

REVIEW ESSAY

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SWISS LABOUR HISTORY

GRUNER, ERICH. *Arbeiterschaft und Wirtschaft in der Schweiz 1880–1914*. Band 1. Demographische, wirtschaftliche und soziale Basis und Arbeitsbedingungen. Band 2. Erster Halbband: Gewerkschaften und Arbeitgeber auf dem Arbeitsmarkt. Zweiter Halbband: Streiks, Kampf ums Recht und Verhältnis zu andern Interessengruppen. Band 3. Entstehung und Entwicklung der schweizerischen Sozialdemokratie. Ihr Verhältnis zu Nation, Internationalismus, Bürgertum, Staat und Gesetzgebung, Politik und Kultur. Chronos Verlag, Zürich 1988; 624 pp.; 1661 pp.; 968 pp. S.fr.286.00.

In 1968 Erich Gruner published an 1100-page, definitive study on the working class in Switzerland in the nineteenth century (*Die Arbeiter in der Schweiz im 19. Jahrhundert*). But, ending in the 1880s, it did not cover the whole of the nineteenth century. The subsequent period from 1880 until the First World War has now been dealt with by the author in this even more extensive, three-volume study of over 3200 pages. In this case Gruner is no longer the sole author: Hans Rudolf Wiedmer co-wrote volume 1, Andreas Balthasar and Hans Hirter volume 2 and Hermann Dommer volume 3. In addition the author also relies on more than a dozen collaborators, from whom some lengthier contributions are included in full. This form of cooperation indicates a new research concept, which recognizes that it is no longer possible for a social history of this scope to be undertaken by a single author but can only be completed as a collective effort. This also means, however, that to do justice to the various approaches the conceptual and methodological framework has been set more broadly. In the preface Gruner announces a 'theoretical and methodological pluralism', which he would like to place "in a broadly conceived Weberian ideal type", while also taking account of Marx. This ultimately somewhat contradictory approach is reflected in the work insofar as the integration of the constituent parts into a whole is not easily achieved.

Volume 1 describes the demographic, economic and social base as well as working conditions between 1880 and 1914. Gruner proceeds from a model of the socialization of all social relationships, in which social groups are

increasingly compelled to organize themselves, thereby giving up their room for manoeuvre. This occurred against the background of a downward spiral in the economic cycle in the early 1880s and an upturn and the second industrial revolution from 1885 onwards. The process of modernization precipitated by this development decisively influenced the structure of the labour force, and, in connection with an increasing mobility and internationalization of the labour market, also radicalized the burgeoning labour movement.

The material foundations of this development are presented in the traditional manner, including an analysis of population movements and a short, 18-page overview of the economic situation. Here Gruner stresses the transition from the internally to the externally led business cycle, as reflected in the growth of the Swiss economy's export quota from 25 percent to 40 percent – in other words, economic growth in Switzerland became export-oriented. The development of Switzerland as an international capital market, the first indications of which can be observed at this time, is dealt with only briefly at this stage, while the issues regarding industrial development and capital requirements are discussed in full in volume 2. Quite rightly volume 1 dwells at length on the development of the economic sectors and working conditions. The statistical material presented is impressive and will doubtless form an indispensable source for future studies for some considerable time. (Owing to the paucity of statistical source material, the calculation of movements of real wages and the cost of living remains a problem. Gruner's calculations of price developments, which rely on the work of Hansjörg Siegenthaler (Zurich), have unfortunately already been called into question by subsequent studies.)

It is noteworthy that a significant factor, namely the role of the bourgeois state (in no way a neutral force), is referred to only in passing or scattered in the various chapters of volume 1. In the preface Gruner regrets that the history of labour has not been linked more directly with "the" history of the Swiss bourgeoisie. The omission seems to me regrettable indeed on two counts: for one, economic development, the labour market and working conditions were closely linked to the strategy and objectives of the bourgeois elite; and for another, the basic values and perspectives which imbued politics and culture, and deeply influenced the mentality of working people in Switzerland more than elsewhere, were largely determined by the middle classes. This becomes very clear in the history of the *Grütliverein*, numerically the strongest formation within the very heterogeneous Swiss labour movement. For instance, it is stressed in volume 3 how the social activities of these clubs, their annual festivals and the formation of subsidiary cultural organizations occurred largely within the framework of bourgeois-patriotic festivals. Yet Gruner also repeatedly repudiates, in surprisingly strong words, the claim of bourgeois dominance. It emerges that a strong conser-

vative, even reactionary, trend began to take hold in the period under discussion. Several longer but scattered sections, such as the chapter on employers' organizations in volume 2 and the discussion of the self-perception and value system of the bourgeoisie in chapter 8 of volume 3, provide extremely valuable analyses of this aspect. But section 811, intended as a theoretical introduction, provides no more than a descriptive summation of some research approaches. In general Gruner posits the prevalence in Switzerland of a distinctly bourgeois class consciousness, which expressed itself in a bourgeois political bloc and a class state. His conclusions will at least explode some of the myths about the idyllic Swiss democracy, something which is long overdue. But the study lacks a synthetic presentation of the development and functions of the bourgeois political system and its ideological conceptions. This could present some problems, especially for those readers not very familiar with Swiss political history. I would recommend readers to peruse, after volume 1, chapter 8 of volume 3 before turning to the history of the Swiss labour movement proper.

Volume 2, consisting of two parts totaling 1661 pages, is primarily concerned with the union sphere and industrial disputes. A long theoretical chapter, which also refers to the situation in other countries, provides important interpretive models. These are further developed in the later empirical studies. Gruner sees a double, conflicting development, in which both reformism and a "neo-revolutionarism" come into play. The state too reveals two sides, acting both as an ally of capital and as a melting pot of diverse class interests. The employers' organizations were able to exploit these conditions most effectively, with especially bourgeois politics – far more so than was the case for the labour movement – coming under the influence of industrial and land-owning pressure groups. Some characteristics specific to the Swiss trade-union movement emerged at this time: the segmented parochialism of the small state, which acted as a fateful structural constraint; the division of the labour market on regional and cultural lines as well as the massive influx of foreign workers, which prevented a rational organization (in fact, in this context one should really use the term segregation); and the system of direct democracy, which largely concealed the class-conflict-based character of the bourgeoisie. Even so, the trade unions must be seen as the dynamic, even revolutionary, force within the Swiss labour movement of this period. Two aspects in particular come to the fore: firstly, the reliance on the strike weapon, an important means of mobilization, pursued primarily by the foreign, politically disenfranchised workers (above all the Italian construction workers); and secondly, the emergence of the workers' unions (*Arbeiterunionen*), local, trade-union-inspired entities, as the most powerful political forces of the working class.

The significance of the year 1880, which sets one of the chronological parameters of this study, lies partly in the fact that it saw the foundation of

the Swiss Trade Union Federation (*Schweizerische Gewerkschaftsbund – SGB*). It should also be borne in mind that around 1880 the secondary sector overtook the primary sector in economic importance, and that the number of immigrating foreign workers began to exceed the number of emigrating Swiss nationals. For more than a decade the SGB remained little more than a “hotchpotch of socially and politically interested debating clubs, more a loose confederation of disparate groups than a federation of trade unions”. The growth phase of the 1890s occurred largely under the sign of the debate over the use of the strike weapon. Between the turn of the century until the First World War the SGB developed into an umbrella organization on the model of its German counterpart. Gruner has long characterized this period with the explanatory phrase “the trade unions between reform and revolution”. This is certainly partly apt, because in the first decade of the twentieth century a vociferous faction gained ground which, taking its cue from the European-wide debate on the general and mass strike, hoped to push the trade unions towards a revolutionary political struggle. I would personally give greater weight to another trend, namely the structural differentiation of the state, economy and society around 1900 which led at all levels and in all areas to an enormous expansion and modernization at all forms of organization. This also signaled the culmination of a social activity which is in the main the expression of a complex, modern market-oriented and industrial society. Despite a certain degree of revolutionary impatience of some young turks, the Swiss trade unions were thoroughly integrated into this development. In my view it is not so much the challenge of ‘revolutionary’ conflict in the labour market but the trend towards participation in organized capitalism and in the social life of the modern mass society which defines the basic character of the union movement during this period.

The influence of the above-mentioned aspect on social developments is clearly brought out during the analysis of the second Workers’ Federation (*Arbeiterbund*), to which Gruner devotes a long chapter. The *Arbeiterbund* was founded not least because of the federal state’s need to set up a representative organization of the working class (similar to those already existing for other economic interest groups) which could undertake certain parastatal tasks, such as collecting statistics or making submissions on proposed legislation. Thus in 1887 government and parliament created a workers’ secretariat, which they legitimated to the working class by linking it to the *Arbeiterbund* in the same year. This large body consisted of a great variety of associations and organizations, in which the socialist element or even the SGB played only a marginal role.

Significantly, the secretariat was entrusted to the reformist and widely popular labour leader Herman Greulich, a German who had come to Switzerland in the 1860s. He played a dominant role in the labour move-

ment as a whole up to the outbreak of the First World War. Although in the long term it was not the *Arbeiterbund* but the SGB which took over the leadership of the union movement, the *Arbeiterbund* considerably shaped the mentality of the Swiss working class. Its activists included a large number of reformists, who in the following decades consistently advocated, with some success, the notions of cooperation with the liberal state and non-violent democratic confrontation with bourgeois society. In this context the importance of the cooperative movement, which had an affinity with the *Arbeiterbund*, should not be underestimated, although Gruner devotes only five pages to it.

The lion's share of the second volume consists of a detailed presentation of the trade and industrial unions as well as a much needed history of industrial conflicts. These two sections lend persuasive support to Gruner's thesis of the ambivalent development between neo-revolutionary action and the need to organize. They include some major contributions by Gruner's collaborators (Andreas Balthasar, Jean-Frédéric Gerber, Hans Hirter, Gisèle Habersaat-Ory and Hermann Dommer). The first of a long series of chapters focuses on the typographers' union, in recognition of its early emergence and level of organization (intermittently 80 percent among setters and printers, high in Swiss terms). Welcome in these monographs is a tendency to go beyond a mere history of the various organizations and include wide-ranging observations on the relevant economic sectors, labour-market conditions, wage trends, social amenities, political implications, technological change and occasionally even on leisure activities. Although it was as a rule difficult to organize female workers, ample attention is paid to the history of working women. And rightly so, of course, not only because this reserve of labour was important for many industries but also because it played a role in the employers' labour market strategy which should not be underestimated. In fact women comprised around a third of the active labour force, and around half of them found employment in manufacturing industry and trades (general figures are already cited in a chapter in volume 1). Because women consistently earned less than men – their wages fluctuated between 71 percent and 75 percent of men's during the 1890s – and also because women workers could be more easily laid off whenever the business cycle demanded it, female work played a significant role in the growth and expansion of Swiss industry.

The immensely detailed and informative section on the individual trade unions is without doubt an important and useful reference work. But the extremely fragmented presentation makes both a continuous and a cursory reading difficult. Overviews and summaries are by no means absent, but the tables (such as the one on union membership between 1904 and 1914 on p. 158 of volume 2) are not always easily understandable.

Chapter 7 of volume 2 deals with workers' unions (*Arbeiterunionen*), "union and party-political hermaphrodites", as the chapter heading describes them. At several points throughout the study reference is made to the pivotal importance of this specific form of organization. The workers' unions constituted the true socialist strongholds, on which the labour movement as a whole relied heavily and which made a major contribution to the consolidation of the Social Democratic Party (SPS) as a nationwide mass party. It was only within the social and cultural context of the workers' union that key socialist and marxist ideas began to have an impact.

The treatment of this central aspect of the labour movement of this period appears to have posed certain problems. Gruner devotes a 40-page chapter to the *Arbeiterunionen* in the trade-union section of his study (volume 2). In the introduction he refers to a further discussion of related aspects in volume 3. But at that point we are told that it would be a "cumbersome undertaking" to outline the history of the workers' unions on a canton-by-canton basis, especially because there are so many gaps in the source material. Unfortunately, then, we are confronted by the fact that a theme which is constantly referred to as a central element of the Swiss labour movement receives only relatively modest treatment. Certainly chapter 38 of volume 3, which deals with the cantonal *Grütlivereine* and the SPS branches, contains many insights into the role of the workers' unions. But we are given no overall view that does justice to the significance of these organizations. It should be borne in mind here that the most impressive and the most important general strike of the period, that in Zurich in 1912, was largely organized by the workers' union of that city and presented the high point of its activities. This strike is dealt with in some detail in two separate sections in volumes 2 and 3. But the fragmented presentation once again illustrates the problems associated with failing to present a complex history of closely linked themes in an integrated analysis.

Following the almost encyclopedic history of the strike movement, Gruner deals with the judicial and political aspects of labour conflicts, the financial situation of trade unions, and the relationships between employers and unions within the labour market. The important final chapter is devoted to the organizations representing the interests of farmers and industrialists. This also throws light on the bourgeois surroundings, whose significance for the history of the working class has been stressed above.

In the introduction to this final section (chapter 15) Gruner provides in a few words an important clue as to the reasons for the radicalization of the labour movement. "Unlike other interest groups", he writes, "the SGB was prevented from defending its interests even when it tried to share this task with the *Arbeiterbund*, the body officially legitimated for this purpose. The espousal of the 'proletarian class struggle' by the SGB in 1908 can in this sense be interpreted as a response to the fact that its activities were

condemned as illegitimate or even as illegal.” With such statements, which are repeated elsewhere, Gruner appears to point to a second development model. It might be summarized as follows: because the judicial and political practice of bourgeois society not only failed to take account of new social conditions, but beyond that also used the political system and the state power to oppose the labour movement, the bourgeois forces were able to open the class struggle from the “right” or from “above” while nominally observing formal democratic principles.

The third volume is primarily devoted to the development of the party and party doctrine. Once again Gruner also deals with theoretical aspects, going beyond the dichotomy of the Marx–Weber model to bring into play, among other approaches, the conflict theory of Lewis A. Coser. Overall, however, there unfolds the occasionally somewhat opaque paradigm of ambivalence, according to which the labour movement tended to oscillate between revolutionary-marxist aims and reformist practice. But whenever Gruner tackles individual themes, specifically adapted Weberian ideal types usually come to the fore. Although one cannot always wholly accept this approach, it does provide a structure to the text and facilitates comprehension.

At the beginning of the section on party history the historical development of the central pillars of the political labour movement are set out in two chapters. In recognition of its political and numerical weight, the *Grütliverein*, that heterogeneous movement composed of artisans and workers, is discussed first. Although the aims of the *Grütliverein* remained fixed in petty bourgeois reformist liberalism and although it proved unable to put its stamp on the development of the labour movement in the long term, its large membership and widely dispersed network of activists contributed decisively to the formation of the Social Democratic Party. Until the merger between the SPS and the *Grütliverein* in 1901 the latter had overshadowed the former in both organizational structure and political presence. This observation needs to be qualified, however, in that especially in the 1890s several local workers’ unions began to formulate militant socialist policies and, since they were usually affiliated to the SPS, thereby exercised a major influence on this as yet rather incoherent body. Incidentally, Gruner goes against the current fashion of dating the origins of the party to 1888 – its centenary was celebrated with great pomp last year – by setting the foundation in 1880. The SPS admittedly remained a wholly inconsequential institution until the reorganization of 1888, but, as Gruner points out, it did not exactly have an earth-shattering impact in the 1890s either. Gruner stresses the heterogeneity of the party programme at this time and the confused nature of developments. So a conceptually based party history of the 1880s and 1890s is still outstanding (as is a similarly based general Swiss history of this period).

The analysis regains its sharpness with the subsequent discussion of the strike movement launched just before the turn of the century – which in my view should not only be set against a background of economic development and inflation but also in relation to the reorganization of bourgeois forces in the 1890s. Apart from the further development of the SPS, marked by the polarization between a right and a left wing, Gruner goes on to discuss in detail contacts with the international labour movement and anarchist tendencies. As mentioned earlier, volume 3 finishes with two chapters dealing with bourgeois society and the federal government's minimal social policies.

Gruner's study belongs without doubt to the greatest achievements of Swiss historiography of the twentieth century. Thanks to this mammoth work it will no longer be possible to write a conscientious history of Switzerland without giving the working class and the class struggle a central role. These three volumes make available a wealth of detailed material, which provide a near-inexhaustible source of information for further studies for many years to come. And, not least, in the theoretical introductions and in the often critical judgements and conclusions Gruner offers many new ideas which certainly enrich future research. Furthermore, this work constitutes a comprehensive encyclopedia, easily accessible thanks to its extensive index of names and topics. And the list of original source material allows one to familiarize oneself with the most important archives and their collections.

With regard to the latter it should be noted, however, that some important documents have not been listed. The Schweizerische Sozialarchiv in Zurich, for instance, has copies of the minutes of the meetings of the *Eintracht* workers' union, which Gruner refers to repeatedly, as well as the highly interesting minutes of the meetings of the executive and delegate conferences of the Zurich workers' union. So future researchers will still have to conduct their own searches for source material. As regards the bibliography, which is very extensive, one can always argue about the selection made in the light of the surfeit of available studies. The reader should be aware, though, that even some important contributions fail to find a mention, while some of those mentioned have only limited relevance.

The main problem with this massive work lies in the organization and arrangement of the material, which is admittedly almost unmanageable. Gruner has opted not only for a complex basic division but also for a thorough subdivision into small and very small chapters. And the statistical tables contain a wealth of detail but are not always as clear as they might be. All this leaves an impression that the work lacks a synthesis that would facilitate understanding. Moreover, the methodological pluralism consciously chosen by Gruner can lead to sudden switches of paradigms, which

only exacerbate the fragmentation. The question also arises whether the frequent theoretical insertions do not occasionally move too far away from the subject matter, whether, in other words, they really elucidate the subsequent empirical studies. However, I would like to stress that these criticisms are not of a fundamental nature. They point to a weakness, which one suspects may be unavoidable in a study of this scope.

The fragmentation of specific subject matters and the duplication of references arises from the same complex of problems. This is no doubt inherent in the subject matters themselves. A strike, for instance, is both a union struggle and a political event, and, given the general structure of this work, will therefore have to be discussed in both volume 2 and 3. But this fragmentation means that certain subjects lack a coherent presentation or are even approached from contradictory angles. A degree of duplication is probably also unavoidable. An example of this is provided by the Zurich general strike of 1912, to which a chapter is devoted both in volume 2 and in volume 3. The first version – written, incidentally, by one of the author's collaborators – stresses the united organization, with the membership of the strike committee being almost identical to that of the union committee; but the second version stresses the opposition between the union committee and the strike leadership in order to clarify an initial hypothesis. Once again I would not like to suggest that we are dealing here with profound differences in interpretation. This example is intended to illustrate the problems associated with the arrangement and presentation of such a bulk of material.

A few words, briefly, regarding the case studies in the smaller chapters. The footnotes, extensive but not excessive, as a rule contain only source references. No doubt all the important references are included. But understandably enough certain gaps can be found here as well. They show us that the research is by no means complete in all areas. Fortunately so, one is almost tempted to say, because in the perusal of this interesting, often brilliant and at times also polemical study one senses the authors' abiding deep commitment to the study of the history of the Swiss labour movement.

Postscript

A year after the publication of this work, Andreas Balthasar and Erich Gruner have published a companion volume of original documents on the history of the Swiss labour movement (*Soziale Spannungen – Wirtschaftlicher Wandel: Dokumente zur Schweiz zwischen 1880 und 1914*. Bubenber, Bern, 1989, S.fr. 65.00). The documents contained in this volume, around 450 in number, have been divided into three sections corresponding to those of the main work, but they do not follow the latter's further subdivisions. Short introductions to the various chapters provide a histor-

ical and thematic setting, and the documents are accompanied by references to the relevant chapters in the main work. These short introductions are very helpful, for they frequently make topics more accessible than is possible in the complex main work, and they may therefore well be more useful than the extensive presentations in the main work to those readers less familiar with the subject matter. The selection of documents is very wide-ranging. Many also shed light on areas which have hitherto been much neglected by researchers. It is very regrettable, however, that although the provenance of the documents is indicated in a short bibliographical entry, no historical or ideological background is provided. The reader is therefore left with no alternative but to collate the relevant information about the authors, newspapers or organization whose documents are contained in this volume from the unwieldy main work.