

A Respected Profession After All: Work Structures and Self-Perceptions of Hamburg Dock Workers After 1950

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Dock work – experiences and narrations. Introduction

Since the 1960s, with the arrival of the container, the working reality has changed in ports worldwide. The success story of the container and the radical changes it brought are well known and academically researched (Levinson 2006). While dock work in some former port cities merely plays a marginal role today, other ports, like Hamburg, have been able to maintain their status as an important reloading point. Hamburg is suited to an analysis of the technical transformation and its effects on work conditions as the port still plays a major role in the city's economy and public image (Rodenberg 2008) – despite enormous job cuts. In addition, the dock worker's profession has always received a lot of media attention, and several formats have contributed to the image and the local anchorage of the domain.

As the perspective of the workers themselves received hardly any attention within this process, narrations on these transformations were at the core of my doctoral thesis (Schemmer 2018a). My ethnographic study analyses the actors' experiences and positions connected to the effects of technical transformations on individual biographies and collective work practices. It provides insights into social and cultural spaces, and the ways the workers subjectively cope with the changed working environment, accelerated work rhythms, and the disappearance of numerous colleagues. This process is to be considered against the background of urban development in port cities and the musealization of dock work, influencing individual as well as collective experiences.

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Figure 1. The Harbour Museum Hamburg is located in quay shed 50a. On the museum site, there are large devices like Van Carriers and cranes. Behind the flood protection wall is the port basin. Credit: Janine Schemmer.

My research began in the Hafenmuseum Hamburg, the local Harbour Museum, an institution where former dock workers' memories are spatially located (Figure 1). Although the municipality runs the museum, there were only a few permanent employees back then, supported by student assistants, and I was one of them for several years. Apart from the directorate, the main protagonists on site as of now are volunteers and former dock workers, shipbuilding workers, and seamen. During my working hours, I had the chance to listen to the narrations of the so-called dock seniors. I established first contacts with interview partners there, and was soon able to develop further connections. Overall, I collected twenty-five interviews with retired dock workers who began their careers between the 1950s and 1970s, thus before and after the arrival of the first full container ship in Hamburg in 1968. Most of the interview-

ees are German; a few Portuguese and Turkish workers who arrived in Hamburg after the 1960s also form part of the sample.¹

When I started my research, one dock senior pointed out the misnomer of the term *dock worker* and spoke about *workers in the port* instead. He made me aware of the professions' heterogeneity that stands in harsh contrast to the homogenous picture often drawn of this occupational group, to which collective values are frequently ascribed. This image is related to the development of the organization and the characteristics of dock work that changed fundamentally in Hamburg after the arrival of the container. Despite global developments such as containerization, structures of ports worldwide have not changed homogeneously. Local ways of organization equally influenced the transformations of ports and the work carried out (Dubbeld 2003, 118).

In this paper, I sum up some of my central findings concerning the structural transformation and its influences on the social space (Bourdieu 2006) and former dock workers' self-perceptions. As occupation, work structures and habitus are closely interlinked, professional qualifications strongly influenced their social capital. Specifically, I will focus on the changed self-awareness and the social and economic advancement of those workers who qualified for technical work and remained in the port, highlighting their reflections about habitual behaviour changes.

Exploring the port – an economic and cultural space

The history of the dock workers is closely interwoven with the development of the respective port cities and has to be analysed in this context (Cooper 2000, 539). The texture and character of the city of Hamburg and its harbour area as a 'structuring and structured space' (Hengartner 1999, 16 ff.) appears essential in public representations of dock work as well as

1 The protagonists I spoke to have in several ways incorporated the port history and firmly identify with it to this point in time. Unfortunately, the voices of countless persons who lost their jobs, and are not or do not want to be part of this narrative community for various reasons had to be left out. As my analysis specifically focuses on cargo handling where women were rarely employed, I did not interview female protagonists. In my study, I also reflect the fact that the self-positioning of the interview partners must always be read in relation to their external positioning. By explaining their former working life to me, an interested young woman with no specific knowledge of dock work and port structures, they consciously place themselves in the tradition of dock workers and present themselves as such.

in the interviews.² The city is a ‘culturally coded space saturated with history and stories’ (Lindner 2008, 86). This characteristic applies particularly to port cities, where many circulating narratives are part of an imaginary. Therefore, it is legitimate to ask whether port cities are ‘a metaphor with a strong memory value and a weak sense of reality’ (Berking and Schwenk 2011, 7).

The insights I gathered doing field research in the Harbour Museum shaped my view of the port as a workplace and at the same time as a location for cultural tourism and an event site. Analysing the media coverage of the last 60 years provides insight into the cultural production of the port city of Hamburg, its maritime atmosphere, the port as a workspace, and the implementation of social as well as cultural ideas about the workers. An early example is the radio programme ‘Hafenkonzert’ of the radio station Norddeutscher Rundfunk, broadcasted since 1929 and for many years directly from onboard the incoming and outgoing ships. It reported about the port, the cargo, the shipyards, the sailors’ life, and wanderlust. Even today, many former workers refer to the programme. Unsurprisingly, as early as the 1950s, the port’s tourism potential increasingly became the focus of tourist advertising (Amenda and Grünen 2008, 112 ff.). Furthermore, several local politicians supported the idea of a particular image of work in the port in their speeches and actions throughout the decades, highlighting the importance of the workplace not only for the city’s economy, but also for the workers and inhabitants. The proximity of politics testifies to the importance of the harbour as an economic centre, while at the same time most mayors also drew benefit from the port for representative purposes. These images of the port and its status as a symbol for the city have to be considered when analysing the narrations on the workplace. Besides, the interviewees closely observed and actively experienced the change of large parts of the former port area from a working into a cultural district. The Speicherstadt, the old port area in the city centre, was built in 1888. The port relocated to the western and southern part of the city through containerization, with new terminals built from the 1970s onwards. After losing its status as a freeport zone in 2003, enterprises from entertainment industries and the creative sector began to settle in the Speicherstadt, and the district turned into a cultural event-space. Next to it emerged the so-

2 I translated all cited quotes from German-speaking authors from German into English.

called HafenCity, a vast restructuring project, occurring in several other European port cities. Characteristic features of the former port and its labour remain in the form of warehouses and cranes and function as the scenery for this event-space, where the profound change of maritime economy materializes.

Apart from material and tangible transformations, several new protagonists began to appropriate the former port area: city marketing, artists, city guides, students, researchers, etc. discovered the district for themselves. However, the port's specific history, and above all that of its workers, remains rather underrepresented. Besides the International Maritime Museum, which is devoted primarily to the history of shipping and maritime culture in general, the Speicherstadtmuseum is another private institution dedicated to a specific section of former dock work in the warehouse district. This marginality of the history of dock work in the city's representation is surprising, as the port has always played a central role in Hamburg's economic policy and in the city's self-image and marketing (Amenda and Grünen 2008, 56 ff.).

As last witnesses of the old port, several workers not only experienced this process passively but became involved and accompanied it actively. Hence, besides the technical transformation, a parallel process of historicizing the port and disappearing working methods has taken place since 1989, when historical ships turned into museum sites for the first time. Already in 1986, some former port workers and trade unionists raised the idea of a museum, which finally opened its doors in 2005. The Harbour Museum, in which the old working world is preserved and made tangible, is situated opposite Speicherstadt and HafenCity in one of the last heritage-protected quay sheds built in 1908. It is located within close range of the container terminals. While the Harbour Museum is the forum where former workers in the port convey their experiences and meet up, at the same time, it has been established as a venue for events in the local cultural scene and for cultural tourism (Schemmer 2018b). The cultural commitment testifies to a strong awareness of the significance of the changes regarding not only the profession but also the port and the shaping of the city. Such consciousness also informs the narratives of my interview partners.

Occupational profiles and qualification – a new image for dock work

Developments in work organization continuously led to new working methods and techniques. However, after 1950, the responsible companies, institutions, and politics experienced significant institutional, technical, and structural changes. For a long time, dock workers were characterized above all by muscle power. Therefore, the restructuring with the focus on technical skills strongly influenced the workers' self-image and the perception others had of people in the port. Below, I will shortly outline the central structural developments.

Whereas the bars around the port used to be the place of employment for casual workers, this system changed when in 1906 port employers founded the *Hafenbetriebsverein* (HBV). The HBV introduced work cards to control the labour market and divided the workforce into permanent workers, unskilled workers, and casual workers. The HBV was the first institution for job placement, but it had no specific intention to improve the social situation. This kind of employment changed with the founding of the Joint Dock Company (*Gesamthafenbetrieb/GHB*), the labour pool of the port, created by the National Socialists in 1934. All employers in the port became affiliated with the GHB, which assigned its workers to the respective company. All port workers received a port card. Anyone who had a card was and is considered a dock worker; this system is still valid today. Furthermore, the port card entitled workers to the right to an employment contract with the GHB. In the case of being dismissed from a private port company (*Hafeneinzelbetrieb/HEB*), workers were assigned a job with the GHB, depending on the conditions of their dismissal. Although this safety net only lasted until 1969, it continued to be associated with some kind of autonomy in several interviews. The aim of the foundation of the GHB was to control the workers and, above all, to politically de-radicalize them.

Immediately after the Second World War, the Joint Dock Company continued its work. Although the British Control Commission removed the legal basis of the institution, several associations and the trade union ÖTV (*Gewerkschaft Öffentliche Dienste, Transport und Verkehr*) continued its work in non-institutionalized ways. On 3 August 1950, the Federal Council passed the Law on the Creation of a Special Employer for Dock Workers (*Gesamthafenbetriebs-Gesellschaft* 1997), and prepared the ground for a 'democratically constituted labour pool' (Bartsch 1999,

49) that took up its work in February 1951. Its structures were and are still essentially the same as those in 1934. Peter Bartsch, one of the former chairmen of the GHB, commented on this development as follows: 'Perhaps it is fair to say that the body of the organism GHB was formed in those years, but the spirit that suited it was only taken in after the end of the war, and not suddenly, but gradually' (1999, 49). With the distinction between body and mind, i.e. the framework, convictions, and contents, Bartsch actively takes up the founding of the GHB by the Nazi regime, distances himself from it and emphasizes the democratic values of the company. The main effort of this renewed institution that existed and exists alongside private companies was and is to reduce the casual character of dock work. Besides this, it aimed to create steady employment conditions, as the volume of work in the port was subject to significant fluctuations, both long-term (e.g. due to cyclical demand) and short-term (due to the irregular arrival of ships).

Above all, the GHB provided security for unskilled workers who were not employed by a private company and were only requested when many workers were needed. Through the GHB, in February 1948, a guaranteed weekly income was established and paid also when there was no work to be done. In the years to follow, the company took several further actions to bring forward decasualization.³ A positive consequence of these structural developments for employers was the decline of the need and willingness of employees to strike.

Since then, there have been three types of workers: those employed by a private company, the workers employed by the GHB, and the temporary, so-called unskilled workers, whose deployment continues to be cause for discussion (Dietz 2011). As shown in the next section, the latter shaped the common perception of the freedom-loving, independent worker for decades. However, the depictions hardly ever address the precarious conditions (de Vries 2000, 707). With this image, constructed and maintained in several media reports, numerous stereotypical associations are still interwoven today. It was not until 1967 that GHB workers were equated in terms of employment legislation with workers of private port companies (Helle 1960, 7). Furthermore, the latter were trained for

3 The port fund bears the so-called guaranteed wage for GHB workers, used to finance periods of low employment. This is achieved through handling charges, which all private port companies collect in their invoices and pay to the GHB.

the handling of technical equipment relatively early, while the GHB started training drivers of the container gantry crane from 1978 onwards.

The second significant transformation process set in after the arrival of the first full container ships in Hamburg in May 1968. As early as 1967, one year before its appearance, the newspaper *Das Sprachrohr*, edited by the GHB, published a programmatic article about the increasing importance of the box, to familiarize the workers with this kind of activity. With headlines such as ‘Don’t be afraid of the container’ (GHB 1967, 3), the GHB promoted a more comfortable manner of working with it. Possible concerns on the side of the workers about the effects of container transport on their workplace, as mentioned in the quotation, seem comprehensible, since containerized cargo increased rapidly. Whereas in 1968 container cargo was only 2.1% of total cargo handling, it was 18.2% in 1973 and reached 42.4% in 1982. Although the container divided public opinion and initially had enthusiastic advocates and fierce opponents, there were already three terminals in the early 1970s.

Politicians and unionists, who collaborated rather closely, were conscious of the need for skilled workers soon after the appearance of the first containers, not only to train specialized staff that were essential but also to attract more junior employees as there were not enough workers in the port in the 1970s (Großbecker 1985, 138). Official reports of the Joint Dock Company claim that workers’ shortages can be traced back to the job’s poor reputation due to hard or dirty work and its casual status (GHB Annual Report 1979). Thus, in 1975, traditional professions were restructured, with special training for water and landside activities, resulting in state-approved skilled occupations. The reorganization was important to increase income, and strengthen the workers’ rights and the profession’s image.

Concerning the technical transformation, several interview partners vividly talk about the change of work procedures, of workspaces, and the development from teamwork to more individualistic and isolated workflows. However, they do not describe these transformations as sudden ruptures, but as a slow process. For decades, there had been a coexistence of self-learned practical work knowledge (Hörning 2004) and containerized movement of goods (Figure 2). Thus, parallel work practices may be one of the reasons why technological changes are never described as a complete break in the biographies. At second glance, though, a lot of ambiguity can be traced in the narratives. Furthermore, the evalua-



Figure 2. General cargo handling at the Container Terminal Tollerort, around 1990. Archive: Hafenmuseum Hamburg, Bestand Cordes/HHLA.

tion of the transformation through containers and computers today varies vastly according to age and individual careers. In addition, fluctuation in the port was always high. The transformation processes did not result in mass layoffs as companies alleviated job cuts by offering their employees early retirement and reduced working hours.⁴ However, the number of workers went down from 13,000 in 1978 to 6,000 in 1994.

In the Hamburg case, one can point out that this structural transformation progressively led to better social, professional, and financial circumstances for those who did not lose their jobs. However, unskilled work never disappeared, but relocated. Since the early 1990s, container packing has been a central topic of discussion, as many companies transferred outside the former free port area where they are not obliged to pay the port tariff (Achten and Kamin-Seggewies 2008).

The fundamental role of work as a 'social resource' (Kocka 2010, 1) in people's everyday lives manifests in their narrations about it. New structures that went hand in hand with both the organization of work and technical developments changed workers' self-perceptions and how others perceived them and transformed social interactions, established networks, and the socio-cultural fabric of dock work.

Climbing the social ladder – imaginaries and self-awareness

Authors of historical studies on the Hamburg port during the German Empire and the Weimar Republic paint a picture of the dock worker as he was to be found for over a century: the casual worker, whose most important skill was physical strength (Grüttner 1984; Weinbauer 1994). For decades, dock work was mainly associated with noise, stench, and, above all, back-breaking work. The figure of the simple worker, who tended to have a negative image, appears in several interviews: 'Whoever worked there, they were all, they were young men of second-class. Those who worked in the port were nothing. Those in the shipyards, yeah. But not in the port, not in cargo handling, that was all, "ah, he's got lice", and with the dirt and all that - no woman wanted to have anything to do with it. Let me tell you that' (Carsten Brandes, 1942). As a young man, Carsten Brandes learned the traditional profession of bargeman, but soon qualified to work with containers. His observation mirrors the fact that dock

4 A detailed social history of developments in port work after 1950 is yet to be written. A look at the number of people who lost their job and the companies' measures suggests that this is only one version that needs to be further analysed.

work continues to carry a gendered connotation. It further suggests a low reputation of dock workers also taken up in other accounts. When talking about the beginning of their professional lives, very few of my interview partners mentioned that they decided voluntarily to take the job. Rather than choosing dock work, it provided a good way to gain a lot of money for hard work, as many emphasized. As work was rare in those years, many interviewees started an apprenticeship arranged by relatives, acquaintances, or other contacts. While some came to the port after they went to sea and to settle down, it offered a new professional orientation to workers with different professional backgrounds.

One reason for the mainly negative ascription by others was the formerly low social and occupational status of the docker, as casual workers and those on short-term contracts shaped the image of the ‘uncultivated, raw, drunkard worker’ (Grüttner 1984, 273), which was constructed, transported, and maintained through various channels over decades and with which numerous stereotypical associations are interwoven. As no specific expertise was required for dock work in the post-war years, anyone who could get their hands dirty and was willing to work hard could be trained to work in the port until the structural changes of 1975 set in. As already mentioned, in most cases GHB staff carried out the simplest and at the same time hardest and dirtiest tasks, another reason for the correspondingly bad image GHB workers had to withstand for a long time.

In the immediate post-war years, media depicted dock workers through their marginal social situation and political developments. Until the 1970s, they represented typical workers as a large, hardworking family sharing collective values, and authors referred to the harmonious, solidary, and down-to-earth coexistence (Figure 3). In addition, the Hamburg dock worker was portrayed as Northern German. This is remarkable as the first so-called guest workers arrived in the port as early as 1959, and almost one third of the GHB-employees were of foreign origin in 1979 (Gesamthafenbetriebs-Gesellschaft 1979, 12).

With structural transformations, this image partly changed. In May 1987, Hamburg celebrated its 798th port anniversary. On this occasion, the local paper *Abendblatt* reported to a wide audience on the transformation in an article titled ‘The silent revolution’ (Sillescu 1987, 3). The subtitle went: ‘The port is dead. Long live the port’ and underlined the port’s central position in the city’s economy and as an employer. However, the ‘Silent Revolution’ referred to the manner of transformation, at least



Figure 3. Finished load. Coffee from Brazil on the *Cap San Lorenzo*, July 1965.
Credit: Karl-Heinrich Altstaedt.

from an outside perspective: as a slow, imperceptible process, as also mentioned in many interviews. The journalist explained that qualified workers were in demand, as from now on 'two big Cs', container and computer, were trend-setting. He highlighted the continuous success of the port as a trading and transshipment centre, in contrast to the negative developments that occurred in the shipbuilding industry. However, now the 'typical' dock worker, represented in the article through Mr. Steiner, was praised as a qualified technician: 'Today he no longer needs biceps, but brains. As a loading master, he sits on the tower of the container terminal at the computer screen and is responsible for hinterland control. [...] Steiner's working world is still the port. But nothing is as it used to be' (ibid). Workers with a foreign background remained marginal figures in the public representation.

Over the years, a romantically idealized image of the dock worker prevailed, and has spread since the 1980s as the number of workers and their traditional occupations has decreased. The traditional worker's imaginary has been turned into a nostalgic figure that is represented in various reports. The image functions as a projection screen for protagonists from the outside and for the workers themselves, and by using it, they combine the positive features and values of the traditional work with those of the new.

In many interviews, the narrators point out that, for various reasons, the dock worker can no longer be compared with that of the past. Uli Amling, who was responsible for the handling equipment in a stevedoring yard, puts the professional activity in perspective: 'Even today, dock worker sounds just so negative. After all, really qualified professions make up dock work today' (Uli Amling, 1949). The bargeman and training instructor Gustav Paulsen refers to the often one-dimensional media portrayal that circulated about the profession: 'That's still in the newspaper today, the job title, when someone committed a crime somewhere. Once, I complained to the BILD newspaper, as they always wrote, the dock worker such-and-such. So they said, "yes, but we also write, the doctor, or whoever". (...) After all, it's a respected profession today' (Gustav Paulsen, 1927). In many descriptions of work practices, qualification plays an important role regarding the upgrading of the occupational profile, but also regarding the quality and the status of dock work, which from 1975 onwards was skilled work from a legal perspective. Above all, Paulsen defends the occupational profile against simplistic media portrayals in the

tabloid press, which does not provide an objective picture of the manifold activities and skills. Such differentiated statements manifest the cultural capital of the interviewees.

Although many locate themselves in the habitual tradition of the dock worker in regard to values and attitude, they also distance themselves from the outdated image of the unskilled worker. However, Bernt Kamin-Seggewies, former head of human resources at the GHB, explains in our interview that certain imageries of masculinity and associations based primarily on outside appearance not only continue to shape images of the dock workers to this day, but are also taken up and passed on by the actors themselves. He relates the following characterizations in the context of the GHB workers and colleagues: 'Some of them run around with tattooed arms, come along on the Harley and tend to puff up. (...) The habitus is still dragged along by some, although the work has changed. It is very interesting to note that the reputation of the dock worker, both among individuals and in the public's perception, is still that of the drunken day labourer of yesteryear, which has nothing to do with reality anymore' (Bernt Kamin-Seggewies, 1960). He expresses some employees' need to carry the acquired economic capital to the outside world through status symbols such as motorcycles or cars. In this example, he vividly illustrates the use of the imaginaries ascribed to their occupational profile in a situational way. They stage habitual attributions to express their masculinity that no longer correspond to current practices. In contrast, in several interviews with actors who belong to a different age cohort, they characterized themselves as social climbers through their abilities and qualifications. Their acquired cultural capital becomes visible as they tightly link their professional biographies to structural developments.

Gustav Paulsen depicted the social advancement using the images circulating about the work and the financial opportunities that arose over the years. He explained that during his time in the port, he had experienced three generations of dockers, mirroring the processes: those after the war had nothing, those afterwards had a bicycle, and those afterwards had a car and moved away from port areas. The development described not only reflects economic and spatial changes, but also influenced social relations.

Changing patterns of solidarity

Containerization and modern cargo handling brought along a variety of transformations concerning the social space. New professional practices brought changed social structures in the working groups, and influenced arrangements based on interaction and solidarity on a professional as well as political level.

Besides a strong reduction of jobs, one central aspect mentioned in the narrations was reduced opportunities for weak or older colleagues or those who were only partially able to work (Kiupel 1990, 77). The port used to offer its workers various niches, and companies, for example, hired workers who were no longer able to carry out their usual activities due to accidents or sickness as custodians in so-called convalescent workplaces, even if they were unable to do physically demanding dock work. These kinds of workplaces were part of 'informal solidarity structures' that dissolved over the years (Brüggemeier 1984, 254). As the system supported the individual, Walter Widmann accentuates the activities with and for each other: 'On this quay shed, for example, there were two or three men who always had something to sweep, to clean, or they cleaned windows [...]. We were able to drag them along. And that's no longer the case today' (Walter Widmann, 1940). Widmann, who worked as a training instructor for many years, also explained that workers who could not attend further training courses or work with technical equipment due to a lower level of education were deployed elsewhere. This already hints at the importance of qualification to stay in the system. Gustav Paulsen, his colleague at the training centre, also emphasizes this aspect. He describes the handling of teaching materials as a major problem for many colleagues who were not used to written tests. Although their working practices were convincing, they fell out of the system due to a lack of abstraction capacity. Furthermore, a central condition for qualification and equal opportunities was knowledge of the German language. In addition, as a training instructor for the GHB workers and a council member, he was particularly committed to work security and health protection, but states that it was not an easy task to transmit this importance to his colleagues, who were mainly interested in working a lot, including overtime, in order to gain money.

Besides transforming the social composition of the profession, the altered work organization affected workers' political attitudes. The regulation of the port milieu by politicians and port operators alike formed

the backdrop for this development. As early as the mid-1920s, the gradual process of de-politicization and a 'boost of individualization' by overpowering companies and powerless unions set in (Weinhauer 1994, 265). Under the National Socialists, the 'breakup of oppositional workers' parties and organizations' was pushed forward (Weinhauer 1997, 417), and the collective capacity to act steadily decreased.

This especially shows in the narratives about the meaning of the syndicate. One must consider the role of the trade union ÖTV in the context of post-war developments. The ÖTV was concerned with ensuring a stable situation for smooth port handling and mediating between employers and employees. Therefore, the policy of the ÖTV often drew criticism. In many cases, the union's approaches were portrayed as too employer-friendly, its attitude as too appeasing and barely confrontational (Geffken 2015, 126). Although various political groups such as the Communist Federation (KB) and the Communist Party of Germany/Marxist-Leninists (KPD/ML) were active in the port in the 1970s, the narrations gave no opinions about these groups. Although all interviewees stated that they had been members of the trade union, this was due more to tradition than political conviction. Many say that they left the ÖTV at the latest when they retired. Some have mixed feelings about the institution, arguing that they did not see their interests adequately represented. Others do not express an explicit opinion and remark that they joined it because everybody did back then, and because the GHB as an employer insisted on it. Uli Amling, who was a permanent employee in a stevedoring company, explains that, despite some doubts, he felt the ÖTV represented his interests well: 'While in between I resigned from the syndicate, I joined it again later, because it kind of gives you a safe feeling. Because you know you can get help if something goes wrong. But I never made use' (Uli Amling, 1949). In response to my question as to how many of the permanent employees in private companies were involved in trade union activities, the former general manager Anton Ermer expresses an exact position: 'Well, in these companies it was actually rather low. Far less than 50%. Why? We paid above tariff. We always motivated our people so much that when there was a strike they didn't participate' (Anton Ermer, 1940). Because of the high wages, political disputes lost their importance. However, Ermer also hints at a kind of pressure exerted from the employers.

The attitude of the former stevedore Achmed Amanat towards the duty and function of the trade union varies significantly from German colleagues' statements. Amanat left Istanbul in 1968, and after several job positions in Germany and France came to Hamburg in 1977. Amanat explains his initial scepticism towards the institution. This may also be since experiences with unions from other countries differed greatly (Goeke 2011). However, he emphasizes the importance it eventually gained for him: 'I used to get annoyed about it. But later on, I understood what it was all about. As a worker, you don't think about the advantages, but they pay attention to it. Most of the workers have to be in the union to stand up for something in a strong way. [...] Whenever we had issues, we went to the workers' council' (Achmed Amanat, 1942). The union developed into an approved counterpart. Eventually, the membership strengthened his self-perception as a dock worker as well as part of the working community: 'We were, I mean [...] we never said, uh, he's Portuguese, German, Turkish, we never said that. We were always equal in the community' (Achmed Amanat, 1942). While he may have experienced discrimination of any kind in his everyday work, e.g. due to language skills, the trade union in his portrayal appears as a non-hierarchical space in which he knew his rights were secured. His remarks indicate that organizations such as the trade union, which for many workers of German origin had an increasingly minor role as a reference point, could have a different value and significance for workers with a different background.

Class-consciousness as symbolic value

Alongside the effects on informal networks and institutions, the increased economic capital affected the political participation of many workers. New structures and qualifications led to an increased process of individualization.

While due to structural transformations and job cuts, various strikes took place in American ports as early as the late 1960s and English ports during the 1970s, the port of Hamburg and its workers, who worked around the clock, profited from these conflicts as the shipping companies made for the Hamburg port instead of Liverpool, for example (Grobeck 1985, 138). In 1979, the labour pool even employed 69 English migrant workers with temporary work contracts, coming above all from Liverpool and Manchester. However, as they had to pay unexpectedly high social security contributions and earned so little that the work did not pay

off, they returned to England at the end of 1979 (Gesamthafenbetriebs-Gesellschaft 1979).

After some wildcat strikes in the early 1950s, mainly led by the communist party KPD which demanded wage increases (Geffken 2015, 90), the only major strike in which the union was involved occurred in 1978 and was based on demands for wage increases for the increasingly qualified skilled workers. In the narrations, the strike is never mentioned as an essential action but rather as an anecdote. Most interview partners did not remember or elaborate on the reasons, and there is no collective memory of the strike. In the magazine *Arbeiterpolitik*, an anonymous contemporary author dealt with the strike action controversially. Besides criticising the approach and attitude of the ÖTV, he explains the German dock workers' behaviour. In his statements, he critically comments on their lacking historical awareness and class-consciousness, stating that contemporary dockers could rarely imagine the spirit 'with which the workers dared to paralyse the port in former times. [...] If they go on strike now, they mostly don't know what it means. To them, striking means: not going to work' (N.N. 1978, 32).⁵ He further comments that this is not surprising, as they lack experience compared to other European colleagues, 'because after 1945 they had become used to being social partners instead of class enemies. They, therefore, have little practical experience with solidarity' (ibid). This lack of practical experience is mirrored in my interviews, where the strike rarely appears as an explicitly chosen topic, and interviewees mostly pick it up at my request. One interviewee points out that strike-breakers were mainly among the permanent employees of private companies. In a few narrations, the strike marks the turning point in the organization of work and the rise of containerization. For Erwin Meier, working as a bargeman back then, the strike marks a significant juncture. Remarkably, in retrospect he combines the transformation and incipient decline of traditional dock work with the major strike: 'And there we stood striking, six of us, and just before that a somewhat older colleague had already said to me, "You, boy, if you ever get the chance, go into the containers. This thing with the barges is no good"' (Erwin Meier, 1949). In his further narrative, he criticises the strike's organization and positions himself as a follower rather than an activist.

5 An important point of reference in publications and narratives to this day remains the Great Dockers' Strike of 1896/1897, to which many narrators refer in order to connect to long-existing actions, which, however, hardly ever occurred in this form later on (Achten and Kamin-Seggewies, 2008).

After 1950, Hamburg could no longer assert itself as the 'stronghold of the labour movement' (Weinhauer 1994, 19). In retrospect, many interview partners instead focused on their professional career to keep their jobs in the port.

However, solidarity and social cohesion did not lose their meaning and value, but received other connotations and became visible in different contexts. For example, Paul Wonner takes a clear stand on the political attitude: 'We can't stand machos and Nazis. Those are the things where we say: No chance! [...] Nevertheless, we pay attention to that, because they are mixing in a bit, as I've heard. [...] If there is a person about whose attitude we are insecure, we don't turn him over. He'll be gone eventually. In this case, we're tough. And that's what we announce during recruitment. Any Nazi characteristics are grounds for dismissal. And we're proud of that. 'Cause part of being a docker is being a worker' (Paul Wonner, 1950). Wonner clearly defines the political standpoint and the limits of the tolerable, underlining the consistency and determination in approaching politically right-minded colleagues. Some years before I interviewed Wonner, the candidate of the right-conservative 'Schill party' was voted the second mayor in Hamburg. Wonner explained that a frighteningly large number of unionists and workers voted for it. By referring to the success of the party in 2001, he also showed that the widely established image of left-wing groups such as workers is no longer valid, with their turning to right-wing parties and contents (Eribon 2016). Wonner still clearly positions the symbolic figure of the worker on the left. However, these symbolic meanings are rather an expression of subjective positioning and hardly ever reflected in collective political action practices. Concerning the political image of the dock worker, Kamin-Seggewies refers to the homepage 'Proud to be a docker', a Europe-wide campaign launched to keep alive the political tradition in the ports and to make it plain to current employees 'that they are workers, too' (Bernt Kamin-Seggewies, 1960). This statement shows the symbolic value that is continuously attached to the figure.

Although the structural transformation resulted in a largely de-politicized work culture regarding public and visible political action, many former workers continue to articulate their consciousness as dock workers and the strong social cohesion amongst colleagues.

Narrating and negotiating dock work - conclusion

While in different settings narrative patterns about dock workers' experiences may be similar, local characteristics in talking about social, technical and atmospheric spaces can be identified. The transformations triggered by containerization resulted in the need for qualified staff, and therefore affected work methods, the working group, the workplaces, and specifically the self-perception of interviewees.

Occupational advancements not only shaped individual career paths, but also found their way into the narratives, focussing on the portrayal of individual professional biographies. In biographical retrospect, perceived losses due to technological change are evident both on a personal level and, above all, related to social connections and attitudes. The meaning of and identification with formerly strong and long-established institutions such as trade unions experienced a decline or a reinterpretation. Respective activities increasingly lost their importance due to professional, and especially financial, security. While some interviewees highlighted the specific focus on understanding or transmitting the importance of achieving qualifications and technical skills to pursue their careers, several narrations show that an increased economic capital had an effect on active political commitment. Thus, the changed organizational structures and qualification measures led to de-radicalization and partly also to de-politicization as individualization processes and economic interests prevailed. However, the workers emphasize the social, collegial, and solidary character of dock work, which despite undergoing a change did not lose its relevance. Many express their moral convictions and political attitudes. However, they no longer carry them to the outside world in the form of visible political action.

The imaginary marks both the ideas circulating about the port city and its workers as well as the narratives of the interviewees. Since the 1970s, media reports and publications have directed new perspectives on this occupational group and its activity fields. Dock workers were increasingly portrayed and perceived not so much as casual or second-class workers, but rather as skilled ones, and were thus able to act and become visible as such. This process changed the way the group interacted with each other, and influenced their self-image and positioning. Since the 1990s, the image of the worker has been replaced by a romanticized, fascinated idea of a profession from the past. The traditional dock worker transformed into a popular nostalgic figure, appearing to this day as a refer-

ence to Hamburg's maritime history. In the narrations, one can observe an active engagement with familiar images, which points to the acquired cultural capital of workers in the port, who in many cases know how to deal with these ideas, and ground them historically. Thus, they refer to the fact that the dock worker has long functioned as a projection screen. In the narrations, the former workers in the port actively combine popular images with their personal and professional biographies. The imaginary functions as a stereotyped image of the outside world, from which they clearly distinguish themselves. This testifies to heightened awareness of the symbolic capital of the profession.

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