Radical Cultures and Local Identities
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Illustrations ........................................................................................................... vii

Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................... ix

Introduction ....................................................................................................................... 1

*Krista Cowman*

**PART ONE: LOCAL POLITICAL ORGANISATIONS AND RADICAL IDENTITIES**

Radical Culture and Local Identity: Berlin, 1871–1920 .............................................. 15

*Dick Geary*

“An affront to the Sensibilities of all thinking Canadians!”:
The Makings of a Communist Town Council and the Community
behind it, Blairmore, Canada .............................................................................................. 33

*Kyle R. Franz*

Trade Unionism, Militancy and Port Communities in Early
Twentieth-century Britain ................................................................................................. 51

*Matt Vaughan Wilson*

“Making areas strong for Socialism and Peace”: Labour Women
and Radical Politics in Bristol, 1906–1939 ..................................................................... 71

*June Hannam*

**PART TWO: LOCAL CULTURAL SITES FOR RADICALISM**

How Local is Local? The Cultural and Imperial Politics of Georgian
Provincial Theatre ............................................................................................................. 95

*David Worrall*

Popular Songs, Social Struggles and Conflictual Identities in Mestre-Marghera (1970s-1980s) .............................................................................................................. 111

*Pietro Di Paola*
Table of Contents

The Myth of the Jarrow Crusade and the Making of a Local Labour Culture ................................................................. 129
  *Matt Perry*

Contesting Radical Cultures: The Cartoons of J.M. Staniforth of the *Western Mail* ............................................................. 149
  *Chris Williams*

**PART THREE: TRANSFERENCE OF RADICAL CULTURES**

Local Radicals Abroad: The View to and from the Caribbean in the 1920s and 1930s .......................................................... 177
  *Mary Chamberlain*

Ethnicity, Place and Protest: South African Perspectives on Urban Radical Cultures and Local Identities ............................. 195
  *Vivian Bickford-Smith*

Radical Cultures and Local Identities: The North-east Labour Movement’s Response to the Spanish Civil War ......................... 213
  *Lewis Mates*

**PART FOUR: RADICAL CULTURE AS ALTERNATIVE CULTURE**

The Local, the Radical and the Popular: Rubbish, Recycling and Local Government in Britain and Spain .............................. 235
  *John K. Walton*

List of Contributors ......................................................................................................................................................... 251

Index .................................................................................................................................................................................. 255
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

A Reasonable Request ................................................................. 154
The Poor Owner and the Fortunate Workman ............................... 155
The Prodigal’s Return .................................................................. 156
Britons never shall be Slaves ..................................................... 158
The Collier’s Choice .................................................................. 159
Hi Own Reputation .................................................................... 160
The Call for Patriotism ............................................................... 161
Portrait of a Welsh Collier as he must appear in the eyes of the world ... 162
Wallowing in the Sewer ............................................................... 163
The Coming Fight ..................................................................... 164
Work and Wages ...................................................................... 165
Look on this Picture—and on this ............................................. 166
A Peep Into The Future .............................................................. 168
“And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest
of these is charity.”—Corinthians .............................................. 169
‘Tis Men’s Lives ‘Ye Are Burning .............................................. 170
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many of the ideas in this collection were discussed at the international symposium ‘Radical Cultures and Local Identities’ held at the University of Lincoln in September 2007. The editors wish to thank all of the participants in the original event, and acknowledge the generous financial support of the University of Lincoln towards this symposium. We also wish to thank Professor Mike Saks and Mrs Carolyn Williams for their ongoing support for the project.

—Krista Cowman and Ian Packer
INTRODUCTION

KRISTA COWMAN

The terms “radical” and “radicalism” occur frequently in social and political history. A recent survey by Glen Burgess uncovered over 850 instances of their use in titles relating to British and Irish history alone.¹ Radicals are as much a part of the lexicography of political history as elites, the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. Yet as Burgess himself noted, whilst both words are readily identifiable, the precise meanings attached to them can be more difficult to extrapolate.² Raymond Williams found that “radical” moved from its original physical meaning to take on political connotations in the eighteenth century for proponents of political reform. Initially a pejorative term, by the later nineteenth century its meaning had shifted. On the one hand it had become more respectable and could be used as a means of distinguishing its adherents from socialists.³ On the other, several socialists proclaimed themselves radical as a means of distinguishing themselves from the reformist wings of their own parties, a binary followed by many labour historians.⁴ Hence radicalism, as E. P. Thompson observed in the 1960s, “suggests both a breadth and an imprecision in the movement”.⁵ In the British context this imprecision has been further complicated in recent years as historians have sought (not without controversy) to locate the origins of a self-identified nineteenth-century radicalism in earlier centuries, before the term had any political meaning, particularly during the English Revolution.⁶

Such consensus as there was amongst those groups and movements which have been historicaised as radical stemmed from the oppositional quality that historians have found to be inherent in radical politics. If they shared no other common features, radicals were consistently counter-hegemonic, “standing in a critical relationship to the status quo and seeking transformation”.⁷ The oppositional dimension of radicalism may account for the wide differences in the term’s definitions and application; if radicalism derives its identity in part from the prevailing culture it seeks to challenge, so it will vary according to its spatial and temporal situation. The etymology of radical and radicalism—from the latin radix or root—suggests the need to uproot completely rather than to alter existing
structures, hence Luc Borot’s definition of radicalism as that which “advocates more thorough policies than those advocated by the opposition movements it associates with”, placing it consistently at the edge of any political mainstream. Radicalism’s extreme dimensions are not limited to movements of the left. In more recent years the term has come to be associated with the political right, particularly in America where “radical right” describes patriotic, anti-communist movements, and in continental Europe where this denotes a number of nationalist, xenophobic, populist groups and parties which work within democratic structures but oppose high levels of state intervention. Nor is its usage restricted to the extreme right: indeed, Anthony Giddens has gone so far as to suggest that post-Communist Europe has witnessed a further shift in meaning, arguing that contemporary politics has reached the point at which new forms of conservatism which have become radical in their disavowal of tradition stand opposed to a socialism which is increasingly conservative in its aims. Yet this does not mean that the left has been removed from definitions of twenty-first century radicalism; Bennett et al have noted that a more recent usage as a substitute for “alternative” had become common by the late twentieth-century. In America, in particular, the term has been increasingly linked to a variety of new social movements since the 1960s including feminism and environmentalism and their associated cultural phenomena such as “radical bookshops” or the “radical press”.

It is this sense of radical as alternative and leftward leaning that underpins the concept of “radical history”. Best known through its association with journals such as Radical History Review in the USA or History Workshop in Britain, “radical history” denotes an approach to researching and producing history which is in itself a form of political action, distinguished, in the words of Ellen DuBois, “from other sorts of subversive intellectual and academic postures ... [by] a commitment to remain active and engaged in historical change in the present”. Radical historians made strong efforts to engage with history beyond the academy in a variety of locations. They did not confine themselves to the study of radical politics or radicalism, but their attempt to locate their research more broadly combined with its underlying political agenda meant that such topics came to the forefront of the genre as radical historians attempted to produce a useable past through which groups could shape and inform their own present-day political struggles. While not all of the contributors to this volume would describe themselves as radical historians, the varieties of radicalism described by the essays in this collection may all be located on the political left, within political parties or trades unions or in less formalised settings.
This collection builds on much of the previous historiography of working-class leftist radicalism which has been placed in a local or regional context. The attraction of a local framework for radical history and histories of radicalism can partly be explained by some of the characteristics of local history itself. The genre, as Charles Phythian-Adams observed some two decades ago, stands in “tacit creative tension” with histories of national developments. Many scholars turned to the level of the local for a more satisfactory examination of phenomena often analysed at a national level including class, religion and politics. The formal instruments of the state, it was argued, comprised “a predominantly self-selecting minority of people at the centre” whilst the majority of those who comprised the nation were much more influenced by local phenomena and allegiances. For the early-modern period, scholars such as Wrightson argued strongly that the emerging classed identities which affected the direction of the nation were formed not at national but at local level. Political identities were similarly often dependent on local rather than national conditions. Not all of the histories which drew on this approach were radical by any means, but it had implications for the historian of radicalism as national political histories, constructed at the level of the nation state, had less to say about the activities, policies and beliefs of those who sought to undermine the state or challenge its hegemony.

A different trend in local history which takes a more bounded approach and considers the local more for its own sake may have equally direct implications for radical history and radical historians. H. P. R. Finberg’s declaration that local history should be “the last refuge of the non-specialist” was evidenced in the 1980s by a growth in community or “living” history projects. Kate Tiller has argued that such work has been vital in extending the chronological scope of local history from its predominantly pre-modern concerns. In Britain, projects such as the Marsh History Group based on a Lancaster council estate have challenged the reputation of post-war housing developments and become a focus for community learning. This duality of purpose has been equally apparent in the work of groups supported by radical historians who continue to view the production of history as a political act rather than an academic exercise. Thus projects such as the Rhode Island Labor History Forum aimed to “connect academic and political perspectives to local history and current community struggles”, beginning with a series of public forums which captured the oral testimonies of generations of activists in this part of the United States. These projects do not necessarily aim to speak to
national agendas but see the production of local history as a means of drawing a community together.

The essays in this collection seek to investigate the links between radical cultures and local identities, considering various local dimensions of radicalism within a number of geographical locations. They seek to question why certain political issues appear to have had more impact at a local level and to query whether common radical responses can be discerned across space and time. Many local studies of radicalism have emphasised the importance of understanding the different settings in which individuals became radicalised. As Mary Nolan has written, comprehending working-class politics requires an examination of

the communities in which the working class lived and their relationship to the larger urban environments in which they were situated. One must investigate the cultures from which different workers came and those they created….To understand working-class politics, in short, one must seek to capture both the diversities and uniformities of working-class life….  

The first essays in this book build on such approaches to consider the role of local allegiances, bases and networks in radical formation in different national contexts. Dick Geary’s contribution returns to the German SPD at the height of its power as the largest European Marxist party in the years before the First World War. Looking specifically at the example of Berlin, Geary examines the economic, social and confessional structure of the urban city, and its relationship to the external Prusso-German State, attempting to explain what it was about the city that led so many of its workers to join left-oriented organisations, and, in particular, those of a socialist/Marxist party. Considering the relationship between local and national contexts, Geary argues that the “Socialist Fortress” of Berlin cannot be viewed as solely arising from the economic and social structure of the city, but that it was also created through the hostility of the Prusso-German state to its socialist message.

Many studies of twentieth-century radicalism have at once been influenced by and helped to perpetuate the image of rebelliousness that has attached to certain individual towns or districts. “Red” councils in Turin or Bologna; the “Little Moscows” of South Wales or the industrial unrest which defined “Red” Clydeside have framed investigations into how, in certain local contexts, radical administrations have been able to implement policies aimed at promoting working-class interests against the wishes of less sympathetic national governments. From the mid-nineteenth century, urbanisation and industrialisation fostered a growth in local government in many countries. Local government franchises could be
more extensive than those at national level; female and working-class residents often elected their local representatives decades before they were able to participate in national elections. The extension of the local government franchise in the nineteenth century could translate into pockets of radical government that were at odds with national politics, a trend which continued into the twentieth century. In countries which retained liberal, conservative or social-democratic governments it was not unusual to find individual town or city councils dominated by representatives of the radical left (or indeed, right). Here, Kyle Franz investigates one such example, the town of Blairmore in Alberta, Canada, which elected a Communist town council, in the face of strong religious and conservative opposition, in 1933. Franz outlines the council’s radical policies, which ranged from an annual school holiday in celebration of the Russian Revolution to an innovative tax on purebred dogs, designed to ensure that wealthier residents contributed to depression relief. Whilst nationally focused investigations into support for Canadian Communism have emphasized its European (including British) character, this essay draws on a variety of sources, including oral history interviews, to argue that in certain industrial towns during the Depression it became part of a naturalised Canadian identity. At the same time, however, local varieties of Communism were not universally welcomed by the national party leadership; they were less interested in international revolution or the finer points of Marxist theory but much more concerned with electing a radical administration that would support the struggles of local mineworkers.

Recent trends in political history have moved away from top-down studies of party leadership and policy to consider the experience of political activism. Investigations into the activities of rank and file party or union members operating at the political grass roots have suggested that the oppositional qualities of radicalism can exist within individual organisations as well as across society more broadly when small groups of members take a more progressive approach than their national leaders. Matt Vaughan Wilson’s essay applies this perspective to members of the breakaway British Seafarers’ Union in the early twentieth century. His study reveals that, while the nomadic nature of sailors’ lives has led to the assumption that local identities had little meaning for them, examining their union involvement within the context of individual cities offers a different perspective. For men based in the liner ports of Southampton and Glasgow, union membership and local identity became deeply intertwined. Building on Sari Mäenpää and Valerie Burton’s research into the high residency levels and continuity of employment of sailors in ports that were dominated by short-sea service or passenger liners, he demonstrates that
seafarers’ unionisation was often deeply rooted in wider local radical traditions. In Glasgow and Southampton, officials from seafaring unions were involved in local trades councils and drew support from activists in other unions during the 1911 seamen’s strike.

Some scholars have found that the local study has provided a useful format for considering the political activities of sections of an organisation that are under-represented or absent in their national leadership. Much work has been done in this area by feminist scholars as part of a broader project aimed at integrating women’s experience of politics into broader political narratives. Local politics proved a more attractive area for radical women for a number of reasons, not least because the competing demands of home and family often left working-class women little time for political involvement beyond their immediate environment, working “with one hand tied behind us”, as the title of one early investigation put it. Also, as Elizabeth Faue’s study of Minneapolis revealed, community concerns were a prominent feature of radical politics. Faue found that women there were drawn to a radical labour politics that “emphasized local autonomy and community-level organization”. These dimensions are present in the final essay in this section where June Hannam uses the example of the British port city of Bristol to demonstrate how socialist women, very much in a minority in national politics, developed thriving political cultures at a local level. Hannam shows how local politics acknowledged women’s expertise in areas less associated with national party agendas, including welfare issues, while at the same time allowing them to present themselves as rooted in their communities when standing for political office.

The second section of the book looks in more detail at some of the different cultural phenomena that have strengthened radical identities at a local level. Approaches from cultural history have been influential in shaping recent historical assessments of radicalism. Investigations into the formation of distinctive political identities have pointed out the importance of a number of cultural phenomena to their construction and maintenance. In 1985, Vernon Lidtke’s pioneering study showed how music, theatre and a variety of recreational activities comprised an “alternative culture” through which the German left defined itself against prevailing bourgeois norms. Although this alternative culture developed centralized structures, Lidtke’s study emphasises the importance of “personal attachments, familiarity and fellowship” at the grass roots which underpinned its development. The second section of this book builds on Lidtke’s approach to consider three distinct cultural manifestations of radicalism. David Worrall’s essay is concerned with the extent to which the provincial theatre facilitated the diffusion of radical ideas in Georgian England.
Through tracing the progress of individual plays, from their metropolitan debuts to performances in a number of smaller market town or shire venues, it suggests that critiques of government or empire which originated in London reached wider layers than their immediate audiences. The discrete worlds of provincial theatres did not merge into a single entity but retained elements of local distinctiveness which have important implications when attempting to define the limits of “local” as Worrall’s title suggests.

In his 1982 study of the French textile town of Roubaix, Laurent Marty suggested that cafés and singing groups spread syndicalism in Northern France as effectively as more obviously political vehicles for propaganda. In the second essay in this section, Pietro di Paola has similarly used the medium of popular song to examine some of the ways in which local radical identities have been transformed as a result of changes in radical cultural practices. Di Paola considers a number of songs rediscovered or composed by Il Nuovo Canzoniere Italiano (NCI) and Cantacronache, two organisations which formed in the 1960s in order to investigate and record the alternative and popular cultures of the Italian working class. Through a close investigation of the function of protest and political song in the Mestre-Marghera region of Northern Italy, he argues that songs were as important to the ways in which a district came to be identified as “radical” beyond its immediate locality as were the more familiar dimensions of working practises and economic conditions. Songs both recorded local events, such as strikes and occupations, and affirmed their position in a self-constructed history of local radicalism through their repeated performances at subsequent similar events.

Song also features in Matt Perry’s essay which describes how a variety of cultural representations, such as music, literature, exhibitions and commemorative events have provided the town of Jarrow with a radical identity despite the more mainstream orientation of the town’s Labour politics. Drawing on Nora’s concept of lieu des memoires, Perry charts the development of the “myth” of the Jarrow crusade from the 1960s, suggesting that whilst it offered Jarrow a distinctive radical identity, the ease with which the crusade could be fitted into narratives of justifiable or respectable English protest overlooked some of its more radical potential and has marginalised similar marches from other regions which carried more sustained revolutionary potential.

Recent work on the print culture of radicalism has argued that the periodical press needs to be viewed as a site for radical activity rather than simply a location where such activity is recorded. In the final contribution to this section, Chris Williams extends this analysis into the mainstream
daily press through an examination of the cartoons of J. M. Staniforth, which appeared in the *Western Mail*, Cardiff’s main daily newspaper, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. During this period, repeated bouts of industrial unrest led to South Wales achieving the reputation of a “storm centre” for strikes in Britain. Williams shows how Staniforth’s cartoons reflected the ways in which a broader public responded to this characterisation of their region. He demonstrates how Staniforth’s own Conservative views (which were shared by the owners of the *Western Mail*) did not prevent him from depicting local manifestations of radicalism in a surprisingly sympathetic light, particularly in his early work.

The essays in the final section of the book consider how locally formed radical identities have been transmitted across regional and national boundaries. Mary Chamberlain’s demonstrates how the wave of strikes and riots that shook the British West Indies in the 1930s could be positioned within two very different, and disparate, local contexts. Most obviously they represented a response to the particular local circumstances following the Great Depression, which hit the West Indies hard and threatened to destabilise their precarious national economies. By participating in strikes across the Caribbean, Chamberlain argues, workers were beginning to display increasing awareness of the role that both class and race played in their oppression. The essay shows how these local responses were shaped by developments far beyond the region. They also drew on the organisational experiences of many West Indians who had migrated to New York or London, often after service in the First World War. Chamberlain shows how political activity became a key feature of West Indian identity in these new settings, thus feeding into new regional urban identities at the same time as maintaining links between migrants and their indigenous culture. Vivian Bickford-Smith’s essay addresses similar themes in a different context, that of pre- and post-apartheid South Africa. Through close examination of a series of protests in Cape Town, the Rand and Durban in the twentieth century, he argues that whilst a strong sense of local identification has contributed to the success of some protests, these have also been cleaved by racial divisions that were also strongly linked to local identity. Uniting workers behind individual struggles, such as the attempts by black women in Durban to protect their local brewery, forged a strong sense of community in the immediate location but did not transcend the racial boundaries that also separated areas. Lewis Mates’s essay considers a less complicated transference of radicalism in the form of the strong support which emerged in the North East of England for the Republican cause during the Spanish Civil War.
Mates focuses on the area of Blaydon, whose radical pedigree was well-established by the time that the civil war began. Echoing Bickford-Smith’s conclusions, he argues that whilst locality may be a useful factor in predicting radicalism, it is also a boundary for other identities, in this case the religious identity of Catholicism, which at one point threatened to undermine Republican support.

The collection concludes with an essay by John Walton that addresses more recent definitions of radicalism through its consideration of local government’s attitudes towards recycling. Walton compares the ecological efforts of councils in northern Britain and Spain as a means of interrogating the different approaches to regional and local government which exist in these countries. Tracing the chronological frameworks which shaped these differences, Walton suggests that the study of rubbish itself could be a “radical (root and branch) extension of legitimate historical writing”, which may open routes to explore connections between the radical, the local, politics, identity and governmentality in new and productive ways.

Notes

3 Raymond Williams, Keywords (London: Hogarth Press, 1985 reprint), 251.
4 See, for example, Seymour Martin Lipsett, “Radicalism or Reformism: The Sources of Working-Class Politics”, American Political Science Review 77 (1983), 1–18.
11 Tony Bennet, Lawrence Grossberg and Meaghan Morris, *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 296; Williams, *Keywords*, 252.
17 Kate Tiller, “Local History Brought Up to Date”, *The Local Historian* 36: 3 (August 2006), 148–162.
18 Tiller, “Local History”, 152.
27 See, for example, June Hannam and Karen Hunt, “Propagandising as socialist women: the case of the women’s columns in British socialist newspapers, 1884–
PART ONE:

LOCAL POLITICAL ORGANISATIONS
AND RADICAL IDENTITIES
RADICAL CULTURE AND LOCAL IDENTITY: BERLIN, 1871–1920

DICK GEARY

Introduction

International and regional comparisons demonstrate that there is no necessary correlation between the advent of wage labour, industrialisation and urbanisation on the one hand and a radical labour identity on the other.¹ There were places, nonetheless, in which significant numbers of workers joined or voted for political parties, which were committed to Marxist or anarchist ideologies; and the country, which spawned the largest socialist party before 1914 was Germany. In the elections of 1912 the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) won 34.8% of the vote and two years later could claim over one million individual members, many of whom also belonged to the affiliated Free Trade Unions (2.6 million members in 1914) and to the many social and educational institutions spawned by the party (over 600,000 German workers by 1914).² It was the large towns of Protestant Germany that provided the SPD with the bedrock of its support; and nowhere was this truer than in Berlin.

The Socialist Fortress: Berlin

In 1877 the SPD won only 9.1% of the German vote nationally but over 39% of voters in Berlin. By 1912 the respective figures were 34.8% (Reich) and a staggering 74.9% (Berlin). In 1910 three of the five largest party branches were to be found in the city, and four years later the membership of the Greater Berlin social-democratic organisation stood at 121,689, making it the largest in the country. Its women’s group of 20,039 was also the biggest and most active in the Reich. These party branches played a major role in the struggles for the reform of the discriminatory three-class franchise in Prussia, and followed the demands of the party’s left for direct action, as on 10 April 1910, when 260,000 Berlin workers went onto the streets to demand suffrage reform. In some places the
demonstrations led to violence and clashes with the police, as they had also done in the district of Rixdorf in February 1910 and were to do in Moabit later in the same year. One party right-winger, Max Maurenbrecher, claimed that the movement for suffrage reform was giving way to a more dangerous campaign for “the right of the streets”, as workers resisted police intrusion into their neighbourhoods. Berlin was also the site of huge anti-militarist and anti-war demonstrations: on 3 September 1911, for example, in the context of the Second Moroccan Crisis, 200,000 Social Democrats demonstrated for peace in the city’s Treptower Park. In late July 1914, at the height of the Balkan crisis, the anti-war mood of the Berlin working class was even more manifest, as over half a million workers went onto the streets to denounce militarism and warn against an international conflagration. That the Berlin party organisations were radical was further confirmed by developments during the First World War.

First, the Reich capital was the seat of one of the few SPD organisations, which developed contacts with the Russian Bolsheviks (especially Karl Radek), namely Julian Borchardt’s International Socialists of Germany (ISD), which had some support in the districts of Charlottenburg and Teltow. Though small, this organisation denounced the war as “imperialist” from the very beginning, separated itself from the mother party at the very outset of the conflict (unlike the much better known Spartacus League) and subsequently played a role, together with the Bremen Left, the Hamburg Left and the Spartacists, in the foundation of the German Communist Party in the Reich capital in late December 1918. The radicalism of the majority Berlin party organisations also expressed itself in a strong anti-war movement from a relatively early date. In March 1916 a meeting of all the SPD branches in the city voted to support the position of the Sozialistische Arbeitsgemeinschaft (SAG—“socialist cooperative”), which called for “peace without annexations” and struggled with the national party leadership for control of party institutions, especially its press. Subsequently the executive of the Berlin organisations lent their support to an anti-war resolution formulated by Rosa Luxemburg; and by the summer of 1916 supporters of the German war effort in the Berlin party had been ousted from all positions of any importance. When the SPD split in 1917 the whole of the Berlin organisation went over to the more radical Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD). At the same time oppositional elements became increasingly strong in the Berlin branches of several trade unions, not least that of the metalworkers union (DMV). This opposition, which was close to more radical elements in the USPD, was in the majority in the capital’s branch
of the DMV and in the Berlin printers’ and woodworkers’ organisations. It led to the formation of independent groups of stewards and in the case of the metalworkers to the emergence of the Revolutionary Shop Stewards organisation, based upon the turners’ branch of the DMV in the city. It was this organisation, far more than any political leaders, which brought hundreds of thousands of Berlin workers onto the streets in the strike of January and the November Revolution of 1918, and which played a major role in the so-called “Spartacist Rising” of January 1919.4

Simultaneous with these organisational developments was the growing discontent of the capital’s population, as war time deprivations began to bite. The first major food demonstrations and riots took place in Berlin in February 1916, were repeated in the summer of the same year and became endemic in 1917 and 1918. Primarily the work of women and the young, these actions have often been regarded as unconnected with political issues; but such a view is decidedly misleading, for the inability of the German state to feed its population or control the inequalities caused by the black market gave rise to questions about the legitimacy of the regime. Women standing in the bread queues were heard to ask “Why are we fighting?” and in some cases in 1917, mentioned the revolutionary upheavals in Russia with favour.5

Far more serious from the government’s point of view, however, was the growth in strike action, especially in engineering, which threatened armaments production. There were strikes in several Berlin factories (AEG, Borsig, Ludwig Löwe) in 1916 and more again in the following year. Increasingly these strikes concerned themselves not only with wages and the bread ration but also with clearly political issues. In January 1918, for example, a massive strike in the Berlin engineering industry, called by the Revolutionary Shop Stewards, brought 300,000 protestors onto the streets and led to violent clashes with the authorities in the districts of Wedding, Charlottenburg, Spandau and Moabit. The strikers demanded peace without annexations, the ending of censorship and martial law, the abolition of legislation restricting labour mobility, the freeing of political prisoners and equal and direct suffrage throughout the Reich—a plea to end discriminatory franchises in the Länder (the individual states), such as that which existed in Prussia.6

Although Germany’s “November Revolution” of 1918 began as a naval mutiny in late October and first spread along the country’s northern seaboard, subsequently to be joined by a separate workers’ seizure of power in Munich on 7 November, Berlin was one of the few places where left-wing groups had actually been planning to overthrow the Imperial regime. On 4 November 1918 members of the Spartacus League and the
Revolutionary Shop Stewards determined upon action for 11 November. Their plans were overtaken by events elsewhere, however, especially when both the SPD and the USPD called for a general strike to force the abdication of the Kaiser and bring about the transfer of power to a democratic regime. On 9 November 1918 up to 750,000 workers marched through the streets of Berlin making these demands; and on the following day a new national government was formed, consisting of an equal number of representatives of the SPD and the USPD. That no social revolution followed this event has often been attributed to the relative moderation of both the SPD leadership, which is incontestable, and of the majority of German workers, which is more spurious and which I have contested at length elsewhere. What can be said with certainty is that a large section of the Berlin working class demanded much more than peace or democratic reform from the very beginning of the revolution. The provisional Workers’ and Soldiers’ Council of Berlin, for example, called for the immediate socialisation of the means of production in industry, whilst the Central Council in the Reich capital claimed parity of power with the official SPD/USPD government in the Council of People’s Representatives and saw itself as the watchdog of revolutionary achievements.

In the elections to the Constituent Assembly in January 1919 the SPD, with almost 40% of the popular vote, trounced the USPD (7.6%); but in Berlin, where the SPD vote stood at 36.4%, the Independents had already mobilised 27.6% of the electorate. In the working-class districts of Friedrichshain and Wedding the two parties were already running neck and neck. As the differences between the two parties became clearer and an initial and widely expressed desire for socialist unity on the part of working-class Berliners waned, so more and more German workers turned to the USPD, a process which was especially marked in Berlin. In the Reichstag elections of 1920 the SPD won only 17.5% of the vote in the capital, whereas the Independents polled 42.7% of Berlin electors; and this at a time when the USPD was moving rapidly to the left. The bloodiest testimony to working-class discontent in Berlin was to be found in strikes and insurrections in January and March 1919, and in the general strike which followed and helped to defeat the Kapp Putsch of 1920. The Reich capital was, without doubt, the “red city”.

Explanations

This section will first attempt to explain why so many Berlin workers joined the organisations of the labour movement and then offer suggestions as to why it was a socialist/Marxist party, which was the
major beneficiary of this mobilisation. The first explanation of the high density of trade-union and party membership relates to the size of the city, for if confessional and ethnic variables are discounted, there is a clear positive correlation in Imperial Germany between the size of town and support for German Social Democracy and its affiliated trade unions. Whereas 42% of workers in industry, trade and manufacture in the Grossstädte (towns of over 100,000 inhabitants) belonged to the Free Trade Unions in 1911, for example, the figure dropped to 16.4% in towns of 2,000 to 100,000 dwellers and to a paltry 1.2% in villages of under 2,000 residents. Similar divergencies characterised the party’s membership and electoral fortunes. In the Reichstag elections of 1903, for example, when 70.1% of the electorate in Altona and 62% of that in Hamburg cast their votes for German Social Democracy, the figures for rural West Prussia, Hohenzollern and Posen stood at 8%, 3.8% and a miserly 2.7% respectively. Again in 1912 the SPD share of the national vote stood at 34.8%, but in the large cities it rose to 54.8%. In consequence Berlin, as the archetypal Grossstadt, was predictably a centre of working-class organisation: as many as 301,644 Berlin workers (43% of the total) belonged to the socialist unions in 1911.

As well as the sheer size of the city, the nature of its housing was highly significant for socialist mobilisation. Between 1875 and 1910 Berlin’s population grew from 966,859 to 2,071,257, leading to massive pressure on the housing market and a shockingly high density of population, a large part of which resided in tall tenement blocks, some as high as eight storeys. These often stretched back to two, three or even as many as six interior, badly lit yards (Hinterhöfe). Within these buildings conditions were cramped, with the smallest flats occupied by four or more people; and few apartments would have more than one heated room. These conditions meant that there was little room for a family-oriented private life or leisure. From infancy socialisation took places on the corridors and staircases, in the yards and on the streets of the working-class neighbourhood. Such overcrowding led many men, especially the young and single, to spend their time in public places, which often meant the public house. Here they would come into contact with the organisations of the labour movement, not least because the Prussian authorities barred the use of civic buildings to the SPD and its affiliated clubs and unions. The connection between the pub and SPD was not lost on contemporaries. The party theorist Karl Kautsky noted that for the proletarian in Germany giving up alcohol means giving up all social life. He doesn’t have a salon at his disposal; he can’t invite his friends and comrades into a sitting room. If he wants to get together with them, then he
has to go to the pub... The solitary bulwark of the proletarian’s freedom, which can’t be taken from him easily, is—the public house...Without the pub the German worker is deprived not only of social but also political life...

This connection was also recognised by the implacable enemies of the SPD. The Imperial Association against Social Democracy, for example, claimed that “the real home, the true locus of education of the social-democratic workers is the pub”. In the pub the party, unions and clubs collected their membership dues and the massive leisure and educational empire of the party had its base. This becomes more easily comprehensible, when one realises that there was a public house for every 129 Berliners in 1905.

The role of these leisure organisations and their relationship to radical politics has been the source of much debate. It has been claimed that these clubs and associations reproduced “bourgeois” values and distracted workers from the class struggle, a claim made not only by historians but also some contemporaries. It was true that the workers’ drama societies performed the classics of high culture and that avant-garde theatre was unpopular with the party membership, whilst the workers’ choral societies sang traditional folk-songs and often bore names without a hint of socialist militancy (Edelweiss, Forest Green, Harmony). Analysis of the reading habits of party members also suggest that historical novels, especially those of Alexandre Dumas, were borrowed much more frequently than the Marxist classics, whilst the satirical and entertainment magazines of the party press (Wahrer Jakob and Neue Welt) enjoyed far larger subscriptions than theoretical journals. This picture, however, is only part of a much more complicated reality.

First of all, when workers heard or read the classics, what they derived from them did not necessarily mirror middle-class reception, and the works most popular with workers’ cultural organisations were not selected at random: the final movement of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony and Schiller’s Wilhelm Tell, for example, owed at least some of their popularity to their celebration of liberty and fraternity. Moreover, the song-books of workers’ choral societies did not simply reproduce the contents of bourgeois song-books but included what were clearly political and class anthems, especially the Workers’ Marseillaise, which was sung at the end of every SPD congress between 1890 and 1914. Workers’ choirs also parodied Christian hymns, such as Bach’s “Reformation Hymn” (“Eine feste Burg ist unser Gott” became “Eine feste Burg ist unser Bund, wie ihn Lassalle geschaffen”—“Our Union, created by Lassalle, is a