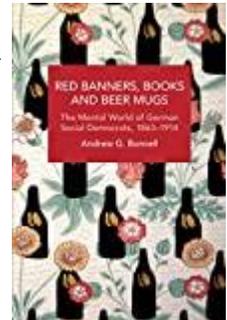


Andrew G. Bonnell. *Red Banners, Books and Beer Mugs: The Mental World of German Social Democrats, 1863–1914 (Historical Materialism)*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2021. 233 pp. \$28.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-64259-600-7.



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Published on H-Socialisms (June, 2022)

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Classical Social Democracy

Because our contemporary historical moment is marked by growing social tensions and a renewed interest in concepts and theories of class to describe the increasing gap between rich and poor, an exploration of how past social movements have tried to gain traction has much to offer. Even if Andrew G. Bonnell's *Red Banners, Books and Beer Mugs: The Mental World of German Social Democrats, 1863-1914* does not pursue a comparison between present-day and nineteenth-century class societies, it can be read as an intervention into a broader scholarly and nonacademic discourse dealing with resistance against the excesses of capitalist production and exploitation. While contemporary protests against social injustice and inequality seem disconcerted and fragmented—new class concepts like Guy Standing's "precariat" reflect the problem of collective mobilization and protestor identity—we can only wonder why in late-nineteenth-century Germany "the Social Democrats were as successful as they

were in creating a mass working-class party under the conditions of an authoritarian imperial state" (p. 5). This is the central question Bonnell tries to answer in his incredibly well-documented study on the mental world of the labor movement during the foundational years of the Social Democratic Party.

The book consists of eight thematic chapters that illuminate a specific aspect of the German socialists' sociopolitical imaginary and culture. In the first chapter, Bonnell examines a specific theme in the cultural memory of German socialism: the personality cult surrounding Ferdinand Lassalle. Lassalle was the leader of the General German Workers' Association, the first major workers' organization and founded by Lassalle in 1863. Even though Lassalle's political views would gradually become incompatible with the ideological stances of the Social Democratic Workers' Party, he was vividly commemorated in socialist circles until the late 1890s. Bonnell analyzes with great

precision the numerous ceremonies, festivals, texts, images, songs, and paraphernalia in order to reconstruct how the Lassalle cult evolved parallel to the organized labor movement and the workers whose needs it tried to represent. An analysis of Lassalle's self-imaging in his public appearances and speeches, as well as how these were received, shows that the cult mirrored a community still heavily influenced by religious thought and looking for charismatic and strong leaders. Bonnell goes on to show how the socialist party later used the aura of Lassalle in an encompassing media strategy to propagate alternatives "to the symbol-figures of Prussian-German nationalism: the Kaisers and Bismarck, the 'Iron Chancellor'" (p. 33).

The first chapter demonstrates the merits and strengths of this book that retrieves long-forgotten materials from the archives in order to revise traditional views that often tend to criticize these important aspects of socialist culture as proof of an alleged "absence of a fully-formed, self-conscious industrial proletariat" (p. 28). This applies for the second chapter on nationalism and internationalism, which explains the difference in socialists' responses to the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, the so-called national question, and Prussian dominance within the unified German state. While the Lassalleans "identified with aspects of Bismarckian policy" and authoritarianism, their rival, the Social Democratic Workers' Party (founded in 1869), was vocally "anti-Prussian under the influence of August Bebel and Wilhelm Liebknecht," who adhered to a federalist and democratic notion of the state (p. 35). Bonnell outlines the various positions concerning war, peace, and nationalism in great clarity. He also sketches out an explanation for the idea of international solidarity between workers, as documented in socialist journalism as well as in police transcripts of conversations between workers made by undercover agents. The "repressive conduct of the German state towards Social Democracy reinforced the primacy of socialist principle over the allegiance to the nation-state" (p. 51), resulting in repeated waves of solid-

arity with workers and protest movements abroad (e.g., the Russian Revolution of 1905 or the Swedish general strike of 1909).

A third chapter retraces documentary materials that shed light on workers' shifting attitudes to labor itself by showing how skilled craft work was gradually superseded and replaced by the shared experience of wage labor as a determinant of class identity. This resulted in a new concept of labor no longer exclusively centered around concepts of honor, but rather the value of solidarity between "workers engaged in industrial conflict both across different occupations and across different geographical areas" (p. 67). This kind of transversal solidarity was also actively promoted by the socialist party press. These changing and divergent mentalities are reflected in a wide array of sources, like workers' autobiographies (e.g., Moritz Bromme, Franz Rehbein, Carl Fischer), reportages of middle-class social reformers (e.g., Paul Göhre, Adolf Levenstein), and newspapers (e.g., the satirical journal *Der wahre Jacob*). In this regard, Bonnell confirms Patrick Eiden-Offe's (*Die Poesie der Klasse*, 2017) recent findings for the period around 1848 that the German proletariat was in fact a non-identical, contested concept that on the one hand was rooted in actual experiences of lack and precarity, but whose meaning was on the other hand being constantly redefined through discourse. In this regard, it is a pity that Bonnell does not also explore literary texts as a viable medium into workers' feelings and attitudes toward work: fiction, too, was one of the genres that rendered a lively and realistic account of day-to-day working experiences, often in an attempt to foster workers' solidarity. Despite this lacuna, the third chapter convincingly shows how discussions about values and views concerning work should be understood as informed by daily life, as were the specific social and political demands of the Social Democrats themselves.

The fourth chapter goes on to elucidate how in socialist discourse, the price of bread could be

singled out as a palpable symbol for structural exploitation, inequality, and problems of basic subsistence. This was the electoral strategy: to ground encompassing demands for political change in experiences of lack felt in everyday life. The fact that the price of food was determined by the ruling class enabled Social Democrats to use it as a symptom of a democratic deficit in general. Furthermore, Bonnell illustrates the effectiveness and success of this propaganda strategy. Police reports in which undercover agents testify about conversations of workers they overheard clearly note that workers echoed socialist rhetoric in linking food prices with concrete political demands.

Military service, a recurrent theme in socialist discourse, is discussed in the fifth chapter, which builds upon the discussions on warfare, nationalism, and internationalism. Prussian officials viewed the Kaiser's army as "the school of the nation," teaching civic virtues through surveillance and disciplinary punishments. Bonnell asks, "How did German Social Democrats experience military service, and did it have a significant impact on them?" (p. 101). This question, however basic and fundamental, has never been systematically explored before Bonnell's meticulous study of memoirs, journalistic reports, and archival material that show how the party tried to prepare (socialist) workers for their service, "giving them a good grounding in socialist ideas" and providing them with "factual information about their legal rights and responsibilities as army recruits" (p. 115). The work of August Winnig, for example, reveals the remarkable trajectory of a worker with socialist inclinations who turned into a nationalist, *völkisch*, and Nazi writer and who revised autobiographical texts (i.e., downplayed the violence and mistreatments he endured as a socialist) in the light of his changing political attitudes. By delving into specific cases, Bonnell shows the difficulty in making any generalized claims about the Social Democrats' experiences in the German military: the sources reveal a variety of views. The chapter again demonstrates the merits of this book, which

is based on thorough archival research and, most importantly, a critical use of sources. Nevertheless, all sources are treated through the same lens of the historian looking for factual evidence, including texts that to some degree demonstrate literary features. While Bonnell at times hints at the impact of genre conventions, he does not systematically deal with the effects of literariness on representation, leaving readers to wonder to what extent partially fictionalized stories are rewritten in the light of genre conventions. Do these sources intertextually refer to or are they even entirely based on existing narrative models? Could it be that the "liberties with chronology" in Winnig's stories have a meaning of their own (p. 105)? Despite Bonnell's attention to primary sources, these questions remain mostly unanswered.

The sixth chapter focuses on the reception of Marx's ideas within German socialism. Bonnell does justice to this complex issue. While only few workers actually read Marx, his main ideas were disseminated indirectly through other texts. These, however, were part of a corpus of socialist theory that was rather eclectic, especially in the founding years of the party. Bonnell gives us a well-informed, source-based understanding of workers' reading habits and literacy, showing that just like bourgeois reading publics, workers too were drawn toward genres like naturalist fiction, radical history, and popular science that articulated a vaguely socialist worldview. Specific Marxian ideas were spread through other avenues—in pamphlets, through the socialist press, and by means of oral communication (e.g., in public speeches and party meetings)—all of which are presented in detail with well-chosen case studies that help us understand why the version of Marxism embraced by German socialists was not purist. Rather, the actual impact of Marx depended on the immediate circumstances of the audiences that socialist activists—as Bonnell shows rather successfully—tried to reach and mobilize. Even though this insight was already reached by previous scholars like, for example, Klaus-Michael Bog-

dal (*Zwischen Alltag und Utopie*, 1991) and Francis Carsten (*August Bebel und die Organisation der Massen*, 1991), Bonnell's warning about false generalizations and clichés regarding late nineteenth-century German Social Democracy cannot be underestimated.

In line with the core argument that the mental world of Social Democrats can only be understood with regard to day-to-day experiences, the seventh chapter argues that the cultural organizations of the labor movement were rooted in workers' needs. Despite the party line, which prioritized political struggle over educational and cultural activities, workers founded organizations that gave them a sense of sociability and togetherness. Bonnell traces how a wide array of organizations, festivals, and other leisure activities came into being and changed over time. His reconstruction of working-class culture unearths a rich assemblage of cultural expressions, some of which mirrored bourgeois cultural traditions, while other Social Democratic expressions challenged them, for example, in the case of dramatic performances in which performers tested the limits of police repression by conveying overtly subversive political messages.

The final chapter delves into the use and development of republican ideas within socialist thought, in an attempt to shed new light on the failure of the Weimar Republic. Bonnell shows why radical democratic ideas, as articulated by Rosa Luxemburg and others, were not integrated into the official party ideology. He points to the authoritarian tradition of Lassalleanism that still lingered after 1900 and to the memory of the Anti-Socialist Laws (1878-90), still vivid among older party leaders. The argument that party officials were pragmatic when they deliberately left their concept of democracy undefined is just as compelling as it is simple: not only did they avoid provoking the already hostile authorities, but this was also a strategy to appeal to a broader public in regions where conservative and monarchical tradi-

tions were still dominant. Other reasons were ideological in nature. Party leaders followed Marx in their suspicion of "recipes for cook-shops of the future" and focused on economic conflicts more than political issues regarding republicanism. The republic was never the goal of socialists, in contrast to the abolition of class society and capitalist exploitation. The lack of reflection on the relationship between republicanism and democracy was, as Bonnell plausibly argues, "one of the several handicaps with which Social Democrats had to cope when Friedrich Ebert took over the receivership of the bankrupt Empire at the end of 1918," because this resulted in a situation where "the republicans had had insufficient opportunity to educate themselves and other Germans about what a republic meant" (pp. 195-196).

Bonnell's study offers a fresh and multifaceted perspective on the mental world and culture of the German Social Democrats. His thematic explorations shed new light on the turbulent early years of German Social Democracy. Bonnell reminds us that every movement that strives toward social justice is rooted in the day-to-day, material circumstances in which it comes into being—a thesis that he compellingly demonstrates. This book deserves the attention of anyone interested in working-class history, the history of ideas, socialism, and mass movements.

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Citation: Michiel Rys. Review of Bonnell, Andrew G. *Red Banners, Books and Beer Mugs: The Mental World of German Social Democrats, 1863–1914 (Historical Materialism)*. H-Socialisms, H-Net Reviews. June, 2022.

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