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Thomas Welskopp (1961–2021): From Social History to the Cultural History of Society

The voice of one of Germany's leading social historians fell silent on 19 August 2021. Thomas Welskopp was a giant among his peers in more ways than one. When he was born in the heart of the industrial Ruhr region of Germany, in the mining and steel town of Bochum in 1961, no one would have predicted a brilliant career as a professor of history. He was born into the German working class and remained conscious of his roots throughout his all-too-short life. He came back regularly to Bochum to visit his elderly mother, to cheer on his beloved VfL Bochum in the stadium on Castropfer Strasse and to eat a Currywurst (or two)—the popular local delicacy in this archetypal working-class town.

Today, Bochum is no longer a city of mines and steelworks, but while Thomas was growing up, he could still see the orange glow of the sky at night and hear the hammering of the steelworks and the sirens of the mines. Yet he was also born into the massive deindustrialization that affected his city and the Ruhr region as a whole and that the Germans like to call *Strukturwandel* (structural change), emphasizing the possibility of steering the process of deindustrialization in a way that would open up new possibilities for future development. In Bochum it was, above all, the Ruhr University that was founded as the very first university in the region in 1965 which came to represent one of the biggest success stories of this structural change. Yet, when Thomas came to choose a university to study history in 1982, his choice was not Bochum, but the equally young University of Bielefeld that was, at the time, the home of the so-called Bielefeld School of History, represented by Hans-Ulrich Wehler and Jürgen Kocka, among others. In the early 1980s, many young history students with left-of-centre political leanings veered towards Bielefeld as the type of social history practiced there seemed like a breath of fresh air in the stuffy and still largely conservative atmosphere of German history seminars, in which professors wore ties and had assistants that carried their bags. More to the point, source criticism seemed the ultimate in the theory of history in a profession still broadly stuck in the world of historicism. Thomas was influenced intellectually by the Bielefeld School and its type of political social history, but he was also deeply impressed with his experiences as an exchange student at John Hopkins University in Baltimore, where Ronald Walters and his studies on social movements, especially American abolitionism, left a lasting impression and sparked a life-long interest in American history.

When he came to choose a dissertation topic, he turned to comparative working-class history and decided to study the history of work and power relationships surrounding work in German and American steelworks. *Arbeit und Macht im Hüttenwerk* was a history of the specific industrial relations regimes that emerged in the American and German steel industries and that he related back to an understanding of class in both countries that could not have been more different. Focusing on the Ruhr region of Germany and the areas around Pittsburgh and Chicago, he identified similar work processes. Thus, the team system, dominant between the 1860s and the 1880s, gave way to the drive system in 1890s and 1900s, and finally to the crew system around 1910. What Thomas showed so brilliantly for each case and for each system was that it was, above all, the mode of production that determined how workers related to each other and to their superiors at work. The success or failure of worker attempts to organize had much to do with those relationships. The book was exemplary in its detailed analysis of the impact of ethnic differences in the work force, and its excellent interpretation of different managerial ideologies on both sides of the Atlantic. At its very heart stood work cultures, and it was already here that Thomas widened the perspective of the social to include cultural processes and expressions in his understanding of the social. In many pathbreaking articles and edited collections over subsequent years, he outlined what was one of the key messages of the book: the revival of labour history, which had entered a crisis in the 1980s, was possible through a focus on the company and the company-level relationships that workers forged at work. The complexity of workplace identities was foregrounded time and again in Thomas's analyses. He thus had little time for simplistic sociological analyses, like those of Harry Braverman, who had famously argued that it was the deskilling of labour which robbed workers of the means to resist management strategies. Thomas's comparative analysis of work relations in the American and German steel industry showed that other factors were at play that were far more important in determining the degree to which workers could oppose management effectively: first, the networks of solidarities forged by workers and their organizations, and secondly, the hierarchies involved in work processes that were based on specific power relationships among different groups of workers.

His dissertation, which was completed at the Free University of Berlin, where Thomas had moved together with his supervisor and mentor, Jürgen Kocka, made him an immediate household name and rising star in Germany's social history circles. In Berlin, he also wrote his Habilitation on German labour history—with another brilliant book on the history of early German Social Democracy from the 1840s to the 1860s. It was a courageous choice, as German labour history as party history seemed almost a dead field of studies at the time. During its heyday in the 1960s and 1970s, it was a subject that had been discovered by a generation of left-of-centre historians who pointed out that the history of left-wing parties and social movements had been kept before the gates of German academia for a long time because of the latter's conservative predilections. The championing of this field of historical writing went hand in

hand with the political hope that a radicalized contemporary labour movement would bring major changes to German society. When this hope began to fade towards the end of the 1970s, the field moved into crisis mode, with many of its doyens reflecting on how it might find ways out of its loss of future horizons.

The comparative method was one such proposed way, and Thomas had already championed it with his first book. A second promising path out was the turn towards cultural history that had swept everything before it in the Anglophone world during the 1980s and arrived in Germany with some delay in the 1990s. The cultural turn in historical writing was not greeted enthusiastically by the representatives of the Bielefeld School. Especially Wehler was extremely sceptical about an emphasis on culture and theoretical perspectives that were no longer inspired by Max Weber and Karl Marx but looked rather to French poststructuralism, in particular Michel Foucault. Thomas's mentor, Jürgen Kocka, was always more open and flexible in his approach to historical writing, willing to enter into dialogue with historians that did not share his theoretical and methodological penchants. It was still a sign of Thomas's self-confidence and personality that he gave his own study of early Social Democracy a decidedly cultural bent, thereby also seeking to further develop the approaches championed by his teachers at Bielefeld and Berlin.

Although Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens would always be more important to his work as a historian than Foucault, Thomas's book was another landmark publication, in which he not only comprehensively covered the history of the early German labour movement for the first time, but also established this history as being largely autonomous from the later history of the Social Democratic Party that emerged fully after the Anti-Socialist Laws in the 1890s. Skillfully combining individual and collective biography, he highlighted the importance of the interconnectedness of the leadership circle of this early form of a party organization. He brought to life the associational culture of early Social Democracy and analyzed its ideology. The close proximity between everyday life and the associational milieu of Social Democracy is described in ways which underline how this milieu became even more important than family ties and workplace relations—at least to what Thomas described as the “carrier milieu” of early Social Democracy. Thomas also identifies an “associated milieu” and a “contact milieu” with declining forms of identification with the party's associational culture. He differentiates between the strongest and most active associations usually to be found in the urban centres and weaker forms of associationalism which sometimes needed constant resourcing from the hegemonic centres in order to stay active.

He shows how journeymen became the most numerous group of workers, next to artisans and small trades people, among early Social Democrats which helps to understand the party's anti-guild stance. Early Social Democracy, Thomas shows, formed archipelagos amidst conservative, liberal, or clerical seas. Describing it as a “decentralized associational party,” he emphasizes the importance of its leisure-time activities as giving the party members a social world of their own which was fundamental to

their identity. He also shows convincingly how the party especially thrived in localities where workers had failed to form trade unions, indicating that in fact the early formation of a political party in Germany was due to failed attempts at trade unionization. Many early Social Democrats perceived themselves, above all, as democrats in search for greater social justice but also in search of a unified German nation state. These commitments formed a bridge to bourgeois democratic politicians and, as Thomas could show, there was as yet a great willingness to cooperate with bourgeois political representatives. The early party associations were thus not so much representing a proletarian counterculture as a variant of liberal bourgeois cultural norms and values. Most early Social Democrats were male, and their associational culture often had an extreme male bias. Altogether, they aimed at the formation of a democratic male civil society. Even in their political language, early Social Democrats tended to exclude women from their “community.” Even though Thomas’s second great book focused overwhelmingly on Germany, he could not quite let go of comparative history. In a wonderfully illuminating epilogue to his book, he compared early German Social Democracy with labour movements in a range of other countries in Europe and North America pleading to establish more subtle differences between them (which he saw rooted mainly in the different political systems in which early labour movements operated) but treating them as one and the same type of movement.

Although he had lost his heart to Munich after a stay at the Historisches Kolleg in 2008/9, he was to stay after 2004 as professor for the history of the industrial world at the University of Bielefeld—thus returning to the place where he spent his first formative university years. By 1997, he co-edited, together with Thomas Mergel, a collection of essays entitled *Geschichte zwischen Kultur und Gesellschaft* (history between culture and society) attempting to historicize the Bielefeld School and to move a modern cultural history of society forward. The first generation of the Bielefeld School were guided by the theories of Max Weber and Karl Marx. The next generation to which Thomas belonged, were deeply familiar with those two giants, but they looked also elsewhere for inspiration. Looking at the different contributions to this edited collection we thus encounter Foucault, Bourdieu, Giddens, Niklas Luhmann, Benedict Anderson, Antonio Gramsci, and a whole range of gender theorists, modernization theorists and theorists of social anthropology as well as communitarianism that have all been influential among this second generation of social historians in Germany. Thomas, in his own contribution to this influential collection, sought to develop the social history of his academic “fathers” further. He was never an iconoclast. His collection of classic texts of the Bielefeld School published together with Bettina Hitzer under the title *Die Bielefelder Sozialgeschichte* (Bielefeld social history), was a tribute to the generation of his teachers that was full of admiration for their achievements but also contained critical perspectives—in line with Max Weber’s famous statement that it was the fate of all scientific endeavour to be overtaken by the next generation of scientists.

For seventeen years Thomas pushed the boundaries of social history at Bielefeld University, always alert to new theoretical developments, always convinced of the “veto rights of the empirical sources” (Reinhart Koselleck). The Bielefeld graduate school in history and sociology, producing another generation of social historians in Germany, became his particular baby. Founded in 2008, its hallmark became the interdisciplinary cooperation especially with sociologists, but also representatives from a range of other disciplines who all became involved in the structured training of PhD students. This hugely productive and influential graduate school benefited enormously from Thomas’s engagement with students among whom he was incredibly popular because he always remained approachable and avoided any form of condescension. His good humour, his wit and his brilliance as a teacher accompanied the Bielefeld graduate school to the end.

At Bielefeld he developed a third important research field, the history of the prohibition in the United States of America. Published under the title *Amerikas große Ernüchterung. Eine Kulturgeschichte der Prohibition* (America’s great disenchantment—a cultural history of the Prohibition), Thomas here practiced a cultural history of society and followed his own theoretical predilections, guided—like in his other two research monographs—by a stupendous knowledge of the sources. He discusses very different facets of the era: legal, economic, political, social, cultural, and gender perspectives were all employed and merge into a rounded kaleidoscope on the years between 1920 and 1932. His book contains many memorable anecdotes and stories that make the book not only insightful, but a pleasure to read. Thus, we learn much about how the illegal drinking dens of the prohibition era overcame the rigid gender division that characterized the male-dominated saloon culture before the 1920s. The “flapper girls,” devoted to illegal drinking, became an iconic image of these years just as much as the gangster cultures that are also given considerable space in this volume. The powerful Anti-Saloon League was in a key alliance, especially in the southern states, with the Ku-Klux-Klan and together they portrayed saloons as dangerous places, where unwanted immigrants and those they deemed as not belonging to America, such as Jews, Blacks and Communists, were planning the downfall of the “city on the hill.” Racist ideologies were closely aligned to the successful banning of alcoholic beverages. The book is acutely alert to a range of idiosyncrasies such as the support of both the Anti-Saloon League and the Klan for the enfranchisement of women, as both were convinced that they would gain new supporters by such a move. The book describes also in detail the massive police violence with which the prohibition was pushed through in different parts of the US. Thomas showed that the banning of alcoholic beverages was overwhelmingly a campaign that drew support from rural and small-town America that dominated the political landscape as the massive urbanization of America and the formation of the big metropolises had not yet led to the redrawing of political constituencies.

Thomas not only produced three pathbreaking monographs but was also the master of the academic article. He had an essayistic talent—something he had undoubtedly learnt from the United States—a country which he loved to visit. In particular the University of Notre Dame in Indiana became a place to which he returned time and again and where he felt at home. In the 2010s, he turned to practice theory with an ever-greater vengeance and sought to shed light on the history of capitalism, on class relationships and on factory life, themes that he had pursued since his PhD days. Some of this work was collected in the book *Unternehmen Praxisgeschichte* (Operation practice history) published in 2014. The factory, in particular, became the locus classicus for some of his most pertinent historical analyses that included attention to the many criminal activities of employers in their attempts to out-manoeuvre the competition under capitalism. In a volume co-edited by Hartmut Berghoff and Cornelia Rauh, Thomas pleaded to differentiate between crimes committed for economic profit and corruption and he also clearly saw that economic crimes rarely questioned the economic order as such. Thomas was also an outstanding business historian that can be seen, among other studies, in his work on the Swiss Migros company or in his attention to the micropolitics of businesses at the shop floor. It was no coincidence that Thomas was an active member of the Association of Critical Business and Industrial History (Arbeitskreis für kritische Unternehmens- und Industriegeschichte), founded in his hometown in 1989. In his final years, he became particularly interested in the boundaries between free and unfree labour, questioning the significance of free wage labour for a history of capitalism.

Politically, Thomas was a man of the left. For a time, he served as a member of the SPD's Historical Commission, but he became disillusioned with the latter's lack of political influence and its inability to make itself heard in public debates in Germany. His heart belonged to scholarship (Wissenschaft), and he loved to research, teach, and build institutions that would further the cultural history of society. In this spirit, he also became a founding member of the German Labour History Association (GLHA) that emerged in 2017. As a member of the association's executive he was instrumental in shaping the first conference of the GLHA around the issue of free wage labour. As founding president of the GLHA, I could always rely on his wise advice and loyal support. His contribution to the revival of German labour history over recent years has been immense.

Thomas's writings in social and labour history betrayed a keen interest in and deep knowledge of the theory of history and the history of historiography which eventually was also to bring us together as co-chairs of the theory and historiography network at the European Social Science History Conference (ESSHC), where he was my colleague for many years. Whilst he was widely read in poststructuralist and narrativist theories, he rejected the relativism that sometimes goes hand in hand with the adoption of such theoretical viewpoints among historians. He was adamant that the historian's task remained one of saying something about historical realities that had

to be pieced together by a profound knowledge of the historical sources, both textual and non-textual. His insistence that there was something he was not afraid to call historical reality made him turn to Anthony Giddens's theory of structuration. Both agency and structure had to be depicted in their concrete social contexts, he would not tire to argue. Conceptually he was particularly interested in theories of capitalism and theories of consumption around which many of his articles and contributions to labour and social history circled.

Thomas was an exceptional scholar, but, above all, he was a real *Mensch*. Our friendship dates back to the days when I was still Professor of Contemporary History in South Wales in the early 2000s. He stayed with my family for a couple of days after attending a conference I had organized. We visited the industrial heritage of South Wales together and sampled the local ales. My older daughter, extremely shy as a child, immediately and instinctively trusted Thomas, who found a way into her heart as he found his way into so many of others. He listened and he was able to relate to others—both qualities not very common in high-flying scholars. Many of his PhD and Master's students can testify to his outstanding abilities as supervisor which sometimes went far beyond scholarly advice. He certainly always was a good friend to me. I shall miss him.