Even in the 1870s there was a fear among employers of rising levels of political consciousness amongst the workforce in Germany. According to an account written at the time (Leslie, 1968: 264), apart from war ‘the capitalist of the Ruhr Basin sees but one other cloud in the horizon – in the attitude which labour is beginning to assume, and the power of organization over all Germany, of which already it displays no doubtful indications, although the trade union is a very recent growth. That a fundamental change in the relations between labour and capital throughout Europe is approaching seems beyond doubt…’ Fear of socialism was a constant refrain in writings about changes in the countryside. Among those who shared this view was Fiedler (1898: 3), who warned against the employment of workers who ‘transplant false Social Democratic doctrines to the country.’ That socialism and not capitalism was the object of struggle conducted by Junkers is clear from many things, not least the fact that among the committees operated by the Chamber of Agriculture was one concerned with day labour on farms, the task of which was to give employers ‘advice in case of breach of contract’ (United States Senate Commission, 1913: 371). In other words, an institutional form of employer collusion in rural areas, so as to police and enforce unfree labour relations in agriculture, thereby attempting to pre-empt the emergence of conditions favouring the development of a working class consciousness.

CHAPTER SIX

GERMANY AND THE UNITED STATES: ‘PRIMITIVE’ OR ‘FULLY FUNCTIONING’ ACCUMULATION?

That capitalists either strive to create, or actually require, a proletariat, while workers themselves resist such a transformation, is one of the more enduring myths informing the debate about systemic transition. The best test of this proposition is contexts such as Germany and the United States, where a capitalist transition had not only long since been achieved, but accumulation was itself a well-established process. That is to say, economies that had transcended what in historical terms might be categorized as ‘primitive accumulation’.

About these two examples – Germany and the United States – one can ask three questions: in what kind of circumstances did this relational transformation occur; what kind of production relations were reproduced as a result; and why and at whose instigation did all this take place. Since it also posits whether or not a ‘fully functioning’ capitalism exists, and thus what kind of transition is on the political agenda, the debate about primitive accumulation also has implications for a socialist transition.¹

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The first section of this chapter examines the development in Prussia of landlord capitalism, and the accompanying transformations in production relations on large estates. The way this was interpreted by Karl Kautsky and Max Weber, who from different political viewpoints expressed concerns about the impact of Polish immigration, is looked at in the second. A third section traces these changes in Germany to class struggle in what was now a ‘fully functioning’ capitalism. Sections four, five and six consider why the same kinds of transformations – from slavery to tenant, migrant and convict labour – occurred in the United States.

I

Rather obviously, debates about the nature of primitive accumulation, and where this is to be placed chronologically in the economic trajectory of any social formation, hinge on two considerations. First, when capitalist development emerged in such contexts; and second, when a ‘fully-functioning’ accumulation process established itself there. In the case of Germany, this debate concerns principally if – and when – the dominant class in Prussia, composed of large landlords (Junkers), can be said to have effected a transition to capitalism.

**Prussian Junkers as Anti-Capitalist Class?**

Where German history is concerned, much of the discussion about this transformation is influenced by the work of Alexander Gerschenkron. He argued that, with the support of the peasantry, the Junkers contributed substantially both to the defeat of the Weimar Republic and thus to the rise of Hitler. Most controversially, however, Gerschenkron characterizes this as an attack on capitalism and democracy by pre-capitalist social forces, of which Junkers were a part. The political lesson drawn from this analysis is that it was bourgeois democracy which – together with an incipient capitalism – required defending from those on the far right in Germany.³

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² The case about German history is made in an influential analysis by Gerschenkron (1943).
³ For the centrality of economic backwardness to his ideas not just about Germany but also about Russia, see Gerschenkron (1955; 1962). The latter is classified by Renton (2001: 146 note 3) as one of the exponents of the *Sonderweg* thesis, and according to Fishlow (2003) ‘Gerschenkron’s analysis is conspicuously anti-Marxian.’