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Who are the workers?

Societal Images in German Class Society

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Acknowledgements

Summary:

The dissertation examines the consciousness and societal images of wage earners in the Federal Republic of Germany. Although the societal images of those who produce society's wealth were the subject of comprehensive sociological analyses and attempts at interpretation right up until the 1980s, too little is known today about how workers position themselves and view society, politics and current affairs. Furthermore, the concept of the 'worker' is today not clearly defined either legally or academically. How, then, do wage earners view society and its operating principles today – and are there elements of what was formerly termed 'working-class consciousness' to be found in their views?

To answer this question, this study builds on the canonical research in labour and industrial sociology on societal perceptions and workers' consciousness of earlier times, and analyses interviews with employees in five sub-samples: coal industry, electronic industry, online retail, educational services and food delivery.

The analysis is guided by the assumption that the experiential context of wage labour must always be understood within its specific historical context. The analysis therefore begins with a socio-historical and economic-historical framework (*A. Social and economic historical background*), in which both the early sociogenesis of the concept of the 'worker' and, above all, the changes in wage labour, social security and precarisation in the post-war period and the past decades – together with their discussion and analysis in the social sciences – are laid out. The aim is to outline the context against which the empirical analysis takes place and must be understood. The relatively wide-ranging first section of the thesis deals with social and economic history, social science debates and theoretical questions equally.

In the subsequent section *B. Conceptual and Methodological Foundations*, the theoretical discussion on workers' consciousness and societal images is summarised, and the conceptual basis for the empirical analysis is developed: the concept of a societal image is operationalised and the interview questionnaire used in the interviews is presented.

This is followed by Section *C. Empirical Analysis*. The analysis examines interviews conducted in 2017 and 2019 with 25 employees from five sectors: coal industry, electronical industry, online retail, educational services and food delivery. These are subjected to content analysis, with the interview excerpts presented and discussed in a structured manner according to their content. The interviewees are given a comparatively large amount of space to speak, partly in order to present the conclusions drawn from the analysis as transparently as possible.

The analysis reveals that there are, in parts, significant differences in the respondents' specific working and living situations, as well as in their societal views and patterns of orientation. Nevertheless, several shared experiences become apparent: the perception of a threatening societal dynamic, characterised by a loss of security, inequality and a lack of political representation, shapes the entire sample. It demonstrates that the social crises and trends towards devaluation and precariousness of the past 20 years have had a significant impact on the consciousness of wage earners. These fuel fears of social decline and anger, which in some cases lead to an affinity for right-wing populism, but also give rise to moments of social critique that could serve as a starting point for collective and solidarity-based action.