

CASTE AND CLASS IN GERMANY: A STUDY  
OF THE POWER POLITICS OF LABOR  
MIGRATION FROM 1955-1980

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Stratification is a characteristic of all complex societies. Inequality in power and privileges, in prestige and status, and in differential access to goods and services is however, more rigidly controlled in some societies than in others. The Indian caste system is an often cited example of a more extreme case of institutionalized inequality. Berreman (1960:120) defines such a system as "a hierarchy of endogamous divisions in which membership is hereditary and permanent." In contrast, class organized societies such as the United States are distinguished by the existence of economically based strata which persist as categories independent of the mobility of individual members. Characteristically, class membership constitutes an achieved rather than an ascribed status. In ideational terms, caste determines group membership by criteria defined as intrinsic to the individual's structural position in the economy; class defines it in extrinsic terms.

Despite this apparent contradiction of the principles of caste and class stratification, we find they can in fact co-exist in time and space. Berreman (1960) has addressed this phenomenon in his discussion of race relations in the Southern United States where color is a mark of caste. The emergence of caste systems is then not confined to a particular point on the social-evolutionary spectrum. Rather, in given historical circumstances it may become economically and politically advantageous for the power elite to institute and perpetuate a caste system. Using the example of contemporary Germany I will analyze the creation of caste in a class society. More specifically, I will discuss the introduction of

foreign workers into the German industrial economy and their centrally controlled ascription to a caste status.

The process of caste formation in Germany began in the early 1950's, when the recruitment of migrant workers across political boundaries began. This initial stage, which might be termed "a contractual caste system," was characterized by the assignment of foreign workers to an inferior political and economic status. For approximately two decades German employers and the state regarded this status as temporary because the recruitment of foreign workers was at first designed to alleviate labor shortages at the lowest occupational levels during a period of rapid economic growth. However, in the early 1970's when jobs became scarce as recession progressed, and Germany stopped its foreign labor recruitment program, the "temporary" caste system became institutionalized in the German society. By 1975 the economically active foreign population was reduced through deportation to half its former size, but the number of foreign residents in Germany had increased as workers sent for their families.

The temporary caste with its rational contractual basis has been transformed into a permanent caste system based on considerations of social status. These two stages in the formation of caste, the creation of the original contractual caste system and its development into a more fully developed status caste, will be the focus of my discussion.

### The Political Economy of Germany's Contractual Caste System

Germany's labor migration policies and its recruitment of foreign workers to a contractual caste status were strictly demand oriented, designed to adjust the labor process to economic fluctuations.

In the post-war era, Germany's expansive economic growth, coupled with an unfavourable demographic situation and a more facile upward mobility of the German workers, contributed to an ever increasing demand for labor in low paying, highly monotonous, menial and socially undesirable tasks. This situation manifested itself most clearly between 1955 and 1960, when the first mass recruitment of foreign workers began. A relatively recent report by Ernst Klee (1975:26) indicates that during this time span approximately 220,000 vacancies emerged in such menial jobs. In satisfying their demand for labor through the recruitment of foreign workers, German em-

employers assigned the majority of migrants (85%) to tasks which demanded little skill and which were predominantly manual such as packaging, carrying and cleaning. Wolfgang Weber (1980:50) has pointed out that only 15% of the foreign laborers in contrast to 39% of the German work force performed tasks demanding any sort of skill (for further reference, also see the study by Nermin Abadan-Unat, 1976:22). It refers to data obtained in 1963, according to which 40.8% of all Turkish migrants did not use a single tool (not even a shovel) at work. Another 45.3% did not operate a machine. Jobs assigned to foreign workers, however, required a great degree of physical endurance as work conditions were often distinguished by noise, heat and monotony. Abadan-Unat (1976:22) makes clear that 47% of all Turkish workers were employed in occupations distinguished by these criteria. Weber's analysis (1980:44) indicates that most foreign workers carried out assembly line jobs. In contrast to 13% of the German workers, over 30% of them were assigned to work operations which change at least once every minute. While only 25% of the migrants were responsible for operations which changed no more than once every hour, we find 41% of the German workers in charge of such tasks. Furthermore, most foreign workers received little or no training on the job. A joint study by Schrader, Nikles and Gried (1979:91) reveals that in the early 1970's, the training time migrant workers received on the job ranged from 2-5 days for women, and 4-10 days for men. An earlier study by Abadan-Unat (1976:22) points to an even shorter training period in 1963. Ursula Neuman's report (1980:76) suggests that of all Turkish workers, approximately 44% received no training on the job at all. These factors not only perpetuated the migrants' occupational status, but also suppressed them to the lowest income brackets in the German economy (for further reference see Neumann 1980:71). From these observations we may conclude that the caste status of foreign workers in Germany initially emerged in the occupational sphere.

In this early period, however, caste assignation was temporary. The recruitment policies and training programs, the payment system and work contract itself, all emphasized this temporary status. Employers hired foreign workers only on a short term basis. The local labor offices issued work permits which were valid for only two years and could be renewed or terminated in conjunction with economic demands (Klee 1975:26-27; Kowalski 1980:30; Mayer 1975:443).

This system proved advantageous for employers in several ways. The policy of unskilled job prescription and the limited duration of work contracts provided employers with the necessary flexibility in adjusting their labor force to fluctuations in the economy. They could dispose of their foreign

employees without generating organizational problems in the production process. They could capitalize on the migrant workers' productive utility without incurring rising labor costs or increased expenditures in mechanizing the production process. Furthermore, employers could expand the migrants' out-put productivity through threats of deportation when the effort they invested into their jobs began to decline.

The conditions necessary for the establishment of a contractual caste system had been secured politically in the late 1950's. Labor movements to Germany were centrally controlled and the recruitment of foreign workers became government policy. The ascription of migrant laborers to a contractual caste became an administrative directive. It was formulated in the policy of 'rotation' adopted by the German National Labor Office which had been entrusted with control over the introduction of foreign labor. This concept implied that migrant workers should not under any circumstances be permitted to remain in Germany beyond a limited period of time. The National Labor Office secured the temporary mobilization of foreign labor politically through international bilateral agreements. These treaties specified that foreign workers could be released and legally deported in accordance with the fluctuations of the economy. Such agreements were ratified with Italy (1955), Spain and Greece (1960), Turkey (1961), Morocco (1963), Portugal (1964), Tunisia (1965), and Yugoslavia (1968).

Invariably, while granting some protection to the foreign workers, the policies of the National Labor Office gave priority to the requirements of German employers and the wider interests of the German economy. Its primary concern was with "quantitatively and qualitatively satisfying demands for manpower in Germany" (Krane 1979:5).

The bureaucratization of the recruitment process was accompanied by an ideological system which further facilitated the migrants' ascription to a contractual caste.<sup>1</sup> State administrators responded to the employers' labor demands with an efficiency which rested on the rationally pursued objectification of those human beings most affected by their policies. They classified, categorized and distributed foreign workers in the German economy relative to their labor capacities and skills. Stripped of their individual identities, migrant workers were converted into instrumental commodities. Bureaucrats and employers not only came to perceive, but to treat migrant workers as if they consisted of no more than productive bodies harnessing labor power which could be temporarily mobilized and adopted to the demands of the German economy.

Once foreign workers arrived in Germany, their whole existence became subject to state control. Their permanent integration into German society was inhibited by legal stipulations which restricted their choice of domicile, confining them to dormitory life and collective housing provided by the employers (Klee 1973 and 1975; Mayer 1975:443; Neumann 1980:58; Rhoades 1978:565; Schrader et al. 1979). These conditions were intentionally created to discourage family reunions and to inhibit the migrants' future planning. Foreign workers were issued residence permits which, being limited in duration, facilitated their periodic forced returns to their home countries. In accordance with section 2.1 of the Foreigners Law, all migrant workers must acquire a residence permit which is issued by the German Aliens' Registration Office (Ausländeramt). Since the beginning of June 1978, this permit is granted only provisionally for the duration of one year. Thereafter, it becomes subject for renewal and may be extended for another two years. After five years of residence in Germany, foreign workers should be granted an unlimited residence permit. After eight years, this status may become unconditional. Naturalization is theoretically granted after ten years of residence, however, this occurs only in exceptional cases.

The initial extension of the residence status was conditional on proof of housing accommodations which met local regulations, on the migrants' proficiency in spoken German, on their children's regular attendance in school and, most importantly, it was tied to the possession of a work permit (Foreigners Law section 2). Consequently, during times of economic decline, when the work permit could be revoked, the residence status was automatically terminated as well. Accountability and appeal procedures against administrative decisions were blocked through additional legal stipulations and the ambiguity of policy directives contained in the Foreigners Law. Here I refer particularly to section 10 of the Foreigners Law which states that residence and work permits will be issued only as long as "the interests of the Federal Republic of Germany are not impaired" by the further presence of the applicant. My research indicates that the generality of this clause allows administrators to revoke residence and work permits for rather arbitrary reasons. During times of economic decline, they may increase deportation rates by charging migrants with minor offenses such as traffic violations, residing in housing accommodations which are inadequate in accordance with legal regulations, drinking in public, or the use of a knife in domestic quarrels. Similarly, when foreign workers threaten to become a burden on government spending through illness or injuries received at work, they can be readily sent home.

State intervention in migratory movements, however, not only secured the mobility of foreign labor. By means of the Foreigners Law with its administrative regulations, the state also ascribed migrant workers to an exclusive sphere of activity within which their productive utility could be maximized by the employers. Administrators could make the residence and work permit conditional on a particular job at a particular firm. Consequently, when foreign workers attempted to change employers to escape suppressive work conditions, to attain higher wages or to move into higher skilled jobs, they could be prevented from doing so with threats of deportation. Often, the movement of workers between jobs bids up their wages. By controlling this movement and therefore wage rates, the German state confined foreign workers to a low occupational status. This measure, however, served the interests of capitalists as a class rather than individual employers.

Furthermore, in denying migrant workers the right to participate in elections on all levels, the German state suppressed the expression of political concerns on both individual and collective levels. Section 6 of the Foreigners Law also denies migrants the right of public assembly and political organization. As such, it restricts their freedom of speech. These stipulations reduce the migrants' ability to resist wage suppressions.

While the wage rates and occupational status of foreign workers was thus kept relatively low, the size distribution of income shifted in favor of the German population. The development of the migrant workers' contractual caste status provided German workers with greater occupational and social mobility.

In a relatively recent study, Jurgen Habermas (1973:82) has pointed out that the increase in and the leveling of the standard of living among the German population decreased the workers' effort on the job. The development of a contractual caste system seemed to promote marginal productivity among German workers. Habermas did not acknowledge that this phenomenon could be counteracted only through the achievement orientation and greater labor effort of the migrant population. During times of economic expansion, the German state therefore needed to secure the effective competitive pressure migrant workers could exert on the German working class in order to retain high levels of productivity. Empirical studies indicate that foreign workers do in fact strive for the same occupational and educational opportunities as their German colleagues (Neumann 1980; Schrader et al. 1979:100-101). The migrant workers' achievement orientation should not surprise us if we take account of the fact that most of them

were recruited from a skilled, urban and industrial labor force. There is sufficient evidence to suggest that administrators selectively extracted those workers from the indigenous economies who had previous contact with industrial production. For instance, Neumann (1980:56,74) points out that prior to 1970 only 37% of all Turkish migrants were employed in the agricultural sector; 18% had been engaged in the provision of services. However, more than 62% were drawn from the industrial sectors of the Turkish economy. Administrators seemed to favor the import of qualified foreign workers. Klee (1975) makes clear that on the average unskilled Turkish applicants waited up to seven years to gain admission to Germany. Skilled and literate workers waited no longer than two years. A report by Abadan-Unat (1976:11) indicates that only seven years after Turkey consented to the export of its citizens to Germany, it had been depleted of 26% of its skilled labor force. By 1971 more than 46% of its qualified labor had been recruited to Germany.

While striving for the same educational and occupational opportunities as their German colleagues, a majority of migrants also expressed the desire to remain in Germany (Weber 1980:43). Furthermore, statistics compiled by the *Bundesminister für Arbeit und Sozialordnung* (1980:IIa 5-28707-6) indicate that every second migrant lived in Germany for more than eight years.

The foreign workers' equal access to education, occupational opportunities and higher wages was, however restricted through their ascription to a contractual caste. Consequently, they could only realize their goals by working relatively longer hours, by accepting shift work and those tasks which the German workers regarded as demeaning. As a result of recruitment policies and the establishment of a contractual caste system, the migrant workers were manipulated into assuming a competitive position in the economy.

### The Formation of a Status Based

#### Caste System in Germany

The original temporary caste system with its rational contractual basis gradually transformed into a permanent mode of institutionalized inequality based on considerations of social status.

The increasing scarcity of jobs resulting from the recession of the early 1970's coupled with the competitive pres-

sure foreign workers exerted on the market generated resentment against the migrant population among the German labor force. Although the German state put a sudden halt to foreign labor recruitment in 1973, and considerably reduced the foreign work force by means of deportation, it soon became clear that migrant workers had become inextricably wedded to the German economic system. Today, four million foreigners have made Germany their country of choice. Of the total labor force in Germany more than 9% are migrant workers.

The permanence of the foreign population and their competition on the labor market leads particularly among the "lowest social strata" to resistance against any kind of social integration of the migrants and their families. Studies indicate that it is most noticeable among the unskilled, semi-skilled, and low ranking German employees who are threatened by unemployment and who compete with foreigners for jobs and education (see Reimann 1979:80). With decreasing job qualifications, the resentment against the presence of migrant workers seems to grow (Anagnostidis 1975:127-128).

At the job and in interaction with their German colleagues, migrant workers are thus confronted with the fact that their marginal economic and political status is duplicated in the social sphere. Perceived as threats to job security and income, they are banned to the lowest ranks in both the occupational and social hierarchies. In interpersonal communication the German workers' resentment against migrant workers is manifest in stigmatization, stereotyping and avoidance.

The emergent prejudice structure characteristic of the formation of a caste system based on considerations of unequal social status also found expression in mass support for repressive legal and administrative measures directed at the foreign population. In this way, the state's ascription of migrant workers to a caste gained legitimacy. Its careful control over the migrants' existence was thus maintained. The implications of this process for the development of caste become even more apparent when one realizes that approximately 8% of the total labor force in Germany is not only foreign but also unskilled. In other words, more than 88% of all foreign employees have been forced to assume a marginal occupational and social position in German society.

The public's criticism of "over foreignization" is as much confirmed by the institutionalization of the caste system as it is exploited in the interest of the economy. In legitimating its control over foreign workers, the German state can continue its policy of stabilizing intervention in the economic system. Employers can retain high levels of labor input at minimal cost.



German workers thus responded to the emergent class-caste conflict in a manner beneficial to both state and capitalist interests. The exploitative basis of the emergent caste system did not provoke questions of legitimation because the politics of capital were concealed by the growing xenophobia in which caste is now embedded. Considerations of social status associated with the caste-class conflict effectively veiled the incompatibility between the requirements of the state apparatus and the occupational system, on the one hand, and the interpreted needs and legitimate expectations of German workers, on the other.

In maintaining a system of caste-class conflict, the German state withheld from public consciousness the persistence of inter-class contradictions. Prejudices manifest in the stigmatization of migrant workers misdirected challenges to the legitimacy of the politics of capital. These were not perceived as having priority "among other dangers to be warded off." The relationship between the subjects and objects of power remained perceptively misconstrued.

#### NOTES

Acknowledgments. I would like to thank Susan Berry, George DeVos and Hadi Esfahani for their insightful comments and constructive criticism of an earlier draft of this paper.

<sup>1</sup> Rhoades (1978) provides a more detailed historical study of the emergence of the characteristics of this "migration ideology."

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