

The background features abstract geometric shapes in shades of blue and white. A dark blue triangle points downwards from the top left. A light blue triangle points upwards from the bottom left. The remaining space is white.

Conference Reports



Work, Class, and Social Democracy in the Global Age of August Bebel (1840–1913)

Conference at the Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy, University of Toronto, May 25–27, 2023. Additional support provided by the Jackman Humanities Institute, University of Toronto, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), and the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD). Conveners: Simone Lässig (GHI Washington), James Retallack (University of Toronto), and Swen Steinberg (Queen's University/GHI Washington). Participants: Celia Applegate (Vanderbilt University), Stefan Berger (Ruhr University Bochum), David Blackburn (Vanderbilt University), Andrew Bonnell (University of Queensland), Amerigo Caruso (University of Bonn), Matthew Fitzpatrick (Flinders University), John D. French (Duke University), Jens-Uwe Guettel (Pennsylvania State University), Jürgen Kocka (Freie Universität Berlin), Christine Krüger (University of Bonn), Anja Kruke (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung), Janine Murphy (College of the North Atlantic), Steven Press (Stanford University), Mona Rudolph (University of Kiel), Jürgen Schmidt (Karl-Marx-Haus, Trier), Carolyn Taratko (University of Erfurt), Philipp Urban (Ruhr University Bochum), Johanna Wolf (Max Planck Institut für Rechtsgeschichte und Rechtstheorie).

The aim of the Toronto conference on “Work, Class, and Social Democracy” was to investigate recent directions in the histories of work, labor movements, and social democracy, particularly as they relate to global studies since 2000. Participants examined the ways these histories interact with studies of class, race, and empire; possibilities of revolution and political emergencies; food and the body; the

workplace, resistance, and state power; violence and emotions; and religion and modernization. The presentations focused roughly on the lifespan of German socialist politician August Bebel (1840–1913), and geographically on Central Europe and European empires.

The conference began with a welcome from conference organizers James Retallack and Simone Lässig. The first session addressed global entanglements of work, class, and race, with Matthew P. Fitzpatrick providing comments and Swen Steinberg moderating. Steven Press explored the Social Democratic Party's critique of German colonialism. As Press pointed out, socialist luminaries such as Wilhelm Liebknecht and Bebel were critical of Germany's colonial enterprise, partly focusing on the actions of men like Adolf Lüderitz, whom they viewed as immoral and scrupulous. Yet, Press argued, there was more to this story. Bebel's view was more nuanced, seeing colonialism as having the potential to culturally uplift colonized peoples. Furthermore, Bebel thought there were potential benefits to be gained by the German working class through colonialization, even if it originated from untrustworthy colonial treaties signed by Lüderitz and his ilk. Mona Rudolph presented a paper that interrogated the labor regime in the diamond mines of German South West Africa, placing it within a global context. Diamond extraction presented German colonial officials with several overlapping dilemmas: diamonds were spread across the entire colony but the only location where there was an available labor pool that could be exploited was in the Ovambo region, where colonial administration and infrastructure were sparse. The working conditions were "absolutely catastrophic." Indigenous Ovambo workers were exploited in a brutal system that existed somewhere between the boundaries of free and unfree labor, conditions that were influenced by mining companies on the ground, the local colonial government, the Reich Colonial Office, and consumers abroad, namely in the United States. Both

papers underscored the importance of recognizing the interlocking complexities of European history and colonial history, emphasizing how European actors operating beyond the borders of Europe reshaped categories of race and labor.

Session two, with a comment from David Blackbourn, dealt with the histories of labor movements during periods of emergency. Amerigo Caruso discussed the German General Staff's plans, commissioned in the wake of the 1905 Russian Revolution, to contain potential mass unrest inside Germany. Caruso found that German officers looked to both contemporaneous and historical practices in France and Italy to learn by example. He argued that the schemes the officers drew up fit into a longer history of reactionary European forces to use states of siege not only to restore order but also to regenerate a moral order in response to democratization. By declaring states of emergency during periods of social upheaval, ever more extraordinary countermeasures were introduced to police urgent security concerns. The product of this process was the gradual delegitimization of labor movements and the discrediting of liberal institutions. Andrew Bonnell presented a paper that asked why the large and widespread German antiwar movement faltered in early August 1914. In part, Bonnell answered this question by noting that once war was declared, a "fatal dynamic of events" occurred which disarmed the antiwar movement. There were also political calculations involved, as reformist politicians sought a positive integration of the workers' movement into Wilhelmine society, while the Social Democratic Party (SPD) leadership bought into the notion that the war was one of national defense, namely against Russia. Party leaders were wary of the repressive powers that could be enacted by the state. Still, Bonnell noted that the antiwar movement didn't fully go away. It re-emerged late in the war with the creation of the oppositional USPD, in the strikes of 1918, and the November Revolution.

The first day's round of panels concluded with a session on "Blood, Sweat, and Food," with comments from Celia Applegate. Carolyn Taratko explored the fraught relationship between the SPD and the German peasantry. Taratko began by highlighting Bebel's futuristic hope that advances in technology could one day liberate man from the soil and usher in an age of plenty. Bebel's view, Taratko argued, arose not out of acquiescence to Marxist theory but because of shifting attitudes of German consumers. Placing the SPD's "peasant problem" in the context of changing global food supply chains and eating habits, Taratko argued that the party became an advocate of consumer interests, advancing a vision of food security. Similarly, Philipp Urban explored the transition of German society from "production-centric" to "consumption-oriented" and how social democrats responded. Urban traced the attitudes of the SPD toward self-help organizations, particularly cooperatives. Initially rejected by Bebel and a majority of social democrats, by 1910 the party decided to support cooperatives at its congress in Magdeburg. Why the change? Urban pointed to several key developments, including increases in the cost of living, the fact that cooperatives had become a large movement nationally and internationally in their own right, and the theoretical and practical debates over revisionism in the preceding years. Urban argued that the SPD's embrace of cooperatives was a signpost along its transformation from a party predicated on class struggle and revolution to one based on representing consumer interests and reform.

On Thursday evening, John D. French delivered the conference keynote address, entitled "A Workers' Emperor and a Workers' President? Germany's August Bebel and Brazil's Luis Inácio Lula da Silva in Comparative Perspective." How was it that these two men built a mass following among workers and the poor? Focusing on their backgrounds, notably similarities in their educational, occupational, and political trajectories, French probed what he called their political

cunning. Both Bebel and Lula managed to survive politically despite imprisonment, entrenched opposition, and authoritarianism, not only due to their political skill but moreover because they seemed to embody the idea that the working class could emancipate itself.

The conference's fourth session, which included a comment from Stefan Berger, opened with Jürgen Schmidt offering a paper that detailed the importance of work in how the labor movement perceived and conceptualized society. Work defined much of the working-class world: it delineated between "idlers" of the capitalist class and "workers." Schmidt then shifted to explore the nature of political work. The rise of mass party politics meant that political work became more time-consuming and more professionalized. Work provided a mental framework for understanding a class-structured society that, coupled with political work, led to a strong organization within the Social Democratic Party that produced success in elections. Johanna Wolf examined the significance of work regulations enacted in factories. Through them, employers made behavioral demands on their employees, producing uneven power relationships that frequently led to labor conflict. While workers sought redress through self-organization, collective bargaining, and the strike, industrial relations also became subject to state control through the Imperial Industrial Code. In this way, modern industrial relations reflected experiences in the industrial workplace, which often codified normative orders and balanced economic interests.

Session five, with a comment by Anja Kruke, included a paper submitted by Christine Krüger but not delivered in person. Krüger's work examined how labor history could be informed through new perspectives on security as a historical concept. The paper argued that security was a central goal of the labor movement. Drawing on examples from both Great Britain and Germany, namely strikes in London

and Hamburg, Krüger showed how the labor movement deployed the concept of security on behalf of workers, for example by advocating for better health and safety measures. The labor movement also used security as a threat, signaling that workers' discontent might sooner or later lead to violence and revolution. Security, then, as a method and category of analysis, shows the agency of the labor movement and its importance in class formation. Standing in for Krüger, James Retallack presented a paper that explored the various media incarnations of August Bebel. Depictions of Bebel varied widely depending on time and place, by tone and message. At one point Bebel could be presented as a violent revolutionary "pétroleuse," an erupting Vesuvius, or as the Moses of the workers' movement. Exploring these divergent iconographies, Retallack probed the boundaries between celebrity and personality cult. Retallack expressed skepticism that Bebel achieved cult-figure status, as defined by Max Weber, since he lacked charismatic authority. Still, Bebel was an immensely popular speaker who became a global celebrity in the age of mass media. Finally, Jens-Uwe Guettel's paper sought continuities in mass urban street action, from the suffrage reform demonstrations in Saxony in 1905 to the strikes, riots, and protests of the early Weimar Republic. Guettel argued for social and political continuities, foremost among them the ways in which those on the street could balk at the political goals of would-be leaders or political ideologies, underscoring the contingency at play. Far from being choreographed, street protests often lacked coherence: they were vehicles for self-empowerment and became a space where participants negotiated class positions through performance.

The sixth session charted the themes of class, religion, and modernization. Andrew Bonnell provided comments. Taking a transatlantic perspective, Janine Murphy considered gymnastic societies to explore the question of citizenship and belonging. When the German Gymnastics Federation

banned members of the Workers' Gymnastics Federation in 1894, it was making a clear statement that reflected middle-class concerns about whether workers could be fully integrated into society. The main gymnastic society founded in North America by revolutionaries of 1848 faced a similar dilemma when new immigrant workers tried to join its ranks. Despite different historical and political contexts, the integration of workers into gymnast societies on both sides of the Atlantic remained precarious. Matthew P. Fitzpatrick explored Bebel's writings and attitudes toward Islam. In Fitzpatrick's reading, Bebel positioned Islam as a progressive antidote to the chauvinistic Christianity he believed was pervasive in Germany at the time. In what Fitzpatrick describes as affirmative Orientalism, Bebel offered an alternative history of Islam that gave to it Hegelian world historical significance as the bridge between Greco-Roman antiquity and the modernity of the Renaissance. In so doing, Bebel saw Islam—and not Christianity—as the direct forerunner of socialist modernity. Fitzpatrick added that Bebel's Orientalism was also a response to the so-called Eastern Question: it was a pro-Ottoman defense against the predations of an aggressive, absolutist Russia he despised.

The conference concluded with a lively roundtable discussion between David Blackbourn, Jürgen Kocka, and James Retallack moderated by Stefan Berger. The participants agreed that the three-day conference had illuminated several exciting new avenues for labor history, particularly as it intersected with other historiographies. The global turn, new histories of capitalism, the history of migration, and memory studies all offer promise to enhance our understanding of the complexities of the German and global labor movements moving forward.

Steven McClellan
(University of Toronto)