

Industrieliteratur Reconsidered:
Weimar Communists on Labor and Rationalization

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Auch der heutige Künstler hat nicht die Macht, den ihm von der Industrie diktierten Inhalt zu bestimmen.

(Lu Märten, “Kunst und historischer Materialismus” 1921)

Die erste Aufgabe der Arbeiterklasse in der Kunst ist die Liquidierung der historisch bedingten Grenzen zwischen der künstlerischen und der allgemeinen sozialen Technik.

(Boris Arvatov, *Kunst und Produktion* 1926)

As the above statements indicate, the 1920s were a time when the left forged a strong connection between cultural and industrial production – a project that amounted to an attack on the alleged autonomy of (bourgeois) art.¹ In her article “Kunst und historischer Materialismus,” from which the quote is taken, German communist Märten argues any distinction between art and work (in fact, she often uses the compound *Handwerkskunst*) to be obsolete. Similarly, Soviet critic Arvatov advances a productivist synthesis of art and specifically industrial labor (he brands non-industrial labor as “backward”). This synthesis was aided by socio-economic changes in the situation of artists and the technological advances in cultural production (photography, film, radio, mass publishing) that contributed to a thorough questioning of art as a separate sphere, and of the artist as distinct from other kinds of workers.

In this article, I will look at little-known communist worker-authors’ (*Arbeiterkorrespondenten*) non- and semi-fictional writings about industrial labor and the ways in which they aided the establishment of this desired synthesis between labor and literature within an expanded notion of proletarian culture.² More concretely, I will focus on this literary issue within the larger context of debates about labor, its status and organization, and its real and perceived changes at the time – a context that found its clearest discursive expression in the debate about rationalization.

By comparison with previous scholarship on this topic – i.e. mainly the rediscovery of Weimar’s working-class literature and materialist aesthetics after 1968 by authors such as Gallas (1971),

Gobron/Rothe (1972), Siegel (1973), Bürger (1974), Albrecht (1975), Witte (1976), Schütz (1977), Fähnders (1977), Kronberger (1979), and Geisler (1982) – I propose two main conceptual changes: first, this article will broaden the scope of primary materials by discussing texts by anonymous workers, rather than focusing on well-known communist authors such as Egon Erwin Kisch, Johannes R. Becher, Willi Bredel, and Karl Grünberg. My main point of reference will be the communist daily newspaper *Die rote Fabne*, whose feuilleton featured, side by side, contributions by both renowned authors and worker correspondents.³ *Die rote Fabne*, with its relatively large circulation of around 130,000 in 1932 and its dynamic interaction between contributors and readers, seems to offer much better basis for conclusions about popular attitudes – the *structure of feeling*⁴ – about work in communist discourse than works by individual(ist) authors.

Second, and conceptually even more important, I take issue with a rather curious tendency in the scholarship on communist industrial literature, namely the paradoxical lack of attention to labor history and theory. Certainly not all, but a large portion of communist writing is set on the shop floor and deals directly or indirectly with the work process. The main purpose was precisely to bring the issue of labor, so conspicuously and scandalously absent in bourgeois literature, to the fore. But communist writing not only condemned the working conditions under capitalism and celebrated the work of socialist construction, it also proposed a new model of artistic and literary practice in which *creation* was to give way to *production*. In other words: literature itself came to be regarded as labor, with the worker correspondent embodying the new synthesis between labor and literature. The aforementioned scholarship has often concentrated on this aspect, as in the following characteristic statement by Bernd Witte in 1976: “Literatur demnach nicht als Gegenstand der Betrachtung, der meditativen Verinnerlichung, wohl aber als menschlicher Arbeitsprozeß, der vor allem dem zugute kommt, der an ihr arbeitet” (16). Witte’s essay is couched in terms laid out by Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin, embracing fully the “author as producer” model as conceptualized by Benjamin in the early 1930s. What scholars like Witte have not done, however, is to critically engage the role of labor in communist discourse and the changes in the work process contemporaneous with the “author as producer” model. Therefore, the questions I would like to pose at the outset are: why does labor theory enter so rarely into accounts of writing about industrial labor? Why does genre, on one hand, and matters of

cultural policy and organization, on the other, dominate in them so clearly?

The answer – as this article attempts to make clear – has to do with the contested nature of labor in communist thinking, writing, and practice at that time (and beyond). The alternatives *Ford oder Marx* (the title of a 1925 book by the communist author Jakob Walcher) were often seen not as mutually exclusive, but complementary. Since the scholarship on proletarian literature during the 1970s and early 1980s tried to carve out a clearly demarcated space for its object of study in literary history, it presented it in clear contours vis-à-vis bourgeois literature.⁵ It therefore avoided the muddy waters of the debate on labor and rationalization in the Weimar Republic. Moreover, the relative absence of the category of *labor* in the existing scholarship is all the more striking given the rich context of the creation and development of *Arbeitswissenschaft* after World War I.⁶ What I propose to change is the frame of reference for *Industrieliteratur*. My hypothesis is that an approach coupling sociological with aesthetic concerns can provide a more proper framework for the re-assessment of the writings about industrial life. Focusing on *labor*, rather than on purely literary aspects (along the lines of “Reportage oder Gestaltung?”, i.e. Lukács’ essays on realism around 1930)⁷ allows us to question the binary opposition between capitalist and communist organization of labor. In other words: in order to fully understand the linkages between economic and cultural life, between labor and literature, we ought to follow Fredric Jameson’s contention that “social life is in its fundamental reality one and indivisible, a seamless web, a single inconceivable and transindividual process, in which there is no need to invent ways of linking language events and social upheavals or economic contradictions because on that level they were never separate from one another.” He urges us to undertake an exercise in *mediation* or *transcoding*, by which he means “the invention of a set of terms, the strategic choice of a particular code or language, such that the same terminology can be used to analyze and articulate two quite distinct types of objects or ‘texts,’ or two very different structural levels of reality” (40).⁸ For the following discussion, I propose the closely related terms *division of labor* and *rationalization* as such codes. The complex ramifications of these terms, which find application across different structural levels of social reality, will allow us to think economic and cultural life together. But in order to accomplish such a project, we first need to consider – at least in broad strokes – the social and discursive context within which communist authors chose industrial labor as a privileged site of textual representation.

The Situation of Labor in the Weimar Republic

What was the situation of labor in the new Republic? Article 162 of the Weimar Constitution gestured towards socialist internationalism by stating that “[d]as Reich tritt für eine zwischenstaatliche Regelung der Rechtsverhältnisse der Arbeiter ein, die für die gesamte arbeitende Klasse der Menschheit ein allgemeines Mindestmaß der sozialen Rechte erstrebt”(Anschütz 739). As vague as that clause might have been, it expressed an entirely new attitude when compared with the old Reich. It appears that, in the early years of the young Republic, the notion prevailed that labor now had the upper hand. In a commentary of the new *Arbeitsrecht*, legal scholar Franz Goerrig stated in 1920:

Vertreter und Vertrauensleute der Arbeiter – selbst Kinder des Arbeiterstandes – sind in die höchsten Stellen der neuen Regierung eingerückt. Der ganze Regierungsapparat wurde mehr und mehr mit Mitgliedern des werktätigen Volkes durchsetzt ... Mit einer ungewöhnlichen Hast wurden fast sämtliche alten Forderungen der Arbeiterklassen auf dem Gebiete des Arbeitsrechtes verwirklicht. (7)

Goerrig creates the impression that the labor movement was almost fully in charge of the Weimar Republic. And there was indeed a lot of progress made: most importantly, the eight-hour workday was finally written into law. As Detlef Peukert explains, inflation helped the state in the early years of the Republic (1919-1924) to “finance state welfare benefits and the agreements on hours and other industrial questions that had been negotiated by the unions and employers” (65). Unemployment was extremely low, not least because millions of Germans had lost their lives in the war. The workers’ standard of living increased slightly during this period, although it was still below pre-war standards, while entrepreneurs often managed to benefit greatly from inflation. In hindsight, Goerrig was wrong to assume that talking about employers’ rights in the Weimar Republic was almost nonsensical since labor was now so dominant (5-6). He did not foresee the extent to which the Social Democrats compromised with the old elites of imperial Germany, which became most violently obvious in the pact between President Friedrich Ebert and General Wilhelm Groener. On the

economic front, Goerrig's assessment turned out to be wrong after 1923 at the latest, when most of labor's gains were rolled back (ironically, by the government headed by a chancellor named Marx). In the words of Eric D. Weitz:

Employers were on the offensive; workers were battered and worn down by the economic crisis. The mine owners had taken the lead in September 1923, and every major industry quickly followed. By spring 1924, the prewar work shift, twelve hours in the factories, eight and one-half in the mines, had been reestablished. Employers also won greater freedom to fire workers at will and to ignore labor representation within the workplace. The crisis of hyperinflation enabled business to destroy – not totally, but to a significant degree – the social measures it had only reluctantly conceded in 1918-1919. (*Weimar Germany* 142-143)

Hyperinflation had hurt workers and civil servants most dramatically, and their situation would remain precarious during the period that was to follow. This period is usually referred to as one of stabilization and rationalization and lasted from 1924-1929 (although popular histories often prefer the term “golden years” or “golden twenties”). For the labor movement, they were not golden for the most part, despite the spread of mass consumption across class lines, with many people spending beyond their means. Instead, these years were marked by the rationalization drive that swept the Weimar economy in the wake of the inflation. As Stollmann notes, the debate on rationalization had started right after the war, but grew in importance in the mid -1920s when its effects were felt more strongly. He cites the influx of U.S. capital in the wake of the Dawes plan (in effect after August, 1924) as the main reason for increased rationalization (42-44). Wehler claims that the rationalization drive of the stabilization period was stronger than in any other country except for the United States, with productivity rates being increased by as much as 41% in steel production (25% on average) between 1925 and 1929 – and that despite massive lay-offs (256). A similar increase seems to have occurred in the category of job-related accidents and illness: according to Hinrichs, the numbers in that area went up by up to 50% between 1924 and 1928 (56). Unemployment, even long-term unemployment that had been largely unknown before, was relatively high during this prosperous

period. In 1926, for example, 2.1 million people (or 16.7% of the work force) were without a job (Wehler 256).

Rationalization took place not only in heavy industries, but also in the white-collar sector, agriculture, and the private household. Rationalization became a catch-all term that could mean anything from assembly-line work to a more efficient organization of one's kitchen. The overall effect of rationalization on the economy was at best ambivalent for the economy as a whole, and clearly hurt workers. Peukert observes that, despite greater productivity levels, rationalization created a host of problems for the German economy, such as higher unemployment, health risks for workers, and general social inequality (122). Furthermore, rationalization was accompanied by massive deskilling. Only about half of the cherished German *Facharbeiter* – well-trained workers who often took pride in prolonging their vocational family tradition – remained at the end of the 1920s due to widespread automation. At the same time, the demand for poorly educated and trained jobs increased sharply, both in the blue-collar and white-collar professions. The number of untrained female office workers, for example, increased by 500% (Hinrichs 59). Finally, well-educated *Kopfarbeiter*, or intellectual workers, found it increasingly difficult to make ends meet without entering the work force. Alfred Weber's essay "Die Not der geistigen Arbeiter" of 1923 is the best-known analysis in this regard. In this text, the sociologist contends that truly *geistige Arbeit* – the German adjective can mean both intellectual and spiritual – cannot be subjected to the laws of the market. Since his analysis demonstrated that indeed it was, however, he diagnosed a severe crisis of the very concept of intellectual work itself (623). Taken together, an evaluation of the sources suggests that the rationalization drive alienated workers of all kinds from the Republic on a permanent basis.

The situation of labor, of course, only got worse in 1929 with the outbreak of the world economic crisis. Following the periods of inflation and then the brief stabilization/rationalization, this third phase of economic tumult rounds out Weimar economic history. Unemployment became a reality for up to 50% of the German workforce, and the crisis management of the various short-lived governments further aggravated the situation. The labor movement, which seemed in charge of the Republic in its early phase, was effective only in its rejection of the system, and could point to a seemingly successful Soviet Union. At the same time, the industrial elite played a significant role in establishing authoritarian rule and the rise of National Socialism (Kershaw 50-60).

With no new major inventions in technology made during the 1920s, the economic issues that stand out most when looking at the Weimar Republic are rationalization and, even more iconic, unemployment. It is hardly surprising that communists, who were often the first ones to be forced out of their factories and other work places, condemned rationalization when it increased unemployment. At the same time, however, communism itself had an intricate relationship with rationalization. As we will see now, this fact led to a conflicting stance regarding not only rationalization, but also the communist understanding of technology, division of labor, progress – in one word: industrial modernity.

Ford or Marx? The Ambiguity of Weimar Communism toward the Division of Labor and Rationalization

Despite the insistence on overcoming the division of labor in Marx' early work,⁹ Second- and Third-International communism lost sight of this objective and instead fully embraced industrial society and its drive toward ever greater division of labor. The Soviet domination of the Comintern, against which the left wing of German socialism (especially Rosa Luxemburg) had agitated early on, set the tone for a rather uncritical embrace of industrialization and modernization by means of American imports such as Taylorism. The positive view of Taylorism by the Communist International, of course, created a predicament for communists in Germany, a country in which this very same Taylorism threatened their own jobs. As Eric D. Weitz demonstrates, communists were indeed the ones to suffer most from lay-offs due to the rationalization drive gaining momentum in 1924: "From a movement inextricably rooted in the workplace-based protests of labor, the KPD became a party of the unemployed working class" (Weitz, *Creating German Communism* 133). He goes on to cite a survey which estimates that, already in 1924, 85% of the KP membership in the Ruhr area was unemployed (144). This certainly explains why the best-known proletarian literature, such as Berta Lask's play *Leuna 1921* (1927), Karl Grünberg's *Brennende Ruhr* (1928), Hans Marchwitza's *Sturm auf Essen* (1930), or Willi Bredel's *Maschinenfabrik N. & K.* (1930), deals much more with strikes or armed struggles of workers against the forces of the reaction than with issues directly related to the work process.

Partly due to the phenomenal success of Henry Ford's autobiography *Mein Leben und Werk* in the Weimar Republic, however, communists were compelled to engage Ford's theories of higher productivity through increased rationalization within the framework of historical materialism. Even though it was mainly industrialists and engineers traveling to the United States and to Ford's factories,¹⁰ Detroit became a popular destination also for communist authors. Grünberg's article "Das Ford-System" or Egon Erwin Kisch's "Bei Ford in Detroit" (in his *Paradies Amerika* of 1930), are both attempts to dismantle the myth of industrial peace between workers and industrialists, high wages, and good working conditions. In a more comprehensive account of Fordism, the aforementioned *Ford oder Marx*, published by the Neuer Deutscher Verlag in 1925, communist author Jakob Walcher also indicts Fordism. At the same time, however, he tries to turn some of its methods against their inventor. In fact, he goes as far as to claim that the phenomenon of Fordism is a decisive affirmation of Marxism (Walcher 5). He reaches this conclusion on the basis of a technological optimism, which he shares with many of his communist contemporaries.¹¹ Drawing on Marx' *Das Kapital* as well as on Engels' *Anti-Dühring*, he pursues two main goals regarding work under communism: the increasing importance of machinery on one hand, and the disappearance of the division of labor on the other. He states:

Die einseitige Teilarbeit wird aufgehoben werden. Die kommunistische Gesellschaft wird die geisttötenden, negativen Seiten der kapitalistischen Teilarbeit überwinden nicht durch Rückkehr zu primitiveren Produktionsformen, sondern indem sie über sie hinausgeht und die vom Kapitalismus entwickelte Produktionstechnik zur Grundlage einer höheren harmonischen Form der gesellschaftlichen Produktion macht. (40)

It should also be noted that Walcher is particularly interested in Fordism because, in his view, its extremely rigid division of labor within the production process, combined with utmost flexibility (should improved methods require it), already contains the seeds for a future communist organization of production. Since capitalism would already demand from the worker his absolute *Disponibilität* (availability, readiness), it already and unwillingly prepares the ground for changing occupations, activities, and interests on the part of the workers (47).

A similar argument about potentially positive effects of the division of labor and rationalization is made by communist economist Modest Rubinstein in an article entitled “Die kapitalistische Rationalisierung” in the journal *Unter dem Banner des Marxismus* in 1929. While dismissing most aspects of Fordism in capitalist society, Rubinstein praises the homogenization of the labor force it brings about – a position shared by theorists as diverse as Emile Durkheim and Antonio Gramsci. Rubinstein argues:

Trotz der aufs äußerste steigenden Spezialisierung der individuellen Arbeit kollektivisiert sich für jeden augenscheinlich die Arbeit, und dies trägt neben den Veränderungen der Zusammensetzung der Arbeiterschaft zur endgültigen Überwindung der handwerks-zünftlerischen Gewohnheiten, Traditionen und Vorurteile bei. (294)

Communist discourse on work, by stark contrast with anarcho-syndicalism (as well as with fascism) was unable to lend credence to non-industrial forms of labor, including white-collar work. In the dominant view, all so-called *residual* forms of labor needed to be rooted out, and rationalization of production was seen as one way of getting there fast. Hence, it hardly comes as a surprise that the boundaries between rejection and appreciation of Taylorism and Fordism appear rather fluid. Consistency was sought by maintaining a clear distinction between economic and technical rationalization. In this framework, economic rationalization was believed to be in full agreement with Marxist thought. It simply meant rational, transparent, and socially just division of tasks and goods for the common good, with the “planned” economy on the horizon. Technical rationalization, on the other hand, was much more difficult to justify, as it usually implies an ever stricter division of labor, greater efficiency, and—one should not forget—in the popular imagination it was associated with higher unemployment.

But the two levels could not be differentiated easily on the level of practice. In 1931, the Austro-Marxist Otto Bauer therefore felt the need to introduce the notion of *Fehlrationalisierung*. He defended rationalization in principle, arguing that only socialist society could bring it to fruition. I agree with Gunnar Stollmann, however, that Bauer’s theory provides little evidence that this future society would alter the then existing industrial division of labor (102-104). Especially the division between planning and execution was to be left untouched.

Arbeiterkorrespondenten on Labor in the Communist Daily *Die rote Fabne*

After this preliminary discussion of highly ambiguous attitudes toward the division of labor and rationalization in communist discourse, we can now turn to the textual responses by worker-authors (*Arbeiterkorrespondenten*) to these phenomena. Their texts about labor in *Die rote Fabne* have to be viewed in the larger context of the explosion of non-fictional and semi-fictional literature in the 1920s. After the waning of Expressionism, New Objectivity, proletarian literature, and even the mostly *völkisch* literature about World War I all turned to social realities and their description. Two essays by Walter Benjamin, “Der Erzähler” and “Der Autor als Produzent” can help us to understand the intricate connections between changes in the sphere of literature and those in the world of work (i.e., the mode of production). The figure of the storyteller, Benjamin argues, corresponds to the era of the artisan, and vanished along with it. Depending on such figures as the resident tiller of the soil, the trading seaman, and a community of listeners, as well as on such mental conditions as boredom, self-forgetfulness, and the potential for experience, storytelling, according to Benjamin, had lost its proper milieu:

Die Erzählung, wie sie im Kreis des Handwerks – des bäuerlichen, des maritimen und dann des städtischen – lange gedeiht, ist selbst eine gleichsam handwerkliche Form der Mitteilung. Sie legt es nicht darauf an, das pure “an sich” der Sache zu überliefern wie eine Information oder ein Rapport. Sie senkt die Sache in das Leben der Berichtenden ein, um sie wieder aus ihm hervorzuholen. So haftet an der Erzählung die Spur des Erzählenden wie die Spur der Töpferhand an der Tonschale. (“Erzähler,” 447)

The novel, by contrast, belongs already to the realm of bourgeois abstraction, both in the way it is written and in the way it is read (i.e., not collectively, but individually). But the questioning of the novel during the 1920s by the demands of mass publishing, the distinctly “modern” sensibilities of New Objectivity, and by proletarian critics, did not signal the return of the storyteller; rather, it announced the advent of the journalist. This is Benjamin’s point in “Der Autor als Produzent,” in

which he promoted the productivist aesthetics of Soviet writer and cultural activist Sergei Tret'iakov.

In Germany, one of the main protagonists and proponents of this turn to social realities was the Prague-born writer-journalist Egon Erwin Kisch. In *Die rote Fabne*, his position was explained as follows:

Schon vor langen Zeiten gab es Reportagen. Dann aber kamen wieder Zeiten, in denen man die Zeitungen mit erfundenen, sentimentalischen Geschichten füllte, in denen man nichts von der Wirklichkeit wissen wollte. Heute hat man erkannt, daß die Phantasie der Wirklichkeit, die Phantasie der nackten Tatsachen stärker ist als erfundene Geschichten. (06/13/1928)¹²

Naturally, workers took to the kinds of realities of working life that bourgeois literature, with minor exceptions, had not found worthy of representation until then. Indeed, those realities were for the most part not pretty, with worker's exploitation by industrialists and through machines being the most common theme to be found in *Die rote Fabne*. In a statistic it published in January of 1930, worker correspondences especially condemned matters of rationalization (even more frequently than other crucial themes such as wage issues, long working-hours, or lay-offs) (*DrF* 01/13/1930). Frequently, the feuilleton incorporated texts about labor as well. I will focus on them since they present us with a more representative idea about labor by comparison with the location-specific reports found in the section called *Arbeiterkorrespondenten*.

What do these texts in the feuilleton of *Die rote Fabne* look like? Hardly any of them can be called fictional, even when written in the third, rather than the first, person; the dialog is often written in dialect in order to imbue it with local and proletarian color; they sometimes are location-specific, to the extent of naming the concrete factory where the action is taking place; they always have, however, a narrative structure with the obvious goal to instruct the reader. The educational objective becomes clear at the end of the texts where one finds, almost invariably, a turning point generally characteristic of communist discourse on labor under capitalism: the larger part of the text can be seen as an indictment of alienated labor and rationalization under capitalism, whereas the last paragraph points out that there is nothing wrong with the industrial apparatus *per se*; what has to be changed is solely the ownership of the means of production.

From the large number of texts “arguing” along those lines, I will reference a select few in order to illustrate the pattern. The brief text “Fabriken,” which appeared on June 27, 1925, is credited to Paul Körner, but simply states “Von einem Arbeiter.” The first three paragraphs of this early worker correspondence paint a gloomy picture of factories, portraying them as a near-transcendent force that renders the workers completely helpless: “Wie riesige Zeigefinger sehen sie aus, die sich drohend emporrecken, als wollten sie andeuten: ‘Wehe denen, die in unseren Bann kommen!’” But no matter how the factories and their machinery are depicted, the last paragraph makes clear that putting them under worker’s control would be entirely sufficient. Körner writes:

So wird es weitergehen, solange der Kapitalist die Sklaven, die Arbeiter in das Joch *seiner* Arbeit spannt. Anders aber wird es erst, wenn die Proletarier ihre Hände, die bisher nur für die Parasiten schafften – nach den Fabriken ausstrecken und diese in ihren *gemeinsamen* Besitz nehmen. (*DrF* 06/27/1925)

Already Lenin’s article on Taylorism, entitled “The Taylor System – Man’s Enslavement by the Machine” (originally published in *Put Pravdy* in March of 1914) is structured in this way, prefiguring the Bolsheviks’ road to “catching up” with the West in the sphere of industrial development.¹³

By sharp contrast with the infatuation with the machine of the various avant-gardes since Italian Futurism (up to New Objectivity), the authors writing in *Die rote Fabne* convey no such enthusiasm.¹⁴ Like the factories in Körner’s text, machines are often depicted as demonic mythological creatures, and the authors describe workers as being afraid of becoming machines themselves. In Erwin Kern’s text “Das Pensum. Skizze aus einem Betrieb,” the worker Weller is portrayed as suffering from the monotony of machine-tending. Kern writes:

Im ewig gleichen Rhythmus klappert der Riemen, schlägt der Hebel auf und nieder, drehen sich Räder unaufhaltsam, immer im Kreis, jeden Tag neun Stunden lang, im Kreis [...] Sechs Jahre stand Weller nun an der Maschine. Kam morgens, ging abends, wurde allmählich selbst zur Maschine in diesem ewig gleichen Rhythmus. “Bei der Arbeit wirst du selbst zur Maschine,” hatte er gedacht, als ihm der Meister zum ersten Mal den Mechanismus erklärte, vor sechs Jahren. (*DrF* 02/21/1926)

Weller no longer perceives his work place as something over which he has control. When he finally tries to reassert his agency by striking down a foreman, the anonymous mechanisms of factory organization immediately take back control: “Weller hat seinen Vorgesetzten mißhandelt. Und vor der Maschine Nr. 6484 schlug das System unsichtbar alle Werkstüren weit im Umkreise zu” (ibid.). For a communist worker-author like Kern in 1926, however, it was unthinkable to call into question the benefits of industrialization, or to think and imagine beyond it. Instead, in the last paragraph, the just laid-off workers are determined to return to the factory and take control of it in the future. In a similar text from March 1927 called “Die Fabrik,” written anonymously “von einem Arbeiter”, the indictment of industrial life is so severe that it seems to go beyond its capitalist organization. Already the abstract title “Die Fabrik” indicates that the author is highly critical of factories in general, not only of the particular one he is inspecting: “Eine moderne Fabrik. Dumpfes, monotones Grummen empfängt mich. Arbeitslied – oder Anklage? Ich durchteile das Feuerhaus mit ungeheuren Schachttöfen, in denen ein Flammenmeer brandet und wogt. Die Luft ist mit Stickgasen erfüllt”. Yet, despite this starkly negative imagery of modern industrial life, the author still has a place to go, at least discursively: the Soviet Union, the place “das in 10 Jahren mehr, wesentlich mehr geleistet hat als andere freiheitsliebende Stämme in Jahrhunderten fertig gebracht haben” (*DrF* 03/25/1927). The argument that the Soviet Union somehow manages to turn the woes of industrial life into a blessing relieves communist discourse from the necessity to think outside the box of industrialization.

Yet another anonymous text from around the same time , written as a Socratic dialog between two workers, hammers home the same point. It is entitled “Für oder gegen die Rationalisierung.” In it, the more class-conscious and politically active worker convinces the naïve, but interested worker that communists are not opposed to rationalization *per se*, but only to its capitalist variant. What becomes obvious in texts like this is that Weimar communists almost never talk about a fundamentally different ideal of work. Instead – and this pattern of thought reaches back to utopian socialism of the 19th century – they envision a state of technological progress in which the workday could be significantly reduced. The dialog’s more erudite conversant responds to the other’s concern about machines replacing human beings:

Im Sozialismus wird man eben Arbeiter in eine andere
Industrie überweisen und die Arbeitszeit verkürzen,

wenn durch technische Fortschritte Kräfte frei werden.
Dann bleibt auch Zeit für Bildung, Körperkultur und
Unterhaltung, wie es dem Menschen zukommt. (*DrF*
01/21/1926)

Again and again, one observes the same figure of thought, be it among anonymous or no-name authors like Kern, or in writers such as Karl Grünberg, the leading figure of the worker correspondent movement. In an essay on Fordism, Grünberg condemns the introduction of the *seelenlosen Arbeitsautomaten* and *Fordleichen* in Germany, only to end in the following way:

Aus dem Gesagten erhellt auch bereits, unter welchen Umständen das Fordsystem für die Menschheit zum Nutzen gereichen könnte. Wenn nämlich die Produktionsmittel in den Händen der Arbeiter sich befinden. Dann wird die Arbeiterschaft das Tempo des Fließbandes, das an sich nichts weiter als eine organisatorische Verbesserung des Arbeitsprozesses ist, regeln. (56)

All these texts, I argue, are by no means mere super-structural *reflections* or *expressions* of the economic base – neither of concrete working experiences of their authors, nor of the dominant communist thinking about work at the time. Rather, they perform a much more active discursive role in that each of them attempts to resolve a fundamental aporia within Marxist thought and practice – the simultaneous rejection *and* embrace of the industrial division of labor and rationalization.¹⁵ This certainly holds true on the level of content, where all of the aforementioned texts first reject capitalist rationalization, and later embrace its socialist variant. They are, to use Ulrich Beck's term, part of the grand *Ma(r)x-Weber-Modernisierungskonsens* which prevented the division of labor from being questioned, and a different organization of work from being implemented.¹⁶

The knowledge they produce shares a common terrain with the one produced by economic thought. Joseph Vogl has called this common terrain *Wissenszusammenhang*, i.e., a constellation of knowledge in which literature and economic thought are equally situated.¹⁷ From the recognition of this intricate relationship, we can gain a foothold for an understanding of the discursive strategies employed by our worker authors. It is not only on the level of content, but also on a more

fundamental, formal level, that their texts affirm industrial modernity/modernization. In their defense of rationalization, they are themselves deeply implicated in the movement of rationalization, now understood not as the specific implementation of new and more efficient production technologies and the quest for higher productivity rates, but understood more broadly: as the larger category through which Max Weber conceptualized industrial modernity as a whole (not least through the metaphor of the *iron cage*, through which he – like Michel Foucault later – linked industrial waged labor with discipline and domination). In a 1908 empirical study for the *Verein für Sozialpolitik*, entitled *Zur Psychophysik der industriellen Arbeit*, Weber had pointed out the grave negative physiological and psychological implications of industrial labor and concludes that “[...] der ‘Apparat’, so wie er heute ist [...] das geistige Antlitz des Menschengeschlechts fast bis zur Unkenntlichkeit verändert hat und weiter verändern wird” (41). Furthermore, he quoted his brother Alfred Weber’s assessment at the end of his study:

In einer [...] Denkschrift für den Untersuchungsausschuß hob A[lfred] Weber [...] hervor: daß die Struktur jenes eigentümlichen ‘Apparates’, welchen die großindustrielle Produktionsorganisation der Bevölkerung ‘über den Kopf gestülpt’ habe, in ihrer schicksalsvollen Bedeutung selbst die Tragweite der Frage nach ‘kapitalistischer’ oder ‘sozialistischer’ Organisation der Produktion übertreffe, weil das Bestehen dieses ‘Apparates’ *als solchen* von dieser Alternative *unabhängig* ist. (40, emphasis in original)

Interestingly enough, Weber arrived at his grave concerns about the division of labor and rationalization of industrial capitalism (or socialism) by means of the utmost rationalistic method of scientific inquiry, founding the *discipline* of “value-free” sociology precisely at a time when the division of labor within the sciences had severed it from political science. We could therefore say that Weber, while having doubts about the industrial division of labor and rationalization, reifies them on the level of his writing. The same, I will go on to argue, can be said about the worker-authors of *Die rote Fabne*. Not only does their discursive strategy provide a(n illusory) textual solution to a real contradiction in Marxist theory and communist practice at the time. Their underlying conception of literature and literary practice rests heavily on the very same phenomena of division of labor and

rationalization, which their texts both condemn and defend. Much unlike the storyteller, the author-journalist is himself an expression of the process of *laborization*, which Hannah Arendt diagnoses for modern industrial societies in her book *The Human Condition*.

Creative Workers or Working Artists?

It is certainly true that the practice of the worker-authors led to the de-differentiation¹⁸ of formerly specialized spheres – this was one of the driving ideas behind the movement, as well as behind proletarian culture in general. After all, one of the key terms for proletarian cultural politics since the initial success of *Proletkul't* in the Soviet Union was *monism*, i.e. the organization of life around one basic principle.¹⁹ In hindsight, however, the fundamental problem of this kind of *monism* was that there was only one legitimate candidate for the one foundational principle: work/labor.²⁰ And if this principle was usually thought to be work, then we still need to ask what *kind* of work was supposed to become the basic principle of social cohesion. In order to answer this question, we need to look at the kind of synthesis between labor and artistic/literary practice German communism propagated during the 1920s.

Since we witness a wide-spread sentiment against the conveyor belt – the main symbol of the division of labor and rationalization at the time – in the texts by the worker correspondents, it may come as a surprise that it is the very same conveyor which allows us to make a transition to communist literary theory at the time. The point here is not that revolutionary pamphlets were occasionally transported on the conveyor belt – even if that truly was a suggestion made by V. Demar in his essay “Die Rationalisierung der Produktion und die politische Arbeit im Betrieb” in 1927 – but that some influential communist literary theorists saw in the conveyor a model for literary production – just as Trotsky saw in it a model for the entirety of social life.²¹ To be sure, this technological optimism was more prevalent in the Soviet Union than in Germany, but it was imported into Germany through *Die rote Fahne* and other communist institutions and publications – most of which were part of Willy Münzenberg’s media empire (such as the *Internationale Arbeiter Hilfe* or the *Arbeiter-Illustrierte Zeitung*).

We should distinguish here between two influential positions in literary theory during the 1920s that both fought against the bourgeois

understanding of literary interiority/inwardness (*Innerlichkeit*) and proposed, in its stead, a more mechanistic model. Russian formalism focused on textual *production* and tried to de-individualize it by maintaining that the text would be composed of *devices*. In this view, the history of literature has no need for specific authors, as it “is being written” by *creative necessity* (e.g. Tynianov 42). The second position, i.e. the proletarian literature, attacked formalism for its alleged blindness to material realities, and instead was interested in changing the socio-economic conditions in search for a truly collective literary production. Especially the idea of the fusion of industrial worker and artist of Proletkul'tist descent was the founding principle of the worker correspondent movement, and Tret'iakov's dictum “Writers to the Kolkhoz” (*pizately na kolkhoz*) was widely disseminated in the German communist press (if not in the exact same words). In September of 1930, for example, *Die rote Fabne* dedicated the entire feuilleton to an exhibit of the Soviet *October* group (*Oktiabr*). The title of the page reads “Der Künstler wird Industriearbeiter” and the article is a summary of the presentations by the Soviet artists Gutnoff and Tagiroff. ‘Writers to the Kolkhoz’ is here changed to “Aus den Ateliers in die Betriebe” – certainly, the factional battles would have prevented a member of the *October* group to use the same slogan as Tret'iakov who was a member of *LEF*. But the position is essentially the same. They state:

Der Künstler soll nicht um die Ausprägung seiner künstlerischen Persönlichkeit sorgen, sondern hauptsächlich an der Verbesserung der Lebenslage der Arbeiterschaft mitwirken. Eine Kunst, die keine Klassenfeinde herausfordert, die nicht die Veränderung der Lebensformen bezweckt (als ideologische und industriell-kollektivistische Methode der Produktion), ist eine unbrauchbare, eine sozial-zwecklose Kunst. In der Epoche der Industrialisierung und der Kollektivisierung muß der Künstler alle persönlichen ‚ästhetischen‘ Sonderheiten abstreifen; er muss seine gesamten Kräfte den kollektiven Aufgaben der neuen Gesellschaft, insbesondere den Industrierwerken und Fabriken widmen. (*DrF* 10/19/1930)

The article further mentions that only six members of the *October* group still worked in studios, while 240 of them actually worked at the factory. Despite the highly different social and political

circumstances in Germany and the Soviet Union, this idea of a unity of art and industrial labor was embraced also by German communists. While rejecting the similar project of constructivism as bourgeois,²² communist literary critics such as Gertrud Alexander, Wieland Herzfelde, Edwin Hoernle, or Oskar Kanehl called for the erasure of the separation of artist and worker by making the worker the only legitimate artist: “Der proletarische Künstler ist im Betrieb. Und zwar als Proletarier. Nie in seiner Eigenschaft als Künstler” (Kanehl, “Kunst und Künstler im Proletariat;” qtd. in Albrecht 530). The term *Kunstwerke*, with its pre-industrial connotations, nearly disappeared from communist discourse in favor of *Produktion*, its industrial counterpart.²³ The adoption of Soviet Marxism by German communists, despite the social and political differences between the two countries, would eventually amount to nothing less than the stifling of thought and cultural activity. As Jameson notes, the theoretical devices of *mediation* or *transcoding*, which I have used here for analytic purposes, would in Soviet Marxism be replaced by *expressive causality*:

Stalin’s “expressive causality” can be detected, to take one example, in the productionist ideology of Soviet Marxism, as an insistence on the primacy of the forces of production. In other words, if all the levels of production – nationalization and the elimination of private property relations, as well as industrialization and modernization – will be enough “more or less rapidly to transform the whole superstructure,” and cultural revolution is unnecessary, as is the collective attempt to invent new forms of the labor process. (37)

Applied to the present topic, this pronouncement implies: Weimar communist *Industrieliteratur*, in fully embracing this productivist ideology of industrial (rationalized and divided) labor and even taking industrial labor as a model for its own literary practice, consented to its subordination to industrial life, left without the ability to critique it. In this sense, the *Industrieliteratur* under scrutiny starts to resemble what Pierre Bourdieu, in his *The Rules of Art*, calls “industrial literature:” a literature so heteronomous (i.e., dependent on the market and/or “technocracy”) as to completely renounce the autonomy of its conditions of production (348).²⁴ In trying to re-integrate art and literature with everyday life, communist cultural theory and practice during the Weimar Republic aimed at realizing this synthesis under the

leadership of a narrowly understood conception of *work* as *industrial labor*. This idea of an *Industrieliteratur* in the sense of a now truly *industrialized literature* runs across the different factions within proletarian culture, and fed on the industrial euphoria in the Soviet Union.²⁵ With so many Germans and especially communists out of work, and with the world economic crisis seemingly proving the superiority of Soviet communism, Russian models of labor played an increasingly important role for a German communist discourse on labor that was in serious need of positive content.

Anmerkungen

- ¹ In Germany, this synthesis was widely discussed across the political spectrum at the time and manifested itself in various positions in the debate over *Kultur* versus *Zivilisation*. Cultural conservatives such as Martin Heidegger also argued for the initial sameness of art and technology. Even though the following quote is taken from a later essay on technology, I am citing it here as a paradigmatic position taken already during the 1920s. He writes: “There was a time when it was not technology alone that bore the name *technē*. Once that revealing that brings forth truth into the splendor of radiant appearing also was called *technē* [...] The arts were not derived from the artistic. Art works were not enjoyed aesthetically. Art was not a sector of cultural activity” (Heidegger 34).
- ² British Marxist Raymond Williams has convincingly shown that the narrow understanding of culture (i.e. canonized high art, Matthew Arnold’s “best that has been thought and said in the world”) has come into being only with the beginning industrialization (see his discussion in *Culture and Society* xiii-xx). In order to broaden our conception of culture, Williams suggests using it in the sense of a “whole way of life.” He writes: “But it would seem that from their emphasis on the interdependence of all elements of social reality, and from their analytic emphasis on movement and change, Marxists should logically use ‘culture’ in the sense of a whole way of life, a general social process” (282).
- ³ For a detailed history of the strategy of *Die rote Fabne*, see Brauneck (1973).
- ⁴ Raymond Williams designates with this term a community’s shared beliefs and practices which operate not only on a conscious, but also on an unconscious level. My choice of texts by unknown worker-authors aims at reaching below the “official” party doctrine – not least since Erich Fromm’s sociological study of Weimar workers testifies to a striking discrepancy between political opinion and everyday life attitudes.
- ⁵ Michael Rohrwasser made this point already in his 1975 *Saubere Mädel – Starke Genossen* (6-7).
- ⁶ For a comprehensive account of this issue, see Hinrichs (1976). In literary histories of the 1970s, this new focus on the detrimental aspects of industrial labor was largely overlooked. A notable exception to my argument is Erhard Schütz’ critique of Kisch’s productivist enthusiasm in *Kritik der literarischen Reportage: Reportagen und Reiseberichte as der Weimarer Republik über die USA und die Sowjetunion* (1977). This
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critique, however, stems less from an interest in theories of work, I would argue, than from his defense of Lukács' conception of literature. Another exception are the essays in the 1980 collection of essays called *The Technological Imagination: Theories and Fictions* with its critical take on the technological utopianism of the Left avantgarde (see especially David Patrick's "Affirmative and Negative Culture: Technology and the Left Avant-Garde").

- ⁷ Having been sent to Berlin from Moscow, Lukács played a major role in the BPRS journal *Die Linkskurve*. In essays such as "Reportage oder Gestaltung" or "Tendenz oder Parteilichkeit," he proposed a conception of proletarian literature based on 19th century realism.
- ⁸ Mediation or transcoding here would not simply mean "reflection," i.e. the orthodox Marxist belief in the superstructure's mirroring of the productive forces. Rather, Jameson's conception allows for a more dynamic interaction between various levels of social life and ascribes to cultural artifacts the more active roles of production, projection, compensation, repression, displacement, etc. (See especially his discussion in *The Political Unconscious*, pp. 33-49)
- ⁹ "For as soon as the distribution of labor comes into being, each man has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape. He is a hunter, a fisherman, a shepherd, or a critical critic, and must remain so if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood; while in a communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic" (Marx/Engels 53).
- ¹⁰ For a near-comprehensive account of the pilgrimage of Weimar industrialists to the U.S. in search of new industrial technologies and organization, see Nolan 18-29.
- ¹¹ Here, Walcher is essentially paraphrasing Trotsky who, in his *Problems of Everyday Life of 1923*, also envisions the end of divided labor by means of technological progress: "But what about the monotony of labor, depersonalized and despiritualized by the conveyor? I am asked [...] This is a reactionary path. Socialism and hostility to machinery have never had and will never have anything in common [...] There will always be branches of industry in society that demand personal creativity, and those who find their calling in production will make their way to them. What we are concerned with here is the basic type of production in its most important branches, *until at last a fresh chemical and power revolution in technology sweeps aside mechanization as we know it today*" (Trotsky 244, my emphasis).
- ¹² This statement reiterates the preface of Kisch's famous book *Der rasende Reporter* (1925). Hereafter, references to issues of *Die rote Fahne* will appear as *DrF* plus the date of publication.
- ¹³ While indicting Taylorism throughout the article, Lenin concludes: "The Taylor system—without its initiators knowing or wishing it—is preparing the time when the proletariat will take over all social production and appoint its own workers' committees for the purpose of properly distributing and rationalising all social labour. Large-scale production, machinery, railways, telephone—all provide thousands of opportunities to cut by three-fourths the working time of the organised workers and make them four times better off than they are today. And these workers' committees, assisted by the workers' unions, will be able to apply these principles of rational distribution of social labour when the latter is freed from its enslavement by capital" (154).
- ¹⁴ For example, the Russian avantgardist Ehrenburg's novel *Das Leben der Autos* was called "ein konterrevolutionärer Hymnus auf die Technik" in *Die rote Fahne*. In this

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- review of July 12, 1930, the author explicitly draws a line from Ehrenburg's novel to the Italian fascist Marinetti.
- ¹⁵ This is one of Hannah Arendt's main points in *The Human Condition*: "[...] the fundamental contradiction which runs like a red thread through the whole of Marx' thought, and is present no less in the third volume of *Capital* than in the writings of the young Marx. Marx' attitude toward labor, and that is toward the very center of his thought, has never ceased to be equivocal. While it was an 'eternal necessity imposed by nature' and the most human and productive of man's activities, the revolution, according to Marx, has not the task of emancipating the laboring classes but of emancipating man from labor; only when labor is abolished can the 'realm of freedom' supplant the 'realm of necessity'" (Arendt 104).
- ¹⁶ Beck views capitalism and socialism as the two main allies (rather than antagonists) of what he calls "simple modernization." His own conception of "citizens' work" (*Bürgerarbeit*) departs radically from the premises on which both industrial capitalism and socialism are founded (see, for example, his *The Reinvention of Politics. Rethinking Modernity in the Global Social Order*).
- ¹⁷ Vogl writes in his *Kalkül und Leidenschaft*: "Die Möglichkeit einer Beziehung zwischen Literatur und Ökonomie (oder bestimmten Wissensfeldern überhaupt) liegt nicht in einer Widerspiegelung, sie liegt weder in einem Abbildverhältnis noch in einer Beziehung von Text und Kontext oder in einer Relation zwischen Stoff und Form. Die Konjunktion von 'Literatur' und 'Ökonomie' verfolgt hier vielmehr den Zweck, das Wissenssubstrat poetischer Gattungen und die poetische Durchdringung von Wissensformen aufeinander zu beziehen und beide damit im Milieu ihrer Geschichtlichkeit festzuhalten" (14).
- ¹⁸ Fredric Jameson introduces this term in his essay "Future City" with respect to multi-disciplinary research and postmodernity whose "law of being is de-differentiation, and in which we are most interested in how things overlap and necessarily spill across the disciplinary boundaries" (68).
- ¹⁹ For Alexander Bogdanov, this basic principle was *organization*, which he thought had reached a new level through the advent of the machine age. He writes: "Machine production transforms the proletariat...into a class infused with working consciousness, infused with positive attitude toward labor, a class that realizes the meaning and value of labor...In the worker's thinking, the idea of labor occupies a central position: it serves as a starting point for him. In his inner world...there develops, firstly, the love of labor and, secondly, the pride in labor, because he sees constantly [...] how labor overcomes nature, overcomes the elemental forces. All this is done by the machine, which carries the self-consciousness of labor [...]" (Bogdanov 38ff.). Of course, we need to be mindful of the major factual battles around and between Proletkul't, LEF, and RAPP in the Soviet Union, and the *Arbeiterkorrespondenten* and the BPRS in Germany. But my argument, which is similar to Boris Groys' in his *The Total Art of Stalinism*, highlights the continuities from the avant-garde to the conservative backlash that finally triumphed in the early 1930s.
- ²⁰ The German language does not have the distinction between *work* and *labor*. I suggest using the term *labor* to refer to *waged labor*, while *work* would signify the broader realm of *human activity*.
- ²¹ See especially the essay "The 'conveyor' principle of socialist economy" (298-302) in *Trotsky's Problems of Everyday Life*.
- ²² See for example G.G. Alexander's article "Kunst, Künstler und Proletariat" (qtd. in Albrecht 538-543).
- ²³ See for example Herzfelde's "Gesellschaft, Künstler und Kommunismus."
- ²⁴ Bourdieu goes as far as calling Gramsci's "organic intellectual" a dangerous illusion: "Cultural producers will not find again a place of their own in the social world
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unless, sacrificing once and for all the myth of the 'organic intellectual' (without falling into the complementary mythology of the mandarin withdrawn from everything), they agree to work collectively for the defense of their own interests" (348).

- ²⁵ To be sure, the larger part of the Russian émigré community in Germany itself was non-proletarian and lived in Germany (mainly in Berlin or, more specifically, "Charlottengrad") for political reasons. For the larger context of German-Russian cultural exchange, see John Willet's *Art & Politics in the Weimar Period: The New Sobriety, 1917- 1933* (NY: Pantheon, 1978). Fritz Mierau's *Russen in Berlin. Literatur Malerei Theater Film 1918-1933* (Leipzig: Reclam 1987). And the catalogue *Berlin-Moskau / Moskau-Berlin 1900-1950* (München: Prestel-Verlag 1995).

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