

Call for Papers

**European Societies of Work in Transformation: Comparative and Transnational Perspectives on Great Britain, Sweden and West Germany During the Seventies**

International Conference to be held at the German Historical Institute London

Date: 26-28 November 2009

Organizers

Dr. Kerstin Brückweh (German Historical Institute London)

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Short Description

During the Seventies, many European countries experienced profound structural transformations that affected their character as industrial societies. In particular, the fundamental changes that reshaped the world of work galvanized public attention as much as they puzzled policy makers and social scientists. Moreover, countless people directly affected by the downturn made their grievances known in public. Focusing on Great Britain, Sweden and West Germany, this conference compares how three European industrial societies struggled to deal with challenges of economic change in a broad range of economic, social, and cultural settings. While the Seventies signalled the end of West Germany's much-vaunted "economic miracle," Britain experienced the difficulties in front of a backdrop of several decades of patchy economic performance. In Sweden, meanwhile, the Seventies brought new challenges after a sustained era of growth but mass unemployment did not manifest itself until the Eighties. Our conference explores to what extent these different economic trajectories shaped public debates and private reactions as well as expectations in each country. We hope to open up this new field for comparative and transnational historical research.

We are particularly interested in papers that address one of the following issues, which are described in greater detail below. Comparative and transnational contributions are particularly welcome.

- Structural Economic Transformations of the Seventies in Comparative Perspective
- The Search for Remedies to Problems of Work and Unemployment in the Seventies
- Beyond Utopias: Expectations of the Future in Societies of Work during the Seventies
- The Changing Role of Families in the Seventies
- The Expansion of Consumerism During a Period of Economic Problems
- The Politics of Education in Societies of Work

Paper Proposals

If you are interested in participating in this conference, please send an abstract of about **200 words** describing your theme, approach and sources along with a two-page *curriculum vitae* to [rezeption@ghil.ac.uk](mailto:rezeption@ghil.ac.uk). Please mark your submission with the heading "Seventies Conference." The deadline for submissions is **1 August 2008**.

## Description of Panels

### Panel 1:

#### **Structural Economic Transformations in Comparative Perspective**

Arriving in the wake of two decades of almost uninterrupted boom, the Seventies have struck observers primarily as a period of economic transformation and crisis. While the abandonment of fixed exchange rates in 1971 introduced new volatility into global commodity and financial markets, the oil crises of 1973 and 1979 exposed not only the shaky foundations of previous growth but also the limitations of Keynesian policy tools. Persistent mass unemployment as well as inflationary pressures in conjunction with sluggish growth affected all three countries under consideration, albeit in somewhat different degrees. Average inflation, for instance, remained at around 4,7% in West Germany, but reached almost twice that level in Sweden and three times that in Great Britain. Developments not only depended on a country's position within the global economy and the sectors dominating within a national economy. Specific measures such as economic, financial and welfare policies mattered as much as the character of trade union movements and their collective bargaining strategies. It will be particularly important to determine which measures were deemed acceptable and effective in each country to understand how, towards the decade's end, profoundly different political recipes to begin to gain the upper hand in Britain, Germany and Sweden, leading to long-term socio-economic divergences that continue to shape all three countries to this day. Contributions to this panel, then, probe the economic and political conditions that set the wider frameworks within which changing societies of work operated in West Germany, Britain and Sweden.

### Panel 2:

#### **The Search for Remedies to Problems of Work and Unemployment in the Seventies**

Renewed mass unemployment provides one of the most striking features of Western industrial societies during the Seventies. In all countries, its impact varied across the social spectrum for a several reasons. To begin with, job losses initially affected only selected, often marginal groups within an industry, while for others income levels kept rising not least as a result of robust collective bargaining. Moreover, unemployment did not hit all parts of the economy alike. The textile and metalworking industries as well as mining emerged as notoriously problem-ridden, but sectors like electronics and the services expanded. Furthermore, many unemployed people refrained from voicing their grievances as a result of the stigmatisation of unemployment. Joblessness, however, was not necessarily viewed as the sole problem to afflict societies of work at the time; the age-old question of "alienation" continued to command prominence as expectations of "self-fulfilment" through work rose. To further self-fulfilment and/or solve the unemployment crisis, numerous innovative models of labour organization emerged in public debate ranging from the introduction of group work in industrial settings to discussions about part-time employment and job-sharing to schemes for a reduction of working hours. Given the multifarious, frequently optimistic schemes which did not always prioritise the return of the jobless into paid occupations, the topic of mass unemployment may well have reached the top of the political agenda only with some delay as, in some countries, tighter labour markets began to emerge as structural features rather than transitory phenomena. This panel charts both public debates and private reactions about remedies to problems of unemployment and alienation in the world of work during the Seventies.

Panel 3:

### **Beyond Utopias: Expectations of the Future in Societies of Work during the Seventies**

In the face of recalcitrant unemployment, public pronouncements that industrial capitalism led to full employment began to sound hollow in many ears. Lively controversies arose about this issue, in which intellectuals played particularly prominent roles. Scepticism about the future in contemporary society increasingly derived from a divergence between a public rhetoric affirming full employment as a policy aim and a social reality demonstrating many initiatives' futility. Moreover, debate about the future in societies of work took up wider cultural trends, too. Published in 1972, *The Limits of Growth* by the Club of Rome turned into one of the most influential studies when the Oil Crisis demonstrated the fragile foundations of affluence in Western Europe and the United States. The mid-Seventies pushed to the forefront numerous debates that asked whether it was realistic and desirable for patterns of economic expansion to continue. Many discussions along these lines possessed a venerable lineage by the mid-Seventies. Environmentalism, which witnessed unprecedented levels of activism, had begun to feature prominently since the late Fifties with the publication of John Kenneth Galbraith's *Affluent Society* and Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, gaining further pace through the disparate ethical consumer movement. Turning to social and economic planning, debates and initiatives drew on inspirations as diverse as Keynesian principles and cybernetics while raising fundamental questions about the future of industrial society. In light of structural transformations, Daniel Bell's slogan of the imminence of "Postindustrial Society" began to circulate widely. This panel considers how contemporaries strove to re-conceive the society of work on a conceptual level in the context of wider social, political and cultural debates during the Seventies.

Panel 4:

### **The Changing Role of Families in the 1970s**

Work and family were closely linked in modern industrial society. The male bread winner model was deeply rooted both in bourgeois and working-class family ideology. In this context, the family not only provided an important institution of socialization that promoted specific work ethics; it also became the centre of many new forms of leisure and leisure-related consumerism. This panel aims to explore changing attitudes towards the classical family and its stability in front of a wider background set by mass unemployment, new gender perspectives on the labour market, new family policies and changing patterns of consumption. In the eyes of some contemporary critics, the 1970s marked the spread of a crisis of traditional family values supposedly sparked off by the student revolt in the late 1960s. This interpretation may overlook that, while middle-class offspring dominated the youth movement, the increase in divorce rates in the Seventies may well have primarily resulted from changes in working-class marriages. To what extent were these transformations related to new attitudes towards work among married women that increased their sense of economic independence and made them more likely to ask for divorce in case of marital discontent? This panel enquires into the simultaneous impact of growing unemployment and consumer expectations on family breakdown that may well have enhanced the importance of family networks and sibling solidarity.

Panel 5:

### **The Expansion of Consumerism During a Period of Economic Problems**

Consumer societies of the 1970s thrived on momentum they had gained in the previous boom decades. Individual mobility, for instance, increased as a result of an expansion of car

ownership and leisure time, enhancing the ability to go on holiday at home and abroad. Consumers of the 1970s celebrated shopping and travelling as forms of self-expression with all their emotional and sensual aspects. This ongoing proliferation of consumerism occurred in markedly different economic environments. Whereas the slowdown of the British economy entailed high inflation, soaring state debt and severe political strife, changes in Germany and Sweden were less dramatic as these countries followed more gradual paths towards deindustrialisation and a long-term growth of the tertiary sector. Thus, British experiences of the economic crisis of the 1970s may well have been rather different from those of continental Europe. This section explores comparatively how the harsher economic conditions of the Seventies affected consumers' attitudes and habits through two lines of enquiry. First, connecting micro and macro levels, this panel asks whether consumption patterns changed quickly during the crisis of the Seventies or whether modifications occurred with a time-lag. Papers on this aspect could either concentrate on the consumption of specific goods such as cars or household appliances within different social classes, or compare different social and regional patterns of consumption. Second, we wish to assess whether mass consumption went along with a democratisation of society or social mobility. In Germany, for instance, the idea that industrial society was evolving into a socially levelled middle-class society (*nivellierte Mittelstandgesellschaft*) had been of fundamental importance for sociological debates since the 1950s. Did this notion have equivalents in other countries, and, if so, how did they develop during the crisis of the Seventies? Papers addressing this dimension will open up sociological perspectives on European societies of work in transition during the 1970s.

#### Panel 6

#### **Politics of Education in Societies of Work**

Education has long been regarded as a key factor in managing the transition from "industrial" to "service" or "knowledge" societies in Europe. Moreover, it has been widely acknowledged that education is essential for social mobility and equality. It is thus no surprise that heated debate surrounded the question of an adequate educational basis for societies in transition. Focusing on discussions about school education, this section examines how assumptions about the future development of society and work shaped the politics of education in the 1970s. While many strategies for the future bore the stamp of the 1950s and 1960s, the 1970s confronted educational politicians and planners not only with an unexpected economic crisis but also with new attitudes towards gender.

The countries under consideration followed fundamentally different educational trajectories. While Germany maintained a half-day, state-school model with early skills differentiation, Sweden was characterized by all-day, comprehensive state schools. In the UK, which retained a strong private-school sector, the Labour government initiated comprehensive state schools in 1965. This drive towards comprehensive schools persisted in Britain through the Seventies. Assessments of comprehensive education differed in each country. In Britain, comprehensive schools triggered massive conflicts that led to repeated modifications in educational policies. The Swedish comprehensive school system, meanwhile, was never under substantial threat. Debate (and consensus) about schooling was intimately linked to the purposes each society identified for education. To give one example: the fact that most mothers in Germany had to stay at home – at least in the afternoon – to take care of their children had an impact on gender roles and emancipation that developed differently in the UK and Sweden.

We will examine the roles public discussion assigned to education during a period of perceived economic decline. Did debates prioritize issues of social equality and mobility, and how did they address new gender models? Did interventions seek to identify adequate qualifications for societies of work in transition? Were different European nations sensible to their neighbours' politics of education? These are some key questions for this panel.