

Thomas Welskopp Obituary

Thomas Welskopp (1961 to 2021) was a founding member of the German Labour History Association and served on the Executive Board since its inception. After a serious illness, he passed away on 19 August 2021.

Thomas Welskopp was an outstanding social historian whose historical services to labour history and historical scholarship in Germany cannot be acknowledged enough. He grew up in a working-class family in the Ruhr area, studied history and sociology in Bielefeld (plus a semester at Johns Hopkins University) and graduated from Bielefeld in 1988. Thus, he became acquainted with social history at its then centre, the "Bielefeld School" with Hans-Ulrich Wehler and Jürgen Kocka. In 1992, Thomas Welskopp completed his doctorate in Berlin with a comparative study of labour relations and workers in the German and US iron industries. Thomas Welskopp moved in the midst of the classic topics of labour and social historiography, but already set a scent here. He turned against the concept of "class formation" that was predominant in social historiography at the time and chose a milieu-theoretical approach instead. Thomas Welskopp argued (until the end!) not against the concept of class or an understanding of capitalist societies as class societies, but against the simplistic idea that industrialisation had homogenised the living conditions of workers, so that they could organise themselves as a class. Thomas Welskopp thus did not ask about the social inevitabilities that led to class consciousness and, in the following step, to organising in workers' parties and trade unions. Rather, one could ask with Thomas Welskopp what adversities and differences in life practices the workers overcame and what efforts they made to form a class and let their organisations emerge. Thomas Welskopp pursued these questions with a praxeologically sharpened approach in his 1999 habilitation thesis on the history of social democracy between "Vormärz" and the anti-socialist laws of the 1880s. At that time, Thomas Welskopp was already a prominent representative of the "culturalist" turn in social historiography. Thomas Welskopp analyses the origins of social democracy not in a preceding class formation, but in a radical democratic popular movement. It was not until the empire that social democracy developed into a class organisation of workers - a process that went hand in hand with the sharp separation of bourgeoisie and workers in the last third of the 19th century, in which social democracy in turn played its organisational part. Few historians before and after Thomas Welskopp have delved so deeply into the sources of the early workers' movement.

Until the early 2000s, Thomas Welskopp worked at the Friedrich Meinecke Institute at the Free University of Berlin, then held professorships in Zurich and Göttingen, and finally taught "General History with Special Reference to the History of Modern Societies" as a full professor at Bielefeld University from 2004. His focus remained on labour history and the theoretical problems of historiography. He continued to pursue his cultural approach in subsequent writings and editorships. In 2010, he wrote an extensive work on Prohibition, in which he combined a history of (alcohol-structured) vice with an analysis of economic, social, cultural and political conflicts that accompanied Prohibition.

Thomas Welskopp was one of Germany's important historians, but for us he was especially a colleague always in solidarity, an empathetic and warm-hearted friend. Thomas was a "non-professional" professor who was at eye level with people, whether they were established colleagues, doctoral candidates or students. Thomas was not looking for the big stage or the self-absorbed appearance. The students and doctoral candidates in Bielefeld can report this from their own experience better than we can. The fact that doctoral students no longer have to be afraid of the Bielefeld colloquia (Oberseminar) is also due to Thomas.

Thomas was not a salesman of himself; he participated in discussions when he thought he could contribute. Since 2014, Thomas has belonged to the circle of colleagues who organise the colloquium "History of the Worlds of Work and Trade Unions". The Bielefeld Graduate School in History and Sociology has hosted this one-day event three times so far, and each time it has been an intense

discussion experience and a culinary event. The hearty Westphalian buffets are legendary (although vegans and vegetarians also got their money's worth). It was out of this circle that the German Labour History Association was founded in February 2017 in a hotel in Augsburg - not in a glamorous meeting room, but in a corner of the breakfast room. This unpretentious origin story of the GLHA corresponded with Thomas' habitus. The impulse to found the GLHA came from outside, but Thomas was immediately on fire. And Thomas finally also gave the impulse for the first conference of the GLHA in 2020: "Freedom of labour in capitalism". With his untimely death, Thomas' preliminary work on a new history of capitalism now awaits the open eyes and ears of younger Labour Historians.

Thomas Welskopp was 59 years old. We will miss him.

Stefan Müller (for the Executive Committee of the GLHA), 23. August 2021