

THE WORKINGMAN'S MYTH OF THE CIVIL WAR: THE PERSPECTIVE OF GERMAN-AMERICAN WORKERS

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The significance of the American Civil War for the labor movement on both shores of the Atlantic has been subject to close interpretation as well as intense discussion.¹ Contemporary observers from the left, labor activists, and Marxist historians have viewed it as a decisive turning point, opening the path to American society's unfettered capitalist development, to workers' increasing awareness of their inferior status as an exploited class, and to a vibrant labor movement resolved to assert workers' rights. From the early 1850, German radicals, like Marxist emigré Joseph Weydemeyer, contributed astute analyses of the economic foundation of Southern slave society to the German-American press, suggesting that only the abolition of slavery would secure free labor's social and political rights.² Friedrich Engels agreed, calling slavery "that greatest of obstacles to the political and social development of the United States".³

From London, the newly-founded International Workingmen's Association - in an address congratulating Abraham Lincoln to his re-election - acknowledged the Civil War's importance even for European workers, declaring that

the working classes of Europe understood at once... that for the men of labor, with their hopes for the future, even their past conquests were at stake in that tremendous conflict on the other side of the Atlantic. [After] this barrier of progress [had been] swept off... [t]he working men of Europe feel sure that as the American War of Independence initiated a new era of ascendancy for the middle class, so the American anti-slavery War will do for the working classes.⁴

The first historian of the German-American labor movement, Friedrich Adolph Sorge, in 1891 succinctly summarized the by then prevalent view, when he wrote in retrospect that the solution of the slavery issue had prepared the ground for the labor question, adding:

1. Hermann Schlüter, *Die Anfänge der Deutschen Arbeiterbewegung in Amerika*, Stuttgart, 1907; Schlüter, "Die Anfänge der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung in New York und ihre Presse," *New Yorker Volkszeitung*, 25th anniversary edition, 21 Feb. 1903, pp. 8-12; F.A. Sorge, "Die Arbeiterbewegung in den Vereinigten Staaten, 1860-1866," *Die Neue Zeit* 9, no. 2 (1891). John R. Commons et. al., *History of Labour in the United States*, vol. II, New York, 1918; repr. John A. Commons, 1946); Philip S. Foner, *History of the Labour Movement in the United States*, vol. I, *From Colonial Times to the Founding of the American Federation of Labor*, New York, 1947; David Montgomery, *Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans 1862-1872* (New York, 1967). Herman Schlüter, *Lincoln, Labor and Slavery: a Chapter from the Social History of America*, New York, 1913, p. 189f. Schlüter, *Die Internationale in Amerika: ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung in den Vereinigten Staaten*, Chicago, 1918; Charles A. Beard and Mary R. Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization*, vol. 2, New York, 1933, p. 54.

2. Cf. Karl Obermann, *Joseph Weydemeyer. Ein Lebensbild 1818-1866*, Berlin, 1968, pp. 333-379.

3. Friedrich Engels to Joseph Weydemeyer, 24 Nov. 1864; in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Letters to Americans 1848-1895*, New York, 1953, p. 63.

4. Address of the International Workingmen's Dissociation to Abraham Lincoln, in: Schlüter, *Lincoln, Labor and Slavery*, p. 189f. Also in: Marx/Engels, *Letters to Americans*, p. 66.

The... "irrepressible conflict" between bound labor and free labor was fought out and its place was taken by the 'irrepressible conflict' between labor and capital.⁵

As is well known, of course, this interpretation of the Civil War as a watershed for American society's development has been challenged in several respects. Economic historians especially have identified the pre-Civil War years from the mid-1840s onward as the decisive take-off phase for industrial, commercial, and transportation development. By contrast, most indicators for the 1860s attest retarded economic growth during this decade.⁶ Have the observers and historians to whom I have referred, been led astray by wishful thinking and hopeful expectations? I suggest that these two interpretations do not necessarily contradict each other. Social structural changes were evident to working-class radicals of the 1840s and 1850s, but it was a different matter to safeguard and sanction them politically. It is thus the emerging political consciousness of the working class that is at issue here. Workers had to make sense out of on-going and rapid social and economic changes, and they had to draw consequences for their own collective behavior. In this sense the Civil War was indeed a turning point for German-American working-class radicalism in several respects as well.

In this paper I will ask in what ways the Civil War signified and symbolized a change for one of the more conspicuous sub-groups within the American working class of the time, i.e. radical German-American workers. To understand those changes and concomitant reinterpretations of the American social order, it will be necessary to look first at the cultural baggage of European preconceptions and idealistic expectations: that these artisan immigrants carried with them. What were the processes that reoriented German radicals away from issues paramount in their country of origin and that initially occupied them after their arrival in the United States? My argument will be guided by the following hypotheses:

1. The American Civil War was the culmination and the end of the coalition between bourgeois radical democrats and the radical wing of the German-American working-class.

2. The slavery question and especially the Civil War forced German immigrant workers to become actively involved in, and to face and accept, the realities of American politics and society. In that process they discarded their old illusions, and even part of their idealism, about republican principles.

3. Organizational and institutional discontinuities in the German-American working class arising from the war effort became the opportunity for a new, qualitatively different orientation toward class solidarity and internationalism.

5. F.A. Sorge, op. cit., p. 398. (This and all translations of quotes from German-language sources by the author.) Cf. also Herman Schlüter who wrote: "It was in the nature of things that slavery and free labor could not peaceably continue to exist side by side;" *Lincoln, Labor and Slavery*, p. 34.

6. Cf. Walt W. Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth*, Cambridge, 1971, p. 38; Stephen Salisbury, "The Effect of the Civil War on American Industrial Development," in: Ralph Andreano, ed. *The Economic Impact of the American Civil War*, Cambridge, MA, 1962, p. 161ff. D. T. Gilchrist and W. D. Lewis, eds., *Economic Change in the Civil War Era*, Greenville, DE, 1965, p. 131-51; Thomas Cochran, "Did the Civil War Retard Industrialization?" *MVHR*, vol. 48 (1961), p. 191-210. Stuart Bruchey, *The Roots of American Economic Growth 1607-1861. An Essay in Social Causation*, New York, 1965, p. 139f.

1. Traditional European Preconceptions of American Republicanism

German working-class radicals, along with liberal intellectuals and a wider literate public, shared an ideal image of America that - for immigrants in the 1850s - turned out to be a serious hindrance to the realistic assessment of American society. This image had emerged during the American Revolution and continued to be propagated widely in an abundant body of literature: travel and personal accounts, journalistic articles and pamphlets, political and historical writings, emigrants' guides, as well as fiction.⁷ Although the picture unfolded in this diverse body of writings was by no means uniform, German radicals identified only with the tradition that emphasized the revolutionary and liberalising impact of the republican experiment.⁸

American independence was a tremendous boost for suppressed longings in Germany to be freed from the despotism and tyranny of feudal domination and absolutist monarchism. Such aspirations were projected onto the new republic by the literary tradition of the "Sturm und Drang" (Storm and Stress) period as well as by the Enlightenment, which hailed the American Revolution as a new stage in the progress of humanity.⁹ The historical event of American independence was rationalised into an ideological symbol of the universal aspirations of mankind, while its practical result as codified in the American Constitution was soon accorded the rank of an inviolable political canon. Such a view of America did not mirror the reality of American institutions and life, but rather universal ideals to be aspired at in the European context of the Napoleonic era and the Wars of Liberation.

The emerging political liberalism in the repressive restoration period continued to center its attention on the American Constitution. In the opinion of liberals, it had transformed their own as yet unattainable ideals of personal and political rights and freedoms into a practical reality.¹⁰ The United States became the symbol of political freedom; during the Hambacher Fest in 1832, which united diverse radical groups in a common demonstration for national unity and political rights, cheers were voiced on "the united free states of Germany" in obvious reference to the United States of America.¹¹ The radical democrats of the "Young Germany" movement, some of them

7. For a general introduction to this literature cf. Hildegard Meyer, *Nord-Amerika im Urteil des Deutschen Schrifttums bis zur Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts. Eine Untersuchung über Kürnbergers "Amerika-Müden". Mit einer Bibliographie*, Hamburg, 1929; and Paul C. Weber, *America in Imaginative German Literature in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century*, New York, 1926. Also Rolf Engelsing, "Deutschland und die Vereinigten Staaten im 19. Jahrhundert. Eine Periodisierung," *Die Welt als Geschichte*, 18 (Stuttgart, 1958), 139; and Gunter Moltmann, *Atlantische Blockpolitik im 19. Jahrhundert. Die Vereinigten Staaten und der Deutsche Liberalismus Während der Revolution von 1848/49*, Dusseldorf, 1973, p. 39.

8. Another perspective on America originating with the Romantic period was a highly critical one; it emphasised the ahistorical and therefore artificial nature of the American republic, the lack of a cultural tradition and the uncivilised character of American public and social life. This kind of cultural criticism, which continued unabated throughout the nineteenth century, was often expressed in the German-language labor press as well.

9. Ernst Fraenkel, ed., *Amerika im Spiegel des Deutschen Politischen Denkens. Äußerungen Deutscher Staatsmänner und Staatsdenker über Staat und Gesellschaft in den Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika*, Köln/Opladen, 1959, p. 20; Meyer, *op. cit.*, p. 8 and 10, and Engelsing, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

10. "During the restoration period," observed a contemporary, "liberalism, in concentrating in its agitation and publications on America, was allowed one of its rare legal means of expression. It celebrated the republic with the star-spangled banner as the practical embodiment of its outlawed ideals." Quoted in Engelsing, *op. cit.*, p. 146

11. Meyer, *op. cit.*, p. 33f.

living in exile in France and Switzerland, helped popularise republican ideals in rousing poems and songs which in spite of their abstract and unhistoric language often were but thinly veiled calls for action. Poems of the *Vormärz* period were later incorporated by the Social Democrats as an integral part of their revolutionary tradition and aspirations. Thus a general and basically uncritical enthusiasm for America's "great democracy"¹² prevailed among radical democrats as well as liberals during the revolution of 1848/49. At democrats' and workers' mass meetings the star-spangled banner was always displayed alongside the tricolor and the revolutionary red flag. Delegates to the meeting of the constitutional assembly in Paul's Church at Frankfurt on the Main were exceptionally well informed on American constitutional as well as political and social issues.¹³ It was especially the democratic left that pointed to the American federal system as an example to be followed and that asked for a new German federal state with a "constitution along the lines of North America with accompanying republican institutions".¹⁴ Although the revolutions of 1848/49 failed miserably to accomplish this goal, the liberal-democratic ideal of America which had guided their leaders and followers to a significant degree persisted right into the 1870s.

German working-class radicals incorporated certain elements of the liberal-republican tradition. After all, several of its leaders, as well as many artisans and workers, had participated in the revolutionary battles in the German Southwest, before they were forced to seek refuge abroad. While many of them gradually adopted socialist principles, they continued to fight for basic democratic liberties, like the right to assemble, to associate, and to vote. Wilhelm Liebknecht is an appropriate case when referring to the impact of the liberal-republican tradition on the socialists' views of the United States. Liebknecht never entirely discarded the republican ideals dating from his revolutionary days in southwest Germany.¹⁵ His positive attitude towards "the great Atlantic republic"¹⁶ can be documented in his personal as well as his political life. Although his plans to emigrate to the United States did not materialize,¹⁷ Liebknecht continued to show considerable interest in American political

12. The term was used by the historian V. Raumer; it is quoted by Meyer, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

13. Cf. Eckhart G. Franz, *Das Amerikabild der Deutschen Revolution von 1848/49. Zum Problem der Übertragung gewachsener Verfassungsformen*, Heidelberg, 1958, p. 105 and 139.

14. "Erster Bericht der demokratischen Partei der deutschen constituirenden National-Versammlung vom 1. August 1848," quoted in Franz, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

15. For a general analysis of the views of European socialists on the United States, see R. Laurence Moore, *European Socialist and the American Promised Land*, New York, 1970. Liebknecht was attacked and ridiculed by Marx and Engels for his attitude; cf. Georg Eckert, ea., *Wilhelm Liebknecht. Briefwechsel mit Karl Marx und Friedrich Engels*, The Hague, 1963, p. 2 if f.; and Moore, p. 27.

16. "Die Botschaft des amerikanischen Präsidenten," *Osnabrücker Zeitung*, No. 189, 24 Dec. 1864; in: Georg Eckert, ea., *Wilhelm Liebknecht. Leitartikel und Beiträge in der Osnabrücker Zeitung 1864-1866*, Hildesheim, 1975, p. 257; cf. also *Volksstaat* No. 6, 20 Jan. 1872.

17. Liebknecht almost emigrated to Wisconsin in 1847. In later years he repeatedly toyed with the idea of emigrating to America. Wilhelm Liebknecht, *Erinnerungen eines Soldaten der Revolution*, Berlin, 1976, p. 16 and 82; Wilhelm Liebknecht, *Ein Blick in die neue Welt*, Stuttgart, 1887, p. vi; Robert Schweichel, "Zum Gedächtniss Wilhelm Liebknechts," *Neue Zeit* 19/2 (1900/1901), pp. 539-44, 571-76, 602-608. Georg Eckert, ea., *Wilhelm Liebknecht. Briefwechsel mit deutschen Sozialdemokraten*, vol. I: 1862-1878, Assert, 1973, p. 14f., 414, 417; F.A. Sorge, letter to J.Ph. Becker, 3 July 1867; to X. Marx, 10 July 1867; to Becker, 11 July 1870, 25 Sept. 1870, in: *F.A. Sorge Papers*, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam.

affairs.¹⁸ Commenting on the Civil War, he expressed his admiration for the way the American people and its political institutions coped with this emergency. In his opinion “the example of the North American Union is pointed out to us by fate like the mirror image of our own defaults”. Although conceding some years later that American institutions were not perfect, he still wished for similar institutions in Germany and Europe.¹⁹

It was not only the radical leaders of the working class who were attracted by this ideal image of American political institutions. More important for the psychological predisposition of the great multitude of German immigrant workers was an underlying popular current of enthusiasm for the American Republic, grounded less in constitutional and political ideals than in hopes of material rewards. It led to mass emigration from Germany at the very moment when liberal aspirations had been shattered in the middle of the century. Fiction had set the stage by popularising the expectation that in America everything would turn out well; one only needed to live there for a while to return as a well-to-do, respected person. Novels, short stories, as well as popular plays written and widely performed in the course of the 19th century, presented the stereotypical “rich uncle from America” admired by relatives and friends upon his visit in the old country. Emigrants’ guides often were no less biased, raising false hopes of easy settlement and quick material success in the new world. But it was above all the “reports of republican happiness spread by emigrated Germans in hundreds of thousands of letters among their fellow countrymen back home”,²⁰ often giving idealised accounts of public life and living and work conditions in the United States, that decisively shaped the masses’ perceptions and expectations.²¹

Take the example of Nikolaus Schwenck, a journeyman coppermith from Württemberg. Experiencing hard times in his trade during his travels in Europe, the young man asked his brother for detailed information on

last year’s emigrants [from his home town], where and how they are, since I am so much reminded of them in my present difficult situation... The easiest way to get out of it, and for you to get me off your back, ... is to be on my way to America in a few weeks. I will say farewell to all I have here, and I will look forward to a golden future. In another letter he added: I am young, healthy, strong and sturdy, and I also want to try my luck in the far-away country, like so many thousands.²²

18. In the introduction to his travel account *Ein Blick in die neue Welt*, p. vi, Liebknecht states: “Since my early youth... I have not lost sight of the great republic in the west, and I have been following the development of American affairs with the greatest sympathy.”

19. *Osnabrücker Zeitung*, No. 18, 7 June 1864; No. 299, 8 May 1865; No. 305, 15 May 1865; No. 574, 5 Apr. 1866; No. 601, 7 May 1866; in: Eckert, *Leitartikel*, p. 54, 381f., 387, 678, 705.

20. *Allgemeine Zeitung*, 16 Apr. 1848, quoted in Franz, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

21. Thus, Gottfried Duden’s *Bericht über eine Reise nach den westlichen Staaten nordamerikas und einen mehrtägigen Aufenthalt am Missouri (1824-1827)*, published in 1829, triggered a veritable emigration fever, and Gustav Koerner in his refutation *Beleuchtung des dudenschen Berichtes über die westlichen Staaten*, published five years later, observed: “In many families it was read day by day on the eve embarking for the New World, and became an authoritative source for their information;” cf. Weber, *op. cit.*, p. 115-119. Fraenkel, *op. cit.*, p. 35 emphasises the “utopian expectations that wide masses of the German people had of America as a land of unlimited opportunities. In more than one sense for the lower classes of Continental Europe, the USA was the myth of the 19th century.” The poet Johann Wolfgang van Goethe wrote that “America was then (1775), perhaps still more than now (1818), the Eldorado of all who found themselves restricted in their present circumstances,” *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, quoted in Weber, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

22. Nikolaus Schwenck to his mother, brothers, sisters, and especially his brother Christian, 3 April 1853; to his brother Christian, January 1854, in Schwenck Family Archives, Langenau, Württemberg.

Such expectations often ran contrary to the reality immigrants faced upon their arrival, as Nikolaus Schwenck also found out soon after emigrating and settling in Chicago. Although he was quite successful financially and was able to establish his own business, experience soon made him see American reality in a more critical way. He noticed that there were few family ties and no solidarity, that everyone had to "help himself", that often there was more misery in America than in Germany. During the depression of the late 1850s he wrote a bitter commentary on the American people's materialistic orientation, and he renamed the country "Despairica" (jammerika).²³ But illusions about ownership of land and the realization of material and social independence were tenaciously held onto by immigrant workers, to the exasperation of German-American radicals like Weydemeyer, who wrote incisive analyses of American capitalist development that obviously were not heeded in the 1850s.²⁴ The liberal-democratic tradition died but a slow death, a fact that should not have come as a surprise, since it was continually being reinforced by the country's political ideology as well as its institutional mechanisms.

2. *From Exiles to Immigrants*

In the wake of the failed revolution of 1848/49, leaders and rank-and-file participants of various social strata and political persuasion - among them radical democrats and plebeian artisans - made their way to the United States as part of the mass emigration from Germany from the end of the 1840s to the beginning of the American Civil War.²⁵ Many intellectuals, however, remained concerned with events back in Europe, hoping to influence them from abroad and waiting for an auspicious moment to return and help upset the old order for good. They considered themselves as temporary political exiles who should not waste their time getting acquainted with and involved in American affairs. This orientation has been thoroughly documented for radical democrats who organized political associations, sponsored lecture campaigns to raise enthusiasm and money for the support of revolutionary leaders and movements, and propagated their political goals in the many newspapers and journals whose editorial offices they took over or which they founded soon after having set foot on American soil.²⁶

Working-class radicals were not immune to this backward orientation. Labor historians intent on describing the emergence of a German-American labor movement

23. Christian Schwenck, letters of 22 January 1854; 24 Dec. 1854; 9 Sept. 1855; 3 Apr. 1859.

24. As late as in the 1890s, Michael Schwab, active in the Chicago labor movement once more after having been pardoned by Governor Altgeld, complained that workers in Chicago still clung to the old liberal middle-class aspirations of owning a home; they therefore remained dependent upon business interests like building and loan associations and were less inclined to join working-class organizations.

25. Bruce C. Levine, "In the Heat of Two Revolutions: The Forging of German-American Radicalism," in: *Struggle a Hard Battle: Essays on Working-Class Immigrants*, ed. Dirk Hoerder, De Kalb, 1986, p. 19-45; also Levine, *The Spirit of 1848: German Immigrants, Labor Conflict, and the Coming of the Civil War*, Urbana, 1992.

26. Cf. Carl F. Wittke, *The German-Language Press in America*, Lexington, 1957; Wittke, *Refugees of Revolution: the German Forty-Eighters in America*, Philadelphia, 1952; Adolf Eduard Zucker, ed., *The Forty-Eighters: Political Refugees of the German Revolution of 1848*, New York, 1967; Ernst Bruncken, *German Political Refugees in the US During the Period from 1815-1860* (repr. San Francisco, 1970).

have emphasized organizational beginnings that helped establish an American tradition; they have therefore tended to down-play equally strong currents of a continuing focus on European affairs and developments. We should not overlook the fact that the 1860s were a decade of ideological fermentation when radical working-class leaders, too, were searching for their political identity, reluctant to surrender former accomplishments and renown for an uncertain and in many ways more difficult terrain. Only slowly did they - like radical democrats - devote their attention primarily to American society and politics. Thus, Wilhelm Weitling returned to Germany immediately after learning of the revolution's outbreak in 1848; only when it had failed did he, for a limited number of years, turn his complete attention to organizing German workers in New York City and in other urban centers.²⁷ He as well as Joseph Weydemeyer were faced with almost insurmountable difficulties because of the thin industrial and social base for a labor movement and a political consciousness among German immigrant workers steeped in artisan, Jacobin, and radical democratic traditions. In this situation Weydemeyer, too, acted much like an exile trying to publicise the European radical labor movement, opening the pages of various papers to contributions of European friends who continued their political feuds often unrelated to American concerns.²⁸ German-language papers were a welcome means of publicising information at a time when the press in Germany remained inaccessible to radicals like Karl Marx. Thus it was important for the latter's reputation that attacks by August Willich against his role concerning the Communist League and the trial at Cologne were countered in the German-language press by German friends in the United States.²⁹ However, these disputes over past occurrences diverted energies and attention from urgent contemporary concerns.

The slavery issue and the Civil War ended this ambivalent orientation - the latter of course in a complete, thoroughly existential way - for many radicals who joined the Union army and fought for, and often died for, the Union's cause. The slavery question was instrumental in finally turning radicals' attention away from past and often lost European causes, focusing it instead on the paramount social, political, and economic problem in America.

The requirements of the Civil War that were bearing heavily on the working class were voluntarily, and often enthusiastically, met by German immigrant workers without substantial opposition. Their political beliefs and aspirations, so long oriented towards ameliorating conditions back in Germany, could now be projected on the Union cause. The ideological preparation for this important psychological and active identification had already come about in Europe. There is overwhelming documentation of the high degree of involvement in, and sacrifice for, the abolition of slavery and the preservation of the Union. Like the Chicago Arbeiterverein, German workers' organisations in all urban centers were depleted by volunteers joining the army. The Chicago German Workingmen's Association, including its women's auxiliaries, collected money for the support of soldiers' families "except for women of commissioned officers"³⁰ and for wounded soldiers, vehemently protested the

27. Cf. Carl Wittke, *The Utopian Communist: the Life of Wilhelm Weitling, Nineteenth Century Reformer*, Baton Rouge, La, 1950; Schlüter, *Anfänge*, p. 69-71; Sorge, "Arbeiterbewegung," p. 232-233.

28. Obermann, *Weydemeyer*, especially pp. 231-268.

29. Obermann, *Weydemeyer*, p. 291-292.

30. *Illinois Staats-Zeitung*, 13 Aug. 1862.

conscription laws, educated the public in mass meetings and public lectures on the necessity of the war and the abolition of slavery, and organised republican sharpshooters, clubs and volunteer militia companies in the city.³¹ Despite the significant numbers of workers who served in the Union army, the Association witnessed a tremendous membership increase during the war years: from May 1862 to the end of 1863, its membership almost quadrupled.³² Although radicals were in the forefront when it came to demanding the emancipation of the slaves, still they could acquiesce in Abraham Lincoln's priority for the war, i.e. the preservation of the Union. For them the central state as yet did not have any negative meaning, on the contrary: for European radicals, and especially for the left in Germany with its desolate political disintegration, it stood for the rights and liberties of citizens against the encroachments of particular, feudal, and absolutist interests. Thus in his editorial columns on the Civil War, Wilhelm Liebknecht could write enthusiastically that

nowhere else but in the United States is the citizen a free, self-determining member of the commonwealth.... The state is not a hostile entity confronting the citizen, nay, it is completely bound up, it is identical with him.³³

German workers thus genuinely shared the general attitude of Northern workers toward the Civil War so fittingly described by David Montgomery:

Varied as the views of Northern workers may have been... toward Lincoln, slavery, the draft, and the various military leaders, one fact remains clear: they were ardently devoted to the cause of preserving the Union intact.... This devotion was rooted in the intense nationalism of the working classes - their commitment to the world's only political democracy.³⁴

3. *Beginnings of Working-Class Solidarity and Internationalism*

The contest over the abolition of slavery forced German radicals into forming a coalition in the face of the overarching threat; a coalition on the one hand pragmatic and highly effective for the purpose for which it was created, but on the other hand tenuous, since it welded together for the last time politically and ideologically divergent, increasingly disparate forces.³⁵ When the Civil War successfully completed and consummated this coalition, it broke apart. Freed from the one issue that, for different reasons, had been able to hold together radicals of different ideological bent, divergent interests now came into the open, sharply separating radical workers from radical democrats. The latter's goals had been accomplished. Social and political developments after the Civil War indicate that the *embourgeoisement* of the majority

31. Cf. for several examples *Illinois Staats-Zeitung*, 2 Feb., 22 Apr., 2 and 11 May, 19 June, 8 and 28 Aug., 25 and 30 Sept., 6 Nov., 23 Dec. 1861; 26 May, 13 Aug., 6 Sept. 1862; 27 Jan., 28 Feb., 3 Mr., 9 and 13 May, 22, 24, 28 and 29 July, 31 Dec. 1863. *Chicago Times*, 2 and 25 Mr. 1863.

32. Membership numbers are: 389 in May 1862, 935 in June 1863, 1,027 in Aug. 1863, and 1,085 in Dec. 1863; *Illinois Staats-Zeitung*, 26 May 1862, 10 June, 31 Aug., 2 Dec. 1863.

33. "Was die Amerikaner thun," *Osnabrücker Zeitung*, No. 18, 7 June 1864, in Eckert, *Leitartikel*, p. 54; cf. also *Demokratisches Wochenblatt*, No. 15, 11 Apr. 1868.

34. Montgomery, *Beyond Equality*, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

35. Cf. Levine, *Spirit of 1848*, *op. cit.*

of '48ers progressed quickly, when they became integrated into American society and respected by their fellow citizens. They turned increasingly self-complacent and conservative, all the while believing that they were clinging to their old values. They were thus also able to reconcile themselves with political developments in their home country. Having actively fought oppression in their fatherland in their youth, the majority of them made a complete turnabout on the occasion of the creation of the German Reich in 1871, putting national unity above their old republican ideals. After 1871, they remained admirers of Bismarck, and they also discarded whatever idealistic notions they might have held for American society, becoming wholehearted supporters of the status quo. Working-class radicals with some justice branded former radical democrats for what they perceived as a betrayal of their principles. Workers now laid claim to the radical tradition among German-Americans, announcing that they were its true heirs. Whereas '48ers had had a historic task to fulfill by opposing and fighting slavery, they had grown self-satisfied and unwilling to adapt to changing times and issues, thus quickly becoming obsolete in the Gilded Age context of unbridled capitalist exploitation.³⁶

The decline of the radical democratic press, an institution which had risen to exceptional prominence and standard in the pre-Civil War years, resulted from its increasing political obsolescence. Both profit-oriented newspapers, which had none the less upheld lofty ideals and fought for liberty and emancipation in their pages, and highly individualistic journals founded by idealistic loners inspired by humanitarian, cultural and radical political convictions, now quickly succumbed to the crass materialism of Gilded-Age America. Only Karl Heinzen was able to continue his *Pioneer* until 1879 with the help of his wife and the financial assistance of friends. After Heinzen's paper merged with the Freidenker, Robert Reitzel's in certain ways anachronistic *Der Arme Teufel*, launched in 1884, proved to be the sole exception to the rule that such papers, the opinions that they carried, and the readership that they represented had become outmoded.³⁷

But discontinuities and new beginnings are also apparent in the working-class movement itself. The slow organisational successes among German immigrant workers in the 1850s were halted by the depression of 1857 and disrupted by the Civil War. Joseph Weydemeyer is at once a prominent and a typical case for the fate of radicals actively engaged in the labor movement on the eve of the war. When he tried to establish himself as editor of a paper in New York City in the first half of the 1850s, he met with indifference and hostility. Unable to support himself and his family, he had to move to various urban centers in search for a job, first to Milwaukee, then Chicago, and back to New York. Like so many '48er radicals, he joined the Union army soon after the outbreak of the war, serving as an officer in various capacities in Missouri. And again, like so many others, he was unable to reap the fruits of his efforts, dying soon after the war in St. Louis in 1866. This drain from both leadership

36. Hartmut Keil "German-American Radicalism in the Late Nineteenth Century," unpublished ms. Keil "The Impact of Haymarket on German-American Radicalism", *International Labor and Working-Class History*, No. 29 (Spring, 1986), 17.

37. Cf. Hartmut Keil "A Profile of the Editors of the German-American Radical Press 1850-1910," in Elliott Shore, Ken Fones-Wolf and James P. Danky, eds. *The German-American Radical Press: The Shaping of a Left Political Culture, 1850-1940*, Urbane and Chicago, 1992, pp.15-28 and 213-219.

and rank-and-file of the working class prevented any continuity on an individual level; it also meant that the impact of a whole generation of radical working-class leaders came to an end. It is difficult to name any important leader from the 1850s who continued to be active in the German-American labor movement. The leaders who emerged after the Civil War had either been too young or, like Friedrich Adolph Sorge and Adolf Douai, had had other political convictions. Even the Communist Club founded in 1857 by former members of the Communist League was a circle of intellectuals of radical, democratic bent, little concerned with workers' issues. Its only public appearance was on the occasion of the commemoration of the June uprising in Paris in 1848. Together with other radical organizations, the Communist Club celebrated this as an event of "worldwide historic importance" for human rights. Typically, the paper reporting on the celebration called active participants "citizens".³⁸ Having suspended its meetings during the war, the Communist Club was a basically defunct organisation without any public influence. Others had to revive it as well as German workers' organizations, once the war was over. Leadership was assumed now by a new group of radicals newly immigrated from Europe along with an increasing stream of workers influenced by the emerging labor movement in Germany.

New organisational activities were successful only, however, because of important internal developments during, and as a consequence of, the Civil War. Emancipation obviously was a precondition for the shifting of political priorities within the labor movement. In addition, however, this reorientation was prepared by a growing awareness among workers that they above all had to pay for the war effort. Thus the conscription bill of 1863 immediately caused the German Chicago Working Men's Association to initiate drill exercises and form militia companies in preparation for the expected conscriptions

so that if some of our members should be selected by lot to take to arms for the sanctity of our laws, they can defend themselves with competence.³⁹

At the same time, mass protests against the bill's exemption clause were organized in which the special privileges for the rich were exposed and attacked in no uncertain terms. In an open letter to congressman I.H. Arnold, the Association reaffirmed its active support of the Union but also emphasized that it "upholds the principle that all citizens shall have equal rights and equal duties" and deplored the fact that Republicans "made a distinction between rich and poor in a law imposing the most sacred duty of defending our beloved country in the hour of peril".⁴⁰ Locals expressed their anger in even stronger words, charging that the exemption clause was "a shameless injustice especially against the poor workers," and demanding to know "if the gentlemen believe that they have only rights, while the workingman only has obligations?"⁴¹ Asking for a strong carpenters' organization in Chicago, a young German carpenter in an open letter in 1864 expressed his insights into the lot of the workers as he had learned them from personal experience. He claimed his right to

38. Cf. *Sociale Republik*, 5, 19, 26 June 1858.

39. *Illinois Staats-Zeitung*, 9 May 1863.

40. *Chicago Tribune*, 25 March 1863; cf. also *Illinois Staats-Zeitung*, 28 Feb., 31 Dec. 1863.

41. *Illinois Staats-Zeitung*, 3 March and 29 July 1863.

live as decently as the "money bags", "for we must support them, it is not the other way round." He also gave a clear answer to "Who pays for the cost of war? Not the rich ... not the contractors ... only the workers." Pointing to the increase in the cost of living, he closed his remarks by rhetorically asking, "Shall we remain the slaves of capital forever?"⁴² Class relations, which were still fluid in the 1850s so that it was "premature to eradicate traditional views and ideas",⁴³ now began to crystallize.

The gradual transformation became apparent on the organizational level, too. Concerned for the outcome of the Civil War, the European labor movement, led by its radical wing, i.e. the International Workingmen's Association, pushed for concrete measures of international working-class cooperation and solidarity. Although transatlantic results were not impressive in the 1860s, the long-term repercussions within the American, and especially the German-American, labor movement, were significant. German-American working-class radicals adopted Marxist concepts of organization when founding trade unions from the late 1860s onward. The beginnings of this process may be summarized by way of example. Thus the Communist Club was resuscitated again in 1867, after Marxists Sigfried Meyer and August Vogt had immigrated from Germany. It even joined the International Workingman's Association. Meyer and Vogt soon realized, however, that its aims were obsolete, and instead merged it with the New York General German Workers' Association, a Lassallean club founded in 1865 that was "cleansed" of Lassallean influences in 1869. In close cooperation with Sorge, who had discarded his old liberal ideals, they then led the Association into the IWA, re-naming it Section No. 1 and, even more significantly, joining the National Labor Union at the same time as Local Union No. 5.⁴⁴ Despite serious drawbacks in the face of depressions, political and social pressures, ethnic division, and internal political differences, the German-American labor organizations after the Civil War thus gradually emerged as clearly class-oriented institutions.

42. *Illinois Staats-Zeitung*, 7 March 1864.

43. Sorge, "Arbeiterbewegung", p. 201.

44. Sorge, "Arbeiterbewegung", 438-9; *Protocole des Communisten-Clubs*, p. 6 and 68; Sorge, "Zwei Pionire der Internationalen Arbeiter-Association in den Vereinigten Staaten", *Pionier* (1900), p. 61-2; Schlüter, *Anfänge*, 160-2; Sorge, letter to J. Ph. Becker, 3 July 1867, IISH; *Protokoll-Buch des Allg. Deutsch. Arb. Vereins zu New-York, 1865-71*, pp. 1, 24.