

Jürgen Kocka

Social History as Commitment. On the Occasion of Klaus Tenfelde's 75th Birthday¹

ABSTRACT

This is the translation of a laudation to Klaus Tenfelde that was presented by Jürgen Kocka at the Institute for Social Movements of Ruhr University Bochum on 20 November 2019, on the occasion of the annual celebration of the foundation of the Society for the History of the Ruhr.

Keywords: *Klaus Tenfelde; life and works; Social History; House for the History of the Ruhr*

1.

Hans Rosenberg, who can be considered one of the founding fathers of German Social History, wrote in 1969 that “the so-called Social History, for many, [has become] a nebulous collective name for everything that [is] considered desirable and progressive in History in the Federal Republic”.² That was ironic, but not without sympathy. Two years later, in 1971, British Historian Eric Hobsbawm, who was later to receive the Bochum Historian's Award, described how Social History flourished internationally and added: “it is a good moment to be a social historian”.³ Another piece of evidence: In the mid-1970s, there were seven professorships for Social History in England, all new, established after 1967.

- 1 Translated from German into English and slightly modified for publication by Vivian Strotmann (Institute for Social Movements and University Library Bochum). A slightly different German version of this talk will be published in *Geschichtskultur Ruhr*.
- 2 All quotes translated freely from the German text, unless originally in English. German original in Hans Rosenberg: *Probleme der deutschen Sozialgeschichte*, Frankfurt 1969, p. 147.
- 3 Eric J. Hobsbawm: *From Social History to the History of Society*, in: *Daedalus* 100:1 (1971), pp. 20–45, p. 43, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20023989> (accessed on 28 January 2020).

It was in the late 60s and early 70s that a rapid ascend of Social History took place—a sub-discipline or current of History that often presented itself as critical of tradition, frequently also as a science of opposition critical of society, claiming to change Historical Studies as a whole and to contribute to society's critical enlightenment, exerting a magical attraction over those who were younger at the time, like Cultural History did two decades later and today possibly Transnational Global History is doing.

At the same time, the late 60s and early 70s, Klaus Tenfelde read at university. Mainly History, mainly in Münster, mainly with Gerhard A. Ritter, meaning with one of the two most important teachers of an entire cohort of soon very active male and female social historians. The student and Ph.D. candidate Klaus Tenfelde was shaped by this formative phase in Social History—and by Gerhard A. Ritter (like myself).

Workers' History was a kind of leading sector in Social History. It was about connecting workers' history and the history of workers' movements. There were attempts at connecting the history of unions' and workers' parties' programmes and organisations with workers' life stories—with the history of their world of work, their households, their hikes and leisure activities, their societies and protests; and we attempted to embed all this in the context of societal history, under consideration of class relations between workforce, business and government. Through his voluminous dissertation on *Sozialgeschichte der Bergarbeiterschaft an der Ruhr im 19. Jahrhundert*, Klaus Tenfelde became one of the leading representatives of this current. The book (published in 1977)⁴ has become a standard reference, a classic. And Social History became the historian Klaus Tenfelde's pillar, which he retained for the rest of his life, despite many challenges and changes in the coming decades.

In the following decades, Social History saw a phase of pronounced extension. At the same time, it became the subject of increasingly harsh criticism by competing approaches and methods.

Klaus Tenfelde went along with the process of thematic expansion, he was curious and energetic enough to repeatedly familiarise himself with new fields of research. His habilitation thesis—1981 in Munich—again treated miners and their solidarity, the miners' town Penzberg in Upper Bavaria, where the Tenfeldes also lived by the time. However, now it was about the period of National Socialism, about this city that was suspiciously watched by the Gestapo as a 'red isle'⁵ and about its role between adaptation, self-assertion and resistance 1933 to 1945, with the previous history since 1900.

4 Klaus Tenfelde: *Sozialgeschichte der Bergarbeiterschaft an der Ruhr im 19. Jahrhundert* (Schriftenreihe des Forschungsinstituts der Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung 125), Bonn-Bad Godesberg 1977.

5 Klaus Tenfelde: *Proletarische Provinz: Radikalisierung und Widerstand in Penzberg/Oberbayern 1900–1945*, Munich 1982.

Over the decades, Klaus Tenfelde developed topics from his dissertation and habilitation further. He wrote about workers' families and gender relationships, about class-specific patterns of consumption, about religion and religiosity of workers, about rural servants in Prussia. Together with Gerhard A. Ritter he presented the synthesis *Arbeiter im Kaiserreich 1871 bis 1914* in 1992⁶, an admirably comprehensive general survey. Klaus Tenfelde also, time and again, reached beyond German history, for example in edited volumes on topics such as 'mining in international comparison' or 'forced labour and forced labourers in the 20th century'. And he accessed new topics, which transcended workers' history: regarding the history of associations, the history of youths and of generation relations, historical demography, history of the city and of urbanisation, as well as—especially important—regarding the history of the bourgeoisie in the 20th century. He also wrote political history, for example about Bismarck. Visual sources had already fascinated him in his very learned oral habilitation presentation that reached back to the middle ages and that was published under the title of *Adventus. Zur historischen Ikonologie des Festzugs*.⁷ Again and again, he returned to the visual dimension of history, for example in his *Bildergeschichte der deutschen Bergarbeiterbewegung* (with Wolfgang Jäger) and the book *Bilder von Krupp. Fotografie und Geschichte im Industriezeitalter*, which was also translated into English.⁸

When, shortly before his death, the editors of *Kritische Studien zur Geschichtswissenschaft* invited him to publish his most important essays in this series, he made a selection that indicated the by now impressive breadth of his interests and topics. Besides three essays on the topic of workers' history, it contained four pieces regarding the subject area 'city—association—bourgeoisie' and two concerning the issue of 'milieu, generation and politics'. The introduction to the volume was to be titled *Social History as History of Socialisation* and meant to move the essays prepared for reprinting into a new context which reflected the problem awareness that Klaus had achieved by now. The wording shows how central the position was that biography and generational change had won in his understanding of Social History. Klaus Tenfelde did not have time left to write this introduction. The book was published posthumously under the title *Arbeiter, Bürger, Städte. Zur Sozialgeschichte des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts*.⁹

- 6 Gerhard A. Ritter/Klaus Tenfelde: *Arbeiter im Deutschen Kaiserreich 1871 bis 1914* (Geschichte der Arbeiter und der Arbeiterbewegung in Deutschland seit dem Ende des 18. Jahrhunderts 5), Bonn 1992.
- 7 Klaus Tenfelde: *Adventus. Zur historischen Ikonologie des Festzugs*, in: *Historische Zeitschrift* 235:1 (1982), pp. 45–84.
- 8 Klaus Tenfelde (ed.): *Pictures of Krupp: Photography and History in the Industrial Age* (Foreword by Berthold Beitz/Transl. by Judith Hayward), London 2005.
- 9 Klaus Tenfelde: *Arbeiter, Bürger, Städte. Zur Sozialgeschichte des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts* (Kritische Studien zur Geschichtswissenschaft 203), Göttingen 2012.

Regarding methodology, Klaus Tenfelde also combined reliability with extension. It is well-known that Social History has, since the late 70s, often been criticised for being too centred on *Strukturgeschichte*. It supposedly was too interested in conditions and collectives, too little in experiences and individuals. It supposedly was too strongly socio-economically oriented, and had too little openness towards culture. The criticism came from the *Alltags*-historians of the 80s, later from different currents in Cultural History, finally also from a post-modern perspective. Klaus Tenfelde never advocated a narrow version of Social History or Social and Economic History. Rather, in his research, he took into consideration a broad range of dimensions of the life world, of culture and of mentalities. But he kept his distance from a culturalistic narrowing of History; socio-economic interests, social inequality and conflicts, institutions and structural connections were too important to him for that. He could be a narrator, but he also was capable of and intent on analysing, with clearly defined terms. He had his difficulties, he once confessed, with *Alltagsgeschichte*.

“Classic Social History in productive evolution”—that is how the editors of *Kritische Studien* characterised Tenfelde’s approach when, in 2012, they published those of his essays which he considered his most important ones in retrospect. Klaus Tenfelde was an important advocate, a master, a reliable pillar of Social History in Germany—with great impact on the discipline, on young researchers and upon us, his colleagues and friends. He was the most important historian of the German workers and the workers’ movement in the generation following such pioneers as Werner Conze and Gerhard A. Ritter.

2.

But what was special about the scholar and contemporary Klaus Tenfelde, what made him unique and set him apart in an incomparable manner, has only been addressed by me in passing until now. I would like to summarize it in three points to conclude:

First:

Again and again, with important historians, one can find a close connection between life experience and professional career. Fernand Braudel was a grammar school teacher in Algiers, got to know and grew to love the Mediterranean Sea from its southern shores, before he wrote his big book on the Mediterranean.¹⁰ The family Stern was from the German-Jewish milieu of Breslau. They fled to New York from National Socialism. Here, the son, Fritz, became a historian and worked as a historian, however

10 Fernand Braudel: *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l’époque de Philippe II*, Paris 1949.

time and again with closest ties to Germany, looking at German contemporary history from this trans-Atlantic symbiosis. In a certain way, his biography as an émigré scholar substantiated his partly critical, partly consenting perspective on German history.

Klaus Tenfelde came from very humble origins. He left the *Volksschule* at the age of 14 and was trained as a miner, he knew the hard toil in the pit from experience, it shaped him. But he wanted and he achieved more: He passed his A-levels in 1967 at the Braunschweig-Kolleg—supplementary education!—he read at university, married Ellen, who had obtained an academic degree and was a progressive doctor, and he made it to a well-known professor, accepted in the regional upper-class milieu. He was the classic social climber. His origins were markedly distant from the world of university, which he reached nonetheless, and both serves to explain a number of things about his professional and personal path in life: his interest in the history of mining, of workers and of ordinary people, likely his lasting commitment to Social History. It is fitting here to refer to what the already-cited Eric Hobsbawm, an unorthodox Marxist, wrote about the worldview of Social History—or more precisely: of some Social Historians' worldviews. He emphasized their pronounced interest in ordinary people,

for the benefit of the ordinary run of people, who are not particularly clever or interesting [...], not highly educated, not successful or destined for success—in fact, are nothing very special. It is for the people, who [...] have entered history outside their neighbourhoods as individuals only in the records of their births, marriages and deaths. Any society worth living is one designed for them, not for the rich, the clever, the exceptional [...].¹¹

In his memory and his loyalties, Klaus remained faithful to his world of origin. He was a Social Democrat. But he also reported why he had striven to escape this world of hard, chafing graft and to gain bits of an upper middle class life for himself—which he succeeded at with an effort. He was convinced that many workers and their families, also during the 19th century, had continuously yearned for middle class safety in their lives. Also, in the working class as a collective, he wrote “middle class ideals were deeply innate from its very beginnings as in the urban artisan workforce, the petty bourgeoisie and among civil servants”.¹² Dieter Langewiesche has presented this in detail in a very respectful obituary of the friend. He writes: “His own experiences in life would have contributed to this socio-political avowal, on which Klaus Tenfelde's historical research agenda is founded.”¹³ Much of Klaus Tenfelde's thinking, striving, and

11 Eric Hobsbawm: *On History*, London 1997, p. 12.

12 German original text in Gerhard A. Ritter/Klaus Tenfelde: *Arbeiter im Deutschen Kaiserreich*, p. 838.

13 German original text in Dieter Langewiesche: *Nachruf auf Klaus Tenfelde* (29. März 1944–1. Juli 2011), in: *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 37:4 (2011), pp. 649–656, p. 653.

habitus probably is explained this way, among other things his serious and determined purposefulness, his sturdy matter-of-factliness, his preparedness to lead a strenuous life, his sense of measure and of discipline.

Second:

The second characteristic and strength in Tenfelde, which I particularly would like to emphasize in this institution, is connected to this. He was not only a teacher and researcher, and least of all in the ivory tower. He wanted and achieved more. He became an organiser of science, a builder of institutions, a *Großordinarius*—here in Bochum since 1995. He took over the Institute for the History of the Workers' Movement that had been developed by Hans Mommsen out of a previously acquired social historical library in 1979 and had been directed by Helga Grebing in the 80s and early 90s. He transformed it into an 'Institute for Social Movements', merged different libraries into a 'Library of the Ruhr' and had the research institute, the library and the archive with its collections accommodated in this 'House for the History of the Ruhr' in 1999. A house that became a place of contact between research and local, regional public—under mixed sponsorship, in which the university, unions, employers and political institutions collaborated and collaborate. Klaus Tenfelde built himself this realm. He found out how this is done, many of you know this better than I do.¹⁴ Tenfelde created an institutional structure that survived him and is flourishing—and is also increasing the reputation of the Ruhr University and the city of Bochum.

Third:

And this brings me to the third distinctive feature that characterises Tenfelde's life and work: He was born on 29th March 1944 in Erkelenz, in the lignite district on the northern shore of the Bay of Cologne. He was trained as a miner at a mine in Essen. His ground-breaking dissertation and numerous other studies were written on mining in the Ruhr area and its workers. True, following graduation and habilitation, he worked in many different places: as a professor of economic and social history in Innsbruck, as professor of history with special consideration for social history in Bielefeld and intermittently as guest at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, at Cape Town University and at the European University Institute in Florence.

But being appointed to the chair of Social History of Ruhr University Bochum was something special for him, it brought him back and at the same time let him reach his goal. His teaching and research, his institutional work and many of his publications had strong references to the Ruhr area. He was active in regional politics, he worked for a historically founded identity of the urban landscape of the Ruhr. He was

14 Jürgen Mittag: *Brückenschläge—Stiftung Bibliothek des Ruhrgebiets und Institut für Soziale Bewegungen* (Stiftung Bibliothek des Ruhrgebiets), Essen 2008.

among the founding members and served as speaker of the 'Bürgerschaftliche Initiative Ruhr-Stadt'. It was not without reason that newspaper articles celebrated him as a professor "from the pit"¹⁵ or spoke of Klaus Tenfelde's "final shift"¹⁶, when he retired in May 2011.

He still had many plans, chief among them a history of the Ruhr area, when he died only a few months later, on 1st July 2011, aged only 67, much too soon. In this Institute, at Bochum's University, in the Ruhr area, in German-language Social History, he left deep traces. Through his influences, he lives on.

Jürgen Kocka is among the most influential contemporary German Social Historians. His research focuses on the history of capitalism with special attention given to processes of trade and industrialisation and their transformative influence on living and working conditions. Further interests include German and European modern history, history of labour and the bourgeoisie as well as the social history of the German Democratic Republic, besides other subjects of inquiry. Following several high-ranking positions in research, numerous publications and a number of awards and honours, Jürgen Kocka retired from a professorship at the Free University of Berlin and from the presidency of the Social Science Center Berlin (WZB) in 2007/2009. Since then, he has held the positions of Permanent Fellow at the Research College 'Work and Life-course in Global Historical Perspectives' (Humboldt University Berlin) and of Senior Fellow at the Leibniz Centre for Contemporary History in Potsdam.

- 15 Tom Thelen: Der Professor aus dem Pütt geht in den Ruhestand, in: WAZ (published on 25 May 2011), <https://www.waz.de/staedte/bochum/der-professor-aus-dem-puett-geht-in-den-ruhestand-id4691030.html> (accessed on 28 January 2020).
- 16 Stefan Laurin: Klaus Tenfeldes letzte Schicht, in: Ruhrbarone. Journalisten bloggen das Revier (published on 18 May 2011), <https://www.ruhrbarone.de/klaus-tenfeldes-letzte-schicht/27308> (accessed on 28 January 2020).