

The worker between practise and ideology from the 19th to the 21st century

El obrero entre la práctica y la ideología desde los siglos XIX al XXI

Niels Jul NIELSEN
University of Copenhagen *

Abstract: Workers' culture and the labour movement previously were prominent fields of research. This had to do with their societal influence and to the fact that many scholars regarded a self-conscious labour class as a means to balance capitalism's negative aspects, if not simply to overcome it as a system. Drawing from this background, the author argues that the common worker has hitherto not been satisfactorily understood as a subject of cultural history. Using investigations among workers at Denmark's largest enterprise from the 19th to the 21st century, the author reveals the complexity and diversity of everyday working life of industrialism, the relations between workers as well as towards employers and society as a whole. The author argues that, as seen from the overall perspective of the state, the labour population –with varying intensity– played a very strategic role from around 1870 to 1990. During this period consideration for their well-being was understood as a precondition for societal cohesion: whereas, since the end of the Cold War, that understanding has changed. The author draws on the ethnological *State-Form and Life-Mode analysis*, also known as *Life-Mode Analysis*.

Key words: Workers culture; Cold War; industrialisation; Life-Mode Theory; Trade Unions.

Resumen: La cultura y el movimiento obrero han sido hasta ahora campos de investigación prominentes. Esto tenía que ver con su influencia social y con el hecho de que muchos estudiosos consideraban a una clase obrera autoconsciente como un medio para equilibrar los aspectos negativos del capitalismo, si no simplemente para superarlo como sistema. Partiendo de este trasfondo, el autor sostiene que el trabajador común hasta ahora no ha sido entendido satisfactoriamente como un sujeto de la historia cultural. Utilizando investigaciones sobre obreros de la mayor empresa de Dinamarca desde el siglo XIX al XXI, el autor revela la complejidad y diversidad de la vida laboral cotidiana del industrialismo, las relaciones entre los trabajadores, las relaciones entre los trabajadores y los empleadores así como la sociedad en su conjunto. Sostiene que, desde la perspectiva general del Estado, la población laboral –con intensidad variable– desempeñó un papel estratégico desde alrededor de 1870 a 1990. En este período la preocupación por su bienestar fue entendida como una precondition para la cohesión social: mientras que, desde el final de la Guerra Fría, esa comprensión ha cambiado. El autor se basa en el *Análisis Estructural de Formas de Estado y Modos de Vida* también conocido como el *Análisis de los Modos de Vida*.

Palabras clave: Cultura obrera; Guerra Fría; industrialización; Análisis de Modos de Vida; sindicatos.

* Received: 30th June 2017. Accepted: 5th September 2017.

The text is a revised version of an article in *Kulturstudier*, 1, 2013. Email: nnielsen@hum.ku.dk.

1. INTRODUCTION

What was the working class? Who were the workers? Why were workers so prevalent in the public discourse fifty and a hundred years ago, and do they exist at all today? Using Denmark as an example, the article discusses the complexity from the middle of the 19th century until today in understanding workers, their political and ideological influence and the daily realities of working life. How was the world on the shop floor? Did the workers see themselves as a class? Did they strive to overturn capitalist society? On the basis of archival and fieldwork material, the article switches between a heterogenic micro-world approach to workers and an overall, strategic state perspective. This research reveals a complex view of contradictions, resistance and alliances internally among workers as well as externally in society; and on this background the article engage a critical discussion with the scholarly traditions in the field.

‘Workers’ comprise the social group that has arguably been subjected to the greatest number of inquiries within the social sciences and humanities during the 20th century. Actually, already from the end of the 19th century, research into the ‘working class’ had become a prominent field of research.

This interest has declined markedly during the previous decades. Since the 1990s, attention has switched to more personal angles on working life such as performance, stress and career management. The financial crisis in 2008 has restored interest in fundamental labour market questions –related to issues such as decreasing union membership, wage pressure and social dumping. However, this renewed interest is, characteristically, not embedded in a traditional conception of the ‘working class’, and today discussions about ‘labour’ are peripheral compared to previous eras. The Brexit referendum and the election of Trump as president of the United States has re-established a concern with the voice of subordinate sections of the population and even led to an increased preoccupation with ‘workers’ and the ‘working class’, though mainly as something exotic enmeshed in irrational sentiments of nationalism, protectionism, xenophobia and the like.¹ In the concluding section of this article, I return

1 NIELSEN, Niels Jul: “Trabajadores sin fronteras: Un debate sobre identidad y autoconsciencia basado en casos de trabajadores emigrantes polacos”, in Salvador Cayuela Sánchez y Klaus Schriewer (eds.): *Cruzando fronteras: Nuevas perspectivas sobre migración, trabajo y bienestar*, Barcelona: Edicions Bellaterra, 2016, pp. 123-150.

to the marginalisation of workers from the societal agenda, which is a significant contrast with the situation during the period from around 1870 to 1990.

The present article has two main points of focus. First, it examines how the ‘worker’ was understood throughout the more than a hundred years when the ‘labour question’ was central on the political agenda. This includes an investigation of the role that the ‘worker’ was assigned and played in the social discourse. Second, the article discusses how the life and self-conception of workers was actually related to this role. How was everyday life in the major workplaces? How did the individual worker see himself in relation to colleagues and to management? How can we understand the broad support to the formalised union system? As mentioned, in the end of the article I return to the way in which societies today relate to broad social and labour market challenges and the reasons for the transformations in this arena.

2. A HIGH-PROFILED FIELD OF RESEARCH

The interest in workers from the end of the 19th century through the 20th century was related to the fact that this social group in particular was regarded to be of significant societal importance. To a large extent this was bound up with the view of workers as potential catalysts for a fundamental societal shift. Without detailing the broad scholarly literature in the field, it is sufficient to mention the common Marx-based conception that workers—as subordinate and lacking property in the capitalist relations of production²—were seen as making up a class ‘an sich’ (which not necessarily implies that they identified as a class ‘für sich’). The logical inference was typically that workers had an ‘objective’ interest in the abolishment of the capitalist mode of production.³

As former general manager of the Danish National Television (DR), later general manager of the European Broadcasting Union, Bjørn Erichsen explained in a 1977 high school textbook *Om Arbejderbevægelsen* (On the Labour Movement): “the [class] struggle’s objective is a... collectivisation of the relations of production... where the producers [the workers] themselves, or through their democratically elected organs, direct and distribute their

2 In the book *Enterprise and Workers’ Life*, I discuss this further in the chapter “Unity and/or differentiation, the different principal theoretical conceptions that have been prevalent in the understanding of the «working class»” (NIELSEN, Niels Jul: *Virksomhed og arbejderliv. Bånd, brudflader og bevidsthed på B&W 1850-1920*, Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2002).

3 See for instance leksikon.org, reference ‘arbejderklassen’ (the working class), visited 2012-11-19.

work.⁴ This excerpt exposes a 1970s linguistic approach; in later scholarly works the understanding of the transformative potential of workers is expressed in other forms. For instance, a 1997 historical account of the concept of solidarity in Christiansen reads, “What ties the workers together are the two joint projects: the urge to achieve recognition and the vision of an alternative to capitalist society”.⁵

Otherwise, alongside the increasing influence from post-modernism, cf. below, these types of conceptual figures have become less commonly heard as a consequence of a general rejection of any form of ‘grand narrative’. The present article maintain an endeavour to point to principal and overall historical transformations, while providing an alternative to the traditional class struggle analyses that the above excerpts are embedded in.

In short, workers’ previous prominent position on the societal agenda was based on the following: A capitalist mode of production founded on private right to ownership, competition and free trade during the 19th century became predominant throughout the world alongside the industrialisation process. This mode of production is characterised by a social dividing line between those possessing the means to organise production and make money on the market and those –the workers– that do (the major part) of the concrete work and are dependent solely on the wage they manage to obtain. For the observers, debaters and researchers who have been concerned about or dissatisfied with the dominance of capitalism in society –and there have been many– this dividing line meant that wage-earners in general were associated with two issues. First, a specific collectively-based culture, implied by their subordinate position in the economic structure, in which they had to act as a cohesive group in order to put pressure on employers. Second, in relation to the excerpts above, that they shared an overall objective of overturning capitalist society and paving the way for an alternative social order. As a consequence, workers were assigned a key role in the development of society.

However, the 20th century revealed that workers did not have the necessary power to change society, nor did a specific class-based common consciousness gain strength. Scholarly works first attempted to explain this within a traditional framework of social history by pointing to a whole range

4 ERICHSEN, Bjørn: “Om arbejderbevægelsen”, in *Introduktionsbog til dansk arbejderbevægelses historie*, Copenhagen: Hans Reitzel, 1977, p. 20.

5 CHRISTIANSEN, Niels Finn: “Solidaritetens historie”, *Dansk Sociologi*, 1, 1997, pp. 9-17, p. 13.

of splitting ‘factors’—such as gender, ethnicity, skill stratification⁶—as a contrast to the core of unity that remained an implicit conceptual understanding; workers might be a class ‘an sich’, but not ‘für sich’. Increasingly—inspired by anthropology and micro history—less tangible aspects such as different ‘life-styles’ and mentalities among workers were also drawn into scholarship, which led, for instance, to an assertion of a dividing line between self-willed and respectable (‘skötsamma’) workers all with the intention of explaining the obvious complexity that characterized workers’ culture.⁷ Nevertheless, in principle it was still widely believed that it was meaningful to speak about ‘workers’ as a specific cultural category, although this concept had been challenged by the range (ultimately infinite) of dividing characteristics regarded as exterior to the (collective) core of the culture.

The increasing influence of post-modernism brought the logical next step. It was pointed out that workers had hardly ever identified broadly with concepts such as ‘class’ and ‘solidarity’, just like the claim of the existence of a particular workers’ culture (or ‘class’) was considered unsound. Thus concluded the English historian, Patrick Joyce, in an inquiry into the use of the term ‘class’ in contemporary literature on workers in the middle of the 19th century: “Other forms of the self and of collective identity emerge, long obscured by the concentration on class”.⁸ In other words, viewing ‘class’ as the central feature of workers’ self-conception and culture was regarded misleading.

A rejection of simplistic claims about the existence of a particular workers’ mentality is both necessary and understandable; workers do not necessarily see themselves as joined under a broad and united umbrella of ‘labour’. But in the wake of the scholarly departure from traditional conceptions, it is fair to ask: If workers are better understood through assigned characteristics that are common to all mankind, why not merely speak of them as ‘individuals’?

6 Scholars pointed out divisions, which had been recognized throughout the entire history of the labour movement. Already Engels, and later Lenin, designated the existence of a so-called labour aristocracy, which, in its endeavour to retain privileges at the expense of others, did not create solidarity with other workers. See for instance: GOLDTHORPE, John (et al.): *The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969; GRAY, Robert Q.: *The Labour Aristocracy in Victorian Edinburgh*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1976.

7 See for instance: LÜDTKE, Alf: “Cash, Coffee-Breaks, Horseplay: Eigensinn and Politics among Factory Workers in Germany circa 1900”, in Michael Hanagan & Charles Stephenson: *Confrontation, Class Consciousness, and the Labor Process*, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1986, pp. 65-95;

8 JOYCE, Patrick: *Democratic Subjects. The Self and the Social in Nineteenth-Century England*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994; JONES, Gareth Stedman: *Languages of Class*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

However, although it is clear that workers make up a highly heterogeneous lot, this is not justification to ‘tackle’ the complexity by merely applying still more labels—if not to simply speak of individual differences. Such a course risks making us blind to significant aspects of cultural history. When ‘workers’ (no matter how we understand them) have incontrovertibly played a decisive, agenda-setting role during the 20th century, it seems improbable that no specific—common—characteristics can be attached to them. At the same time, the challenge is to fully comprehend the profound and unavoidable differentiation at stake, which, importantly, should not be attributed to external dividing ‘factors’.

3. THE NECESSITY OF THE MICRO-STUDY

One way to move forward is to enquire into the contexts in which the unity and the differentiation have been revealed. Close and deep empirical investigation provides a productive means of research to fully understand the social context during the more than a hundred years from the end of the 19th century onwards. Below, by combining such a micro-approach with overall national and international development, the following sections attempt to characterize a complex cultural entity—‘workers’—from what could be termed its birth through consolidation and increasing political significance nationally as well as internationally, until what today appears to be its dissolution.

This analysis is based on more than twenty years of inquiries made about workers’ culture from the middle of the 19th century until today.⁹ This culture is understood in broad terms as both the everyday life on the shop floor¹⁰ as

9 Among others: NIELSEN, Niels Jul: “Lifelong Care and Control - Paternalism in 19. century Factory Communities”, en *Ethnologia Scandinavica*, 24, 1994, pp. 70-90. NIELSEN, Niels Jul: “Industrial Paternalism in the 19th Century - old or new?”, *Etnologia Europaea*, 2000, pp. 59-75. NIELSEN, Niels Jul: “Trabajadores sin fronteras. Un debate sobre identidad y auto-consciencia basado en casos de trabajadores emigrantes polacos», in S. Cayuela Sánchez & K. Schriewer: *Cruzando fronteras: nuevas perspectivas sobre migración, trabajo y bienestar*, Barcelona, Bellaterra, 2016, pp. 123-150. NIELSEN, Niels Jul; SANDBERG, Marie: “Between social dumping and social protection: The challenge and re-negotiation of creating ‘orderly working conditions’ among Polish circular migrants in the Copenhagen area, Denmark”, *Ethnologia Europaea*, 44, 1, 2014, pp. 23-37. NIELSEN, Niels Jul: “Ordinary Workers and Industrial Relations in a New World Order”, *Sociology Study*, 4, n. 8, 2014, pp. 728-737.

10 Family and leisure life have played a less significant role in these inquiries, due to the methodological design of creating a stable framework over long periods of time based on specific companies. In my current work on contemporary lifemodes—mainly ‘workers’—and their transition during the past decades, the dimension of family is prioritised on equal terms with working life.

well as the organizational dimension of what has been termed the ‘working class’. My methodological approach has been to combine close analyses (from within and from the bottom-up) of individual contexts through the ‘reconstruction’ of working and everyday life in specific workplaces with inquires (from outside and top-down) of initiatives and rationales from organizational and political realms. Such an approach is not unusual within Danish and Nordic ethnology, but my work draws moreover upon the distinction between society and state in the Hegelian and Marxian inspired so-called Structural State-Form and Life-Mode Analysis. Simply put, society is regarded as the realm of conflicts, connections and contradictions between distinct interests (life-modes/classes), and the state as the realm of a ‘universal will’ that is conditioned by internal social complexity as well as external challenges related to other states. Between these two ‘levels’ plays out a complex game of demands/resistance and interpellation/recognition.¹¹ Through this approach the intention is to achieve both empirical sensitivity and richness while deepening understanding of the everyday lives and patterns of practise that are actually possible and enduring. This is accompanied by learning about how and when this changes with transformations in cultural history.

Another advantage of a step-by-step reconstruction of everyday practise based on a broad use of sources is the ability (in parts of the analysis) to take an independent approach to discursively loaded material –such as newspaper and other debate material– born from the controversies of the period and marked by normative representations of the viewpoints of those involved. This type of material is central to an understanding of the transformation and social positioning of wage-earners; but it must be related to the many aspects of workers’ practise, which take place in total anonymity day in and day out –and which reveal wholly different cultural aspects than the ones that stand out in the opinions highlighted in the public discourse.

To get close to everyday practise and cultural orientation among the actors that for more than a century were identified as ‘workers’, it is thus not sufficient to examine discourse and overall features of transformation such as the establishment of political parties and organisations. We must also get insight into everyday patterns of practise on an individual level, where actors

11 For an outline of the principal theoretical and methodological reasoning in structural state-form and lifemode analysis, see for instance HØJRUP, Thomas: *State, Culture and Life-Modes*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003.

stand vis-à-vis each other and relate to the given conditions in various historic periods. To do this, it is necessary to establish a limited field, where agency and ways of coping can be scrutinised in detail during long periods of time while at the same time being meaningfully compared.

Based on these approaches, I have made a detailed investigation of Denmark's largest company for more than a century, Burmeister & Wain (B&W). This workplace has for the present purpose the additional advantage that it is indisputably the country's most discursively prominent company when it comes to the political and ideological agenda about wage-earners as key actors in collective action and societal shift. Moreover, the company has existed throughout the entire period from the early industrialisation before the middle of the 19th century until today, when it –in markedly changed form– lives on with production outsourced to mainly the Far East. The following discussions are based on material, inquiries, examples and research from the books *Enterprise and Workers' Life: Bonds, Ruptures and Consciousness on B&W 1850-1920* and *Between High Politics and the Workshop Floor. The Danish Worker - Before, During and After the cold War*.¹² Needless to say, the empirical data used as source material is varied and not fully listed in this article; as for the examples used here, the relevant sources are included.

4. THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A SOCIAL GROUP

In September 1871 a strike erupts in B&W Shipyard, the first large-scale strike in Denmark in the period following the abolishment of the old craft guilds ten years before. Close to 300 workers stop work, motivated by the refusal of some quartermasters to follow the usual practise of taking off the remainder of the workday after a new ship is launched. The strike breaks out in a period marked by commotion both nationally and abroad. During the spring and summer period the Danish public had with horror witnessed (for instance via dozens of detailed xylographic pictures in the monthly magazine *Illustreret Tidende*) the occurrences in Paris, where poor workers in the name of socialism launched The Commune, a regime later defeated by French troops. In Denmark during the same period efforts had been made to establish a Danish branch under the Internationale founded by Marx in London in

12 NIELSEN, Niels Jul: *Mellem storpolitik og værkstedsgulv. Den danske arbejder – før, under og efter Den Kolde Krig*, Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2004. NIELSEN, Niels Jul: *Virksomhed og arbejderliv...*, 2002.



1. Aerial photograph.

View over Burmeister & Wain's premises at Christianshavn, Copenhagen, in 1871 from the tower of a nearby church. To the fore are boiler smithy (house end towards the canal), machine shops and foundry (adjacent to the church at the extreme right) and smithy (with the many white smokestacks from the forges). In the background the shipyard can be faintly seen; a hull of a ship on the slipway tower above the rooftops (left of centre). It is in connection to a launching of a new ship at B&W that the large strike erupts in the autumn of 1871 and sets a new societal agenda; the 'labour question'. The picture, however, is from the spring, taken in connection to very different circumstances, namely the silver jubilee of Burmeister to celebrate his 25 years as factory head; a quarter of a century has past without 'workers' being associated with the potential threat that otherwise comes to mark the subsequent more than hundred years. (B&W, MAN Diesel).

1864 with a declared objective of establishing solidarity among workers across the world as a means to detach from the coercion of capital. The socialist leaders in Denmark use the conflict at B&W to convene a mass meeting, and after a couple of weeks the Danish branch of the Internationale is launched.¹³

With these occurrences an initial, collective consciousness-raising is indisputably taking place among Danish workers –similar to other industrialized countries of the period. The workers learn how they can gain power by organizing their forces in one joint voice. This is also a significant process of critical reflection for the society as a whole. It is generally conceded that the conflict is not merely a tumour on an otherwise healthy social body. Capitalism has brought society out of balance, and this new concern soon becomes known as the ‘labour question’.

Over the subsequent three decades –with huge local variations– the Danish worker is integrated in a collective process towards recognition and representation. This process also occurs internationally, although in few countries is it as thorough and formalized as in Denmark, where the September Compromise of 1899 enthrones workers’ and employers’ mutual recognition of each other as recognized counterparts.

5. A COMPLEX DIVERSITY

But what does this movement towards creation of unity and joint action actually reflect? Let us turn to the situation behind the factory gate to see the world beneath the formalized external contexts. B&W in the latter part of the 19th century produced partly industrial machinery, mainly prime movers, and partly ships. Until the first years of the 1870s the latter took place at a shipyard in the old neighborhood Christianshavn in the Danish capital; and thereafter –until the shutdown of the shipyard in 1996– at a new yard at Refshale Island in the northern part of Copenhagen harbor.

It is challenging to comprehend everyday life circumstances at a workplace in a period with no records of oral accounts. My approach has been, as

13 The conflict is treated in an almost unanimous daily press. Here I have used *Arbeideren*, Nov. 1871, *Socialisten*, n. 11 (Sept.), Oct. 2nd, 7th, 14th, 21st 1871 and *Berlingske Tidende* Oct. 2nd 1871. The conflict moreover is outlined in detail in LORENTZEN, Daniel og Johannes KJÆRBØL: *Typer og tidsbilleder fra de københavnske skibsværfter, udgivet af skibssmedeforeningen i København i tilslutning til dennes 30 aars stiftelsesdag den 7. april 1925*, Copenhagen, 1925, pp. 18 following.

much as possible, to ‘reconstruct’ (being well aware that such an endeavour unavoidably contains a good deal of ‘construction’) a range of the aspects related to the production process and the involvement of the workers within this.¹⁴ What is produced? How is it done? Who does it? Which working relations are involved? Which levels of management? And moreover, within which indoor and outdoor locations have the activities taken place? Where was which work performed? Where was it possible to have breaks, prescribed as well as informal?

A glance into workshops and outdoor locations largely gives an impression of enormous diversity. There is almost no skill unrepresented: Blacksmiths, coppersmiths, metalworkers, shipbuilders, moulders, pattern makers (making three models of blanks that are later to be casted), mechanics, carpenters, unskilled labourers, etc. The workers are distributed among a vast number of small and large workshops, on outdoor slipways and in huge production halls.

Through analyses of work process journals¹⁵ and other source material,¹⁶ the picture of highly complex work processes is strongly supported. Innumerable types of operations are carried out, some of them challenging in terms of skills, others routine, in some cases with many levels of management and in other cases with almost none. But how then do the workers ‘see’ each other? Do they feel like a ‘collective’ in these informal everyday contexts?

14 I used a wide range of unpublished source material from the archives of the company as well as contemporary manuals in ‘mechanical engineering’, memory material, etc. See NIELSEN, Niels Jul: *Virksomhed og arbejderliv...*, 2002. The different sources are listed throughout the book, these varying immensely during the seven decades covered by the research.

15 A work process journal is not a standardised form of documentation and thus not a type of source commonly found in Danish workplaces; in any case they are only rarely preserved. At B&W they typically consist of the master’s (the manager of the different main working areas) daily sporadic accounts about the work done, the persons involved (designated by surname), hours worked and wage paid. These journals are not regularly kept and moreover are only preserved in some periods in the second part of the 19th century; and they are far from covering the different workshops’ broad range of operations. Still, as they reveal the complexity in tasks and payment for a specific type of work, they are useful for this research.

16 Among other sources, map material (showing the changing physical layout of the premises) has been valuable, just as inventories have contributed to the piece-by-piece reconstruction. Memories (written down in later periods) concerning working processes and arrangements, hierarchies and relations have been usable when it seems that no major changes in these fields have occurred.

And are marked changes occurring in the decades after 1870 alongside the consolidation of the labour movement?

Wage is one expression of the internal relations between workers, which are shared from the total wage funds of the company. In the present context it is crucial to point out that I regard the wage pattern as an expression of working relations of a more general kind, which are only revealed sporadically in the source material and are more intangible and difficult to measure and compare. I am referring to important aspects such as the degree of strain and degradation with different tasks, the opportunity to take breaks, the liberty of action in relation to masters and managers at subordinate levels (including gangers), the ability to access lucrative work tasks, the prospect of having a connection to the company throughout one's lifespan, the possibility of making one's son an apprentice, and much more.¹⁷ The chances of influencing such significant aspects of work parallel the wage pattern, which can be more easily detected. These connected features are relevant to the following discussion of wage distribution.

One should rebut completely an understanding that the early industrialisation through the latter part of the 19th century created a relatively egalitarian distribution of wage, which was later (as some simplifying historical accounts assume)¹⁸ superseded by an individualisation related to late modernism. Wage differences in the workshops in the latter part of the 19th century were exorbitant. For skilled workers –and also those within the same

17 Research was largely based on twenty-nine accounts from the Danish National Museum's Industry, Artisan and Worker Memories (NIHA), which were written around 1950 by elderly workers, thus revealing circumstances from the 1880s onwards. Some jubilee publications, in particular Lorentzen and Kjærbøl 1925, also contained valuable information. Newspaper material in some cases gave insights into everyday circumstances on the workplaces. All newspaper articles containing information on B&W from *Socialisten/Social-Demokraten*, *Politiken* and *Berlingske Tidende* for the period c. 1870-1910 (found through a card index compiled in the 1920s by the *Institutet for Historie og Samfundsøkonomi*) have been used. For the period after the 1880s, protocols and statutes from the company's workshop clubs (the most local level of the labour movement) have been used to understand everyday work and social practises.

18 For example: BECK, Ulrich: *The Brave New World of Work*, Massachusetts: Polity Press, 2000; BECK, Ulrich & Elisabeth BECK-GERNSHEIM: *Individualization: institutionalized individualism and its social and political consequences*, London: Sage, 2001.

workshop— differences exceeding 30 per cent were prevalent.¹⁹ The lowest paid skilled workers made the same wage as unskilled labourers. In addition, there was a widely distributed system of piecework arrangements that created a much wider wage range, which was moreover distributed differently among the workers.²⁰

For the focus in this analysis it is decisive to see if this pattern underwent a fundamental change alongside the establishment of trade unions and the increased formalisation of the labour market conditions in the decades after 1870. Did this unification bring about a decline in inequality? This, in summary, was not the case. On the contrary, an important motivation for supporting the establishment of labour market organisations in the latter part of the 19th century seems to have been to maintain the system—of course also with increased chances of improving conditions at a general level. Everything was done to preserve the internal differentiation, which was even consolidated, when the skilled workers used their strength to make a distance to the unskilled labourers. This could be done through increasing the number of workshop clubs that the workers established as local organs for negotiations, organised below the umbrella of the new trade unions. And this pattern was moreover repeated in a range of ‘reproductive’ associations—sickness insurance funds, social benefit associations, etc.—that were mainly established within the framework of the workshops and crafts, and following skill types.²¹ Furthermore, a great deal of the social gathering in the canteens and informal breaks, etc., appears to have taken place within these same separate frameworks.

19 In 1874 B&W launched a pension fund. In connection with this was made a annual list (until the fund was closed in 1897) that included every member’s wage and conditions of employment in the company—alongside personal data (year of birth, marital status, etc.). With this source it has been possible to determine the individual—differentiated—distribution of wage at the workshop level (and of course also on the company level) synchronically as well as diachronically.

20 Piecework and controversies related to it are revealed in protocols from the workshop clubs, of which a limited number is preserved from the 1890s onwards.

21 Knowledge of these very important sources to the ‘reproductive’ endeavours of the workers’ foremost is found in a very rich collection of pamphlets in the Royal Danish Library from B&W. This collection also contains songs and programs for festive occasions at the company from the 1850s onwards, which give interesting insights into the paternalistic relations in the company (see NIELSEN, Niels Jul: *Virksomhed og arbejderliv...*, 2002). For a critical discussion of the evolutionistic understanding that paternalism should be understood as a characteristic rooted in the past and declining as a consequence of industrialisation see also: NIELSEN, Niels Jul: “Industrial Paternalism...”, *Ethnologia Europaea*, 2000, pp. 59-75.

Returning to wage as an expression of differentiation, it is relevant to note that scholars have not been aware of –or interested in– the profound diversity. The uncontested authority in the field in Denmark, Jørgen Pedersen, who in 1930 mapped the development of wage in Denmark since the middle of the 19th century, largely ignored the issue. He briefly mentions that wage differences could probably be attributed to “the rather mechanical principle of seniority”;²² in other words that increases in wage were a result of length of employment. Such an understanding is completely misleading, and there have been no consistent patterns between wage determination and seniority.²³ Pedersen has entirely avoided the problematic of wage differentiation; like many others he regards the issue as insignificant in comparison to the overall development towards increasing wages compelled by efficient collective pressure. The point here, however, is that the differentiation in the area of wages must be regarded as an integrated aspect of life as a wage-earner, rather than an insignificant deviation from the movement towards increased unity.

In other words, there are two –apparently contrasting– features that are connected to ‘the making of’ (to use Thompson’s renowned wording)²⁴ the new social group, workers. On the one hand this can be observed as a consciousness-raising among a joint group, parallel with workers undergoing a formalised gathering, through which they attain means to influence their wage and working conditions (in broader terms the preconditions for their livelihood). On the other hand, workers are characterised by a profound inner demarcation, which is not only maintained but consolidated in parallel with the organisational gathering and unification.

22 PEDERSEN, Jørgen: *Arbejdslønnen i Danmark under skiftende Konjunkturer i Perioden ca. 1850-1913*, Copenhagen, 1930, p. 137.

23 NIELSEN, Niels Jul: *Virksomhed og arbejderliv...*, 2002, p.158.

24 THOMPSON, Edward P.: *The making of the English working class*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1964; which is critically discussed in NIELSEN, 2002.



2. *Smithy.*

The continuous internal competition among the workers regarding what they take home from their employment is illustrated in an exemplary manner by a case from the smithy of the shipyard at Refshale Island in 1909. In the smithy there is a main division between blacksmiths and ‘helpers’; the black smiths being the ones that foremost manage the work processes. For a number of years the wage division has increased between the two groups and in 1909 the helpers urge the blacksmiths to renounce new wage increases ‘unless the helper of the blacksmith concerned gets his wage raised as much’. The blacksmiths refuse by referring to the regulations in the workshop club (the local level of the national union system) that points out that everyone is committed ‘to raise his wage and working conditions as much as possible’. After many and repeated discussions, also involving superior levels of the union system, the blacksmiths’ contention is upheld in order to ‘avoid stagnation of wage raising’. A few years later, then, it is the helpers themselves that manage to get a significant raise without the blacksmiths keeping up with them. In micro format the case illustrates the way in which small exclusive workers’ groups more easily can improve their wage (and other conditions of work) if they act alone as a demarcated entity. Importantly, however, when it comes to superior union levels, where recognition as such of rights to negotiate is safeguarded and general conditions are determined, blacksmiths and helpers make up a joint unit. Also the relationship to the master of the workshop –at the picture standing left of the centre– is an ambiguous one; at the one hand he represents the workers’ counterpart, the employer, but at the other hand he is the one who guarantees that particular workers keep their access to particular areas of work (and the conditions connected hereto). 1919. (B&W, MAN Diesel).

6. CO-EXISTENCE OF UNITY AND DIFFERENTIATION

When the features of unification and differentiation are so markedly established in conjunction, it is scientifically unsatisfactory to understand the differentiation as a deviation from an inner core of unity; that is, to see it merely as an unfulfilled aspect of a fundamental principle of solidarity—an ‘an sich’ which has not yet turned into a ‘für sich’. Such a perspective seems to lie beneath an expression such as the following, which broadly represents a prevalent view of the missing identity between a conceptual preconception of workers and their historical-empirical development:

‘Workers’ solidarity is horizontal. It unfolds within one class that, notwithstanding internal social or gender-based differences, has waged work as basic condition. Moreover, it is a class solidarity that goes beyond borders. It is both national and international. It symbolises the subversion of previous local forms of solidarity, and it exceeds the craft guild’s solidarity within sectors and disciplines... Workers’ solidarity moreover exceeds the national borders... what binds together workers are the two common plans: the wish to achieve recognition and the vision of an alternative to the capitalist society... That this transcendence [of internal, national, and international borders] to some extent, as we now, remains an ideal, *does not affect the principle*.²⁵

If it is correct that both features of unification as well as of differentiation are significant –and enduring– aspects of workers’ practise throughout history, such a conclusion is inadequate. The challenge instead must be to determine the principle, which can explain the continued co-existence of unity and differentiation. Here the structural state-form and lifemode theory has a suggestion. Within this conceptual construction the wage-earner –as a conceptually construed lifemode– is determined in a mutual relationship to capitalistic production. Just like a capitalist company requires staff that contributes innovative ideas as an imperative to maintain a competitive edge,²⁶ it

25 CHRISTIANSEN, Niels Finn: “Solidaritetsens historie”, *Dansk Sociologi*, 1, 1997, pp. 9-17, p. 13. Authors translation and italicizing.

26 This kind of staff –in the theory’s concept designated as ‘career-professionals’– is theoretically constructed as a principal other kind of employees distinct from ‘wage-earners’, the latter in principle providing pre-defined tasks of some sort (which are not necessarily of a routine kind and can demand high skills, yet not containing the uniqueness that capitalist companies (also) depends on in order to maintain and continuously reproduce a competitive edge; and which the ‘career-professionals’ contribute). These distinctions are of a principle kind, and part of the conceptual development of ‘lifemodes’ connected to the concepts of modes of production (in this case the capitalist mode of production); thus concrete individuals ‘are’ not lifemodes, but

requires a smaller or larger proportion of workers who undertake already predefined tasks (both simple and skilled). What on the other hand the wage-earner obtains from the capitalist production unit is the necessary conditions to 'reproduce' him or herself—thus the biological term lifemode. The company in this way becomes an unavoidable component in the lifemode of the wage-earner. In order to influence the specific level of reproduction, it is necessary to put pressure on the company through the monopolisation of one's work, thereby protecting it from others willing to work in poorer conditions. As is well known, labour power within the capitalist mode of production is a commodity; however, through monopolisation of the supply of labour power, competition regarding this particular commodity is suspended (in temporary constellations). This provides an explanation—as is also commonly deduced—for the establishment of labour organisations, and hence the collective appearance.

Such an understanding of the concept of monopolisation is meaningful, regarded in relation to a common unity of capital. But capital merely appears in such a form when viewed in its most basic conceptual determination. In order to understand the way in which capitalism is realised in the world, it must be specified to a next step, where the internal competition between capitals is recognized. In practise, workers encounter capitalism in the form of a number of competing single capitals—which themselves compete to attract the necessary labour power. This process entails a differentiation in the price of labour. In such a situation, monopolisation is not a productive means if in a form, where it includes all workers of the world.²⁷ However, monopolisation becomes an efficient means in the creation of better livelihood conditions if it is possible to stand out vis-à-vis the employer as a smaller group; i.e. as a demarcated monopoly. Bringing this principle to the example of the workers at B&W, this means that it is much easier, for example, for the skilled workers in the

their passions, preferences, strategies—in short, their praxes and ideological universe, and thus their idea of 'the good life'—can be analysed with the lifemode concepts. To learn more about the *the structural state form and lifemode analysis*, which here is not the place to unfold, see HØJRUP, Thomas: *State, Culture, Life-mode*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003; JESPERSEN, Astrid Pernille; SANDBERG, Marie; MELCHIOR, Marie Riegels (eds.): *Verden over - en introduktion til stats- og livsformsteorien*, Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum, 2006; SCHRIEWER, Klaus: *Die strukturelle Lebensformanalyse*, Marburg: AVK, 1993; and <lifemodes.ku.dk>.

27 And one could add that an all-embracing pressure for wage increases would imply such a massive challenge for capitalism's own reproduction that all societal means would be utilized to prevent it.

forge to gain a favourable situation in negotiations, where they identify an increased demand for their skills, to improve their wage (and the broad range of other working conditions, cf. above) if they do not at the same time represent B&W's carpenters, cabinetmakers, riveters, unskilled labourers, etc.; not to speak of the rest of the country's, or for that sake the world's, workers. Actually, for their pressure to yield results, they simply have to stand out as an exclusive group. Then, in other situations, it will be the unskilled labourers, or other groups of skilled workers that would achieve that standing. On a larger level, this is revealed in the trade union system's split into myriad branches, each of which has negotiable rights to the price of labour power in specific and demarcated fields.

The concept of monopolisation thus contains both an inclusive and an exclusive side. The inclusive side establishes that everyone needs to recognize the premise that he or she is part of a system of committing relations between workers and employers, that demarcations between skills and tasks are recognized (and therefore also the whole spectrum from central organisation, national trade unions (*fagforbund*) and trade unions (*fagforeninger*) to local company-based clubs (*værksteds-/faglige klubber*) and comply with agreements. It is insignificant whether this is practised in a very formalised system such as the Danish, with a high proportion of organised members, or in more informal forms where compliance with agreements relies on personal relations. The exclusive side of the monopoly relies on observing the overall ground rules, but it is unavoidable if groups of workers in specific contexts of negotiation will have the chance to influence their wage and working conditions, and thus on a deeper level their livelihood as wage-earners.

Exclusive monopolies are everything but given. A constant struggle goes on regarding their recognition, not to mention the demarcations vis-à-vis other exclusive monopolies, borderlines that are imperative in order to stand out as a well-defined actor in negotiations and to ensure that agreements are complied with. Exclusive monopolies must be recognised not only by the employer's side but also by other workers, thus ensuring that everyone respects the other demarcated fields of work.

Following this analysis, it does not seem to be an empirical inconsistency that the historical investigation reveals a profound and continuous diversity and heterogeneity. Depending on the negotiable circumstances in specific contexts, in one particular period it could be skills that are most valued in negotiations with the counterpart; in other contexts it could be gender, the



3. *A riveting gang.*

Picture of a riveter's gang from the 1950s; in this period welding is still not used in all cases when steel plates are assembled. The *rivet heater* makes the rivets red-hot in the mobile forge, the *riveter* pummels the rivet with the pneumatic hammer, and the *dolly* make a counter-press at the opposite side of the assembly. If access to the working site is very narrow, which is not rarely the case at a ship, the gang also contains a fourth member, a *rivet passer*. To make an even and watertight assembly a *chiseller* hereafter chisels the edges. To be 'riveter and chiseller' was categorized as an ordinary skilled craftsman education, despite the fact that the tasks were rather limited and did not demand skills of a particular refined kind; although an old B&W employee might have exaggerated somewhat when he in 1996 told that the craft was something that you could 'learn within an afternoon'. Traditionally riveting was made without machinery, where two riveters alternately hit with a special riveter-hammer; this should be done quickly and with precision ensuring that the rivet was pummelled while hot. That the craft still after the introduction of pneumatic tools remained as a skilled occupation illuminates how crafts and demarcations between them is about the ability to monopolise particular parts of work, rather than a question of what the work actually contains. (B&W, MAN Diesel).

particular attitude of the workers (for instance, if they show respect and loyalty towards the company); or for that sake, seniority. The point is, however, that these characteristics should not be understood as expressions of not yet fulfilled sources of diversity among workers. On the contrary, the continuous creation of demarcations should be understood as integrated in a wage-earner practise (instead of as features common to all mankind), as part of the necessary endeavour to influence the conditions of lifemode reproduction. In other words, if one criterion for exclusion is not in evidence, it will be another.

In itself there is nothing new in pointing out an inner differentiation among the working population. Already Marx brought into focus the relation outlined above between capital and labour as it was realised empirically in his own time and explained it in this way: ‘the competition among workers is only another form of the competition among capitals’.²⁸ However, in a lifemode theoretical perspective, the understanding of this diversity is fundamentally different than in a traditional class analysis. The class analysis points to a union of workers around a class-specific consciousness and ultimately the dissolution of capitalist society as two sides of the same coin. As a result, the continuous differentiation –regardless of whether it parallels a support for the inclusive side of monopolisation– must be understood as an ambiguity that originates outside the joint objective of the ‘class’, a perspective that has resulted in a view of the working population in its historical realisation as an unfulfilled cultural formation, and in the most extreme interpretations as a group with ‘false consciousness’.

An alternative to this perspective is the concept of a wage-earner lifemode, which is developed in its reciprocity with the (concept of the) capitalist mode of production. The condition of existence for the wage-earner lifemode in this understanding is capitalism itself, and the lifemode consequently depends on capitalism’s endurance. When workers support the labour movement it is thus, in this approach, understood as an endeavour to improve conditions of reproduction as wage-earner and not as an effort to establish another economic system, where wage-earners in principle have no place. Accordingly, the practise of workers –maintaining internal demarcations–

28 The excerpt is from *Grundrisse* (1857-58), here quoted from CHRISTENSEN, Erik: *Konflikter mellem faglærte og ufaglærte arbejdere*, Aalborg: Aalborg universitetsforlag, 1978, p. 16.

in this approach appears rational and reasoned, even though their struggle never fundamentally challenges capitalism but in practise leads to capitalism's consolidation.

The historic study –from within and bottom-up– was necessary to gain insight into the continuity of demarcations (in constantly changing forms). The theoretical exegeses concerning the inclusive side (with recognition of a system consisting of demarcations) and exclusive side (with recognition of specific demarcated fields of work) of monopolisation helps us to understand how the processes of unification and differentiation are inseparably linked, both necessary for workers to attain the means to influence the conditions upon which they base their existence.

On a fundamental level, however, it is necessary to add another element to the theoretical configuration: the right to monopolise should be recognized as a means. And not only the employers' side is relevant here, also society as such –in the form of the particular state in question– is decisive. This can be empirically observed from the end of the 19th century when the state –as a response to the urgent 'labour question'– builds the conditions to negotiate and make agreements; as well as to interfere should it be deemed necessary. This returns us to the question of whether a potential for a social shift –revolution– can be observed among the working population. In fact, this potential vanishes, and the threat disappears as long as the conditions of reproduction are satisfied; and if employers do not see to that (at the level and in the form given by the specific historical context) the state intervenes. With this, workers become partners in the capitalist system. They end up consolidating it –in new, still more labour-friendly forms– instead of threatening it. A crucial argument is, however, that the threat they represent as a consequence of their potential attack on society is an essential means in this endeavour to improve conditions. In summary, pushing it to the extremes, despite the version given in party programmes, the maxim of overturning capitalist society (or, if one prefers the more moderate version of replacing it with socialism through reformism) does not have its function as an objective but as a means in the struggle of wage-earners for improved conditions.

7. IN A STRATEGIC KEY ROLE

As has been previously discussed, a fundamental differentiation has been an integral part of workers' culture from its birth and through its maturation period in the decades around 1900. The differentiation thus is not connected with the post-war 'individualisation' that has commonly been highlighted as a contrast to this period. At the same time –and this characteristic is of similar significance– the workers have stood out as a united entity, and through this they have been able to influence the social whole politically. This latter opportunity was even increasingly pronounced during the 20th century. Even in recurrent junctures the revolutionary potential of the broad working population is brought forward again –such as immediately after the Second World War and in the years around 1970.

In the middle of the 20th century, centrally located American sources closely connected with NATO characterised the European labouring population as the focal point for survival of the Western world –'labor has in world affairs become a key factor'.²⁹ The argument was that the radicalised groups among workers that threatened society –indirectly or directly supported by the communist counterpart embodied by the influential Soviet Union– would gain power, unless the West complied with the demands of the labouring populations for improved conditions of reproduction regarding work, residence, education, material standards and much more. It would provide the moderate groups among workers, supporting the existing societal system, with a chance to emerge as reliable representatives for broad interests of labour, because politicians across the political spectrum were impelled to improve living conditions for the broader population. In a Danish context, this has meant that The Social Democratic Party, as the unifying political representative of the system-supporting part of the workers, have obtained an uncontested influence on societal matters. This ability to stand out as a unified entity, however, must not be interpreted as evidence that the differentiation observed internally has declined compared to the era around 1900.

29 The Danish Labour Movement Archive: Arbejderbevægelsens Erhvervsråd, box 26, folder 329. Den atlantiske komite (The Atlantic committee). For details concerning the NATO conference from which the excerpt stem, see NIELSEN, Niels Jul: *Mellem storpolitik og værkstedsgulv. Den danske arbejder – før, under og efter Den kolde krig*, Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2004, p. 93-106.



4. Massdemonstration.

The relationship between the social standards of workers and the potential of mobilizing them against the societal order is confirmed in Denmark in the turbulent year 1956. Years of a lacking ability to really raise living conditions together with the fact that the government led by the Social Democratic Party put on the Statute Book a compromise proposal, which at the collective bargaining in the spring has been rejected by the labour side, ultimately leads to almost revolutionary tensions. The conflict is led by communist shop stewards and politicians, who enjoy broad public support from unsatisfied workers. However, that it is not the international communist movement as such that the support is about –but rather an efficient pressure to improve living conditions– is revealed in the autumn of 1956 when the Soviet Union defeat a public uprising in Hungary and the support for the Danish communists vanishes. The Workers' Museum, Denmark.

Let us once again examine the situation among the thousands of workers at B&W as an example of internal relations among workers.³⁰ The picture that could be observed in the early period of the company is completely unchanged during the 20th century. Life on the shop floor occurs mainly in exclusive units. During the day, including breaks, the workers stick to their closest colleagues, the ones with whom they have built up working routines over the years, those with mutual commitments. Accordingly, relationships to the closest managers, whether gangers, sub-masters or masters, is pivotal to make the days pass as smoothly as possible; therefore, these relationships were in no way marked merely by antagonism. All this comes about in very informal ways. A more formal framework around at least part of the heterogeneity is the local company-based clubs (recognised on a higher level in the trade union system), of which there are more than thirty at the shipyard in the middle of the 20th century.³¹

In tandem with life in this micro-world, the workers at B&W partake in a stormy high-political game, since this workplace –just like other larger workplaces (in particular in Copenhagen)– is regarded as a bastion for the larger struggle for improved conditions. A potential radicalisation of the workers is always an incessant concern, unless their demands are met. Furthermore, the workers at B&W tend to choose communist shop stewards,

30 Research into working conditions, social relations, patterns of action, self-perceptions, alliances and controversies in the post-war period was largely based on a comprehensive set of interviews and observations; this was supplemented by archival material from national trade unions, regional trade unions and company-based clubs, as well as newspapers and pamphlets. Close to the closure of B&W Shipyard in 1996, I, together with a colleague Torkil Adersen conducted fieldwork during 6 months, which included observations and interviews with workers and management from different departments (ADSERSEN, Torkil & NIELSEN, Niels Jul: *Sjak, mestre og skibsbyggeri. Arbejdsliv og dagligdag på B&W 1945-1996*, Copenhagen: Arbejdmuseet, 2005). Again in 2000 and 2001, I did a number of similar interviews; this time with a focus on union and ideological struggles related to high politics during the latter half of the 20th century.

31 The abundance of skills at a shipyard makes the differentiation very apparent, but it should be emphasised that it is not conditioned by the needs of a broad range of skills. Also, workplaces consisting mainly of unskilled employees are divided in a profusion of mutually demarcated work areas, simply because the political conditions for influence were favourable in this period. At the Danish brewery Tuborg, for instance, around 1970 there were two ‘company clubs’ for the cleaning employees, one for men and one for women (NIELSEN, Niels Jul: *Tuborg. Arbejdsliv og dagligdag 1955-95*, Copenhagen: Nationalmuseet, 1997), a division that is obviously not conditioned by skill profile.



5. Meeting with Primeminister Krag.

Throughout the main part of the 20th century 'labour' is influential to a degree that appears surprising today. One expression of that is the way in which the Danish state is expected to subsidize a large company such as B&W when it struggles to survive. On recurring occasions the company is in deep trouble, yet is rescued through intervention from the Danish state. The picture is from 1967 where competition from shipyards in the Far East almost fatally challenges the company on the market for launching newbuildings. Politicians from the Social Democratic Party (with premier Jens Otto Krag) and the more leftwing Socialists' Peoples Party (with renowned chairman Aksel Larsen, former chairman of the Danish Communist Party) has received the leading shop stewards from the four different B&W workplaces in Copenhagen. According to the text to the picture, which is published in the communists' newspaper *Land og Folk* (Nation and People), the premier states that 'the government will do everything within its power to maintain employment'. This is a characteristic expression of the Keynesianism that marks most Western economies in the post-war decades, where it has the highest priority to avoid reliving the social crisis of the 1930s that led to radicalisation and growth for both the far left and the far right. The Workers' Museum, Denmark.

a matter of fact that should not be misinterpreted as a broad support for the communist goal to take over the means of production (and end capitalism), but rather as an expression that the communists (compared to the social democrats whom from their political hinterland are compelled to be unobtrusive in their demands) have the most success at improving wage and working conditions. This, paradoxically considering the communists' own agenda, in the long term generally keeps the workers in a pro-system course.

A similar logic can be argued to play out at a larger level in the years around 1970, when the Western world experienced a profound radicalisation, even marked by an acute flare-up of revolutionary rhetoric. The revolutionary alliance that Leftists point to between workers and intellectuals (such as students, who adhere to the New Left and dissociate themselves from a still more compromised Soviet-embedded communism) seems to build on diverging objectives. When important worker demands are met –both in Denmark as well as in other countries in the wake of wildcat strikes (not approved by the union system)– again the apparent threat towards society is revealed as a means, not as the goal.³²

8. IN CONCLUSION: FROM A KEY ROLE TO MARGINALISATION

As discussed in the introduction, the labour movement during the previous decades has shifted from a position of setting a societal agenda to one on the political periphery. Today the word 'worker' simply sounds awkward –not to speak of the 'working class'; instead, terms such as employees, personnel and staff are used. The point here, however, is that this fundamental change is not conditioned by some sort of increased individualism or by loss of workplaces for wage-earners. Individualism and cultural heterogeneity is –as has been shown in this article– in no sense new; and despite discussion of knowledge-society, still there is an abundance of work that is largely pre-defined (whether skill-demanding or not). Arguably, the most important principal change is that the threat is completely altered. The breakdown of the Eastern bloc has entirely removed the attention that demands from the worker side (in very different versions) previously had. This has had a tremendous effect on the unions' ability to maintain conditions

32 For further discussion of this argument refer to NIELSEN, Niels Jul: *Mellem storpolitik og værkstedsgulv. Den danske arbejder - før, under og efter Den kolde krig*, Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2004, p. 308-315.

for workers. The influential position that was previously connected to being ‘workers’ –with an implicit potential to mobilise in large numbers– today has almost vanished. In connection to this transformation, monopolisation, which it has been argued constitutes the fundamental condition for a viable wage-earner lifemode, has come under attack. The opportunity to stand out as an exclusive wage-earner monopoly with a specific right to negotiate and access particular demarcated fields of work is challenged by a demand for access to a broader supply of workers and competing forms of negotiation, if not the right of every person to take a job and negotiate the conditions individually.

The founding principle of monopolisation is the ability to draw lines of demarcation; it appears as if the profound societal support for this ability has been conditioned by the opportunity, through mobilising, to become a threat to society. Thus, as the Berlin Wall fell, when the storm of high politics swept across Europe –and removed an important dimension of the threat potential– the demarcations between branches, between skills and areas of responsibility, between work and leisure time, have been strained; cf. the popular phrase ‘borderless work’. Everywhere there is a demand for flexibility, which in its ultimate form is the negation of monopolisation. And, although it was common during the 1990s to see this transformation as leading towards more ‘developing’ (udviklende) (even ‘good’) work,³³ both trade unions and researchers of working life have acknowledged how such new features can easily develop to stress. And after all, this is not surprising: If monopolisation is the necessary means to a durable practise as a wage-earner (where one does not live from selling unique cutting edge skills, like career-professionals, see note 14) it is fatal to remove its precondition: the ability to make demarcations as well as the coexistence of inclusion and exclusion.

The historical inquiry from within and bottom-up illustrated workers’ culture in its complexity. Together with conceptual elucidation, it reveals how the continuous co-existence of characteristics of unity as well as differentiation was an expression of a necessary condition for endurance, not an expression of a not yet fulfilled way of life. This history from below sheds light on the perspective of workers within their own practise. The historical inquiry, however, also revealed the importance of understanding the larger picture –from outside and top-down. From its birth, during maturity and growth during

33 See for instance HVID, Helge: *Det gode arbejde*, Copenhagen: Fremad, 1990. For an analysis of these tendencies, see NIELSEN, Niels Jul: *Mellem storpolitik og værkstedsgulv. Den danske arbejder – før, under og efter Den kolde krig*, Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2004, pp. 340-344.



6. Immigrants At B&W.

In 1969 (as far as it is possible to determine) B&W shipyard receives its first ‘foreign workers’; as they are labelled in that period. This year the journal published by the central company based union club (*Fællesklubnyt*) reports that workers from Yugoslavia has been received in the airport accompanied by pomp and circumstance, just like the company magazine *Intern Kommunikation* (1969, no. 15) informs that a number of Spanish steelworkers has been received. The picture is from around 1980; the three men with moustache all come from the small Turkish village Kelhasan or nearby. According to interviews with B&W-employees in 1996 the presence of foreign workers during the previous decades did not cause challenges worth mentioning. This is probably due to the fact that foreign workers in this period completely were absorbed into the union system (as a routine they were introduced for two full days to the Danish union system along with learning about working security, etc.); thus they were not felt as a threat to achieved standards. ‘Apart from the ones who were really believing [religiously] they just mingled with the rest of us’, as one puts it. This is a significant difference compared to today, where the influence of the unions has declined and accordingly their ability to determine the conditions for foreign workers; who moreover have much easier access to the Danish labour market due to EU’s open border system. Today, employment at the Danish labour market might take place outside the agreements and on poorer conditions, this threatening the foundation for achieved wage and working conditions and in the long term also how these are determined. (B&W, MAN Diesel).

the 20th century, it was widely acknowledged that the state (not only in Denmark, which has been the main focal point here, but internationally) should recognise wage-earners as a social body deserving a significant voice. The situation today is much less clear. Even though debaters –not least after the financial crisis of 2008 and increasingly after Brexit and the election of Trump as president in the United States in 2016– indicate that we still live in a kind of class society, with parallels sometimes drawn between contemporary unrest and the social turbulence of the 1930s, it seems that the frames of reference and the discursive context of contemporary tensions deviate from previous eras. The threat of a mobilisation of the ‘working class’ has been replaced by a more diffuse attention to the risk of social unrest and dissolution. The future will show whether, and in that case how, the challenge finds a firmer political and ideological form; but for the present, a wage-earner perspective with clear demarcations in relation to rights and duties in the labour market, to a much lesser extent than previously, is recognised as a particular subjectivity in the social whole that needs to be met with appropriate responses. It is not likely that we are facing the end of a wage-earner lifemode –for the simple reason that wage work is an integral part of capitalism– but it seems to be under fundamentally changed conditions and in new forms.³⁴

LITERATURE

- ADSERSEN, Torkil & NIELSEN Niels Jul: *Sjak, mestre og skibsbyggeri. Arbejdsliv og dagligdag på B&W 1945-1996*, Copenhagen: Arbejdermuseet, 2005.
- BECK, Ulrich: *The Brave New World of Work*, Massachusetts: Polity Press, 2000.
- BECK, Ulrich & BECK-GERNSHEIM Elisabeth: *Individualization: institutionalized individualism and its social and political consequences*, London: Sage, 2001.

34 The principal transformation that conditions for wage-earners underwent during the previous decades are currently being studied in the collaborative research project at the Ethnology section of the Saxo Institut, University of Copenhagen, and funded by the Velux-foundation: *Neoculturation of lifemodes during the current transformation of state system and world economy – the challenges, variations and changes in cultural lifemodes*, see *Centre for State and Lifemode Analysis*, <www.lifemodes.ku.dk>.

- CHRISTENSEN, Erik: *Konflikter mellem faglærte og ufaglærte arbejdere*, Aalborg: Aalborg universitetsforlag, 1978.
- CHRISTIANSEN, Niels Finn: "Solidaritetsens historie", *Dansk Sociologi*, 1, 1997, pp. 9-17.
- ERICHSEN, Bjørn: "Om arbejderbevægelsen", in *Introduktionsbog til dansk arbejderbevægelses historie*, Copenhagen: Hans Reitzel, 1977.
- GRAY, Robert Q.: *The Labour Aristocracy in Victorian Edinburgh*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1976.
- GOLDTHORPE, John et al.: *The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969.
- HORBY, Björn: *Egensinne och Skötsamhet. Arbetarkulturen i Norrköping 1850-1940*, Stockholm: Carlssons Bokförlag, 1993.
- HVID, Helge: *Det gode arbejde*, Copenhagen: Fremad, 1990.
- HØJRUP, Thomas: *State, Culture, Life-mode*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003 (original: *Omkring livsformsteoriens udvikling*, Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum, 1996).
- JESPERSEN, Astrid Pernille, SANDBERG, Marie, MELCHIOR, Marie Riegels (eds.): *Verden over - en introduktion til stats- og livsformsteorien*, Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum, 2006.
- JOYCE, Patrick: *Democratic Subjects. The Self and the Social in Nineteenth-Century England*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- JONES, Gareth Stedman: *Languages of Class*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.
- LORENTZEN, Daniel & KJÆRBØL Johannes: *Typer og tidsbilleder fra de københavnske skibsværfter*, udgivet af skibssmedeforeningen i København i tilslutning til dennes 30 aars stiftelsesdag den 7. april 1925, Copenhagen, 1925.
- LÜDTKE, Alf: "Cash, Coffee-Breaks, Horseplay: Eigensinn and Politics among Factory Workers in Germany circa 1900", in Michael Hanagan y Charles Stephenson: *Confrontation, Class Consciousness, and the Labor Process*, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1986, pp. 65-95.
- NIELSEN, Niels Jul: "Lifelong Care and Control - Paternalism in 19. century Factory Communities", *Ethnologia Scandinavica*, 24, 1994, pp. 70-90.
- NIELSEN, Niels Jul: *Tuborg. Arbejdsliv og dagligdag 1955-95*, Copenhagen: Nationalmuseet, 1997.
- NIELSEN, Niels Jul: "Industrial Paternalism in the 19th Century - old or new?", *Ethnologia Europaea*, 2000, pp. 59-75.

- NIELSEN, Niels Jul: *Virksomhed og arbejderliv. Bånd, brudflader og bevidsthed på B&W 1850-1920*, Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2002.
- NIELSEN, Niels Jul: *Mellem storpolitik og værkstedsgulv. Den danske arbejder – før, under og efter Den kolde krig*, Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2004.
- NIELSEN, Niels Jul, SANDBERG, Marie: “Between social dumping and social protection: The challenge and re-negotiation of creating ‘orderly working conditions’ among Polish circular migrants in the Copenhagen area, Denmark”, *Ethnologia Europaea*, 44, 1, 2014, pp. 23-37.
- NIELSEN, Niels Jul: “Ordinary Workers and Industrial Relations in a New World Order”, *Sociology Study*, 4, n. 8, 2014, pp. 728-737.
- NIELSEN, Niels Jul: “Industrial Paternalism in the 19th Century - old or new?”, *Etnologia Europaea*, 2000, pp. 59-75.
- NIELSEN, Niels Jul: “Trabajadores sin fronteras: Un debate sobre identidad y autoconsciencia basado en casos de trabajadores emigrantes polacos”, in Salvador Cayuela Sánchez y Klaus Schriewer (eds.): *Cruzando fronteras: Nuevas perspectivas sobre migración, trabajo y bienestar*, Barcelona: Edicions Bellaterra, 2016, pp. 123-150.
- PEDERSEN, Jørgen: *Arbejdslønnen i Danmark under skiftende Konjunkturer i Perioden ca. 1850-1913*, Copenhagen, 1930.
- SCHRIEWER, Klaus: *Die strukturelle Lebensformanalyse*, Marburg: AVK, 1993.
- THOMPSON, Edward P.: *The making of the English working class*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1964.

