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Hilda Weiss: Industrial Sociology as Activism

Emily A. Steinhauer¹

In 1922, a young Hilda Weiss (1900-1981) took up work in the Carl Zeiss factory in Jena to finance her studies at the local university. For the young woman from a bourgeois Berlin family – she was a distant relative of Walter Rathenau – her experiences on the factory floor were formative. Not only did they acquaint her with the conditions of manual labour in interwar Germany, they also contributed to her political formation as a left-wing activist and trade unionist. Crucially, however, her two-year stint at the Carl-Zeiss-works also fundamentally impacted her academic work, which she continued in Berlin and Frankfurt: throughout her career as a social researcher, the realities of factory work as well as questions relating to the organisation of labour shaped her agenda as a social researcher. Weiss' combination of personal experience, political activism and cutting-edge research-methodologies make her stand out among her peers in German interwar sociology. This article will consider her place in interwar industrial sociology, and her role in shaping the methodology of the Frankfurt School, casting her as an 'activist intellectual' for whom social research was closely intertwined with political ends. I argue that through this approach, Weiss developed a worker-centric, engaged sociology that would foster a model of political change through pedagogy.

Weiss was born in 1900 – only three years before Theodor W. Adorno, with whom she shares not only this generational affiliation, but also the intellectual association with the Institute for Social Research (IfS) in Frankfurt, where both worked during the interwar period.² Like Adorno, by the time the Nazis came to power in 1933, Weiss had to flee the country, relocating first to Paris, and then more permanently to the United States of America. Yet unlike her fellow researcher at the IfS, Weiss has been largely forgotten by sociologists, historians of sociology and the wider public. Although recent academic initiatives have seen a resurgence of interest in women sociologists of the twentieth century, and some light has been shed on Weiss as an academic, her biography and work remain under-researched.³ This is due to a number of interlinked factors: gender, exile and archives. Although opportunities for women in social research had greatly increased since the late 19th century, and especially through the opening of universities to them, no parity was reached.⁴ This persisting inequality was reinforced through the conditions of exile.⁵ Women's marginalisation in academia and

1 Emily A. Steinhauer is a historian based at Royal Holloway University of London. Her work focuses on German intellectual history in the late nineteenth and twentieth century.

2 See e.g. correspondences from 1936, which consist of short, pejorative remarks on Weiss. There are no substantial discussions of her research work, but the comments speak to contemporary gendered dynamics at the IfS and the academic community more broadly. Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, *Briefwechsel. Band I: 1927-1937* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2003): 184-262.

3 Marion Keller, *Pionierinnen der empirischen Sozialforschung im Wilhelminischen Kaiserreich* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2018); Marion Keller, Ulla Wischermann (eds.), *Sozialwissenschaftlerinnen an der Universität Frankfurt am Main, CGC Online Papers*, Vol. 2 (2017); also see network-initiatives such as the DGS-section „Soziologiegeschichte“ which enabled a conference on „Women in the History of Sociology“ (Universität Braunschweig, November 9th-11th 2022). A shorter version of this paper was presented there.

4 For a summary of different opportunities open to women, see Keller, *Pionierinnen der empirischen Sozialforschung*, esp. introduction.

5 Irene Messinger, Katharina Prager (eds.), *Doing Gender in Exile: Geschlechterverhältnisse, Konstruktionen und Netzwerke in Bewegung* (Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2019).

beyond consequently impacted record-keeping, meaning historians of sociology researching women like Weiss today are faced with the problem of few archival traces, in addition to a limited number of published materials.⁶

Her role as an ‘activist intellectual’ puts Weiss into a long line of politically motivated individuals whose work in an academic or intellectual context was directly infused with the imperative to bring about meaningful political change. For Weiss, (industrial) sociology was the primary locus of this attempt to combine academic work with political activism. Here, she could draw on her own experience, her advanced training in cutting-edge social research methods developed in the interwar period among members or associates of the Frankfurt School, such as Erich Fromm, and link this up with her political education obtained during her membership of various left-wing groupings. Responses to ‘social questions’ were nothing new in (German) sociology, but Weiss’ activist streak sets her apart from many contemporaries and her immediate predecessors in the Verein für Sozialpolitik who had, in the first decade of the 20th century, pioneered many of the methods that still influenced her. Thus whilst Alfred and Max Weber’s *Enquêtes* were similarly interested in the impact of industrial working conditions on personal developments and lifestyles as much as working conditions, they emphasised the studies’ ‘pure social-scientific purpose’ and denied direct political tendencies.⁷ Instead, Weiss reconnects with an older tradition, as she rediscovers Karl Marx’ social research. Thus whilst her work on his ‘*Enquête Ouvrière*’, discussed at greater length below, explicates her vision of the connection of social research and political activism, it also sets her apart from her immediate intellectual environment – the Frankfurt School and the IFS, and the particular set of methodologies developed there over the interwar period and during the years in American exile.⁸

Whilst this article’s aim is thus to recover Weiss as an important figure for the history of twentieth century sociology, it is not content to limit itself to this. Women’s intellectual history is increasingly challenging such straight-forward paradigms of canon-enlargement. Instead, at the heart of this article is the question what vital contribution Weiss’ oeuvre makes to our understanding of the history of twentieth-century sociology, and how her activist streak, as it developed over the years and in the context of an evolving capitalist economy, adds complexity to our narrative of the field’s evolution. Her sociological vision recentred workers as the agents of their own destiny, challenging both vanguardist or elitist tactics in the communist movement as well as the rising expert-culture in mid-century social science.

6 Katharina Prager, Vanessa Hanneschläger, ‘Gendered Lives in anticipation of a biographer? Two intellectual relationships in twentieth-century Austria’, *Tijdschrift voor Genderstudies*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (2016): 337-353.

7 Gert Schmidt, ‘Zur Geschichte der Industriesoziologie in Deutschland’, *Soziale Welt*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (1980): 259-260; Max Weber, ‘Methodologische Einleitung für die Erhebungen des Vereins für Sozialpolitik über Auslese und Anpassung der Arbeiterschaft der geschlossenen Großindustrie’ (1908), in: Weber, Max, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Soziologie und Sozialpolitik* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1924): 1-60.

8 Hilda Weiss, ‘Die „Enquête Ouvrière“ von Karl Marx’, in: Fürstenberg, Friedrich (ed.), *Industriesoziologie: Vorläufer und Frühzeit* (Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1959): 81-101 [originally published in *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, No. 1 (1936): 76-85, 88-97]. On the Frankfurt School and critical theory in exile see Thomas Wheatland, *The Frankfurt School in Exile* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009); David Jenemann, *Adorno in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

The Making of an Activist Intellectual

Weiss' biography can be roughly divided into three stages: her initial 'education' – in Marxist theory through friends and comrades, through her more 'traditional' university studies and through her experience of factory work and union activity. This all culminates in her PhD-dissertation as the first serious foray into an experience- and theory-informed social research.⁹ The second phase is that of her work at the IfS and its orbit, where she is part of a team pioneering sociological research in the 1930s and 1940s. This period, although it begins amidst the intellectual excitement of the Weimar Republic, is equally marked by the darkening of life on the European continent. Weiss as Jew, Marxist and intellectual was triple-marked in the eyes of the Nazis, and she was among the first wave of exiles to leave Germany, settling initially in Paris, where she conducted further research. Weiss then managed to gain entry to the United States, and here, initially in the American South and then in Brooklyn, NYC, is where the third part of her biography takes place – marked by the conditions of exile.¹⁰ Although she continued to cooperate with the IfS, which was among the few research-institutes to survive intact the flight from Germany, she was never given a full position. Having to make ends meet, she teaches initially at one of the 'black' colleges in the American South, where she encounters the racist segregationist policies of the U.S. and then moves to New York to take up a teaching position. There is no archive dedicated to Weiss, and she has left little public records, meaning historians have to attempt to trace her in other records, for example in correspondences by IfS-colleagues.¹¹ At the same time, scholarship has moved little beyond these biographical interests, and Weiss' intellectual contributions remain sidelined.¹²

Weiss' early life was typical of her social milieu, and resembles that of many of her later colleagues at the IfS in Frankfurt.¹³ From an early age, she encountered, on the one hand, the „intellectual habitus“ of her father, fostering her academic and political interests, and, on the other hand, the charitable but bourgeois work of her mother, which acquainted her with social inequalities and the distinctly middle class attempts to alleviate these. What sets her apart from many of her Frankfurt School contemporaries, such as Adorno, Max Horkheimer or Friedrich Pollock, is the importance played by political activity for her personal, and then intellectual, formation.¹⁴ Her experiences with the politics of early twentieth century Germany – from her early encounters with the Wilhelmine class system, the endurance of antisemitism during her schooldays and her participation in a liberal youth group as an adolescent – were systematised once she befriended Wilhelm Liebknecht – son of the more prominent Karl. Through him, she encountered Marxist theory and became acquainted with socialist politics in the war-ravaged, newly emerging German Republic. Already during her schooldays, Weiss tried to translate her theoretical knowledge into practical activism, moved by the violent turmoil of the Weimar

9 Hilda Weiss, *Abbe und Ford. Pläne für die Errichtung sozialer Betriebe. Inaugural-Dissertation zur Erlangung der Doktorwürde der Wirtschafts- und Sozialwissenschaftlichen Fakultät der Universität Frankfurt a.M.* (Frankfurt, 1927).

10 Weiss' own autobiography is the key source for biographical information. *Hilda Weiss – Soziologin, Sozialistin, Emigrantin: Ihre Autobiographie aus dem Jahre 1940*, ed. Detlef Garz (Hamburg: Kovač, 2006).

11 Detlef Garz has been able to recover some source material and published it in Weiss, *Autobiographie*, postscript.

12 Joel Schmidt, 'Hilda Weiss', in: Keller, Wischermann (eds.), *Sozialwissenschaftlerinnen an der Universität Frankfurt am Main: 57-76*, here p. 57.

13 See e.g. Stefan Müller-Dooch, *Adorno: Eine Biographie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2003), first part.

14 See e.g. Lenhard, Philipp Lenhard, *Friedrich Pollock: Die graue Eminenz der Frankfurter Schule* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2019).

Republic's early days, which, given her close connections to some of the left's leading figures, merged the personal and the political.¹⁵ This early commitment to socialist politics, even at personal cost, would remain a prominent feature of Weiss' life.

Weiss' most formative experience was yet to come, however, when she moved to Jena in 1921 to attend university. Here she enrolled in economics, employment law and sociology, but due to the economic crisis' effects on her family's finances also quickly had to pay her own way. Between 1922 and 1924, Weiss therefore worked in the Carl Zeiss factory, cutting her teeth on the manual labour many of her (male) colleagues only theorised about. After some initial difficulties finding her feet, Weiss became a cherished member of the workforce and even advanced to become a union representative, a duty she followed with such vigour that it eventually cost her the job.¹⁶

The relevance of her work-experience becomes particularly clear when considering Weiss as an observer of the socialist movement. In the early 1920s, she participated in educational programmes for workers, and although she praised the overall content, Weiss was nonetheless sceptical of the success of the project.¹⁷ Her particular perspective – as someone with a solid theoretical schooling, experience of the factory floor and trade-union activity – allowed her to look at the socialist movement from several of its constituent, but not always agreeing, parts. The main problem she identified was the increasing gulf between an artificially created party-elite and the masses of the working-class movement, those card-carrying members who participated in protests or subscribed to party-newspapers but were not, or only at a low level, involved in organisational activity. In her autobiography, she singles out the 1921-‘März-aktion’ (‘March-Action’) in particular as an eventually unsuccessful event that had been steered by removed party elites: the uprising in the industrially strong areas of central Germany had been initiated by the Communist International, rather than local figures in the movement, was badly prepared and initially struggled to gain the support of workers.¹⁸ Education was not alleviating, but aggravating this issue:

I believe the teachers of our summer school or at least part of them were sincere and did not realize at all how far they were from the sympathies and interests of the laboring masses. Nor did they know how great the gulf was growing as a result of this kind of education.¹⁹

In Weiss' opinion, the Communist Party in Germany had made the fatal mistake of adopting the Russian example, following Leninist theory that propagated the building of a vanguard party which would lead the working class in social revolution.²⁰ Weiss clearly considered this a flawed approach:

Considering the fact that the majority of the working classes were interested only in gradual social reforms, it would be the task of the Communist Party, to work as a decisive minority group for the political interests those masses had not yet recognized. [...] This exclusive group instructed by party leaders would be responsible only to them and not to the

15 Weiss, *Autobiographie*: 27-30. Also see Corinne Painter, ‘Revolutionary Perspectives: German Jewish Women and 1918-19’, *Journal of European Studies*, Vol. 51, No. 2 (2021): 93-110.

16 Weiss, *Autobiographie*: 36.

17 Weiss, *Autobiographie*: 46.

18 Weiss, *Autobiographie*: 47; Hans Ulrich Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte. Band 4* (München: C.H.Beck, 2003): 405.

19 Weiss, *Autobiographie*: 48.

20 On the development of the CP in interwar Germany, see e.g. Andreas Wirsching, ‘„Stalinisierung“ oder entideologisierte „Nischengesellschaft“? Alte Einsichten und neue Thesen zum Charakter der KPD in der Weimarer Republik’, *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, Vol. 45, No. 3 (1997): 449-466.

working class. Despising more or less consciously the imperfect work of improving the workers' daily labor conditions the communist education was far from the real problems and needs of the factory workers.²¹

The main problem Weiss identified here was the discrepancy between workers' interests and the challenges they faced on the one hand and the elitism of the communist party vanguard which followed different goals but failed to raise workers' consciousness sufficiently on the other. Instead of educating of educating workers in such a way that would allow them to understand the system around them, and proposing solutions to issues immediately affecting the working classes, „academic arrogance“ created a party elite and „Gewerkschaftsbonzen“ [trade union moguls] undermining a coherent socialist movement. Instead, the growing disconnect between elites and masses opened the door for the Nazi Party.²² As will become evident, industrial sociology offered an alternative to remedy the elitist approaches and recentre workers.

These broad-brushstroke assessments of the failures of the interwar labour movement derive from Weiss' 1940-autobiography, which she wrote for an official U.S.-competition seeking émigré-accounts of their lives before exile. The text is therefore written in hindsight and with the knowledge not just of the Nazi rise to power in 1933, which forced her to flee the country, but of a number of sociological inquiries into the mind of the working class, which would have confirmed her assessments.

The confidently written text never hides Weiss' personal standpoint, clearly relaying her assessment of the German labour movement and its failure, and the reflections thus provide readers with a clear sense of her own intellectual agenda. In particular her concern with working class experience and education sets her apart not only from the party elite which she criticises in her autobiographical writing, but also from much of the (academic) sociological establishment at the time.

Her time in Jena had alerted Weiss to the plight of the working classes and shaped her activist-agenda, but it was only during her time in Frankfurt and later in Paris, that she sharpened her intellectual profile and developed her own social research methodology. When she moved to Frankfurt in 1924, Carl Grünberg, then director of the IfS, advised her to incorporate her own experience in Jena into her doctoral dissertation.²³ The resulting work, *Abbe und Ford: Pläne für die Errichtung sozialer Betriebe*, did just that: it compared the work of Ernst Abbe in Jena with that of Henry Ford in the U.S., considering their interest in philanthropy and the relationship between labourers and capitalist production in both companies.²⁴ As Schmidt highlights, her Marxist standpoint, scrutinising and critiquing especially the Fordist ideology, is easily overlooked by commentators. This first dissertation gives Weiss the initial opportunity to combine social research, Marxist critique and her own factory-experiences in one research project. After completing her dissertation, Weiss worked on a number of different projects, among them Erich Fromm's so-called *Arbeiter- und Angestelltenstudie*, until in 1933 she was forced to flee the country and she settled – albeit briefly – in Paris. Here, she completed a second dissertation entitled *Les Enquêtes Ouvrières en France entre 1830 et 1848* [*The Enquêtes Ouvrières in France between 1830 and 1848*], which also

21 Weiss, *Autobiographie*: 47.

22 Jürgen W. Falter, Dirk Hänisch, 'Die Anfälligkeit von Arbeitern gegenüber der NSDAP bei den Reichstagswahlen 1928-1933', *Historische Sozialforschung. Supplement* (2013): 145-193.

23 Weiss, *Autobiographie*: 61.

24 Schmidt, 'Hilda Weiss': 65-69.

included research on Karl Marx' *Enquêtes* from 1880.²⁵ It is these two works that are foundational for our understanding of Weiss' activist intellectualism and the function of her own social research methodology.

Collaboration with Erich Fromm 1929/30

The development of Weiss' sociological research method must be understood in the context of the political ferment of the Weimar Republic and the fight for the allegiance of the working class in particular. The defeat of the revolutionary movements in the first days and months of the Weimar Republic, culminating in the unsuccessful Spartacist uprising and the murder of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht in January 1919, had manoeuvred the radical left into a position where it was fighting on two fronts: the right remained the enemy, but the newly founded Communist Party (KPD) also turned against the Social Democrats (SPD), the oldest and for a long time strongest Socialist movement.²⁶ But besides the failure of the political elite of the left-wing movement to mount a successful challenge to their political opponents, the events of 1919 also signalled something else: the working class itself was struggling to live up to the expectation of many Marxists at the time that it would gain consciousness of its role in the class struggle, thus fulfilling its role as the subject of history and bringing about revolution.²⁷

One way of circumventing this problem of workers' class consciousness was the vanguard party which would be able to function as a leader in times of political crisis – this had seemingly worked in Russia in October 1917, when the Bolsheviks had overturned the regime of the February Revolution.²⁸ Yet, as Weiss' own reflections on her encounters with this sort of political organising have already shown, this tactic sooner or later led to a fundamental problem: the growing gulf between workers and party elites, and loosening of bonds between them. Vanguardism, and the overt influence of the Soviet Union and the Comintern, thus to Weiss, and many others, seemed a dubious tactic that could not lead to sustainable success.

Following a period of relative calm in the mid-1920s, the end of the decade saw a renewed surge in political tensions.²⁹ The rise of the Nazi party in particular began to undermine the position of the left among their core demographic, the working class. Although many workers were members of left-wing organisations, which influenced their lives in all sorts of ways – from labour organisation at their work place to youth organisation and cultural initiatives like Agitprop theatre – some observers were starting to question the hold this system really had on workers. This question was especially pressing in the face of propaganda- and recruitment-

25 Hilde Rigaudias-Weiss, *Les Enquêtes Ouvrières en France entre 1830 et 1848* (Paris: Libraire Felix Alcan, 1936).

26 On leftist interwar in-fighting, see e.g. Terence Renaud, *New Lefts: The Making of a Radical Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2021), chapter 2.

27 Georg Lukács, *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein* (Bielefeld: Aisthesis Verlag, 2013), esp. pp. 233-56 on the difference between bourgeois and proletarian class consciousness; Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute for Social Research, 1923-1950* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973): 43-44.

28 Vladimir I. Lenin, *What is to be done?* (1902), (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1963); Bert Hoppe, *In Stalins Gefolgschaft: Moskau und die KPD 1928-1933* (München: Oldenbourg, 2007): esp. pp. 21-31.

29 Eve Rosenhaft, *Beating the Fascists? The German Communists and Political Violence 1929-1933* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983).

successes of the Nazis in traditionally working-class areas, where they had started to employ a highly organised strategy tailored to the specific milieu they were targeting.³⁰ Among the first to doubt the strength of workers' commitment to the left were individuals in the environment of the IfS, and especially Erich Fromm, who in 1929 led a team of researchers in the quest to determine the true character of *Arbeiter und Angestellte am Vorabend des Dritten Reichs*. The alarming preliminary results of this study, which circulated among IfS-members and were summarised by Weiss in her contribution to the Institute-publication *Autorität und Familie*, are credited as part of the reason for the Frankfurt School's rapid withdrawal from Germany in 1933, and the precautionary measures they had taken in the previous years.³¹

As Fromm summarised the results of the study in 1980, political allegiance was more complex than it seemed:

The events in Germany after the completion of the survey have shown how important it is to question to what extent the respective political opinions match the overall personality [of the participant]; because the triumph of National Socialism revealed a terrifying lack of resistance among the German labour parties, which contrasted starkly with their numerical strength that had been evident in election results and mass demonstrations before 1933.³²

The survey was, from the outset, designed to reveal such a discrepancy between outwardly political allegiance with left-wing causes and the eventual wavering of the working classes in the face of National Socialism. Although Fromm is today often the only researcher associated with the study, he himself points out the involvement of other researchers. Anna Hartoch, Herta Herzog, Ernst Schachtel, Paul Lazarsfeld and Hilda Weiss were all thanked at the beginning of Fromm's report, and although it is unclear what their specific functions were, scholars have pointed to Weiss' pivotal role in organising and evaluating the study. As Wolfgang Bonß highlights, Weiss took the lead on implementing the study, whilst Fromm functioned as intellectual impulse-giver – although in hindsight, it is difficult to clearly separate their contributions.³³ In 1936, in a summary of the project published in the *Studien über Autorität und Familie*, a footnote still states that „the execution and initial interpretation“ were undertaken by Weiss, yet by the time Fromm and Weiss were in U.S.-exile, the material was in Fromm's hands.³⁴ One major issue complicates attempts by historians to reconstruct the team and their different input into the survey and its construction: because the rise of the Nazis pre-empted the full evaluation of the study's material, and the IfS in Frankfurt was shut down already in March 1933 and forced to relocate abroad, the study was only fully evaluated by Fromm in the 1980s.

The study was based on a questionnaire that had been circulated among workers, reflecting a shift in perspective among social researchers towards a greater immersion in the

30 Anders G. Kjøstvedt, 'The Dynamics of Mobilisation: The Nazi Movement in Weimar Berlin', *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, Vol. 14.3 (2013): 338-354.

31 Jay, *Dialectical Imagination*: 25-40.

32 Erich Fromm, *Arbeiter und Angestellte am Vorabend des Dritten Reiches* (1980) (Gießen: Psychosozial-Verlag, 2019): 28. [my translation]

33 Wolfgang Bonß, 'Kritische Theorie und empirische Sozialforschung: Anmerkungen zu einem Fallbeispiel' (1980), Erich Fromm Document Center Tuebingen, http://www.fromm-gesellschaft.eu/images/pdf-Dateien/Bonss_W_1980.pdf [last accessed 21/07/2023]: 1-2, 24; also see David Norman Smith, 'Anti-Authoritarian Marxism: Erich Fromm, Hilde Weiss, and the Politics of Radical Humanism', in: Kieran Durkin, Joan Braune (eds.), *Erich Fromm's Critical Theory: Hope, Humanism, and the Future* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020): 131-65.

34 Max Horkheimer, Erich Fromm, Herbert Marcuse (eds.), *Studien über Autorität und Familie: Forschungsberichte aus dem Institut für Sozialforschung* (1936) (Lüneburg: zu Klampen, 1987): 239 [my translation]; Bonß, 'Kritische Theorie und empirische Sozialforschung': 2.

contexts and life-worlds of participants.³⁵ Prominent initially among American ethnographic researchers, e.g. from the Chicago School, similar interests are reflected in Paul F. Lazarsfeld's and Marie Jahoda's study on *Marienthal: The Sociography of an Unemployed Community* or, taking a journalistic approach, Siegfried Kracauer's *The Salaried Masses*.³⁶ Yet methodologically, the survey aimed to go beyond „pure description“ and „statistical tallying of the [participant's] conscious statements“.³⁷ Instead, the reasons for certain responses had to be probed, and taken together, were assumed to provide a basis for interpreting the personality structure of the participant, questioning the congruence of a participant's publicly articulated political persona and their underlying personality. Three character-types were developed in response to the finding, which attempted to measure the degree of this congruence or diversion. Both the „RR“ and the „AA“ characters fitted with expected attitudes among participants: „RR“ classified individuals who both openly professed to a „radical“ disposition – e.g. through their party membership, political attitudes and so on – and were also displaying „radical“ characteristics in their responses to less direct questions that were trying to ascertain their wider personality traits. A subgroup of this type was „R-“, which designated those participants who were open and often outspoken radicals, through party membership or trade union activity, but did not show any signs of deeply rooted, emotional or psychological commitment.³⁸ These individuals were usually loyal party members, but needed to be roused by more committed leaders into action. „AA“, the second type, designated the mirror image of the „RR“-character, as they were consistently displaying authoritarian traits. The biggest insight, however, came with the discovery of a third category, labelled „RA“. This character-type distinguished itself by the inherent contradiction of its political and personality tropes. The results from these participants pointed to radical political attitudes but authoritarian traits in their personal lives.³⁹

Although Fromm finalized his analysis of the survey and its questionnaires only in the 1980s, the preliminary results had allowed him and his team to draw two major conclusions. The first affected their analysis of the German political landscape more directly: whilst the left-wing parties could for now rely on membership numbers and votes, „they had not [...] succeeded in altering their members' personality structure in such a way that they would have been reliable in critical situations.“⁴⁰ The survey thus confirmed fears regarding the working class's unreliability. The second conclusion Fromm and his team drew related to their methodology: the outcomes of the questionnaire had shown that there were different layers to an individual's opinions and personality, and that straight-forward questioning could often not reveal enough of these layers to give a reliable picture of the participant's attitudes and character which would determine their eventual actions. Questionnaires thus had to be designed and evaluated in a way that allowed to lay bare deeper personality structures, in order to

35 Fromm, *Arbeiter und Angestellte*: 307-318.

36 For a pre-history of the questionnaire, see Kerstin Brückweh, *Menschen zählen: Wissensproduktionen durch britische Volkszählungen und Umfragen vom 19. Jahrhundert bis ins digitale Zeitalter* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2015): 81-164; Marie Jahoda, Paul F. Lazarsfeld, Hans Zeisel, *Marienthal: the Sociography of an Unemployed Community* (1933) (London: Transaction, 2002); Siegfried Kracauer, *The Salaried Masses* (1930) (London: Verso, 1998).

37 Ibid.: 30-31.

38 Ibid.: 264.

39 Ibid.: 266.

40 Ibid.: 270.

make sustainable predictions.⁴¹ This element of revelation, which borrowed from psychoanalysis, fundamentally shaped Frankfurt School sociology in the following years, such as the *Studies in Prejudice* or the ‘Group Experiment’.⁴²

Weiss was thus part of a research project that fundamentally shifted the parameters of twentieth century sociology.⁴³ Discerning her contribution is more difficult, however, given the complicated history of the study’s genesis. David Norman Smith, among the few scholars to have dedicated published work on Weiss, is adamant in his insistence on Weiss’ prime role in shaping the study:

„Weiss was in many ways the principal architect of the workers’ survey, which built on work she had already completed in industrial sociology and laid the foundations for research she would later conduct on Marx and the history of working-class surveys and families.“⁴⁴

Smith, like this article, emphasises Weiss’ triple-qualification, which make her stand out in comparison to her collaborators: firstly, she was academically qualified, secondly, she had first-hand experience of working-class culture, and thirdly, she had direct ties to trade unions, essential for carrying out a survey in this milieu.⁴⁵ Weiss’ own brief assessment of the questionnaires in her autobiography crucially resembles her criticism of the Communist Party in the early 1920s. Rather than diagnosing an overall dissatisfaction with the principles of socialism, she again emphasised the disconnect between the working class and party-leaders. Individual workers often, she states, upheld party-membership out of tradition, whilst their own political viewpoints were much broader and less fractious.⁴⁶ Weiss’ conclusion is vital in understanding her persistent and hopeful centring of workers in her industrial sociology, and her turn to Marx in the following years.

Social Research as Pedagogy: Weiss and Marx

Transposed into French exile after the Nazi ‘Machtergreifung’, Weiss nonetheless remained committed to the questions that had already guided her work with Fromm: how could psycho-sociological work, and in particular, questionnaire-studies, help to analyse workers’ political motivations? As Lazarsfeld had emphasised, psychoanalysis could function as a tool to explain the discrepancy between Marxists’ theoretical predictions, and the actual human behaviour witnessed in 1918.⁴⁷ But for Weiss, questionnaires were not simply an analytical

41 Wolfgang Bonß, ‘Critical Theory and Empirical Social Research: Some Observations’, in: Erich Fromm, *The Working Class in Weimar Germany*, edited and with an introduction by Wolfgang Bonß (Leamington Spa: Berg Publishers, 1984): 1-38; Emily A. Steinhauer, ‘Empirical Research as a Form of Participatory Knowledge? The Sociological Projects of the Frankfurt School as Democratic Strategy’, *History of Intellectual Culture*, Vol.1, No.1 (2022): 103-110.

42 American Jewish Committee, *Studies in Prejudice*. <http://www.ajcarchives.org/main.php?GroupId=1380> [last accessed 12/07/2023]; Olick, Jeffrey K. and Andrew J. Perrin (eds., transl.). *Group Experiment and Other Writings: the Frankfurt School on Public Opinion in Postwar Germany* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2010).

43 Wolfgang Bonß. *Die Einübung des Tatsachenblicks: Zur Struktur und Veränderung empirischer Sozialforschung* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1982): 186-187.

44 Smith. ‘Anti-Authoritarian Marxism’: 138.

45 Ibid.: 144.

46 Weiss, *Autobiographie*: 62-63.

47 Wolfgang Bonß, ‘Analytische Sozialpsychologie – Anmerkungen zu einem theoretischen Konzept und seiner empirischen Praxis’, in: Michael Kessler, Rainer Funk (eds.), *Erich Fromm und die Frankfurter Schule* (Tübingen: Francke, 1992): 23-39, here 25.

tool, but an instrument to return agency to the workers – a premise that was at the heart of her second dissertation. In it, she compared the social research investigations undertaken by the French state and philanthropists with a questionnaire targeted at workers, designed by Marx in 1880 for the French newspaper *Revue Socialiste*.⁴⁸ In 1936, Weiss published a shorter version in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, which brought to the fore her historical and political arguments: although the study's main focus lies on a scrutiny of the different methodologies and purposes of historical studies, there is a political element implicit in her interpretations.

Both Marx' questionnaire, and the surveys conducted by French government and philanthropic agencies have to be seen in the context of increasing industrialisation and its impact on the population. Weiss notes that all of them had realized the drastic impoverishment of large parts of the working class, and were using social surveys as a tool to attempt to alleviate the situation – but their ultimate goals differed starkly.⁴⁹ Analysing Marx' *Enquête Ouvrière*, Weiss notes that it deviates in three crucial ways from preceding surveys: it demands an accurate description of social relationships, it turns not to intermediaries but to the workers themselves for this, and finally, it fulfils a pedagogical purpose by alerting participants to the realities of their own social situation, helping them to identify problems and possible solutions.⁵⁰ How did older surveys differ from this model set out by Marx then?

In her examination of Marx' *Enquête Ouvrière*, Weiss notes that the questionnaire was designed not only to collect facts about participants' working- and living-conditions but help them interpret these for themselves. Philanthropists, however, did not project such a transferal of agency into their surveys. Instead, they continuously saw the impoverished workers in their studies as objects to be administered, or as potential recipients of charity:

„For the philanthropists they were, as the suffering class in society, the object of their welfare; Marx saw in them the socially suppressed class, that would become, once it had gained consciousness of its situation, master of its own destiny.“⁵¹

The workers themselves thus had in the government- and philanthropist-conducted surveys no real agency. In many cases, they were not even directly addressed, instead, the survey was mediated by social workers or factory administrators. Inevitably, then, the surveys were able to reveal that problems existed, but could not pinpoint their real reasons.

Weiss attributes this blindness to the deeper-lying causes of social problems, not just to the lacking direct engagement with workers, but also to an ideological agenda on the side of the researchers. In 1848, for example, the surveying of the population had as its main goal the strengthening of the state, which had been rocked by revolutionary fervour.⁵² The goal of these surveys was the managing of social issues within the parameters of the existing economic system, not their complete revelation and overcoming. In Weiss' eyes, the potential dangers of social research had already been recognised:

„From time to time, veiling the true conditions was decidedly welcomed, namely when there was the danger that workers would no longer be satisfied with charity and the application of palliative measures and would prefer their own independent action to improve the situation.“⁵³

48 Rigaudias-Weiss, *Les Enquêtes Ouvrières*.

49 Weiss, 'Die „Enquête Ouvrière“ von Karl Marx': 84.

50 Ibid.: 87.

51 Ibid. [my translation].

52 Ibid.: 86.

53 Ibid.: 85 [my translation].

As Weiss makes clear through her parallel analysis of French governmental and Marxist surveys, controlling the methods of social research was not simply a question of getting the most accurate results and the most facts – it exemplified, but also had the potential to challenge, the prevailing political system.

Conclusion

Smith's argument that Weiss' collaboration on Fromm's 1929/30 inquiry into workers' attitudes prepared the ground for her analysis of Marx' *Enquête Ouvrière* thus certainly makes a valid point.⁵⁴ Both assume that social surveys and questionnaires had to directly engage with their objects of study – the workers in this case – to extract usable results, both Marx and Fromm did not want to simply reproduce the status quo of their studies. Yet Weiss' engagement with Marx' study shows a much greater interest in the agency of workers and the active role social research could play in the class struggle. Weiss' positive assessment of Marx' attempt to create a questionnaire that was not only designed for knowledge-production but also an educational tool that would develop working class consciousness aligns much more closely with her observations on working class education than the detached framework of the Fromm-study. The empowerment of workers through social research is the crucial element of Weiss' sociological work. This is evident also in her later post-war work in the USA, when she tackles the problem of „human relations“ in industry, connecting the contemporary buzzword of „freedom“ to the principle of democratic planning and „mutual control“, the collaborative, multidirectional creation of consent.⁵⁵ In the face both of managerial capitalism, but also elitist interpretations of socialism, Weiss retains a worker-focused outlook on the role sociology could play in society. This work from the post-war decades has to be considered carefully and within the context Cold War political pressures. In 1945, she attained a position at Brooklyn College in New York City, where she remained until her retirement in 1970. Only in 1963 was she made Assistant Professor, and there is little research-output from these years to measure against her interwar work.

54 Smith, 'Anti-Authoritarian Marxism': 138.

55 Hilda Weiss, 'Human Relations in Industry: From Ernst Abbe to Karl Mannheim', *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (1949): 287-297; Hilda Weiss, 'Industrial Relations, Manipulative or Democratic?', *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (1958): 25-33.