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**THE MIGRATION OF IDEOLOGY
AND THE CONTESTED MEANING OF FREEDOM:
German Americans in the
Mid-Nineteenth Century**

Bruce Levine

*with comment by
Hartmut Keil*

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Mid-Nineteenth Century**

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**Continuity and Change
in the Transfer of Ideologies**

Hartmut Keil

Preface

IN THE PAST FEW DECADES, much progress has been made in the writing of history in the United States. Within the context of national history, the role of ethnic groups and the meaning of ethnic identities have been studied with renewed vigor. Within the field of immigration history, the attempt has been made to go beyond social and statistical data and to grasp the "mental baggage" of those who entered the United States. Within labor history, cultural aspects have been analyzed, which helps us better understand social conditions and political actions. Finally, within the history of specific ethnic minorities, myths and legends of ethnic persistence and ethnic heroism (as well as notions of smooth assimilation and harmonious acculturation) have been tested.

For those interested in the history of German-American relations and the history of German Americans, the speed with which and the degree to which these fields have been affected and revitalized by new insights and methods has been fascinating to observe. In his paper "The Migration of Ideology and the Contested Meaning of Freedom: German Americans in the Mid-Nineteenth Century," Professor Bruce Levine not only combines the results of recent research in labor history, the history of immigration, and the history of German Americans. By discussing the central issue of freedom, he moves beyond any sectoral approach and addresses questions of national American history. We are most pleased to present his study in our series of Occasional Papers together with a comment by Dr. Hartmut Keil, deputy director of the German Historical Institute.

Bruce Levine is an associate professor of history at the University of Cincinnati. He is the author of *The Spirit of 1848: German Immigrants, Labor Conflict, and the Coming of the Civil War* (Urbana, IL, 1992) and *Half Slave and Half Free: The Roots of Civil War* (New York, 1992). Before joining the faculty at the University of Cincinnati, he served as the director of research and writing at the American Social History Project at the City University of New York.

He is the principal author of the ASHP's two-volume history of the American working class, *Who Built America?* (New York, 1990).

Hartmut Keil earned his degrees at the Universities of Freiburg and Munich. After working as a research fellow at the Amerika-Institut of the University of Munich, he was the project director of the Chicago Project, a study on the settlement and assimilation of immigrant workers in Chicago in the nineteenth century. Dr. Keil has edited, among other publications, *German Workers' Culture in the United States, 1850 to 1920* (1988) and (with J. Jentz) *German Workers in Chicago: A Documentary History of Working-Class Culture from 1850 to World War I* (1988). He is currently working on "Race Relations between African Americans and Immigrants in the 19th Century."

Hartmut Lehmann
Washington, D.C., July 1992

The Migration of Ideology and the Contested Meaning of Freedom: German-Americans in the Mid-Nineteenth Century

Bruce Levine

IN THE MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY, people in both Europe and North America struggled to reconcile popular government with social order, communal rights with personal liberty. Resulting debates and overt conflicts revealed major differences in the way that distinct sectors of the population understood these concepts and their proper mix. In turn, disputes concerning the meaning of freedom, self-government, and social justice drew upon contending definitions of American identity and national tradition. No one put this problem more clearly or perceptively than Abraham Lincoln in a speech he delivered in the spring of 1864. "The world," he began, "has never had a good definition of the word liberty," and this unclarity was especially evident among Americans. "We all declare for liberty," Lincoln noted, but

in using the same *word* we do not all mean the same *thing*. With some the word liberty may mean for each man to do as he pleases with himself and the product of his labor; while with others the same word may mean for some men to do as they please with other men and the product of other men's labor.

"Here," Lincoln observed, "are two, not only different, but incompatible things, called by the same name—liberty."¹

The same problem bedeviled Europeans in general and Germans in particular—as it did the many German-speaking immigrants who came to Lincoln's America, that is, to the United States of the 1840s and 1850s.

This paper has benefitted from constructive reactions to earlier drafts presented at the 1992 meeting of the Organization of American Historians in Chicago, the Pittsburgh Working-Class History Seminar, and the German Historical Institute in Washington, D.C.

¹ Roy P. Basler et al., eds., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols. (New Brunswick, NJ, 1953–1955), VII, 301–302.

I

In the early nineteenth century, German society seemed to many observers thoroughly and seamlessly archaic. Much of the agrarian population still labored under various types and degrees of feudal or semi-feudal compulsion or obligation. Craft guilds survived in many places through the 1860s. The estate system of social organization survived, dominated by landed aristocrats and the higher clergy of established churches. Political power resided in an authoritarian state apparatus, despite gestures toward constitutional reform. These vestiges of the Middle Ages drew strength from and helped perpetuate Germany's high degree of parochialism and national fragmentation.²

Behind this appearance of utter stagnation, however, powerful forces had begun to transform the lives of Germany's agricultural and industrial producers. Slowly, unevenly, and very painfully, an old and familiar world—in which petty commodity production, merchants' capital, and seigneurialism had long if uneasily coexisted—was being undermined and transformed by a combination of demographic and commercial growth and agricultural and industrial change. One result was the rise of a layer of acquisitive merchants, contractors, and other employers of manufacturing labor determined to increase their wealth and prerogatives. Another was the extensive expropriation, pauperization, and/or proletarianization of small producers in both town and country.³

² Reinhart Koselleck, *Preußen zwischen Reform und Revolution: Allgemeines Landrecht, Verwaltung und soziale Bewegung von 1791 bis 1848* (2d ed., Stuttgart, 1981), 23–51, 78–115; Friedrich Lütge, *Deutsche Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte: Ein Überblick* (3d ed., Berlin, 1966), 344–86, 445–53; Hugo C. Wendel, *The Evolution of Industrial Freedom in Prussia, 1845–1849* (Allentown, PA, 1918).

³ See, for example, Pierre Ayçoberry, "Probleme der Sozialschichtung in Köln im Zeitalter der Frühindustrialisierung," in *Wirtschafts- und sozialgeschichtliche Probleme der frühen Industrialisierung*, ed. Wolfram Fischer (Berlin, 1968), 521–22; Wolfgang Köllmann, *Sozialgeschichte der Stadt Barmen im 19. Jahrhundert* (Tübingen, 1960), 103–105; Helmut Sedatis, *Liberalismus und Handwerk in Südwestdeutschland* (Stuttgart, 1979); Friedrich Lenger, *Zwischen Klein-*

The revolutionary events of 1848/49 encouraged all discontented groups to present their own catalogues of grievances and demands. The resulting public debates served to clarify a spectrum of popular impulses and values, the precise nature of and differences among which had been muffled and obscured by *Vormärz* repression.

Among the urban population, three overlapping but increasingly distinguishable currents appeared, each of them proposing its own solution to the ills of German society. In 1848 liberal businessmen and their allies in the intelligentsia urged expansion of their civil liberties and political power. They sought—as Heinrich von Gagern of Hesse-Darmstadt put it—to "assure for the middle class a preponderant influence over the state." Liberals found the appropriate political formula for their project in a constitutional monarchy based on a limited suffrage. Such political reforms would, in turn, yield an economic policy by the government that was more oriented toward development and bring an end to the anachronistic fragmentation of the German nation. Liberal hostility to egalitarian social experiments was palpable. But, as a number of historians have demonstrated, German liberalism was stunted. Fear of privileged elites, on one side, and of desperate marginal producers, on the other, discouraged vigorous advocacy of truly consistent free-market policies.⁴

Attempts by German *Handwerker* to articulate their own desires, demands, and vision of a just society were marked by the same tension between old and new—between tradition and change—that

bürgertum und Proletariat: Studien zur Sozialgeschichte der Düsseldorfer Handwerker 1816–1878 (Göttingen, 1986); Wolfram Fischer, *Der Staat und die Anfänge der Industrialisierung in Baden 1800–1850* (Berlin, 1962), 290, 303; Hartmut Zwahr, *Zur Konstituierung des Proletariats als Klasse: Strukturuntersuchung über das Leipziger Proletariat während der industriellen Revolution* (Berlin, 1978); Frederick Daniel Marquardt, "The Manual Workers in the Social Order in Berlin under the Old Regime" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, 1973); and especially Jürgen Kocka, *Lohnarbeit und Klassenbildung: Arbeiter und Arbeiterbewegung in Deutschland 1800–1875* (Berlin, 1983), 101–106.

⁴ Theodore S. Hamerow, *Restoration, Revolution, Reaction: Economics and Politics in Germany, 1815–1871* (Princeton, NJ, 1966), 61, 127–28, 215; Donald G. Rohr, *The Origins of Social Liberalism in Germany* (Chicago, 1963), 95–96; James J. Sheehan, *German Liberalism in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago, 1978), 74.

was reshaping their material conditions and redefining their social status.

One ideological pole was represented at the so-called Artisans' Congress (formally, the *Deutscher Handwerker- und Gewerbekongress*), which met in Frankfurt-am-Main in July and August 1848. It was dominated by threatened master craftsmen who sought to reach a conflict-free, corporatist society by regenerating the guilds (indeed, by allotting them unprecedented power), by banning outright all rural, household, state-owned, and large-scale manufacture, by further restricting entry into the handicraft work force, and by reinforcing the power of guild masters over their helpers.⁵

Journeymen commonly evinced less affection for traditional hierarchies than did the delegates to the Artisans' Congress. Journeymen went on strike in the spring and summer of 1848 to compel masters to raise wages, reduce hours, and limit the use of labor-displacing machinery. Those who participated in these strikes and raised these demands thereby defied both corporatist traditions and champions of the free market, both of which assigned to masters exclusive jurisdiction over such matters.⁶ To be sure, this combative stance did not preclude utilizing some traditional standards, symbols, and rituals to articulate and advance plebeian interests.⁷ But in 1848/49, organized journeymen commonly articulated a social vision

⁵ P. H. Noyes, *Organization and Revolution: Working-Class Associations in the German Revolutions of 1848–1849* (Princeton, NJ, 1966), 177–90.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 127, 131, 135, 139, and passim; Marquardt, "Manual Workers," 471–73; Werner Conze and Dieter Groh, *Die Arbeiterbewegung in der nationalen Bewegung* (Stuttgart, 1966), 25–31; Frolinde Balsler, *Sozial-Demokratie 1848/49–1863. Die erste deutsche Arbeiterorganisation "Allgemeine deutsche Arbeiterverbrüderung" nach der Revolution*, 2 vols. (2d ed., Stuttgart, 1965), I, 47–152; Helga Grebing, ed., *Arbeiterbewegung: Sozialer Protest und Kollektive Interessenvertretung bis 1914* (München, 1985), 45–46; Wilhelm Eduard Biermann, *Karl Georg Winkelblech (Karl Marlo): Sein Leben und sein Werk*, 2 vols. (Leipzig, 1909), II, 270–71, 455; Jürgen Bergmann, "Das Handwerk in der Revolution von 1848. Zum Zusammenhang von materieller Lage und Revolutionsverhalten der Handwerker 1848/49," in *Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der frühen Industrialisierung vornehmlich im Wirtschaftsraum Berlin/ Brandenburg*, ed. Otto Busch (Berlin, 1971), 340–46.

⁷ Striking workers commonly used the time-honored charivari, complete with the raucous *Katzenmusik* ("cat music") familiar on such occasions, to focus public disapproval upon employers allegedly violating the journeymen's traditional rights. Bakers accused of overpricing or undersizing loaves of bread received similar serenades.

distinct from both liberalism and guild-revivalism—a vision that has been termed "radical democracy." They aspired to a more stable and humane society governed by and in the interests of actual producers, a society whose ordered and regulated economy would safeguard (in the words of labor leader Stephan Born) the "social freedom and independent existence" of each and a just and amicable coexistence among all. These ideas, moreover, reverberated beyond the confines of the organized labor movement, especially in the so-called democratic societies of the 1848 period.⁸ As is well known, conflicts among liberal, corporatist, and radical democratic constituencies helped defeat the revolution of 1848.

II

Between 1840 and 1860, at least a million and a half Germans (most of them from the crisis-ridden Southwest) departed for the United States to escape the social and political ills of their homeland. Some engaged in agriculture in the New World, especially in the Midwest. But, in 1860, about two-thirds of the German-American labor force still made their living in manufacturing and commerce. This number included a small elite of quite wealthy, well-connected, and influential merchants and financiers. Below them lay considerably broader strata of lesser traders, manufacturers, and professionals.⁹ For the great majority of non-farming German families, however, income took the form of wages. Many uprooted peasants sustained themselves through unskilled labor. Across the country,

⁸ Stephan Born, *Erinnerungen eines Achtundvierzigers* (Leipzig, 1898), 144–45. While a clear and comprehensive social profile of the democratic rank-and-file of 1848/49 remains unavailable, fragmentary evidence indicates that handicraft and other workers made up an important part of this movement. See Gustav Lüders, *Die demokratische Bewegung in Berlin im Oktober 1848* (Berlin, 1909), 70–110, 141–56, 160–67; Hermann Josef Rupieper, "Die Sozialstruktur demokratischer Vereine im Königreich Sachsen 1848–1855," *Jahrbuch des Instituts für deutsche Geschichte* 7 (1978):457–68; John L. Snell, *The Democratic Movement in Germany, 1789–1914* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1976), 90–91.

⁹ Lee H. Soltow, *Men and Wealth in the United States, 1850–1870* (New Haven, CT, 1975), 149; Karl Büchele, *Land und Volk der Vereinigten Staaten von Nord-Amerika* (Stuttgart, 1855), 284.

though, German immigrants concentrated in disproportionately large numbers in skilled consumer-goods crafts, especially in those undergoing major changes, such as the growth of wholesale production, stepped-up competition, intensification and division of labor, and declining skill standards.¹⁰ These differences in occupation and wealth helped mark antebellum German America (as Kathleen Conzen has observed) with "sharp internal divisions," divisions that made it "impossible [for it] to unite in defense of any particular ... class interests."¹¹

To be sure, certain practical pressures and cultural affinities tended to draw German Americans together across lines of occupation and social class. The sharing of a language (even one fragmented by dialect) and innumerable points of cultural reference proved a potent source of cohesion, the more so in a new, English-speaking, and, in many ways, culturally alien land. Problems of adjustment, which were exacerbated by unemployment, poverty, and discrimination, tended to reinforce ethnic ties and identities. Joyous reaction to early news of the 1848 revolution also strengthened these bonds of ethnic unity. In one city after another, well-to-do, well-rooted, and well-dressed German-American merchants and professionals cheered alongside down-at-the-heels craftworkers and laborers.

It did not take long, however, for differences within this broad coalition to surface in support of European progress. German-American liberals expressed dismay at the extent and depth of the social conflicts and political polarization that the revolution of 1848 had unleashed.¹² At the height of their enthusiasm for revolution in 1848, German (and German-American) liberals had hoped that their fatherland would henceforth develop along North American

¹⁰ For a summary of relevant data on the place of Germans in the midcentury American working class, see Nora Faires, "Occupational Patterns of German-Americans in Nineteenth Century Cities," in *German Workers in Industrial Chicago, 1850–1910: A Comparative Perspective*, ed. Hartmut Keil and John Jentz (DeKalb, IL, 1983), 37–51.

¹¹ Kathleen Neils Conzen, "Immigrants, Immigrant Neighborhoods, and Ethnic Identity: Historical Issues," *Journal of American History* 66 (1979):613; idem, "Patterns of German-American History," in *Germans in America: Retrospect and Prospect*, ed. Randall M. Miller (Philadelphia, 1984), 22–23.

¹² See, for example, issues of the *New Yorker Staats-Zeitung* for January 19, 1854, and October 28, 1856; *Cincinnati Daily Enquirer*, October 13, 1860. See also Theodore Pösche and Charles Göpp, *The New Rome; or, The United States of the World* (New York, 1853), 100.

lines. In the United States, they believed, property and its accumulation coexisted with the broadest political liberty. "We see accomplished here [in America] what we wish for you." So wrote Gustav Körner (who had immigrated years earlier and, by 1848, was a respected figure in the Illinois Democratic party) to the Frankfurt Assembly in 1848. "Although we enjoy here the utmost liberty," he explained, "and everyone, whether capitalist or wage-worker, exercises the right of voting, property is nowhere better regarded, better protected."¹³

In fact, the comparative political stability and economic prosperity of American society that Körner celebrated encouraged in the antebellum United States a far fuller flowering of liberal bourgeois ideals (particularly among immigrant entrepreneurs and associated professionals) than had yet occurred in the fatherland. As confidence in republican government waxed, so did faith in economic individualism and untrammelled capitalist development. The ranks of such yea-sayers grew swiftly during the 1850s, and forty-eighter Carl Schurz became one of their most prominent spokesmen.¹⁴

Other German immigrants, however, were less enthusiastic about their adoptive land. Having fled to North America in search of economic salvation, large numbers were unprepared for the bleak, hard-driven, and straitened existence that faced many laborers and sweated craft workers here. If most were materially better off in the United States than they had been in Europe, their lives nonetheless proved considerably harder than they had anticipated. Stark contrasts in the New World between privation and great wealth put an edge of bitterness on immigrant disappointment. They also helped convince a substantial number of people that the supposedly "European" evils that they sought to escape had crossed the Atlantic, too. The immigrant shoemaker Peter Rödel told a receptive crowd in New York City in January 1855 that "in our country we have fought for liberty and many of us have lost, in battle, our fathers, brothers, or sons." In America "we are free, but not free enough,"

¹³ Gustav Körner, *The Memoirs of Gustave Koerner, 1809–1896*, ed. Thomas J. McCormack, 2 vols. (Cedar Rapids, IA, 1909), I, 535.

¹⁴ See Carl Schurz, *Speeches, Correspondence, and Political Papers*, ed. Frederic Bancroft, 6 vols. (1913; repr., New York, 1969), I, 5–8.

because here "you don't get bread nor wood," even though "there is plenty of them." "We want," he exclaimed, "the liberty of living." A German-born resident of Pittsburgh declared that in the United States, "the rich and distinguished stand here higher above the law than in any other country," while "the laboring masses are treated in as shameful a manner as in Europe, with all its ancient prejudices."¹⁵

To combat "European" evils, immigrant labor organizations reached for "European" weapons. During the 1840s and 1850s, German-American labor organizations sought to revive not only the spirit but also much of the substance of Europe's emerging radical democratic tradition. They sought alternatives to wage labor in the form of producer and consumer cooperatives. They made demands (such as for collective labor contracts, for payment according to standard wage rates, and for union-shop guarantees) that infringed on employers' presumed right unilaterally to govern their enterprises. When these labor organizations addressed themselves to broader issues, they demanded the defense and extension of popular political rights (seeking, for example, the direct election and recall of all public officials). And they proposed that government take an active role in safeguarding the interests of working people—for instance, by making public lands available cheaply or free of charge to settlers, by legally imposing maximum-hours and minimum-wage standards, and by prohibiting child labor.¹⁶

During the economic crises of 1854/55 and 1857, the locus of such protest shifted from trade unions and strikes to meetings and demonstrations of the unemployed. In New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago, Baltimore, Cincinnati, and elsewhere, workers demanded governmental assistance for needy citizens in the form of food, housing, land, and public employment. Speakers there invoked "the *right* to live not as a mere charity, but as a right" and asserted

¹⁵ The "Pittsburgh" quotation is taken from an article first published in the German-language *Pittsburgh Courier* and then reprinted in John P. Sanderson, *Republican Landmarks: The Views and Opinions of American Statesmen on Foreign Immigration* (Philadelphia, 1856), 223–25; *New York Herald*, January 16, 1855.

¹⁶ These demands were raised in platforms of German-American labor federations and published in *Die Republik der Arbeiter*, October and November, 1850; *Die Reform*, June 1 and 25, July 16, and September 4, 1853; and *Sociale Republik*, April 24, 1858, and January 29, 1859.

that "governments, monarchical or republican, must find work for the people if individual exertions prove not sufficient."¹⁷

Aspects of European guild traditions also echoed in German America. Among certain groups of German craft workers, those traditions reinforced the impulse to protect working and living standards by more strictly demarcating skill levels and otherwise restricting entry into the labor market. Apprenticeship and its terms could raise related issues, as when used to oppose the employment of women.¹⁸ But such exclusionary tendencies did not go unchallenged. Among some, at least, democratic and egalitarian principles required a more inclusive application of equal rights. Another ideological obstacle was the absence in North America of any significant guild tradition to which immigrants could appeal. At the practical level, the inclusion of women had already become a *fait accompli* in a number of the most hard-pressed trades by the 1850s. Many craft-worker households employed on an outwork basis already combined the efforts of female as well as male family members. In such industries, attempts to unite the existing work force against employers had to accommodate this fact. Some German-American labor bodies formed during the 1850s thus included female members and at least paid lip service to ideals of "equal rights for all, regardless of color, religion, nationality, or sex."¹⁹

III

Anglo-American critics responded to German-American labor and other radical reform efforts by declaring the newcomers and their doctrines to be beyond the pale of American tradition. "Theirs is a democracy eminently European," warned nativist author John P Sanderson. "No one can mistake its paternity ... It is not the republicanism of Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Hamilton, Jay, Madison, and their illustrious compeers." Rather it was "the

¹⁷ *New York Herald*, January 9, 1855, November 6, 1857; *Newark Daily Mercury*, November 10, 1857.

¹⁸ *Sociale Republik*, June 19, 1858.

¹⁹ *New York Daily Tribune*, April 9, 1850; *Die Republik der Arbeiter*, May 10, 1851, March 27, April 24, August 28, November 13, 1852; *Die Reform*, June 1 and 25, September 4, 1853; *Sociale Republik*, January 29, 1859.

democracy of the leaders of the revolutionary movements in Europe, whose ultra, wild, and visionary schemes and theories have brought obloquy upon the very name of republicanism in Europe."²⁰

Nor did German-born liberals who celebrated the virtues of American life express much sympathy for their radical-democratic countryfolk. Unlike in despotic Europe, according to the Cincinnati *Volksblatt*, free working people in the United States could have few legitimate complaints. Like all other American citizens, workers would reap the full fruits of their individual efforts. Thus it was, enthused the *Volksblatt*'s editors, that "most millionaires have become so only by first being workers." "Let all men, therefore, rejoice," agreed academician Francis Lieber, "whenever they see that one of their fellow-creatures has succeeded in honestly accumulating a substantial fortune."²¹

When workers rejected such counsel and challenged their employers' dictates with collective action, immigrant entrepreneurs and their political allies bridled. No less offensive to immigrant liberals than trade unions and strikes were calls for active state intervention in the economy to aid wage earners and the poor, even in periods of widespread want and misery. The up-and-coming German-born lawyer and politician Hermann Kreismann admonished jobless immigrant workers in Chicago in 1857 "that our government was not like the European despotisms which they had escaped; that here there was no obligation on the part of the governing power to secure to the laborer food and work, because it leaves him always free to follow what calling or pursuit he may choose."²²

German-American opponents of radical democracy thus joined their native-born counterparts in rejecting the applicability of radical democratic norms and doctrines to American society. Gustav Körner was not surprised, therefore, that "the ignorance, the arrogance, the insolence and charlatanism of these would-be reformers" had stoked the fires of American nativism.²³

²⁰ Sanderson, *Republican Landmarks*, 227.

²¹ *Cincinnati Volksblatt*, November 15, 1851, quoted in the *Cincinnati Hochwächter*, November 26, 1851. Frank Freidel, *Francis Lieber, Nineteenth-Century Liberal* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1947), 194–95.

²² *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 16, 1857.

²³ Körner, *Memoirs*, I, 567.

The "would-be reformers" usually replied that they (and the radical forty-eighter heritage that they celebrated) stood well within American tradition—the tradition, that is, of the American Revolution. They asserted the kinship between 1776 and 1848 in various ways. Some adopted Thomas Paine (whose works had first appeared in German in the 1790s) as a kind of secular patron saint, reveling in his radicalism and celebrating his birthday as a holiday. One after another German-American labor and social-reform society couched its goals in the form and language of the Declaration of Independence. To convey the need for labor solidarity, the *Amerikanischer Arbeiterbund* in 1853 at first employed the motto of Alexandre Dumas's *Three Musketeers*—"All for one, one for all" (*Einer für alle, alle für Einen*). Soon, however, it substituted words with a distinctly more American-revolutionary resonance: "United we stand, divided we fall" (*Vereinigt stehen wir, Vereinzelt fallen wir*).²⁴

In these and other ways, immigrant reformers depicted themselves as champions of a venerable American democratic tradition. What they sought was not the promulgation of new principles but only the realization of principles already propounded, principles that they, at least, interpreted to guarantee not only legal but also socioeconomic rights—first and foremost what shoemaker Peter Rödel called "the liberty of living."

IV

We have thus seen that ideological differences and conflicts born in Europe survived the Atlantic migration; conditions in the New World by no means rendered them automatically irrelevant, obsolete. Indeed, the distinct ways in which different immigrants "adjusted" to life in industrializing America made some sociopolitical ideas of Old World vintage seem quite relevant even in the New World setting.

But, as I have also noted, new and still changing conditions encountered here left their mark as well. Because American society

²⁴ Hermann Kriege, *Die Väter unserer Republik in ihrem Leben und Wirken* (New York, 1847); *Volks-Tribun*, January 10, 1846; *Die Reform*, March 26, July 16, 1853; *Sociale Republik*, April 24, 1858 and January 29, 1859.

was not identical to that of Germany, assumptions and ideals continued to evolve (even when that evolution was not acknowledged by the advocates). Thus, in its antebellum North American setting, German-American liberalism became bolder and more consistent, while guild-inspired corporatism declined in significance.

In the decades following the Civil War, accelerated economic growth and its social consequences further modified these ideological patterns. Mechanization, urbanization, and immigration made rapid strides. For significant numbers of enterprising (and lucky) individuals, the postwar era abounded in personal opportunity. Compendia of notable German Americans and many state and city histories published in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are filled with the names of "successful" immigrant artisans, small shopkeepers, and professionals whose children and grandchildren steadily ascended the ladders of economic, social, and political prominence.

At least some of these people—guided by personal prosperity, evolving philosophies, or both—became convinced that the defense of civil liberty required the most zealous enforcement of property rights and social order. That conviction, in turn, fueled their retreat from consistent political democracy. No one personified this tendency better than former forty-eighter Carl Schurz. By the late 1860s, he had become a champion of a "Liberal Republican" movement that demanded not only a laissez-faire economic policy but also an end to Reconstruction attempts in the post-Civil War South and a government apparatus guided like the economy) by society's "best men" of culture, breeding, and wealth. In 1898, Schurz memorialized his generation of immigrant reformers in a speech marking a half-century since the abortive German revolution. "Surely no one will deny," Schurz presumed, "that these German representatives of the movement of '48 who have sought a new home in America have always been good and conscientious citizens of their new fatherland." "Most of them," he added, "have proved that the revolutionary agitators of 1848 could become reliable and conservative citizens under a free government."²⁵

²⁵ Schurz, *Speeches*, II, 437–38; III, 89–90; IV, 509; V, 470. The Liberal Republican movement of the early 1870s attracted many of the German-born liberals and democrats of the antebellum era. Jörg Nagler, "Deutschamerikaner

More than a few subsequent chroniclers of German-American history followed Schurz's lead; in their hands, German-American history became a sort of ethnic Horatio Alger tale. Their chronicles tended to portray the German immigrants' experience in antebellum America as a mere prelude to the illustrious careers of Schutz and others like him.²⁶

This sanitized version of the German-American experience necessarily left out much of the real story. There was no room in it for complaints, such as those that Christian Kirst expressed in a letter to relatives in Germany in 1881—that "here there are all private mines and factories and if a man has an accident he doesn't get a pension, if you're sick you don't get any sick pay ... [and while] today they hire 50 men tomorrow they fire them." Kirst's reaction to the individual's economic isolation and vulnerability in America elaborated on the dismay expressed by a fellow countryman twenty-five years earlier: "[T]hey don't take care of each other here," Martin Weitz had noted in 1856, "everyone has to look after himself."²⁷

Such conditions and the bitter reaction they elicited stimulated renewed interest in elements of the old guild-corporatist ideology, particularly among certain immigrant Catholic lay and clerical leaders. The German-born shoemaker-turned-priest Adolph Kolping began planting the seeds for this corporatist revival in the mid-nineteenth century. In America, Kolping campaigned to establish immigrant artisan societies imbued with his own conviction that "Natural reason already points towards the corporative order

...

and das Liberal Republican Movement 1872," *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 33 (1988):415–38. For supporting data, see Stanley Nadel, *Little Germany: Ethnicity, Religion, and Class in New York City, 1845–80* (Urbana, IL, and Chicago), 152–53.

²⁶ Albert B. Faust's landmark study, *The German Element in the United States*, 2 vols. (1909, 1927; repr., New York, 1969), thus concluded that the "queer resolutions" endorsed by "socialistic, anarchistic, and humanitarian" groups of early immigrants were, in fact, insignificant and urged readers "not [to] take them too seriously." (The passage appears in vol. 2, 186–87.)

²⁷ These letters have been translated and reprinted in *News from the Land of Freedom: German Immigrants Write Home*, ed. Walter D. Kamphoefner, Wolfgang Helbich, and Ulrike Sommer (Ithaca, NY, and London, 1991), 471–74 and 355–57.

Upon the natural order in society, which is given through the estates, depends the welfare of the social family at large." "Next to religion," urged the *Volkverein für Amerika* in 1905, "the chief task of Christian social politics is the proper restoration of the corporative order of society" on the basis of "its natural classes and estates." The Catholic businessman Frederick P. Kenkel became the dominant figure in the *Deutsch Römisch-Katholischer Central-Verein von Nord-Amerika* during the first half of the twentieth century. He, too, argued for "a social and economic system which avoids the errors of both individualism and collectivism," explaining that "every society should be structured according to *estates*."²⁸

As Philip Gleason has shown, this yearning for a modern form of Christian-corporatist order derived much of its power from the alarm raised by the growth of social and political radicalism among German-American workers. Such immigrant wage earners played prominent roles in the historic upsurges of organized labor during the late nineteenth century.²⁹ Led, in some cases, by veterans of the 1840s and 1850s and reinforced by huge post-war infusions of immigrant industrial workers and farm laborers, such people constituted a bridge between the radical democracy of the antebellum decades and the militant trade-union, anarchist, anarcho-syndicalist, and socialist movements that were spawned by changing conditions and with which many German-American workers identified in later years. Here was the reality behind the lament of

²⁸ Sister M. Irmtrudis Fiederling, O.S.F., *Adolf Kolping and the Kolping Society of the United States* (Chicago, 1941), esp. 58–66; and Philip Gleason, *The Conservative Reformer : German-American Catholics and the Social Order* (Notre Dame, IN, and London, 1968), esp. chaps. 4 and 6 (quotations on 85, 137–38). See also Marc Karson, *American Labor Unions and Politics, 1900–1918* (Boston, 1965), chap. 9. On the German background, see Arnold Brüggemann's Nazi-era study, *Sozialer Katholizismus im 19. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt/M., 1943).

²⁹ Philip S. Foner and Brewster Chamberlin, eds., *Friedrich A. Sorge's "Labor Movement in the United States"* (Westport, CT, 1977), 100, 109–13, 152–53, 198–99; Samuel Bernstein, *The First International in America* (New York, 1965), 65; Paul Avrich, *The Haymarket Tragedy* (Princeton, NJ, 1984); Paul David, *The History of the Haymarket Affair: A Study in the American Social-Revolutionary and Labor Movements* (New York, 1936); Morris Hillquit, *History of Socialism in the United States* (5th ed., 1910; repr., New York, 1971), 197.

William Henry Elder, the Cincinnati Archbishop, that in the United States the German language had become “a vehicle of socialism.”³⁰

The objects of Elder's complaints were German Americans who showed little interest in a refurbished corporatism, while they also rejected Carl Schurz's confident equation of human freedom with the freedom to sell one's labor. As manufacturing and commercial enterprises grew larger and opportunities for self-employment declined, wage labor became a permanent status for unprecedented numbers. In the eyes of many, that status signified a major loss of independence, pride, and enjoyment of the fruits of one's labors and a corresponding subjugation to the will of an (increasingly faceless) employer. It was this distinctive view of liberty and its condition in the New World that the St. Louis worker Ludwig Dilger expressed in 1866 in his letter to relatives in Westphalia: "Freedom, it sounds ridiculous to hear a man speak of freedom, when he is still enslaved by a corporation ..."³¹

³⁰ Gleason, *Conservative Reformers*, 71. See Carol J. Poore, *German-American Socialist Literature, 1865–1900* (Bern, 1982), 36–62; Hartmut Keil, "German Working-Class Radicalism in the United States from the 1870s to World War I," in *Struggle A Hard Battle: Essays on Working-Class Immigrants*, ed. Dirk Hoerder (DeKalb, IL, 1986), 71–94.

³¹ *News from the Land of Freedom*, ed. Kamphoefner et al., 493–94.

Continuity and Change in the Transfer of Ideologies

Hartmut Keil

WHILE BRUCE LEVINE HAS FOCUSED his insightful lecture on the liberal democratic tradition that emanated from the revolution of 1848/49 and its impact on immigrants from Germany to the United States, I would like to turn my attention to some supplementary issues.

The major ideological meeting ground between European Enlightenment thought and American republicanism was indeed the United States, once mass emigration, including emigration from Germany to the United States, took its course. However, this transfer of ideas was not a one-way street. In the last quarter of the eighteenth century, Europeans paid close attention to the War of Independence and especially to the American constitutional debate a decade later. The post-Napoleonic, repressive climate within the German kingdoms and principalities led liberal reformers to idolize the American Constitution in their frantic search for examples to guide them in the fulfillment of their own dreams of a democratic society. Political repression only succeeded in submerging, but not in extinguishing, the memory of the Enlightenment and republican traditions. In the *Vormärz* period, it was kept alive by young radicals who, during the insurrectionary Hambach festival of 1832, demanded a free united states of Germany—an obvious reference to the United States of America, even before radical mass meetings during the revolution of 1848/49 symbolically flew the Stars and Stripes alongside the Tricolor and the revolutionary red flag.

Even more important, this liberal undercurrent was by no means confined to intellectual circles. Although they did not frame the issue of freedom in theoretical or constitutional terms, common people also wondered about their prospects for making a living. They increasingly compared their own condition with the enthusiastic accounts of cheaply available land, unrestricted economic opportunities, and social and political equality that family members and friends who had emigrated to the United States gave in a flow of

letters back home. Thus, the American example served as a constant reminder of political as well as economic liberal goals. Both the popular and the intellectual traditions eventually surfaced and combined in the revolution of 1848/49.

As a result, enlightened European liberals and large numbers of artisans and workers who supported the revolution first encountered a mediated form of American republicanism even before they emigrated. America's image in the minds of the European radicals became a reflection of aspirations they sought to realize on the old continent. It mattered little to the radicals that this ideal image did not reflect the realities of American life but rather the theories of constitutional government and a democratic social order that they wished to see established in their home countries. It is no wonder, therefore, that "America" could mean so many different things—a fact that had important repercussions on the German immigrants' perceptions of the American political system and American institutions when they finally encountered them in their practical manifestations.

The meeting of liberal and radical thought with the realities of American life as a result of mass migration to the United States in the 1850s led to revisions and adaptations of previously acquired conceptions and expectations. Strategies for coping with the new environment initially differed substantially. Some immigrants, including the most radical proponents of social change, such as Wilhelm Weitling, saw in America an opportunity to withdraw from society altogether and used the country as proving ground for alternative communities. Others used the American social order as a haven from persecution and were only waiting for a propitious moment to return to their former place of political combat. Most emigrants, however, tried to take advantage of the personal and political freedom to actively pursue their own goals, since their aspirations had been stifled in Europe. It was the latter group of emigrants, in particular, that was confronted immediately with the inconsistencies and unfulfilled promises of American life.

I would argue that slavery and abolition were the crucial issues that forced German immigrants to engage in the political process, which, in turn, led to their integration into American society and their genuine acceptance as citizens of the republic. The substantial and rapidly expanding German-language press offered intellectuals a medium to voice their concerns about American society's obvious

shortcomings. It was the Republican ideology of free land and free labor, however, that appealed more directly to the majority of immigrant artisans and workers, since it promised them a just return for their labors. The ultimate reconciliation of the European radical tradition with the American republican tradition was forged when German liberal and radical intellectuals, as well as a large part of the German immigrant working class, realized that only by actively helping to defend the Union in the Civil War could they hope to preserve the freedoms that they had cherished for such a long time.

Finally, the transfer of ideas and their encounter with American republican values was not confined to the mid-nineteenth century and the groups to which I have already referred. It is essential to mention in this context the characteristic patterns of both change and continuity. German immigration was halted temporarily by the Civil War, picked up again in the post-war years, and did not come to an end until the onset of the depression of the 1890s. Of all the Germans settling in the United States during the nineteenth century, fully two-thirds came in the twenty-five year period after the Civil War. These new arrivals had often been influenced by the emerging German labor movement. Both the Social Democratic party and the trade unions played a role, building upon institutional and ideological traditions of the 1848/49 revolution. Whereas the Social Democrats consistently defended the liberal claims of personal liberty and popular franchise, the unions depended heavily on outmoded guild traditions in their initial efforts to organize skilled workers. But each went beyond typically liberal goals, demanding social and industrial reforms that prefigured the modern welfare state or calling for new political and social structures as the first step toward a socialist society.

Such currents also led to a debate within the German-American immigrant community about the proper heirs of the 1848 tradition. Socialists derided the radicalism of the forty-eighters as an obsolete relic in a rapidly industrializing society, laying claim to the revolutionary tradition themselves. It is evident in this debate that generational and ideological change overlapped. Representatives of the new generation still positioned themselves within both the American republican and the European Jacobin traditions but insisted that new strategies were needed in order to preserve them. In their view, a just and egalitarian state had to contend with, and contain, the threat of a plutocratic ruling class.

Thus, these substantial ideological shifts and the new meanings attached to freedom in the second half of the nineteenth century were clearly adapted to a changing social order. At the same time, they also remained couched in traditional liberal terminology and the accepted republican frame of reference.