

# Obituary:

H. Gustav Klaus

Christian Schmitt-Kilb

(Rostock)



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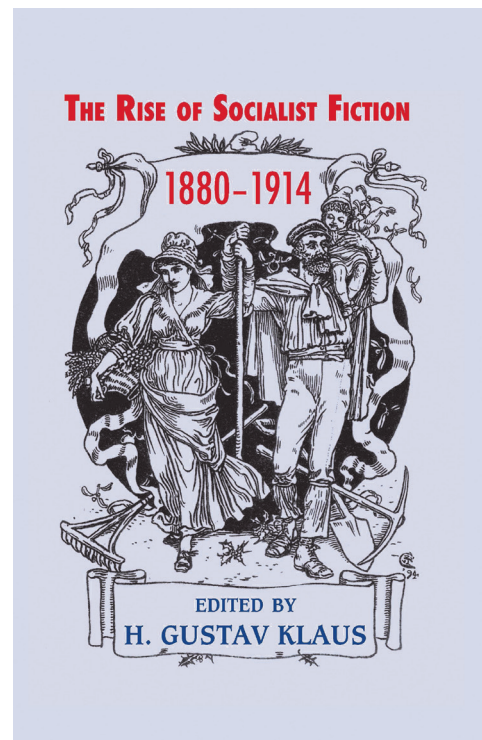
On February 25, 2020, H. Gustav Klaus died after a short and aggressive illness. We had been colleagues in Rostock for almost ten years before he retired in 2009 – he held the chair for Literature of the British Isles (1994-2009), I was his research assistant since 2000. Our collegial exchange and friendly relationship continued after his retirement and his move to the south of Germany. Only four weeks before he died, we had exchanged emails about personal and family matters, but also about the 2018 re-issue of a collection of his essays (*Voices of Anger and Hope*) and his current scholarly interests.

No word at this stage about health concerns. It came as a shock when, three weeks later, his son contacted me with the bad news of his father's illness and with the grim prospect that Gustav had only a few days to live. Five days later, he died.

One of Gustav's last publications was an obituary of Stuart Hall that appeared in an issue of the *Journal for the Study of British Cultures* co-edited by Sebastian Berg and myself. As much a personal memoir as an obituary, it leaves the reader struck not only by the extent of Gustav's involvement with the transformation, in Germany, of English Departments during the 1970s and 1980s, but also by the role he played as part of a generation that was at the same time an international community of left-wing scholars. Many of them, like Stuart Hall, went on to quickly achieve well-established academic posts and become household names, in Britain, as public intellectuals. Gustav's 'memoir' reads in part as a who's who of those intellectuals and university teachers, and his

own publications on Marxist literary criticism, but above all on working-class literature, attained a degree of visibility and recognition beyond the boundaries of German academia that remains unusual among German scholars of English literature. Furthermore, Gustav's collaboration and friendship with key figures of what was to become the field of cultural studies allowed him to edit and sometimes translate some of the first collections of their texts to be published in Germany. While Gustav's research, his collaborations and his political commitments align him with the concerns of cultural studies during the early years of the field's emergence, when many of the leading scholars had had their academic training in literary studies, he continued to regard himself as a scholar of literature and literary criticism. Perhaps this was partly a response to the field's gradual consolidation as a discipline that, at times, seemed more akin to a version of media studies than to the political endeavour it had started out as during the early days.

The trajectory of his career, in comparison to those of some of his contemporaries and collaborators, is symptomatic of the differences between the British and the German higher education sector and public sphere. Thus, while Gustav worked under precarious conditions, "on a six-month basis never knowing whether a contract for another semester would come" (108), with the Christian Democrat government of Lower Saxony wary of appointing Marxists to professorships by the time he had finished his *Habilitation*, the British higher education sector was rapidly expanding and transforming



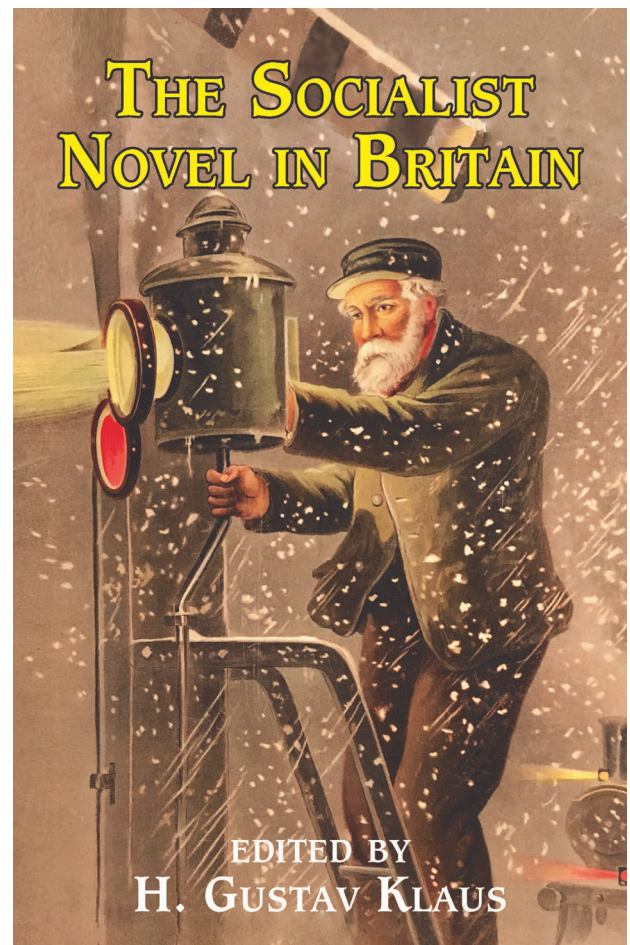
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itself, creating openings for the appointment of some central representatives of cultural studies from the 1970s onwards, regardless of their overtly left-wing political orientation. The transformation of the former polytechnics into universities, the substantial increase in admission numbers, and the founding of the Open University were crucial developments that allowed for the creation of new positions that were sometimes filled based on achievements that did not necessarily correspond to pre-defined qualifications. Thus, Stuart Hall never completed his doctorate (in English Literature) and did not hold even a first degree in sociology, yet could be appointed Director of Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary cultural studies, and, later, Professor of Sociology at the Open University. No comparable changes took place in Germany, and it was only with the "restructuring of the universities in the East" that professorial positions for some of the most active German left-wing scholars of English

literature and cultural studies opened up. As Gustav put it, “It is one of those ironies of history that an originally leftwing project profited from the collapse of an entire system that had labeled itself as ‘actually existing Socialism’.” (112) Therefore, when in 1994, Gustav was offered the chair for Literature of the British Isles at the Institute for English and American Studies of Rostock University, the path by which he reached this destination had not been without its difficulties. A Ph.D. in Bremen (1977) and *Habilitation* in Osnabrück (1982) were followed by research periods in Denmark, Australia and Scotland as well as visiting professorships in Warwick (UK), Osnabrück, and Bremen. These years – “years of irregular employment and insecure income”, as he himself put it – were in part due to his unbridled commitment to English Studies with a decidedly political, left-wing bent. He repeatedly topped the short list for professorships at one university in Lower Saxony, only for the position to be scrapped by Lower Saxony’s ministry of education rather than letting him be appointed.

The field of literature and literary studies was Gustav’s major domain, as his contributions to a British literary history from below in his research as well as his teaching testify. Nevertheless, his specific interests and political commitment, as previously suggested, were aligned with those of the emerging field of cultural studies, and he played an important role in the reception and popularisation, as early as the 1970s, of pioneering British scholars pertaining to that field, and in the implementation of their ideas in the discourse of German *Anglistik*. In this

context, the turn from *Landeskunde* to cultural studies played a central part. Gustav had a hand both in the introduction into German *Anglistik* of names and ideas from across the channel and in contributing to journals that advocated new left-wing perspectives on English Studies. He translated and published Raymond Williams as early as 1975, he traced the history of the Old and New Left in an anthology of Marxist literary criticism which he edited in 1973, wrote pieces on Richard Hoggart and the Birmingham Centre of Contemporary Cultural Studies and interviewed Stuart Hall for the second edition of the newly founded journal *Gulliver: German-English Yearbook* (1977) – itself an emerging platform for the discussion of a re-organisation of English studies in Germany along the lines of gender studies, postcolonial studies, Marxist

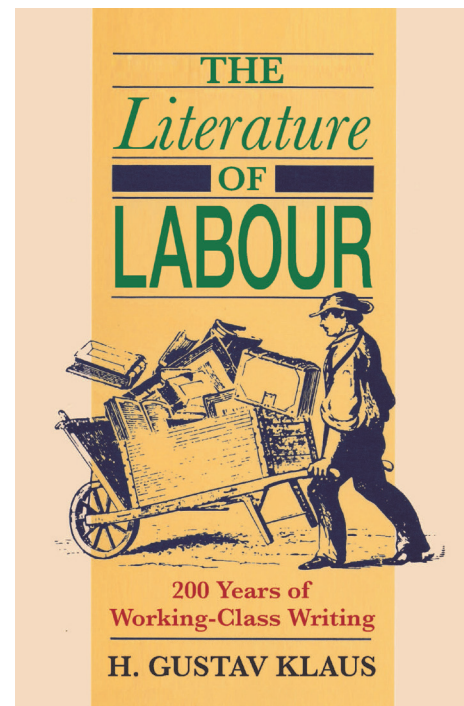


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literary criticism and cultural studies generally. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that he later became one of the founding members of the “German Association for the Study of British Cultures”, today an integral part of English Studies in Germany, wielding a determining influence on the development of the discipline.

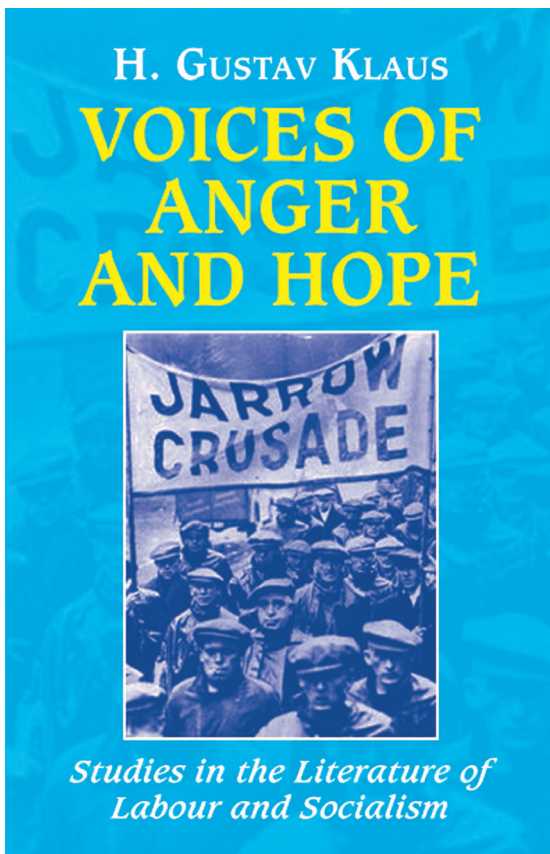
Gustav’s intellectual biography had been shaped by his student years in Frankfurt/Main, Marburg and Berlin in the 1960s. This was the time when the cracks in the façade of what was widely recognized as the cultural, social and political post-war consensus became more and more visible, and demand for change was gaining momentum, especially amongst politicized students at the universities. Gustav’s first major publication, the above-mentioned anthology of Marxist literary criticism in 1973, set the course for the general direction which his future research and work should take. One key feature which characterises much of Gustav’s critical work stems directly from his political commitment: a strong focus on neglected and overlooked aspects of the literary tradition – something that was also a central concern of British cultural studies during its early years. This holds true for Gustav’s 1987 volume *The Rise of Socialist Fiction, 1880-1914*, for his edition of writings by the Spanish Civil War volunteer Thomas O’Brien (in *Strong Words, Brave Deeds: The Poetry, Life and Times of Thomas O’Brien*, 1994), but also for his excursion into the field of detective fiction (ed. with Stephen Knight, *The Art of Murder. New Essays on Detective Fiction*, 1998). While crime fiction is not necessarily associated with a lack of popularity, Gustav



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made sure that the major and well-explored lines of the generic tradition were complemented with little-known sources, ideas and authors which turn crime fiction into an ideal site to investigate the interrelation of culture and society. *To Hell With Culture. Anarchism and Twentieth-century Literature* (ed. with Stephen Knight, 2005) is another volume dedicated to marginal(ized) figures. Most obviously, this focus on the overlooked is predominant in his 1993 volume *Tramps, Workmates and Revolutionaries*. In this collection of essays, which concentrates on many writers whose names rarely make an appearance in standard literary histories, it is the odd chapter on well-known authors like D. H. Lawrence and Katherine Mansfield rather than the majority of essays on the unknown ones that needs justification in the preface.

Many of Gustav’s publications were based upon preceding conferences that he helped to organize, e.g. in Rostock or Oxford. He wasn’t the man for the big get-togethers of



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the *Anglistik*-guild; the events he enjoyed most were characterised by small groups of scholars working on related issues who met in an equally familiar and intense atmosphere (as far as I can tell from having been present at three of them). They were carefully planned so that both intellectual exchange and informal talk had a good chance to come into their own. As an example for the successful combination of a small conference with a subsequent publication, let me mention “The Red and the Green: Ecology and Literature of the Left” held in 2007 at Corpus Christi College, Oxford. The event, organised together with John Rignall, underlines Gustav’s openness for critical developments (ecocriticism, literature and ecology) which, as he himself admitted in a 2010 essay entitled “Raymond Williams and Ecology”, were alien to him to the point that he automatically heard ‘economy’ when people said ‘ecology’.

Throughout his academic work and his life, Gustav insisted on the necessity of a politically charged and socially relevant form of literary criticism in order to keep the utopian dimension of literature alive and to prevent literary studies from becoming the intellectual pastime of a small bourgeois elite. These convictions manifested themselves in his research (as outlined above) but also in his university teaching. Courses on working-class literature, detective fiction and the literature of the Spanish Civil War underlined that he was deeply convinced of the integration of scholarly research and university education, while a seminar on the films of Ken Loach was inspired by cultural and media studies. Amongst students, he gained for himself the reputation of having challenging reading lists and high expectations, and of offering unvarnished critical responses to their work. Nevertheless, or perhaps in consequence, his courses enjoyed great popularity. His class-based approach to literature managed to reveal the social-critical content inherent “even in seventeenth-century country house poetry” (as of one of his students put it), thus bringing alive these texts and contexts for a fresh audience in the twenty-first century.

At the time of the text’s publication in our co-edited issue of the *JSBC* in 2015, it did not cross Sebastian’s and my minds that Gustav’s combination of obituary and personal memoir was to be his last text written for the *Journal*, one of his last texts altogether, and with hindsight, indeed, almost a legacy. It testifies to the significance of his loss, as a central representative

not only of a politically-committed literary criticism that also played a crucial role for the emergence of cultural studies in Germany, but also of an exemplary political commitment that did not remain confined to his publications but that characterised his intellectual and teaching practice as well as his life.