Introduction

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If Charles Dickens, Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx made Great Britain the classic country of a capitalism which mass-produced poverty and social misery among the labouring classes, the Hammonds, the Webbs, R.H. Tawney and G.D.H. Cole made Britain the classic country of a social history of the working classes and their organisations which told a tale of progress and emancipation. They laid the foundations on which a distinguished generation of post-war historians including such household names as Asa Briggs, Eric Hobsbawm, John Saville and E.P. Thompson could build. Their respective versions of a 'forward march of labour' became questionable only when the emancipatory potential of the labour movement was doubted by a new generation of historians who had been disillusioned with the Stalinist dictatorships in Eastern Europe and who had watched the Social Democratic project turn stale in the 1970s. By the 1980s it not only seemed timely to say 'farewell to the working class',[1] it also was a time in which the dynamism and creative energy characteristic of labour history in the 1960s seemed largely absent. In 1991, in a volume of this journal dedicated to the state of play in British labour history during the 1980s, Rainer Schulze argued that the subject was indeed in deep crisis. Not only did the supply of money for labour history seem threatened by Thatcherite reforms to the funding of university research and postgraduate studies in the social sciences and humanities, but the collapse of Communism had brought widespread assumptions of the imminent demise of labour history.[2] The aim of this volume is to ask whether these predictions have come true and to take stock of the state of play in British labour history at the beginning of the 21st century.

Let me say straight away: rumours of terminal decline have been much exaggerated. Sure enough, many labour historians continued to talk about crises in the 1990s and some of the contributions to this volume, in particular the ones by Andy Croll, Steven Fielding and Karen Hunt expand on this subject, but it should be recognised that vigorous debate following a diagnosis of crisis is a sure sign of recovery. Hence any blind spots of British labour history have been energetically addressed from a variety of different angles, e.g. by what Fielding calls the 'new labour history', by what Hunt refers to as a 'gender-aware labour history' and by what Croll takes to be fruitful interventions by postmodernism which have been taken on board and developed in eclectic fashion by a younger generation of historians in the 1990s.[3]

1 Andre Gorz, *Farewell to the Working Class* (London, 1982).

2 Rainer Schulze (ed.), *Arbeiterschaft und Arbeiterbewegung in Großbritannien. Forschungsstand und Perspektiven der Forschung, Mitteilungsblatt des Instituts zur Erfoschung der europäischen Arbeiterbewegung* 11 (1991), pp. 3 and 7.

3 Croll himself is a good example of this trend to adapt selectively aspects of postmodern theory. See Andy Croll, *Civilising the Urban: Popular Culture and Public Space, Merthyr c. 1870–1914* (Cardiff, 2000).

What else has changed between 1991 and 2002? For a start: much has changed in contemporary politics. In 1991 Schulze could see the Labour Party looking towards the German Social Democrats for inspiration and guidance. Labour at long last appeared on the road to its long-overdue equivalent to Bad Godesberg.[4] A decade later the relationship is almost reversed: Labour's 'third way' has been much discussed throughout Western European Social Democracies and Gerhard Schröder's 'Neue Mitte' (New Centre) is clearly rooted in attempts to adapt Third Way thinking to German conditions.

If we move from politics to history, regional and local research in labour history has continually made a big impact on the subject. The articles by Lawrence Black, Chris Wrigley and Dan Weinbren all emphasise the very high quality of local studies in their respective areas of research. British historians of the Industrial Revolution have argued for some time now that only regional and local history will allow for an adequate historisation of the past, whereas larger frameworks tend to distort and homogenise the historical experience.[5] Although, as John Halstead emphasises below, the Society for the Study of Labour History (SSLH) was set up as and understands itself as a British Society, local and regional perspectives are emphasised in many of the articles published in the Society's journal, *Labour History Review*. More importantly, lively separate labour history societies in Scotland, Wales, the North West and the North East of England have increasingly developed their own historiographical traditions.[6]

It is now common practice for publications in British social history to refer explicitly to the multi-national character of the UK and to treat the histories of England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland as separate entities. Thus, Ross McKibbin's *Classes and Cultures*, discussed below, is specifically about England, excluding discussions about other parts of the UK. For too long, English history had been conflated with British history. The current concern with devolution in Britain strengthens the perception of different pasts in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.[7] The last *Mitteilungsblatt* dedicated to British labour history (no. 11, 1991) paid tribute to this trend in that it was structured not along thematic but along regional (some might say national) lines – with separate reviews for England, Scotland and Wales. Despite the many

4 Schulze (ed.), *Arbeiterschaft*, p. 4.

5 Pat Hudson, 'The Regional Perspective', in: idem (ed.), *Regions and Industries. A Perspective on the Industrial Revolution in Britain* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 5–32; compare also Rainer Schulze, 'Region – Industrialisation – Structural Change: A Regional Approach to Problems of Socio-Economic Change', in: idem (ed.), *Industrieregionen im Umbruch; historische Voraussetzungen und Verlaufsmuster des regionalen Strukturwandels im europäischen Vergleich* (Essen, 1993), pp. 40–57.

6 For Wales see the remarks on the emergence of modern Welsh historiography by Chris Williams, 'Introduction', in: Duncan Tanner, Chris Williams and Deian Hopkin (eds.), *The Labour Party in Wales 1900–2000* (Cardiff, 2000), pp. 2–13. Also for Wales see the journal *Llafur*, established in the early 1970s, and for Scotland see the journal *Scottish Labour History*, established in 1969. The North East Labour History Group was founded in 1966 and the North-West Labour History Group followed suit in 1973. The latter publishes its journal *North West Labour History* annually since 1974.

7 The ESRC's five year programme 'Devolution and Constitutional Change' reflects this concern and promotes research into the federal character of Britain. For details see: http://www.esrc.ac.uk/esrccontent/ourresearch/devolution_and_constitutional_change.asp.

benefits of such an approach I have decided not to repeat this structure but to go for particular themes which seemed relevant to British labour history over the last decade. Although there is undoubtedly a danger of not paying enough attention to regional diversity, new themes and developments become more visible this way. Furthermore, English, Scottish and Welsh labour history remain strongly interrelated. It is often impossible to write about the working class, and in particular the politics of the working class, without referring to the larger British framework. Especially in Wales, which took over most of the English institutions and organisations, it is often difficult to establish what was specifically Welsh in its history. Finally, the emphasis on regionalism and localism, for all its merits, also has its dangers: none greater, I would argue, than the dangers of parochialism and antiquarianism. For years now, labour history conferences on local/regional topics have attracted very strong support and engendered much interest; by comparison labour history conferences on explicitly comparative or international topics struggled in this respect. Surely local and regional history needs the larger picture if it wants to gain perspectives from which to gauge the significance and meaning of local and regional developments.

If the structure of this volume follows a British rather than a four-nations approach, the ultimate aim of this volume is the same as the one edited by Schulze eleven years ago: it wants to inform German historians with an interest in British labour and social history about recent developments and encourage co-operation, adaptation and cross-fertilisation across national boundaries. As the 1991 volume already contained an excellent introduction to the most important archives and libraries in Britain which specialise on aspects of labour history, I have not attempted to repeat this information here but would refer those who are interested to the older volume. It should however be noted that the archives of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) are now part of the holdings of the National Museum of Labour History in Manchester which also contains the Labour Party archives.[8] Furthermore, those parts of the TUC archives which are not part of the Modern Records Centre at the University of Warwick are now held by the University of North London.[9] For British readers interested in following German publications about British labour and social history, an excellent source and starting point are the bibliographies published by the German Historical Institute in London.[10] German-language research on Britain brings me to the language of this volume. Some German readers might wonder about the fact that all of the articles here are in English. I know of no professional German historian who cannot at

8 For details see http://www.nmlhweb.org/archive.htm. An excellent and up-to-date guide on national, regional and local archives for the Labour Party is provided by Stephen Bird and Christian Handschell, '100 Jahre Britische Labour Party. Grundzüge der Quellenlage', in: *Mitteilungsblatt des Instituts für soziale Bewegungen* 24 (2000), pp. 205–223.

9 For details on the Warwick holdings see http://modernrecords.warwick.ac.uk/mrchac.shtml, and for North London, which mainly contains library material collected by the TUC up until the end of 1993 see http://www.unl.ac.uk/library/tuc/.

10 The *Bibliography: Research on British History in the Federal Republic of Germany* has been published in five editions since 1983. The last one was published in the spring of 2002. They are now also available online at http://www.ghil.co.uk/def/def.html.

least read English, which, for better or worse, is increasingly becoming the lingua franca of the international scholarly community. Certainly German historians with a special interest in Britain will be able to speak good English. Hence I regard a translation of these articles into German unnecessary.

The first section of this volume deals with the four pillars of the British labour movement: political organisations, trade unions, the co-operative movement and the friendly societies. 2000 saw the centenary of the Labour Party which produced a flurry of publications attempting to provide surveys, syntheses and interpretations of one hundred years of Labour Party history. In his thoughtful survey of this literature Lawrence Black argues that the increased contemporary interest in 'New Labour' also contributed to a revived interest in the history of the major working-class party in Britain. Thus Blairism led to a string of publications on the importance of party leaders and leadership more generally for Labour, while New Labour ideas made it seem worthwhile to pay more attention to the political ideas which had informed Labour Party policies in the past. Overall, the more recent literature on the Labour Party shows a distinct tendency to move away from seeing its politics rooted in class relationships and instead it emphasises the relative autonomy of politics from social history. The new interest in Labour history stands in marked contrast to the very modest efforts of the current Labour Party to celebrate its centenary. New Labour has a problematic relationship to its past, as many of the traditions that it could refer to have been tainted ones for the party. Few like to remember the 'traitor' Ramsay MacDonald who sent the party into the political wilderness in the early 1930s; few like to think too hard about Tony Crosland and Hugh Gaitskell who are widely regarded as having failed to modernise the party in the 1950s and 1960s; and any reference to the Gang of Four who split the party and formed the breakaway Social Democratic Party (SDP) in 1981 is still a taboo subject in contemporary Labour discourse.

New Labour's problems with usable pasts is also the starting point for Steven Fielding's stinging critique of much of the older labour history in Britain. New Labour, he argues, is in fact not as new as left-wing critics of the contemporary Labour government and New Labour ideologues would want us to believe. Blairism is linked to a variety of revisionist tendencies, policies and politicians in Labour's past who have argued for a long time for a synthesis between the values of Liberalism and of Social Democracy – among them MacDonald, Gaitskell, Crosland and the Gang of Four. Yet this is a part of a Labour history which does not fit what Fielding castigates as the avantgardism of left-of-centre Labour historians. Their idea that the party had to lead and influence the masses was not only an illusion that they shared with left-wingers inside the Labour Party; it also led historians to produce detailed studies of small left-of-centre organisations and their politics. The Socialist Labour Party, Social Democratic Federation and the Communist Party were, for the most part, marginal to the history of the British labour movement, yet their histories are superbly researched. A concentration on left-wing organisations, according to Fielding, suited the political predilections of left-wing historians and resulted in an almost complete blindness in facing historical and

political realities. It is revealing to look back to Arthur McIvor's excellent review of labour historiography in 1991: McIvor points out that the politics of many academics became more radical during the 1960s, and concludes his own survey arguing that 'the history of the labour movement is necessarily questioning the dominant ideas and values of capitalist society'.[11] Arguably fewer British labour historians would now share this assumption, as the 1990s have seen a de-radicalisation of academic positions. Today a more moderate, more sceptical and more nuanced tone dominates the debates on Labour's past and presence. Fielding himself has been a prominent member of an extremely productive group of Labour historians who have attempted to move labour history closer to the political centre over the last decade. The 'new' Labour history starts from the assumption that a political party has to keep the interests and needs of the voters uppermost on its mind, if it wants to be successful. The mistrust and even contempt of the Labour Party for many of its voters explains in large measure the relative dominance of the Conservatives over twentieth-century politics in Britain. Just as the contempt of Labour historians for the working classes led them to focus on left-wing avantgarde organisations which had been marginal to working-class politics but were closer to their own political beliefs.

If there is much re-assessment of the history of Labour politics in Britain, Labour's foreign policies have also come in for a good deal of careful analysis in the 1990s. John Callaghan provides a survey of the foreign policy traditions of the Labour Party in the twentieth century. Like Fielding in the domestic sphere and Alastair Reid vis-à-vis the trade unions, he emphasises the strong influence of Liberal ideas on Labour's foreign policy conceptions. Labour's early rejection of secret diplomacy, ideas about the reform of Empire and its own brand of left-wing patriotism have all been indebted to the Liberal heritage. It is no co-incidence that Tony Blair is frequently compared in his foreign policies to William Ewart Gladstone. If Fielding provides us with an agenda for a revamped domestic Labour history, Callaghan points the way forwards for a new history of Labour's foreign policies. So far, too many foreign policy studies have focussed on Labour governments. They tend to emphasise their pragmatic policy-making and downgrade the impact of socialist ideologies on Labour's foreign policy. By contrast, Callaghan calls for a greater recognition of the influence of intellectual traditions on Labour's foreign policy ideas. Labour's ambiguous positioning between pro- and anti-Americanism after 1945 as well as its complex attitude towards the Cold War cannot be adequately understood without reference to ideas.

As if to underline Fielding's argument about avantgardism, Communist Party history in the 1990s is positively booming. One of the leading scholars on British and international Communism of a younger generation, Kevin Morgan, provides us with a masterly survey of the renaissance of scholarship on British Communism following the opening of the archives in Eastern Europe generally and Moscow in particular. Morgan confirms that interest in the

11 Arthur McIvor, 'Die Forschung zur Geschichte der Arbeiterschaft und der Arbeiterbewegung in England: Ein Überblick über die jüngsten Entwicklungen', in: *Mitteilungsblatt des Instituts zur Erforschung der europäischen Arbeiterbewegung* 11 (1991), pp. 17 and 35.

small Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) was traditionally strong among labour historians, as many of them had close affiliations or at least considerable sympathies for Communism. Yet Morgan highlights the successful attempts by Communist Party historians to relate the history of the party to developments in wider British social history. The complex relationship between Communists and other social and political activists was for a long time the focus of Communist Party history in Britain. This strong national contextualisation of the CPGB was also, according to Morgan, the reason why British Communist Party historians reacted relatively late towards the opening of the archives in Moscow. Certainly, British labour history did not see the kind of acerbic and bitter debates about Communist pasts that became a characteristic of German, French and Italian Communist Party historiography of the 1990s. In contrast to French and German labour history, it remains largely unthinkable for British labour historians to discuss Communism and fascism under the label of totalitarianism. Yet discussions about the relationship between the Moscow centre and the British periphery were not entirely absent from the literature: Morgan is critical of attempts to focus Communist Party history on centre-periphery relationships. For him these debates have reached a dead end, as there is almost consensus today that especially smaller Communist Parties at times had considerable national autonomy in their decision-making whilst the overall hegemony of the Moscow centre over all important decision-making processes is also beyond doubt. To overcome the relative insularity and inwardness of much of the British research on British Communism, Morgan calls explicitly for more comparative history to find answers to the question of what was specific about British Communism's social structure, political culture, ideas and practice.

If Black and Fielding both emphasise the importance of revisionist perspectives on Labour Party history in the 1990s, Alastair Reid delivers a systematic analysis of a similarly strong revisionism in the field of trade union history. Once again revisionism hinges on perspectives which give class much less prominence as an explanatory factor for trade union development. The formation and maintenance of effective unions is not now regarded as the almost inevitable outcome of objective class relationships. Instead new work on the trade unions has emphasised that trade union unity had to be constantly remade through acts of symbolic politics. The idea of the forward march of increasingly socialist trade unions has given way to a thorough discussion of diverse interests of different sets of workers. An assumption of heterogeneity rather than homogeneity is now the starting point for many studies on trade unionism. In his article Reid distinguishes between craft unions, seniority unions and federal unions which all served different constituencies and had very different outlooks. Whereas previously historians tended to overemphasise the influence of small socialist groups of trade unionists in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, more recent research has highlighted the importance of the liberal and voluntarist mainstream. Over the *long durée* Reid emphasises the defensive character of British trade unionism. The aggressive militancy of the 1960s and 1970s appear here as the exception to the rule. For Reid the long continuities in trade union behaviour over the whole of the twentieth century is striking – an argument which leads him to doubt the impact of Thatcherism on British industrial relations in the

1980s. Whilst this is an intriguing argument which Reid will hopefully develop further in his forthcoming general book on British unionism, scheduled for publication in 2003, a recent project on the importance of ideas of social partnership in different West European states, indicates a different conclusion. Here Britain appears as the only West European state, where notions of social partnership seem totally discredited and where there are no mechanisms in place for policy concertation.[12] It would seem obvious to explain this at least partly with a fundamental restructuring of industrial relations by the Thatcher governments.

Whilst the trade unions, the Labour Party and the CPGB have been at the very heart of labour history for decades, the next two articles deal comprehensively with what have often been the neglected two pillars of the British labour movement: the co-operative movement and the friendly societies. Once again it was an anniversary which sparked off historiographical interest in the co-operative movement: in 1994 one could celebrate 150 years of co-operative societies since the foundation of the first co-op by the Rochdale pioneers in 1844. Chris Wrigley identifies twelve broad thematic threads that structure the existing research on the co-operative movement in Britain. First, co-operative history as business history has developed strongly in line with a renewed contemporary interest in Social Democratic political thought (as discussed also in Edmund Neill's chapter) to develop alternative economic ideas to the predominance of liberal capitalism. Secondly, the gendering of labour history (as discussed also in Karen Hunt's chapter) has produced many new insights into a movement which gave women more than usual scope for agency. Thirdly, regional diversity in the character of the co-op movement is an important theme with much research concentrated on the strongholds of the co-op in Northern England and the East Midlands. The fourth and fifth thematic threads are closely related: they encompass studies which look at representations and the language of the co-op movement. In these contributions we find the kind of influence of postmodernist theories that Andy Croll talks about in his article. Sixthly, much has been written about the influence of the ideals and values of the co-operators: were dividends and economic performance more important than notions of mutual support and solidarity? Wrigley is sceptical of approaches which one-sidedly try to de-emphasise the idealism present in the co-operative movement. Seventhly, the influence of the co-op on British politics forms a focus for debate from their very active contribution in the post-Chartist era to the foundation of their own political party in 1917. Eighthly, an emerging broader history of consumption in Britain[13] has contributed to an upswing in research on co-operatives which are, after all, an integral part of any history of consumption. Ninethly, studies on the relationship between trade unions and the co-ops have shown that the latter often delivered crucial support in times of strike, while, tenthly, studies on the co-op culture have revealed the important

12 Stefan Berger and Hugh Compston (eds), *Policy Concertation and Social Partnership in Western Europe. Lessons for the 21st Century* (Oxford, 2002).

13 The funding councils AHRB and ESRC are together funding a £5 million research programme entitled 'Cultures of Consumption'. 20 to 25 projects will be selected in 2002 with research commencing in 2003. The aim is to analyse the producer/consumer cycle and the impact of consumerism on society. For details see the AHRB and ESRC websites: http://www.ahrb.ac.uk and http://www.esrc.ac.uk/esrccontent/researchfunding/cultures_of_consumption.asp.

contribution of the co-ops to a wider labour movement culture. The final two threads of Wrigley's historiographical review are made up of explicitly comparative studies and of those works which investigate the international dimension of the co-operative movement.

Wrigley's emphasis on the value of local studies of co-ops is in tune with Dan Weinbren's championing of local perspectives on friendly societies over the past ten to fifteen years. The renewed interest in the history of friendly societies, like that in the history of the Labour Party, is also connected to contemporary political ambitions to revive the notion of voluntarism as an alternative to the centralised and bureaucratised state. Most historians of the friendly societies have been delivering ammunition for this kind of argument by emphasising their achievements and successes. They set out to demonstrate the diversity and complexity of friendly societies but also stress that they were not necessarily an exclusive domain of skilled male workers but incorporated also poorer workers and women. Like Black, Reid and Fielding, Weinbren takes older histories of friendly societies to task for using concepts of class too mechanistically. To describe friendly societies as working-class organisations hides more than it reveals, as there were complex social hierarchies within the friendly societies including various forms of social and political patronage. Furthermore Weinbren emphasises that newer studies of friendly societies have located the origins of these organisations in medieval guilds and non-conformist religious organisations about a century earlier than previously assumed. Myths and rituals were of great importance to the cohesion and success of friendly societies as were kinship ties for the recruitment of additional members.

The second section of this volume attempts to put the labour history of the last decade into the context of developments in the realm of the broader social history of the working class. Not only in Britain but generally in labour history, the 1990s were characterised by increased attention to identities which often rivalled the pre-eminence of class or, at best, accompanied class identities: gender, religion, and ethnicity/race are particularly prominent in this respect.[14] De-emphasising class for the benefit of producing a more complex picture of working-class identities has already been a strong topic in the chapters on labour movement history. It is also extensively discussed by Andy Croll's thought-provoking piece about the influence of postmodernism on British social history. Divisive theoretical debates about postmodernism and history dominated many of the leading British history journals in the 1990s. Contributors often went for an all or nothing approach which either called for a complete renewal of history-writing or rejected postmodernism lock, stock and barrel. Croll can demonstrate convincingly that a younger generation of historians productively engaged with postmodernism and eclectically and selectively adopted insights from postmodernism to guide their own historical research. A productive synthesis of modern and postmodern history is taking shape – something that had already been demanded by some of the contributors to the debate in the 1990s.[15]

14 For a masterly summary of the state of labour history at the beginning of the new millenium see Marcel van der Linden and Lex Heerma van Voss (eds), *Class and Other Identities. Gender, Religion and Ethnicity in the Writing of European Labour History* (Oxford, 2002).

15 Geoff Eley, 'Is all the World a Text? From Social History to the History of Society two Decades Later', in:

Few British historians have been willing to accept the radical core of postmodernism, i.e. the assumption that there is no social reality but only language which constructs social reality. But several historians have accepted the idea that language is not a mere mirror of social reality. They do not have to deny the existence of a social reality to accept the notion that this reality is accessible only through language. Language can construct this reality differently but language cannot normally invent a social reality from nothing. Postmodernism makes it more difficult to speak of 'historical truth', but it does not prevent historians from falsifying theories and interpretations. History does not become arbitrary, it only becomes more complex and ambiguous. The denial of social reality as such can only be found on the (theoretical) margins of postmodernism and it has to remain doubtful whether such ideas can be made productive for the practice of historical research.

Postmodernist criticism in Britain focused very largely on Marxist perspectives which reflects the strength of Marxism in post-war British historiography. Yet Croll rightly points out that their critique is equally valid concerning non-Marxist historians. In Germany and Austria, where Weberian social theory was far more important for the kind of political social history which emerged from the 1960s onwards, postmodern approaches have also brought fresh perspectives.[16] Marxist (or for that matter Weberian) notions of class have been among the preferred objects of demolition for postmodernist historians who have criticised an often exclusive concern with class in modernist histories and instead opted for more pluralist approaches which highlighted the diversity and complexity of identities.

And yet, despite all the beating that class as a conceptual tool has taken recently, what was arguably the most influential book on modern English social history in the 1990s[17] puts class centre-stage in its understanding of English society between 1918 and 1951. The first five chapters (205 pages) of Ross McKibbin's *Classes and Cultures* deal with the upper class, the middle class and the working class respectively, and the remaining eight chapters on education and social mobility, religion, sexuality and morality, sports, music, cinema, radio and literature all testify to the overriding importance of class for all areas of social life in England. Class consciousness, McKibbin tells us, was acutely developed in all social classes in England.

Terence J. McDonald (ed.), *The Historic Turn in the Human Sciences* (Ann Arbor, 1996), pp. 193–244; Stefan Berger, 'The Rise and Fall of „Critical" Historiography? Some Reflections on the Historiographical Agenda of the Left in Britain, France and Germany at the End of the Twentieth Century', in: *Europa. European Review of History* 3 (1996), pp. 213–232.

16 German introductions to some of the key postmodern texts which largely come from France, Britain and the US sold very well in Germany. See in particular Christoph Conrad and Martina Kessel (eds), *Geschichte schreiben in der Postmoderne* (Stuttgart, 1994), and eidem (eds), *Kultur und Geschichte. Neue Einblicke in eine alte Beziehung* (Stuttgart, 1998). The Austrian journal *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* has been amongst the most open-minded among the professional German-language journals in reflecting the international debates on postmodernism and the 'cultural turn'.

17 R.W. Johnson, 'Mister Sheppard to you', in: *London Review of Books*, 21 May 1998 has argued that McKibbin's book 'has, at a stroke, changed the historiographical landscape.' An excellent assessment of McKibbin's work is also given by John Callaghan, 'Ross McKibbin and the British Working Class: Labour Without Socialism', in: J. Callaghan, S. Fielding and S. Ludlam (eds), *Approaches to Labour: Studies on the Labour Party and Labour History* (Manchester, 2003, forthcoming).

From it followed class segregation which intensified in the years between 1918 and 1951, as the middle classes became increasingly hostile to the working class. Where the middle classes were plagued by fear of loss of status and loathing for those socially below them, the working classes make an appearance as defensive to the point of defeatism and introverted to the point of fatalism. Class deference and the maintenance of social oligarchies were crucial to the success of the Conservatives in dominating politics in the interwar period. The different class cultures in England are discussed by McKibbin in great detail, and no one among his reviewers has faulted him as a social historian. Where his book did attract some criticism was where he attempted to link this social history with the political history of England. This is also why his article in this collection is concerned with rethinking the relationship between social and political history. He argues that the basic social divide between working and middle class structured politics in the pre- and inter-war eras alike. Furthermore McKibbin sees the politics of the 1930s, and especially the political dominance of the Conservatives, following logically from social changes in the composition of the middle classes, new forms of bourgeois sociability and the bridging of the former divide between Liberal and Conservative middle classes. Yet he makes one important correction to the framework presented in *Classes and Cultures* in that he now argues that a connection between social change and political change was largely absent in the time between 1940 and 1945. Political developments, in particular the need to bind the Labour Party into the war-time alliance and the resulting legitimacy conveyed upon Labour, led to declining working-class support for the Conservatives in the 1945 general election. McKibbin thus underlines the importance of social history for political history but at the same time insists on the relative autonomy of political events from social structures. Political history cannot always be read off social history, but political change can frequently only be explained by reference to social conditions. Given this theoretical positioning, it is hardly an accident that McKibbin's work has become somewhat of an inspiration to many of the 'new' Labour historians referred to in Fielding's article.

If debates about concepts of class have been to the fore in both British social and labour history, the same can hardly be said about developments in British political theory in the 1990s. Here all eyes were directed towards attempts to overcome the dominance of Thatcherism in the 1980s. Edmund Neil traces what can be described as the renaissance of Social Democratic ideals and values in the 1990s. The late 1980s and early 1990s were characterised by attempts to challenge the intellectual hegemony of the new right. Left-wingers often found that difficult, as they shared some of the basic assumptions of Thatcherism. They, like Thatcher, characterised the 1960s and 1970s as decades in which trade unions had been powerful and a Social Democratic state guaranteed welfare for all whilst libertarian values conquered British society. Hence it was ultimately through the works of two renegades that Thatcherism was effectively overcome. By the mid-1990s John Gray and Anthony Giddens had provided alternative models to Thatcherism which carefully weighed up the strength and weaknesses of new right thinking. Neill stresses how close Gray's and Giddens's positions often are, but he also points out that ultimately they come from very different backgrounds. Gray was a Thatcherite who developed grave doubts about neo-liberalism, while Giddens was a Social

Democrat, who became disillusioned with some of the key tenets of classical post-1950s Social Democracy. As renegades they both indeed were looking for a 'third way' between neoliberalism and Social Democracy. However, by the end of the 1990s, political theorists such as Michael Freeden and Stuart White were questioning their critique of social democracy and instead pointed out that a reformist social democracy had already achieved the fusion of social democratic and liberal principles that the third way was allegedly all about. Whether their renewed emphasis on old social democratic ideas such as social equality and redistribution of wealth will have an impact on Labour's outlook in quite the same way as Giddens's ideas had an impact on Blairism has to remain an open question.

Finally, Karen Hunt asks whether labour history has become more gender-aware in the 1990s. Reviewing the relevant literature and commenting in particular on conferences organised under the auspices of the SSLH in the 1990s and articles published in *Labour History Review*, Hunt's answers are not too optimistic, although, undoubtedly, gender as a category of analysis has become much more prominent. She identifies a range of promising avenues which a gender-aware labour history of the future could usefully explore, such as research on consumption and on the 'everyday', studies which analyse the gendering of skill and definitions of masculinity and new approaches to political history (especially in the areas of suffrage history and women's relationship to gendered notions of citizenship) as well as the history of imperialism and race. Hunt is sceptical of the positive impact of postmodernism on on a more gender-aware labour history, arguing that many postmodernist historians have been uninterested in exploring the gendered nature of language. Overall, she pleads for a more inclusive labour history which takes seriously the complex conceptual challenges of gender.

The SSLH surfaces not only in Hunt's contribution but throughout this volume, and it is without doubt the oldest and most important institution promoting the study of labour history in Britain. It is curious that no one has so far written an account of the Society's history. While this gap remains to be filled, it is fitting that this edition of the journal should finish with an interview of the current chair of the SSLH. John Halstead confirms the importance of adult education and university expansion in the 1960s for the flowering of labour history's fortunes. The strength of Communist labour history is also underlined by Halstead. When the influential CPGB's Historians' Group split in 1956 and the SSLH was founded in 1960, the Society became a new forum for many left-of-centre historians. The overall strength of a Communist historiography in Britain should not deflect from the presence of anti-Communism in British academe. The story of Sidney Pollard, as recalled by Halstead, is a timely reminder that Communist historians and even, as in Pollard's case, historians with a Communist past, often had a difficult stance in Western societies. Pollard wrote himself of how the head of his department at the LSE, T.S. Ashton, warned prospective employers that Pollard was a Communist and how therefore he was turned down again and again for assistant lectureships at various British universities.[18] Arguably it was one of the strengths of British

18 Sidney Pollard, 'In Search of a Social Purpose', in: Peter Alter (ed.), *Out of the Third Reich. Refugee Historians in Post-War Britain* (London, 1998), p. 205.

Communist historians to avoid sectarianism and instead demonstrate a willingness to co-operate fully within a SSLH which was a broad church when it came to political orientations of its members. The key issue in the early days of the Society was, in any case, not so much political orientation but rather the struggle of labour history to get established in the mainstream of British history. It helped that the 1960s were the heydays of social history.[19] Nevertheless, what Halstead refers to as 'history proper' put up a fight against labour history and its representatives. In the ensuing struggle for recognition historians such as Asa Briggs were so important to labour history because they were already part of 'history proper' and could give credibility to the whole project. All of this is a reminder of how status-conscious and hierarchical British universities were in the 1950s and early 1960s – with memories of 'Lucky Jim' floating by.[20] Part and parcel of becoming respectable and coming of age in the 1960s was also the development of a strong professional self-understanding which shines through many of Halstead's statements. It involved a rejection of amateurism, the celebration of the historian's craftsmanlike qualities and the explicit separation of politics from 'scientific' historical work. Overall labour history has undoubtedly been successful in getting itself established in the mainstream of British history – to a degree, in fact, where, as we can see from several other contributions to this volume, it has become one of the favourite targets of those who have attacked the lack of originality and innovation in British history.

Yet, as the historiographical surveys in this volume demonstrate, the last ten years have seen a wealth of methodologically challenging approaches as well as radical re-interpretations of former positions in labour history. Major syntheses stand next to pioneering new studies which have reconfigured the realm of labour history. It is particularly pleasing to see that comparative perspectives have become more prominent in the 1990s. Geoffrey Crossick has recently pointed out that the comparative method is only of peripheral importance to British historiography and only superficially anchored in the practice of British historical writing.[21] This may indeed be the case if compared to German history, where leading representatives of social history, such as Jürgen Kocka and Klaus Tenfelde, have for a long time practised what they preached and produced as well as encouraged much comparative labour history.[22] It is no mere co-incidence that some of the leading comparativists among the younger generation of German historians received their training as labour historians.[23] British labour historians

19 Jim Obelkevich, 'New Developments in History in the 1950s and 1960s', in: *Contemporary British History* 14 (2000), pp. 125–167.

20 Kingsley Amis, *Lucky Jim* (London, 1954), the classic 1950s campus novel which ridicules the class-ridden, provincial and authoritarian world of British academe.

21 Geoffrey Crossick, 'And what should they know of England? Die vergleichende Geschichtsschreibung im heutigen Großbritannien', in: Heinz-Gerhard Haupt and Jürgen Kocka (eds), *Geschichte und Vergleich: Ansätze und Ergebnisse international vergleichender Geschichtsschreibung* (Frankfurt/Main, 1996), pp. 61–76.

22 For an early survey which had considerable influence on a younger generation of labour historians see Klaus Tenfelde (ed.), *Arbeiter und Arbeiterbewegung im Vergleich* (Munich, 1986).

23 I am thinking here in particular of Thomas Welskopp who has written extensively on the theory of comparative studies and has also produced comparative history. See, for example, Thomas Welskopp, 'Stolpersteine auf dem Königsweg. Methodenkritische Anmerkungen zum internationalen Vergleich in

might be less theoretically aware, but there is a growing recognition of the helpfulness of comparative perspectives and a willingness to look beyond the British nation state in assessing labour history. Thus Black, for example, makes some intriguing remarks about Social Democratic parties on the continent having a stronger historical consciousness than the Labour Party. The construction of usable pasts by diverse working-class parties in Europe would certainly be worth a major comparative historical study. Morgan explicitly calls for the development of a comparative framework of study for Communist Party histories. And Wrigley makes some perceptive comments on the exceptionalism of the British co-op movement's liberal orientation in the late nineteenth century as compared to the earlier and stronger influences of socialism on the French and German co-operators. Fielding's contribution here is more concerned with re-interpretations in current labour historiography in Britain, but it should be noted that his own strong interest in comparative history has contributed significantly to his stimulating critique of the concept of 'labourism' in British labour history.[24] One of McKibbin's essays in comparative labour history has become a 'classic' of its kind.[25] Overall, many British labour historians have endorsed the value of the comparative method as a major tool to shed light on what was specific about the British labour movement.[26] While there is good comparative work focussing on non-English-speaking countries, the deplorable state of the teaching of foreign languages in Britain means that often comparative work is focussed on English-speaking countries, where language is less of a barrier for comparison.[27]

der Gesellschaftsgeschichte', in: *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 35 (1995), pp. 339–367, and his monumental *Arbeit und Macht im Hüttenwerk. Arbeits- und industrielle Beziehungen in der deutschen und amerikanischen Eisen- und Stahlindustrie von den 1860er bis zu den 1930er Jahren* (Bonn, 1994). But see also, even earlier, Christiane Eisenberg, *Deutsche und englische Gewerkschaften. Entstehung und Entwicklung bis 1878 im Vergleich* (Göttingen, 1986). Both Welskopp and Eisenberg have studied with Kocka.

24 Steven Fielding, '"Labourism" and Locating the British Labour Party within the European Left', in: *Working Papers in Contemporary History and Politics* 11 (Salford, 1996).

25 Ross McKibbin, 'Why was there no Marxism in Great Britain?', in: *English Historical Review* 99 (1984), pp. 297–333.

26 Three recent monumental studies are Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy: The Left and the Struggle for Democracy in Europe, 1850–2000* (Oxford, 2002), Donald Sassoon, *One Hundred Years of Socialism. The West European Left in the Twentieth Century* (London, 1996), and Neville Kirk, *Labour and Society in Britain and the USA*, 2 vols (Aldershot, 1994). Other examples of recent comparative and international work by British labour historians includes: Tom Buchanan, *The Spanish Civil War and the British Labour Movement* (Cambridge, 1991); Christine Collette, *The International Faith. Labour's Attitudes to European Socialism, 1918–1939* (Aldershot, 1998); Gerd-Rainer Horn, *European Socialists Respond to Fascism. Ideology, Activism and Contingency in the 1930s* (Oxford, 1996); John N. Horne, *Labour at War. France and Britain 1914–1918* (Oxford, 1991), Karen Hunt, '"The Immense Meaning of It All": The Challenges of Internationalism for British Socialist Women Before the First World War', in: *Socialist History* 17 (2000), pp. 22–42; Duncan Tanner, 'The Development of British Socialism, 1900–1918', in: *Parliamentary History* 16 (1997), pp. 48–66; Chris Wrigley, 'Widening Horizons? British Labour and the Second International, 1893–1905', in: *Labour History Review* 58 (1993). This list would have to be substantially extended in a systematic review of comparative work on British labour history.

27 Stefan Berger, 'Guest editorial', in: *Socialist History* 17 (2000), entitled *International and Comparative Labour History*, pp. v–xii.

If it is gratifying to see the increase in comparative labour history in Britain over the past ten to fifteen years, it is equally positive to note that the ties between Labour history and social history remain as strong as ever. British labour history was never exclusively hung up on organisational history, but, instead, often combined the organisational and social history of the working classes in exemplary fashion.[28] Overall, the articles in this collection are testimony to the productivity and liveliness of debates and controversies of British labour history in the 1990s and early 2000s.

28 The tone was set by the past masters of labour history in Britain, such as Eric Hobsbawm, E.P. Thompson and John Saville and it has been emulated by subsequent generations of labour historians. For recent examples see Alan Campbell, *The Scottish Miners 1874–1939*, 2 vols (Aldershot, 2000), and Chris Williams, *Democratic Rhondda: Politics and Society 1885–1951* (Cardiff, 1996).