

German Historical Institute  
London



BULLETIN

ISSN 0269-8552

Bernhard Rieger:

*European Societies of Work in Transformation: Comparative  
and Transnational Perspectives on Great Britain, Sweden,  
and West Germany during the 1970s.*

Conference Report

German Historical Institute London Bulletin, Vol 32, No. 1  
(May 2010), pp 171-173

Copyright © 2010 German Historical Institute London. All rights reserved.

*European Societies of Work in Transformation: Comparative and Transnational Perspectives on Great Britain, Sweden, and West Germany during the 1970s*, international conference organized by the German Historical Institute London and University College London held at the GHIL, 26–8 Nov. 2009.

During the 1970s, 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 who were directly affected by an international downturn made their grievances known in public. Focusing on Great Britain, Sweden, and West Germany, this conference compared how these countries responded to pervasive economic change in a broad range of economic, social, and cultural settings.

The first panel approached the topic from the perspective of economic history. In his paper on the Federal Republic of Germany, Werner Abelshauser argued that rather than view the 1970s exclusively through the lens of growth problems, this decade should be understood as initiating a return to older patterns of production characterized by flexible specialization rather than the forms of Fordism that had become dominant during the 1950s and 1960s. In terms of the labour market, Abelshauser emphasized that this change brought with it a growing demand for highly skilled labour while unskilled workers lost employment en masse. With respect to Britain, Martin Daunton pointed out that trends in the financial and fiscal sectors had aggravated comparatively low industrial productivity, thus enhancing strains in the labour market that had started to build up since the 1950s. In contrast to the previous speakers who emphasized the economically transformative character of the 1970s, Norbert Götz highlighted Swedish efforts to preserve and stabilize a welfare model with strong re-distributive elements despite flagging growth. Unemployment thus remained low in Sweden in the 1970s irrespective of the onset of stagflation from 1973.

The second panel focused on transformations of the labour markets. Antoine Capet explored how low productivity and tensions in British workplaces resulted from the behaviour of trade unions as well as a deep-seated class antagonism. Bernhard Rieger, by contrast,

## Conference Reports

highlighted how Volkswagen succeeded in navigating a severe crisis that required large-scale lay-offs because the management adopted a consensual approach to industrial relations. Gustav Sjöblom focused on the rise of novel computer-based information management routines in Swedish work environments that were to undermine established patterns of industrial relations from the late 1970s on.

The third panel addressed the issue of whether the economic transformations of the 1970s affected concepts of the future during the 1970s. In a comparative paper Rüdiger Graf showed that the so-called oil crisis of 1973 did little to transform British and German attitudes towards energy planning in expert and political circles. By directing her gaze towards the burgeoning field of future studies, Elke Seefried highlighted a change in mentality. The prognoses of futurologists met with increasing scepticism as the decade progressed. Jens Ljunggren concluded this panel with a talk about the importance of opening political analysis for the history of emotions.

The fourth panel, which dealt with educational systems, was opened by Wilfried Rudloff speaking on changes in the English secondary school sector. He showed how educational reforms of the 1960s were halted in 1973–4 as the idea of promoting social equality and mobility through school policies was eroded. Michaela Brockmann and Linda Clarke compared British and German forms of vocational training in a paper that revealed a sharp national contrast. Although aware of the measures put in place in Germany for training skilled workers, British politicians and entrepreneurs failed to implement comparable educational schemes in the United Kingdom. Focusing on Sweden, Jenny Anderson addressed the rise of neo-liberal thought in the wake of the 1970s.

The development of consumerism provided the theme of the fifth panel. Helena Mattson's presentation showed how the Swedish government took up critiques of affluence from the 1960s in a campaign that created a large number of highly successful, consciously unbranded products directed at 'basic consumers'. Alex Mold directed her attention to the increase in heroin use in Britain throughout the 1970s. She detailed the evolution of a black market for this hard drug as the result of an increase in addicts, whose numbers, however, only exploded dramatically in the 1980s. Fernando Esposito compared the West German and British punk movements and showed how their initial rejection of mainstream commercialism quickly

came to be incorporated into the very heart of commercial pop culture.

The last panel dealt with the transformation of the family in the 1970s. Hilary Land's presentation showed how a series of legal reforms furthered female emancipation in the world of work and thus eventually undermined the model of the male breadwinner in Britain. Hans Bertram drew attention to the co-existence of clear breaks and continuities in West German family life in the 1970s as a result of changes in the labour market. While the decade witnessed a dramatic increase in female employment, this transformation did not lead to changes in the sexual division of labour in the domestic sphere, where women rather than men continued to perform the majority of chores.

The concluding discussion revolved around the question of to what extent the 1970s could be viewed as a time of crisis. That this approach can have limited purchase for all three countries had been amply demonstrated by the panels on consumption and on the family. After all, neither the continuing expansion of consumerism nor the growing female presence in the world of work can meaningfully be explored through the prism of 'crisis'. Moreover, the comparative approach revealed a broad spectrum of nationally specific perspectives among contemporaries. In Sweden, talk of crisis could remain marginal despite the country's mounting economic problems. And where crisis experiences were articulated openly, these could differ fundamentally. In Britain, many observers regarded problems of the 1970s, including strained industrial relations and low economic productivity, as a culmination of longer trends since the Second World War. Meanwhile, West German perceptions of the 1970s as a time of crisis were predicated on a sharp contrast with previous decades widely viewed as the 'miracle years' when the economy had boomed. Viewed from these angles, it became increasingly doubtful whether 'crisis' is a useful master category for historical analysis of the 1970s.

BERNHARD RIEGER (University College London)