear in English, and the latter two will be published in German as well. Since Hartmut Keil has already reported in this journal (No. 16, fall 1979) on the project, its subject, and goals, we will only shortly summarize its theoretical approach here, then review our research and its results to date, and finally provide a bibliography of our completed and shortly forthcoming work.

Theoretical Approach

While closely studying the changing economic and social structure of the city, the project has focused on workers' everyday experience and their social and cultural response to industrialization. We have been 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. Our theoretical approach to these subjects has been guided by two major hypotheses:

- 1) In view of the predominantly ethnic composition of the American working class in the second half of the nineteenth 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 Ger-

many. A social history of the German working class in Chicago therefore has 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 German workers helped to shape and transform.

In the light of these hypotheses we can analyze class differences in life styles and recognize qualitatively divergent perceptions and experiences 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 actively participated in shaping their own class. This means that we understand the cultural traditions of the German workers not as merely 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 values, we want to avoid the bias of defining the cultural resources of a minority solely in terms of the value system of the dominant culture.

In choosing a social historical approach we want to go beyond predominantly quantifying or statistical studies. It has been our intention to reconstruct a whole way of life as it can be extracted from numerous documents relating to the life of German workers in Chicago. Although 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. We have therefore extrapolated from various statistical sources a reliable frame of social data against which subjective experience—as obtained from newspaper reports, letters, contemporary observations—could be projected and interpreted.

Research of the Chicago Project

Census Analysis

The manuscript federal census schedules were 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 within the city over the latter half of the nineteenth century. The published census is inadequate for these purposes. We have analyzed the manuscript schedules of the federal censuses of 1850, 1880, and 1900. For 1850 we analyzed all 5,000 Germans in Chicago, a procedure which allowed us also to study German boarders outside German homes. In 1880 we sampled households headed by persons with German-born fathers in order to include second-generation Germans. In addition, the 1900 sample includes household heads of all national groups in order to permit comparisons; for German households all members were included to permit analysis of

family structure. The sample of 1880 consisted of 2,222 households (11,112 individuals), that of 1900, 6,116 households and non-German household heads (14,442 individuals). We used a coding procedure that permitted us to answer questions about family, occupational, and class structure.

Newspaper Analysis

Because the history of the working class happened largely unnoticed and undocumented, it is to the labor press—an essential part of working-class culture as well as its recorder and interpreter—that we have turned for detailed information on the immigrant working-class experience. The labor press also provides social data which often relate to smaller social units not referred to in official statistics. Our most important source has been the *Chicagoer Arbeiter-Zeitung*, published from 1877 through 1919, and its weekly and Sunday editions, *Vorbote* (1874–1919) and *Fackel* (1879–1919). Other papers studied include German-language trade union journals and middle-class papers. Religious and associational papers as well as the English-language press of Chicago provided supplementary information on specific events.

We have systematically studied the *Chicagoer Arbeiter-Zeitung* between 1879 and 1900, analyzing all existing issues for significant material pertaining to the world of work, working-class institutional life, and the structure of the German community. Other issues, like political participation, have been analyzed by defining critical points at which we used the detailed coverage of the press as well as other sources. Similarly, everyday working-class life and culture has been 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 have been chosen to coincide with the census dates so that we could utilize the material on everyday life from the newspapers in conjunction with our census data to do detailed neighborhood studies. Also detailed name files of all significant participants in the organizations under study were compiled for the purpose of analyzing the broader leadership of the German-American working class.

Neighborhood Studies

Neighborhood studies are 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 changes and continuities within them. Neighborhood community life was the locus of ethnic working-class experience in America, and studying it requires 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—from newspapers and church histories to the manuscript census and fire insurance maps—we can 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 mechanization on traditional trades like cigarmaking or baking, the impact of industrialization on the everyday life of workers, and the relationship between ethnic and working-class culture in America.

Industry Studies

In close conjunction with the neighborhood studies the Chicago Project has analyzed a set of Chicago industries over an extended period in order to understand the changing character of the work that Germans performed. Three types of industry were selected: neighborhood trades like baking, cigarmaking, and tailoring; industries in which medium-sized firms predominated like furniture and metal work; and large-scale manufacturing branches like meat packing and agricultural implements. Germans were strongly represented in all these industries at some point, in some cases continually, and studying them as workers in specific industrial contexts permits us to analyze the concrete character of industrial change and thus get beyond the usual larger generalizations about division of labor and mechanization. It also permits us to analyze on a local level the early development of unions instead of starting from top down with national or even city-wide organizations.

Findings and New Directions Resulting from Research to Date

Our work so far has resulted in new and fruitful insights into the history of Germans immigrating to the United States, their settlement in urban industrial centers, and their participation in the Chicago labor movement.

On the basis primarily of the samples of the manuscript population census of 1880 and 1900 we have for the first time been able to define precisely the character of the last great German immigration wave from 1880 to 1886. These findings have provided a needed corrective to the typical picture of skilled craftsmen who came from the old regions of German emigration, because to an unparalleled extent the immigrants of the 1880s brought both agrarian traditions from the eastern provinces and experiences of modern industries in Germany itself. In addition, we have been able to describe the impact of this immigration wave on the development of German neighborhoods and their social structure. Thus the German community in Chicago in the last quarter of the nineteenth century was much more differentiated than is usually assumed, and its long history in the city beginning in the late 1840s added to this diversity of traditions, social experience, and social class. The experience of the German population in Chicago cannot, therefore, be exclusively, or even primarily, understood in ethnic terms but rather must be analyzed through concepts of class and economic status, particularly as industrialization increased toward the turn of the century. Finally, the close social analysis of the largest German immigration wave in American history opens new perspectives on the duration of German traditions within Chicago's German population and even on the scholarly categories in which this population is understood. For example, the German population of the

city reached its numerical highpoint and the peak of its cultural and political influence in the 1890s precisely when most American immigration histories place so much stress on the “new” immigration from southern and eastern Europe. In fact, given the character of the ’80s immigration, one can seriously question the categories of “old” and “new” immigration as they apply to the Germans, for so many of these immigrants came in fact from the eastern and more economically backward parts of Germany. Thus German immigration included both old and new phases.

Our research in the years past 1880 has also permitted us to integrate the period of most intense American industrialization into the analysis of German immigrants, so that we can, for example, discuss the changes in occupations and trades caused by modern production methods. Until now the stereotype of the quickly assimilating German artisan has dominated American historical thinking, a stereotype that had a certain truth before 1880. Now, however, during the decisive sixteen-year period between the depressions of the 1870s and 1890s, we can analyze the similar processes of devaluation of skill and displacement of craft production in the traditional trades in which Germans were so strongly represented. In addition, we can show in detail which industries and occupations were most affected and what consequences these changes had for artisans, as well as for the unskilled Germans arriving in such unusual numbers after 1880. At the same time we have been able to identify industries like metal fabrication and occupations like machinist in which industrialization created a demand for new skills which were not represented by the old crafts and which were especially attractive to Germans, particularly of the second generation.

Our detailed analysis of trades and industries in which Germans dominated shows their varied stages of development at any one time and helps explain the increasing radicalism of German workers in particular branches of industry. Thus we have also been able to deepen the usual interpretation of the vital German labor movement of the 1880s, which attributes it to importations from Germany, by tying it to the changing social and economic conditions in Chicago. At this time the neighborhood was of decisive significance in building the solidarity necessary for the founding of stable unions, even when the local base had to be transcended to form multi-ethnic city-wide and national unions. Similarly the neighborhood supported the notable German radicalism of the ’80s. Although the anarchist and socialist initiatives of these years failed, German unions and political groups advocated socialist ideas and ideologies which influenced later reform programs on the local, state, and national levels. In their radical organizing efforts German immigrant workers contributed substantially to breaking down the ethnic barriers within Chicago’s work force. Using our diverse kinds of evidence, we can therefore evaluate and contribute to the most important explanations for the unrest and rebellion of the immigrant work force in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, using the largest ethnic group, the Germans, as an example.

Finally, the second generation of German workers has become ever more prominent in our recent work. While analyzing their social and geographic mobility, we also want to describe their role in the emerging American labor movement,

which was characterized by ethnic, generational, and cultural change. It was the second generation German and Irish workers who carried the experiences of the first American industrial working class into the twentieth century when the new immigrant workers became so prominent. It was also they who confronted, participated in, and helped create the mass popular culture of late nineteenth and early twentieth century America, a culture which in part challenged and helped undermine the more localist working-class cultures of urban America's Gilded Age. Along with the role of the second generation immigrant workers in the American labor movement the nature and consequences of this mass popular culture have been of major concern to the Chicago Project.

*Publications, Papers, and Dissertations done in
conjunction with the Chicago Project*

Publications

- H. Keil, H. Ickstadt, "Elemente einer deutschen Arbeiterkultur in Chicago zwischen 1880 und 1890," *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 5. Jahrgang, Heft 1 (1979).
- H. Ickstadt, H. Keil, "A Forgotten Piece of Working-Class Literature: Gustav Lyser's Satire of the Hewitt Hearing of 1878," *Labor History*, 20, No. 1 (Winter, 1979).
- H. Keil, "German Immigrant Workers in Chicago, 1870-1890: Workers, Leaders, and the Labor Movement," to be published by the University of Illinois Press in 1983 in an edition of articles on American labor and immigration history, ed. Dirk Hoerder.
- H. Keil, "A Social History of the German Workers of Chicago, 1850-1910," *International Labor and Working Class History*, No. 16 (Fall, 1979).
- H. Keil, J. Jentz, "A Social History of the German Workers of Chicago, 1850-1910," *Historical Social Research*, 16 (October, 1980).
- J. Jentz, H. Keil, "From Immigrants to Urban Workers: Chicago's German Poor in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, 1883-1908," *Vierteljahresschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, Vol. 68, No. 1 (1981). Published in English.
- H. Keil, J. Jentz, "German Working-Class Culture in Chicago: A Problem of Definition, Method, and Analysis," *Gulliver 9* (1981). Published in English.
- J. Jentz, "Evaluating the Reliability of the Published Manufacturing Census: The Problem of the Hand Trades," to be published in *Historical Methods*, 1982.
- H. Keil, J. Jentz, editors, *Chicago's German Workers in Comparative Perspective*, edition of papers delivered at the Chicago Project Conference, October 9-12, 1981, to be published in the winter of 1983 by the Northern Illinois University Press.
- H. Keil, "Chicago's German Working Class in 1900." (Chicago Pro.)
- N. Faires, "Occupational Patterns of German-Americans in Nineteenth-Century Cities."
- J. Jentz, "Skilled Workers and Industrialization: Chicago's German Furniture and Metal Workers, 1880 to 1900." (Chicago Pro.)

- J. Barrett, "Immigrant Workers and Early Mass Production Industry: Work Rationalization and Job Control Conflicts in Chicago's Packing Houses, 1900-1904."
- T. Suhrbur, "Ethnicity in the Formation of the Chicago Carpenters' Union: 1855-1890."
- C. Harzig, "Immigrant Neighborhoods in Gilded Age Chicago: the German North Side, 1880-1900." (Chicago Pro.)
- D. Schneider, "'For Whom are All the Good Things in Life?': German-American Housewives Discuss their Budgets."
- B. Levine, "Free Soil, Free Labor, and *Freimänner*: German Chicago in the Civil War Era."
- R. Schneirov, "Class Conflict, Municipal Politics, and Governmental Reform in Gilded Age Chicago, 1871-1875."
- C. Heiss, "German Radicals in Industrial America: The *Lehr- und Wehr-Verein* in Gilded-Age Chicago." (Chicago Pro.)
- P. Buhle, "German Socialists and the Roots of American Working-Class Radicalism."
- K. Ensslen, H. Ickstadt, "German Working-Class Culture in Chicago: Continuity and Change in the Decade from 1900 to 1910." (Chicago Pro.)
- R. Oestreicher, "Industrialization, Class, and Competing Cultural Systems: Detroit Workers, 1875-1900."

Papers

- J. Jentz, "Chicago's German Bakers: A Case Study of Industrialization and Unionization," unpublished paper delivered at the Fünftes Historikertreffen der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Amerikastudien, Munich, February 17-19, 1982.
- H. Keil, "The Knights of Labor, the Trade Unions, and German Socialists in Chicago, 1870-1890," unpublished paper delivered at the Biennial Conference of the European Association for American Studies, Paris, March 30 to April 2, 1982.
- J. Jentz, "Chicago's Furniture Industry and Its Work Force from 1850 to 1910: A Social and Economic Framework for Interpreting the German-American Furniture Workers and Their Unions," unpublished paper delivered at the Biennial Conference of the European Association for American Studies, Paris, March 30 to April 2, 1982.

Dissertations (by subject, all in German)

- a comparative study of the *Illinois Staatszeitung* and the *Chicagoer Arbeiterzeitung* for the years 1880 and 1898 (S. Pitzer, University of Munich, M.A., completed)
- a history of the *Lehr- und Wehr-Verein* of Chicago (C. Heiss, University of Munich, M.A., completed)
- a study of German carpenters and carpenters' unions in Chicago from 1870 to 1900 (B. Zeigler, University of Munich, M.A., completed)

- an analysis of successful Chicago German manufacturers in the late nineteenth century (C. Liede, University of Munich, in progress)
- an analysis of the *Schwaben Verein* of Chicago (A. Redinger, University of Munich, M.A., in progress)
- a study of German freethinkers of Chicago and Milwaukee (B. Goldberg, University of Bochum, M.A., completed)
- a comparative study of German and English-language working-class literature in Chicago between 1875 and 1890 (Y. Loritz, University of Berlin, M.A., completed)
- a study of German emigration from Bavaria (B. Meyer, University of Munich, M.A., in progress)
- an analysis of the perception of America in the German labor press in the late nineteenth century (S. Pitzer-Täubrich, University of Erlangen, Ph.D., in progress)
- a social history of the German-American Turners with special emphasis on Chicago and Milwaukee (R. Wagner, University of Munich, Ph.D., in progress)
- a study of the institutional history of the German-language labor press in Chicago from 1873 to 1886 (R. Kiesewetter, University of Munich, M.A., in progress)