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**abstract:**

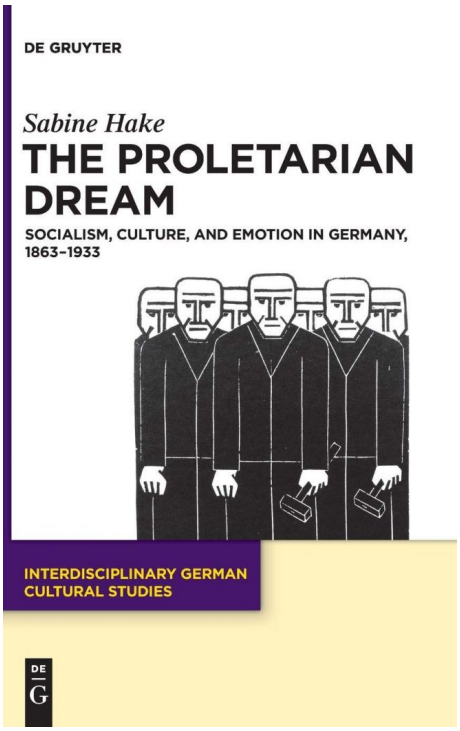
A conversation about Sabine Hake's interdisciplinary three-volume study on the proletarian imaginary in German culture from the 1860s to the 1960s.

**Sabine Hake** - Professor and Texas Chair of German Literature and Culture in the Department of Germanic Studies at The University of Texas at Austin. A cultural historian working on nineteenth and twentieth century Germany, she is the author of seven monographs, including "Topographies of Class: Modern Architecture and Mass Society in Weimar Berlin" (2008) and "Screen Nazis: Cinema, History, and Democracy" (2012). Her most recent book, "The Proletarian Dream: Socialism, Culture, and Emotion in Germany 1863-1933", appeared in fall 2017 and won the 2016-17 MLA Aldo and Jeanne Scaglione Prize for Studies in Germanic Languages and Literatures. She is currently writing the second volume with the title "The German Worker: Reimagining Class in the Third Reich".

**Magda Szcześniak** - Born 1985. Assistant Professor at the Institute of Polish Culture, University of Warsaw, leader of the MA program in visual culture. Author of books Normy widzialności. Tożsamość w czasach transformacji [Norms of Visibility. Identity in Times of Transition, 2016] and Poruszeni. Awans i emocje w socjalistycznej Polsce [Feeling Moved. Upward Mobility and Emotions in Socialist Poland, 2023], co-author of the two-volume Kultura wizualna w Polsce [Visual Culture in Poland, 2017]. Recipient of the Fulbright Foundation Junior Advanced Research Grant (2010/11, University of Rochester, Graduate Program for Visual and Cultural Studies) and the Fulbright Foundation Senior Award (2019/20, Duke University, Institute for Critical Theory). She has also received stipends and grants from the National Science Center (Preludium grant, 2013-2015; Sonata grant, 2018-2023) and the Ministry of Higher Education and Science (stipend for outstanding young scholars, 2017-2020). In 2017, she won the prestigious award for young scholars granted by the "Polityka" weekly (Nagroda Naukowa Polityki). She has published articles in numerous academic journals, including New Literary History, Oxford Art Journal, Journal of Visual Culture, Teksty Drugie, Dialog, Konteksty, Kultura i Społeczeństwo. She is currently leading a research project titled Representations of the popular classes in contemporary Polish visual culture.

# The Power to Express Who You Can Become. Sabine Hake in Conversation with Magda Szcześniak

**Magda Szcześniak**: In the first volume of your three-part project devoted to reconstructing the proletariat as an imaginary subject, you examine a wide array of cultural production – literature, life writing, visual arts, performance – created over 70 years: from the birth of the socialist imaginary in the 1860s to the end of the Weimar Republic. Could you say how you arrived at the central category of the "proletarian dream"?




**Sabine Hake**: For me, the title captures two sides of my project. First, the will to move beyond the strictures of ideology critique and recognize the power of utopian thinking, which can also be geared toward fantasy. I wanted to take it seriously on its own terms – not to simply dismiss utopia as escapist or denounce fantasy as falsehood, but to see them as productive forces which help(ed) people in making sense of their lives and engaging with the world. Of course, this is how early utopian socialists reasoned, but this attention to feelings, desires, and fantasies as productive forces is written out of the debates as we get to the emergence of "scientific socialism" in the German context. The early twentieth century witnesses an ideological struggle between the reformist Social Democrats and the revolutionary KPD (Komunistische Partei Deutschlands).

Even scholars have remained beholden to the categories of the times and denounced dreaming as escapist, which led them into the trap of leftist dogmatism and reproducing ad nauseum all those debates from the 1920s and 1930s. I always found that very confining. I guess my intellectual temperament also leads me to those who are marginalized, repressed, and denounced.

The other side has to do with the fact that I've always worked on popular culture. Even in my work as a film scholar I was not interested in art film, but in genre cinema. By focusing on working-class culture as popular culture, I wanted to examine how aesthetic modalities produce, define, and validate political emotions. Starting out in the late nineteenth century proved very helpful, given the growing opposition to two equally reviled aesthetic and emotional modalities – pathos and sentimentality. There was a point in early Social Democracy and the worker's movement when those were in fact considered legitimate and valuable. The deeply felt love of socialism in the autobiographies of leading Social Democrats, the romance with nature in worker's poetry, or the pathos of heroic masculinity could today of course be dismissed as proletarian kitsch – but that would cut us off from the rich genealogies of working-class culture. As the First World War draws to an end, we witness the appearance of a very different aesthetic and emotional paradigm – that of cold-hearted detachment, hardness, discipline, and self-denial. This can be likened to the trauma of war but also to the vanguard habitus of the Bolsheviks. KPD artists and writers especially favored more militant, agit-prop styles and decidedly masculinist perspectives. These are the two things I wanted to capture with the book's title – marginalized utopian identifications and the aesthetic modalities that are later denounced as not appropriately proletarian: that is, as too emotional, too irrational, and not masculine enough.

**MSz**: Although you don't specifically refer to visual culture as a field of study, I feel that your use of the category of the proletarian dream corresponds with the ways in which the discipline theorizes images and their social lives. Just because the proletariat conjured and represented by the images and texts examined in your book doesn't exist, and never existed, it doesn't mean that the representations didn't influence working-class lives and identities. In fact, you incisively show how they mediate social relationships and structure political goals.

**SH**: What I do is look at cartoons, paintings, photomontages, and films as part of multimedia practices. The crude "culture as reflection of reality" model always diminishes the experience of the aesthetic. Most of the texts, broadly defined, are not "great art"; that doesn't mean they don't have an aesthetic quality and that their imagined identities and identifications cannot be incredibly powerful. There's a reflective, but also a formative and productive quality in these representations. We have no problem seeing those two sides in bourgeois art, but somehow when it comes to working-class cultural practices, we only focus on how they provide a reflection of social reality. That's why I bracket questions of taste and quality altogether.

Cover of the journal *Süddeutsche Postillon* (21:6 1902).

**MSz**: The issue of how to represent a class has always been a central one for progressive and left-leaning artists, activists, and theorists. Unlike some other identity categories, class is not immediately visible; more than a – real or imagined – individual

feature, class is constituted through hierarchic relations between groups of individuals. It has also long been conceptualized as strongly dependent on representations, thanks to which a class in an empirical sense becomes a class in a political sense. In *The Proletarian Dream*, you trace various attempts at representing class, showing the ways in which they are embedded in specific cultural configurations and visions of politics. The most visible antagonism here is between "socialist allegory" and "proletarian modernism."

**SH**: While writing the book, my goal was to move past this very conventional way of writing about the representation of certain social groups, along the lines of "the image of the worker in..." Such a straightforward approach implies that the preferred modality in studies on working-class literature is realist (or documentary), and that images and stories should fall into that paradigm. What helped me in developing a more nuanced understanding of working-class culture was writing the chapter on song and theater, in which I situate representations within social practices. Terms such as performance, reception, sociability, and public sphere become central. In the *Sprechchor*, a theatrical form that involves choral speaking, you are really dealing with a collective body, speaking in one voice, and performing unity and solidarity in the process of becoming a class. Working-class culture was defined as much by associational culture, festivals, anniversaries, performances, and everyday life as by what we find in the archives – images of workers in journals or novels about workers; it was even less defined by the writings of Marx and Engels.

Franz Wilhelm Seiwert, *Demonstration*, 1925, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

Moving toward the dialogic and performative allowed me to better conceptualize the prefigurative function of culture: the power to express who you are, but also who you can become. This same kind of tension is evident in the section of the book where I discuss "proletarian modernism." A part of the revolutionary left in Germany was very influenced by modernism. John Heartfield's photomontages are well-known; the opposite is true of the painter Franz Wilhelm Seiwert or the writer Franz Jung. But there is also great anxiety over the proper voice, proper style, and proper attitude which emerges in countless debates about modernism and realism, and the difference between partiality and tendency (to reference Lukács). An important element of my book is the uncovering of the incredible diversity within working-class culture and the inevitable contradictions and non-synchronicities. One thing that become very apparent to me is the centrality of gender to the proletarian dream. Rather than reclaiming the voices of women, including those associated with the proletarian women's movement, I decided to concentrate on working-class masculinity and its emotional modalities – that is, to follow the dominant narrative in the making of proletarian identifications.

**MSz**: If you come to this book with an idealism about working-class culture and revolutionary culture, then that's one of the more difficult moments, I feel. You have to acknowledge its masculinist and patriarchal character.

**SH**: Oh, it was a difficult moment for the author as well [laughs].

**MSz**: Another moment of heavy-heartedness for the idealist progressive reader would perhaps be your recognition of the impurity of working-class culture.

You refer to Raymond Williams and his notions of residual and emergent cultures, which – as you write – "bring out the dynamic, contested, and nonsynchronous qualities" of working-class culture. Seen in this perspective, emergent cultures are always indebted to past forms, both dominant and subversive. This is a very interesting and refreshing point for me, as someone who works on socialist working-class writings and culture. As scholars of non-dominant cultures, we often seem to be driven by the need to find something truly autonomous, but then just as often we must reconcile with a very muddled state of things. And so, for example, one of the more fascinating questions that you weave throughout your book concerns the constant negotiations of bourgeois subjectivity within working-class culture. On the one hand, artists and activists sought to propose new modes of representing the working classes without repeating this model. On the other, you show how indebted they are to it and to bourgeois, religious, and national cultures more generally.

**SH**: What really helped me throughout this entire process of working on the book were the uncanny ways in which my project dialogued with discussions in the United States at the time. First of all, the debates about populist politics and its use of emotions. I don't think that I could have written my book without Trump. Second, the ongoing college campus discussion about appropriation, which I find highly problematic, as it presumes an authentic essence of ethnic identity and, by extension, identity-based culture. But my annoyance helped me to see how much working-class culture proudly, aspirationally, and strategically appropriated bourgeois elements. This is especially prominent in Wilhelminian Social Democracy, whose leaders revered the classics and believed that the cultural uplift offered by high culture, together with education, would be empowering. I think there is still an argument to be made for that. After the French Revolution, it was bourgeois culture that appropriated elements of aristocratic culture and created

a roadmap for the struggle for freedom and democracy in the nineteenth century. Why shouldn't working-class culture proceed in the same way?

The other element that's even harder to think about in the German context, because of National Socialism, is how big a role regional differences played in working-class culture. Especially when it comes to worker's song and theater, regional and folk culture were still dominant forces. Thirdly, and this was probably the hardest for me personally, was the absolutely central role of religion and religiosity, both Protestant and Catholic. It's more pronounced in the nineteenth century, but it never really goes away. The language of redemption, the notion of sacrifice and salvation, the fantasy of peace and harmony, and the privileging of suffering all come straight from Christianity. Not to see that is to ignore an entire dimension in socialism. For me, a secular West German, it was difficult to accept the pervasiveness of religious attachments.

**MSz**: Right – religious imagery even makes an appearance in John Heartfield's photomontage with the nailing of a worker's hand to a cross-like Swastika.

**SH**: The takeaway for me is that culture is and always has been heterogenous. Appropriation, instrumentalization, re-inscription, remediation – these have always existed, even when media technologies were not as developed as they are in the twenty-first century.

**MSz**: And then there are also texts and images produced as a result of a specific class relationship, as in the chapter devoted to worker's life writings, in which you very interestingly trace the negotiations between working-class authors and bourgeois editors. Both sides exercise agency and act in accordance with their own class interests to produce the final work. It's a complex and muddled situation.

I'd like to move toward the topic of emotions. Throughout the book, you trace the emotional regimes produced within working-class cultures, and the emotional communities that are forged through cultural production. You were also able to uncover competing discourses about emotions, showing that there existed a conflict over emotional standards and the question of which of them would be particularly effective in achieving the goals of the worker's movement. Could you talk a little more about the move from "emotional socialism" to emotional discipline?

**SH**: I had already developed some interest in emotions while writing *Screen Nazis*, where I tried to answer the question of why we love to hate these quintessential villains of world cinema. For this project, I dove deeper, reading up on affect theory and the history of emotions. I also reviewed the scholarship on the politics of emotions, a topic which emerged in the last ten years in response to a pervasive crisis of democracy (and commitment to democracy) in North America and Europe. Emotions suddenly became part of an effort to understand this crisis: the disillusionment with democratic institutions – a culture of resentment and rage mostly associated with populist movements. This resonated in powerful ways with nineteenth-century discussions about *Gefühlsozialismus* [emotional socialism] – the belief that emotions were essential to political activism, and the process of writing emotions *out of* socialism in the subsequent turn toward scientific Marxism, dialectical materialism, and Marxist-Leninism.

To repeat, the turning point is the First World War. We cannot underestimate what kind of a paradigm shift it was – not just in the turn from empires to nation states, but also in the convergence of the history of modern capitalism, class society, and warfare. It profoundly changed meanings of subjectivity, identity, and experience, and, in a strange way, the notion of vanguard suddenly assumed a triple meaning: the military vanguard, the political vanguard of the Bolshevik party, and the

avant-garde as a response to the disruption brought about by the First World War and the October Revolution.

In my narrative, the next turning point is 1933. In terms of emotions, it means that suddenly the politics of emotions is not one of opposition and resistance; it has to be rewritten as part of hegemonic culture. Right now, I'm working on the second volume, *The German Worker: Reimagining Class in the Third Reich*, and I'm writing a lot about joy, strength through joy, *Arbeitsfreude* [the joy of work]. The question now is: what happens when the proletarian imaginary becomes part of the culture of consent? Some feelings completely fall by the wayside and need to be suppressed, feelings such as anger and rage. And some suddenly become part of this new culture of "workerdom" [*Arbeitertum*]: pride, joy, and happiness. And how are these emotions visualized and performed? The *Sprechchor* becomes the *Thingspiel*, a choral drama unique to the Third Reich, and decidedly modernist industrial photography is used in support of the war economy. There are surprising continuities across the 1933 divide. Nazi culture was very modernist in ways we have still not fully understood, especially when it comes to labor and industry. Meanwhile, the dictates of joy in work and the program of beauty of labor by the German Labor Front sound uncannily like the cult of happiness Soviet style, which sustained the gigantic project of industrialization and electrification under Stalin.

Curt Querner, *The Agitator*, (1930). Copyright Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst Bonn).

**MSz**: There's an interesting paradox in these discussions about emotions. On the one hand, all the political actors appeal to some sort of authenticity, claiming that they are addressing the existing emotions of actual workers. On the other, there is a very straightforward politics of modelling, producing emotions, which are considered as particularly useful for political goals. In the chapter about 1930s agitprop, you examine the ways in which the working class was taught how to "take a stand" – a command that functions not only in a metaphorical sense, but also becomes quite literal. The communist agitator is taught how to stand in a very specific way, how to engage his body in a political performance.

**SH**: In the second volume, I devote an entire chapter to *Arbeitsfreude*, joy in work, a real obsession in the Third Reich. Everyone, including academics, was trying to determine how to increase *Arbeitsfreude*, which was supposed to lead to two effects. First, people would feel part of the *Volksgemeinschaft*, the folk community. Second, it was expected to increase productivity. So it started out as a productivist model, but quickly, and very much under the influence of Italian fascism, functionaries recognized that leisure time was absolutely essential to joy in work. The worker, they realized, needed to be made part of the folk community not just at work, but also at home. The politics of joy was a biopolitical fantasy that was already fully developed in the 1920s and 1930s. Of course, one could ask – were workers joyful? Probably not.

But joy is normative and performative, so when workers appeared as workers in public spaces, they performed joy for themselves and others. We're precisely in this intermediary zone you mentioned, where public performances of certain emotions may not be authentic, but they still have a powerful effect.

**MSz**: This does sound somewhat like the emotional politics of the Soviet Union as well as other post-war European socialist republics. Do you feel that the German post-war socialist state was modeled on a similar emotional regime, or would you say that memories of the Nazi past resulted in a need to produce different emotional standards?

**SH**: I would say both. The inter-war years set the stage for the post-war period, including through old and new internationalisms. All across modernized and modernizing economies, ambitious public work projects were being initiated, including in New Deal America. Around that time, a heroic iconography of steel plants, electrification projects, and engineering triumphs emerges. This continues in Asian and African socialist countries after the Second World War. At the same time, one must recognize that in Germany, the notion of community (or *Gemeinschaft*) functions as an instrument of collective identifications inseparable from its racist functions. Happiness on the Soviet tractor and in the *kolkhoz* is in fact very different from joy in work as envisioned by the German Labor Front. Joy has a racialized and gendered component that the more egalitarian happiness Soviet style does not. How these legacies of the past continue to inform questions of industrial labor and representations of workers will be the topic of the third volume, when I focus on the German Democratic Republic and the Federal Republic of Germany.

**MSz**: You devote the afterword of the first volume to what you call the "historiography of the proletarian dream," in which you point out how historical discussions about working-class cultures were entrenched in very specific emotional responses to progressive projects. So, for my last question, I would like to ask about your emotional attachments and the stake of the present moment.

**SH**: Well, as I embarked on this project I realized that my intellectual temperament is that of a contrarian [laughs]. Growing up in Hanover, I started my political biography in radical left groups but found my home in the feminist movement. As a scholar, I have worked on German film and Weimar culture for a long time. And at one point I recognized I could continue writing the same things over and over again, but since that would bore me, it was time to do something very different – and no longer care about career implications. As I started to present my new research, I got two responses that shocked but didn't surprise me. The first response went along the lines of: "Who cares about this? This is all old hat; it has been settled." The second response was: "You are not a real leftist and are incapable of working on this material." Over the years I've come to see that whenever academics say a topic needs to be addressed in a certain way or is no longer important, it might actually mean that it is or will be very relevant to the world at large.

But then, as I continued with my research, I met a lot of younger scholars from a range of fields – art history, Scandinavian literature, musicology, East Asian studies, Latin American studies – who are working on similar issues. This propelled me to step out of my German studies silo and begin a dialogue with colleagues from other disciplines. Our discussions have been informed by similar historical inquiries, theoretical questions, and contemporary references. We can all agree that the character of class societies has changed, that we

need to think in global terms, and that the connection between work and identity must be reimagined. At the same time, capitalism is more powerful than ever, and the levels of economic and social inequality are only increasing – reason enough to gain a better understanding of working-class culture, its historical manifestations, its cultural legacies, and its emotional attachments. So that's my own political investment in the subject.