Pub Conversations. Antisemitic Attitudes among Hamburg’s Craftsmen around 1900

SOURCE DESCRIPTION
This source is one of ca. 20,000 reports written by police spies about conversations they overheard in Hamburg pubs and in public spaces between the end of 1892 and the end of 1910.

When the Anti-Socialist Law [1] was not renewed in 1890, the Hamburg senate began to fear the Social Democratic labor movement and the outbreak of social revolt. As part of a reorganization of Hamburg’s police force following Prussia’s model in the early 1890s, the chief of the political police succeeded in establishing a department for gathering intelligence on the mood and political views among Hamburg’s workers and craftsmen. The department consisted of six civil servants who visited Hamburg’s pubs, beer halls, and streets disguised as workers in order to observe the conversations of those present and subsequently write reports on them. The city was split into 16 observation districts, one of which was the dockland area called Billwerder Ausschlag. Hamburg’s political police reports on the mood of those observed have been given little attention in historical scholarship for the most part until historian Richard J. Evans reviewed and published a selection of them. They proved to be a trove of archival material that is immensely informative with regard to the cultural history and everyday life of workers, craftsmen, and the lower classes. This 1898 report written by Constable Erxleben sheds light on a common conversation in which antisemitic stereotypes are being evoked.

Antisemitism in the context of industrialization
Antisemitism is not a phenomenon that inevitably had to emerge from a supposedly permanent religious antagonism between Christianity and Judaism. In order to understand antisemitism, it is necessary to recognize the context of its origins and the specific circumstances of its proponents. In the 19th century the fundamental changes in work, social life, and the social order led to a collapse of the previous living environment, and in the course of only a few generations, a complete change in everyday life took place. Not all contemporaries were able to adjust to the new order based on competition, money, and profit. In their fear of decline, poverty and pauperization, and in moments of economic crises, social conflict, and political upheaval, those contemporaries still attached to the old order looked for answers as well as for someone to hold responsible. They sought refuge in the supposed certainty of traditions and lore, and they clung to the old-fashioned social-moral values and norms of an outdated and exhausted economy. They defended the “moral economy” of the pre-industrial world according to which work did not serve the purpose of profit and earnings, but that of satisfying one’s needs, of fulfilling one’s social obligations while being based on moral
values. The economic success enjoyed by parts of a previously spurned and humiliated Jewish population within the capitalist organization of markets inspired jealousy and resentment in them. Therefore they blamed the Jews for the destruction of the old patriarchal world they sentimentalized as idyllic. Thus the Jews became the scapegoats for the challenges and demands of the new industrial society.

As this source illustrates, craftsmen were among those whose existence was threatened by industrialization and whose mentality was unsettled as a result. Industrial mass production destroyed the outdated, patriarchal order of the guilds that had governed the traditional trades. It quashed both the corporative framework of labor and the tradition of craftsmen's honor. Some parts of the trades underwent a long learning process and moved away from the ideas of the old moral economy in order to develop new forms of protest adequate to the political economy, meaning the conditions of the industrial society. Others meanwhile opposed the demands of the capitalist organization of markets to defend the traditional economic mindset of the old, culturally embedded subsistence economy[2].

**Typical antisemitic tropes**

Affected by such worries and fears, two Hamburg craftsmen sitting in a pub in the dockland area of Billwerder Ausschlag are discussing the suicide of a shoemaker. In the very first sentence recorded by police spy Erxleben, one of the craftsmen accuses the Jews of having driven the shoemaker to his death. In the course of the conversation, he goes further and claims the Jews had ruined the entire shoemaking trade. In the next sentence he broadens his statement – in line with the dynamics of antisemitic agitation – by alleging that the Jews controlled not only the shoemaking trade, but also the leather goods trade overall. By adding the phrase “all over the world” to this first trope, the Jews’ alleged destruction of the trades, he picks up on a second motif of antisemitic language, namely the supposed desire of the Jews for world domination. This is a topos devoid of any relation to actual circumstances or actual experience. Following the usual trajectory of associative conversations and the tendency of verbal statements to be more radical, the craftsman then turns to the topic of agriculture. In this context he uses a third element of the antisemitic vocabulary, i.e. the Jews’ alleged engagement in usury. The chain of associations that follows leads him back to the trades when he claims “the Jew” had invaded every trade “in order to ruin it.” He makes use of a rhetorical element of antisemitic language, namely the collective singular “the Jew,” in order to vilify the Jews as a group. The fourth evident theme is the antisemitic agitation against the Social Democratic labor movement, in this case personified by former craftsman and Socialist politician Wilhelm Hasenclever, who had died ten years earlier. Hasenclever was the chairman of the General German Workers’Association[3] (co-founded by Lassalle) as well as a co-founder of the united Socialist Workers’ Party of Germany[4], where he was also an elected party executive.

**Antisemitism as cultural code**

The craftsman’s conversation partner initially agrees with him and expresses his own dislike of Jews. Thus the conversation serves as a detailed demonstration in the workings of what Shulamit Volkov has called a “cultural code.” In order to belong to, be part of, and gain recognition in a shared cultural milieu, he also evinces his aversion against Jews. He, too, describes Jews as dangerous and makes reference to another stereotype, namely their alleged acquisitiveness. In the end he points out, however, that these observations
were no reason to incite racial hatred against Jews since they, too, were “good people like us.” Although he thus distances himself from racist antisemitic agitation, his phrasing reveals the antisemitic opposing of Jews and non-Jews when he makes a distinction between Jews and “us,” which excludes the former from the community of “us.”

The craftsman dominating the conversation then tries to uphold his argument without contradicting his counterpart. He twists the thoughts on racial hatred his interlocutor had expressed into their opposite and holds the Jews responsible for its emergence. Another characteristic of 19th-century antisemitic agitation was the combination of antisemitism and antisocialism. The record of this conversation provides evidence for this as well. The craftsman seeks to back up his position by claiming that the Jews were conniving with “the Reds” in inciting racial hatred. Thus both craftsmen use antisemitic language to a varying degree.

This 1898 conversation between two Hamburg craftsmen in the Billwerder Ausschlag quarter illustrates how craftsmen responded to the social changes and conflicts that resulted from industrialization and the social changes unfolding in the 19th century. The social disruptions and moral decline caused by the new market economy were blamed on the Jews. As Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno wrote in their “Dialectic of Enlightenment”, they imposed “the economic injustice of the entire class” of manufacturers on the Jews.

The spreading of antisemitism among craftsmen in the 19th century

In the process of economic change, the social-moral norms and attitudes of the traditional subsistence economy[5] clashed with the political economy and the demands of the new capitalist market economy. Thus antisemitism is, as historian David Peal wrote in his biography of Hessian antisemite Otto Böckel, using the example of agrarian antisemitism, the result of a “clash of economic mentalities.” It was their clinging to traditional forms of moral economy and ideas of just food, craftsmen’s honor, and patriarchal order that made craftsmen susceptible to antisemitic propaganda. Their social character was marked by an authoritarian disposition, and they often displayed a mentality of subservience. Politically they usually were of a monarchist-conservative bent. Antisemitic agitators picked up on this mood and sought to mobilize craftsmen for their cause. In his 1879 publication titled “Deutsches Handwerk und historisches Bürgerthum” ["The German Trades and Historic Citizenry"] Otto Glagau, who had made a name for himself with his pamphlets on the 1873 bank and stock exchange crisis, complained in urgent terms that freedom of trade had deprived the trades of “their very basis.” He ranted that the decline of the guild system had led to the “dwindling of the craftsman’s work ethic, sense of duty, and honor of his class.” Freedom of trade, Glagau wrote, was doing the bidding of capital. “On the graves of the craftsmen’s guilds rises large scale industry.” He went on to say that “free competition is the biggest swindle of the 19th century,” and that “in the end the Manchester ‘freedoms’ mainly benefitted the Jews.” Glagau’s phrase, “The social question is basically the Jewish question,” became a central slogan in antisemitic propaganda. Both in the agitation by antisemites like Otto Glagau and in the conversation between the two Hamburg craftsmen, the Jews were made into “personifications of the intangible, destructive, endlessly powerful, international rule of capital,”[6] so powerful indeed that they had destroyed the old world of the trades and driven a Hamburg craftsman to suicide.
Antisemitism: not an inevitable development

Yet the turn towards antisemitism was by no means an inevitable development for the craftsmen due to the circumstances of their lives and work. In the fight against the poverty and misery brought about by the social changes, other craftsmen such as the above-mentioned Hasenclever developed adequate new forms of protest. Thus the Social Democratic Party passed a resolution at its 1893 party convention that stated: “Antisemitism results from the discontent of certain strata of the bourgeoisie who feel threatened by capitalist developments [...], but who, misjudging the actual cause of their situation, do not direct their fight against the capitalist economic system [...].”

Select Bibliography


Selected English Titles


Notes

[2] Products are farmed and goods are produced in order to cover domestic demand, but not for export.
[4] Vereinigte Sozialistische Arbeiterpartei Deutschlands
[5] Products are farmed and goods are produced in order to cover domestic demand, but not for export.

About the Author

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