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978-0-521-29951-0 - Work and Revolution in France: The Language of Labor from the Old Regime to 1848

William H. Sewell

Excerpt

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# I Introduction: social history and the language of labor

THE PAST TWENTY YEARS have seen an enormous proliferation of research on the history of working people. Carried out from widely varying perspectives and trained on many different aspects of working-class life, this research has inevitably generated its share of divergent findings and scholarly controversies. Yet there is almost universal agreement on one point: that skilled artisans, not workers in the new factory industries, dominated labor movements during the first decades of industrialization. Whether in France, England, Germany, or the United States; whether in strikes, political movements, or incidents of collective violence, one finds over and over again the same familiar trades: carpenters, tailors, bakers, cabinetmakers, shoemakers, stonemasons, printers, locksmiths, joiners, and the like. The nineteenth-century labor movement was born in the craft workshop, not in the dark, satanic mill.<sup>1</sup>

This fact has important implications for the practice of labor history. Above all, it suggests that research can no longer be confined exclusively to the period since the industrial revolution. If the labor movement *were* a specific product of the factory, ignoring the period before factories existed would be defensible. But because it was initiated by artisans, workers in trades with long and rich histories, ignoring the preindustrial period can have only pernicious effects. It is true, of course, that artisans were subjected to new pressures and challenges by the development of industrial capitalism. But their responses were inevitably shaped by values, traditions, and organizational experiences that predated the modern industrial era. The discovery that artisans created the nineteenth-century labor movement makes the problem of continuity with preindustrial forms and experiences impossible to escape.

The need to address this problem is particularly great in France, where the special discontinuities introduced by the French Revolution make the preindustrial past seem even more remote. In labor questions, as in nearly all others, the French Revolution marked a fundamental break. The guild system – or, as it is usually called in France, the corporate system – had been

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the dominant mode of organization of French industry since the Middle Ages. The guilds, or corporations, were dismantled during the Revolution, and the affairs of the trades were thereafter left to the free play of the market. Most French historians have assumed that trade corporations were utterly swept away in the Revolution, and that nineteenth-century labor organizations were created in response to the new industrial economy – for which the French Revolution had created the preconditions. Labor historians have therefore been sensitive to early nineteenth-century anticipations of the class-conscious workers' movements of the later nineteenth or the early twentieth century but have generally ignored what seemed to hark back to the old regime.<sup>2</sup> This tendency has been reinforced by the organization of the French historical profession, which has made the old regime, the Revolution, and the nineteenth century domains of different specialists. Only the occasional interloper – for example Maurice Agulhon<sup>3</sup> – has undertaken studies spanning the revolutionary era, and until now no one has done so in labor history.<sup>4</sup>

This book traces the organizations and the ideologies of French workers from the old regime to the Revolution of 1848. It seeks to demonstrate that themes and sentiments originating in the prerevolutionary corporate system remained central to workers' consciousness and experience through all the changes of this remarkably turbulent era. In spite of three major revolutions (1789, 1830, 1848), ten changes of constitution, and the onset of the industrial revolution, there were important continuities in the way French workers perceived, and acted in, the world. It would be insufficient, however, simply to note that workers retained corporate sensibilities as late as 1848. For the *meaning* of corporate phrases or institutions was inevitably altered by changes in the surrounding society. This history, consequently, pays as close attention to what divides as to what unites the subordinate journeyman of the prerevolutionary corporations, the *sans-culotte* of 1793, and the socialist worker of 1848. It seeks to encompass both the consistencies *and* the revolutionary breaks in the workers' evolving social practice.

## THE PARADOX OF CORPORATE LANGUAGE

I began my research on nineteenth-century French workers with a study of the working class of Marseille. In reading public discourse by and about workers, I was repeatedly struck by the use of such unambiguously corporate terms as *corporation*, *corps*, *état*, *corps d'état*, and *corps de métier*. In fact, this corporate terminology was particularly prevalent among left-wing republicans and socialists during the Revolution of 1848, the last place one would expect to find sympathies with the old regime. Nothing in my training had prepared me for this seemingly paradoxical flowering of the old regime's language in the midst of a radical revolution; although historians

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had sometimes reproduced these terms in quotations from contemporary sources, they had never commented on their usage or significance. My initial hypothesis was that terms like “corporation” and “corps d’état” were vestigial, that they no longer carried their ancient messages and were now merely a convenient shorthand for designating the collectivity of workers employed in a given trade. But as my research progressed, I became convinced that the terms had a deeper resonance and that a continuity with the corporate notions of the old regime was much greater than had generally been allowed. There were many reasons for my growing conviction: the fact that in the first three-quarters of the nineteenth century, labor organizations were concentrated almost exclusively in the same urban crafts that were organized as corporations under the old regime; the striking similarities in purpose, form, and function between mutual-aid societies formed by trades in the nineteenth century and the religious confraternities they had formed under the old regime; the continuing vitality of the self-evidently corporate workingmen’s associations called *compagnonnages*; the elaborate and seemingly archaic structure of some of the most successful nineteenth-century labor organizations; the tendency for the most powerful labor organizations – in Marseille at least – to exclude outsiders and to pass the trade on from father to son just as trades had been passed from father to son in old-regime corporations.<sup>5</sup> There was, it seemed to me, something distinctly corporate about the working-class world of nineteenth-century France that fit with the continued usage of corporate terms in the workers’ language. But what these terms really meant in the nineteenth century, and what they implied for the experience and consciousness of mid-nineteenth-century workers, remained obscure. The obscurity, moreover, had little chance of being cleared up with the evidence at my disposal. To establish what meaning corporate terminology had for workers, I needed a much larger body of writing produced by and/or intended for workers than existed in the libraries and archives of Marseille.

Rémi Gossez’s study of Parisian workers in 1848 supplied the documentation I lacked in my study of Marseille.<sup>6</sup> Based on a lifetime of detailed and painstaking research, Gossez’s book is packed with quotations from documents written by and for workers. When I first read this book a few years after its publication in 1967, it confirmed my belief that corporate notions were central to the working-class experience of the Revolution of 1848. Yet Gossez did not solve the problem of the *meaning* of the workers’ corporate idiom. His long immersion in the mental world of Parisian workers enabled him to display that world in the most vivid detail, but it also deprived him of the sense of distance so essential for formulating a critical interpretation. His book did not resolve the paradox of a radical revolution carried out in corporate terms. It did, however, supply a body of evidence sufficiently rich and abundant to make an attack on that paradox possible.

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My original plan had been to juxtapose a brief description of the corporate system of the old regime with an account of workers' ideology and practice in 1848, pointing out the continuing vitality and importance of corporate themes and showing how much the socialism of 1848 owed to the long-standing collectivism and the strong sense of solidarity of the corporate trades. The problem was that there were as many differences as continuities – both immediately discernible differences in rituals, phrases, and practices, and somewhat subtler differences in their meaning. It soon became clear that the corporate content of workers' ideology in 1848 had not been delivered intact from the old regime but had been reshaped by the vast historical changes of the intervening years. Hence, what began as a demonstration that the old regime was still alive in the working class in 1848 became a history of how corporate language and practices came to mean something very different in 1848 than they had meant before 1789. To write this history, I had to consider a wide range of transformations that affected the meaning of corporate notions: changes in the legal system, in economic life, in political constitutions, in property relations, in moral and religious ideas, in conceptions of labor, and so on. This history of the corporate idiom has therefore become a general history of labor from the old regime to 1848 – although a general history of a peculiar sort. Rather than skipping directly from the old regime to the Revolution of 1848, the bulk of the book now deals with the historical transformations that took place between 1789 and the 1840s. Although the subjects treated range from contemporary metaphysical conceptions of labor to details of the organization of production in nineteenth-century workshops, the book is still centered on the problem of corporations, and the analysis is designed to lead to the Revolution of 1848. The accounts of the old regime, the French Revolution, and the social and political changes of the first half of the nineteenth century are meant to be valid in their own terms; they have been written, however, from the perspective of 1848, a perspective that has surely caused me to overlook or undervalue some things that specialists in these periods would consider more important but has also enabled me to see things other historians have missed.

This book is what the French call an *essai de synthèse* – “synthetic essay” might be an acceptable translation. It is an attempt to draw together the findings of a large number of more specialized studies into a new general interpretation. Although I have occasionally drawn on my own archival research in Marseille, the book has been written mainly from sources available in the United States. I have attempted to base my arguments on the best available scholarship, both recent and not-so-recent, but my purpose is not to summarize and evaluate this scholarship. It is, rather, to use it – often in ways quite different from the intentions of the author – to formulate a new interpretation of a broad field of historical research; to suggest connections

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not hitherto perceived, and to place particular findings within a larger – or at least a different – framework. As specialists will recognize, I have generally avoided the venerable controversies that so dominate the historiography of the old regime and the Revolution, preferring, instead, to develop my own line of argument.<sup>7</sup> Like Marc Bloch's explorer, who must make "a rapid survey of the horizon before plunging into thickets from which the wider view is no longer possible,"<sup>8</sup> I am attempting to sketch out a new map that will indicate relations between already explored regions and suggest useful approaches to those not yet explored. Thus, although this book does not aim to be "definitive" in the usual sense of the term, it aims precisely to be definitive in a more literal sense: to give sharp *definition* to a set of problems and processes that hitherto either were not perceived or were perceived only indistinctly; to *define* a theoretical perspective, a set of questions, and a line of interpretation that will make sense of previously disconnected findings and, by doing so, may help to shape future research.

‘‘THE NEW SOCIAL HISTORY’’ AND THE PROBLEM OF  
IDEOLOGY

This book is written from a particular theoretical perspective, one that, in large part, I have had to construct for myself – albeit with materials borrowed shamelessly from such sources as "the new social history," intellectual history, cultural anthropology, and certain new strains of Marxism. A brief description of this perspective and of how I reached it should help the reader see why this book is written as it is.

Like most labor historians trained in the 1960s, I began as a practitioner of what was called "the new social history" or "history from the bottom up." Inspired by the populist spirit of the time, "new social historians" wished to write about the masses of ordinary workers who had been left out of traditional – that is, political and institutional – labor history. In part, this simply meant going to old archival sources with new questions in mind – inspired, perhaps, by the examples of Soboul, Rudé, Cobb, or Thompson.<sup>9</sup> But it frequently also meant using new sources and, above all, sources that could be analyzed quantitatively. Even the most obscure and inarticulate men and women, we began to realize, came into contact with the state apparatus at some point in their lives: when they were counted by the census taker; when they were born, married, and died; when they paid taxes; and when they got into trouble with the law. By aggregating and analyzing records of such encounters, we could reconstruct the social experiences of whole categories of the population that had hitherto escaped the historian's net. We could, at last, hope to write labor histories that said as much about the experiences of ordinary men and women as about the pronouncements of leaders and the factional struggles of socialist parties.

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Utilizing these quantitative sources required major changes in the conduct of research. In America, at least, this meant borrowing methods from the social sciences and above all from sociology. Along with the new methods came a whole range of new questions and theoretical perspectives.<sup>10</sup> One result was an enormous expansion in the range of topics addressed by labor historians. Before 1960 our knowledge had been restricted almost exclusively to three topics: the institutional history of the labor movement, the intellectual development of socialist ideology, and the declining, stagnant, or rising real wages of the workers – this latter considered as an index of workers' suffering and exploitation. To these, the new, more sociologically aware, histories of labor added urbanization, political mobilization, demography, occupational recruitment, voting behavior, social mobility, family structure, migration, kinship, residential patterns, the fine structure of work experience, and so on.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, our knowledge of working people in the past is now immeasurably more complete, subtler, and more exact than it was in 1960.

But this vast expansion of our knowledge has not been achieved without cost. One of the conditions of carrying out the new style of research has been a reduction in the scale of the populations studied. As long as most research focused on working-class parties or trade-union movements, work on a national scale remained feasible. But once historians determined to reach entire working-class populations – by laboriously searching through manuscript census schedules, tax records, and the like – research had to be confined to a single town or region. Even with the aid of computers, the sheer volume of data would otherwise have been overwhelming. Adopting new techniques of research, thus, also meant redefining the object of study. Rather than the institutional history of a national or international labor movement, labor history has increasingly become the history of a series of local working-class communities. These accounts of local communities are vastly richer and more complex than the old institutional histories; at their best they approach the inspiring but ultimately unrealizable French ideal of *histoire totale*. But their greater richness and complexity could be obtained only by limiting their geographical scale.

This limitation of scale could hardly be counted a loss when it came to questions of demography and social structure, because the findings of the new social historians were filling a void left by earlier scholars. But on political and ideological questions, the superiority of the new ways was far less certain.<sup>12</sup> Politics and ideology were, of course, part of the total community experience we wished to describe. Indeed, it was common for the new social histories of labor to be centered on some important political struggle – a revolution, an uprising, or a strike – in which the local working class gained a new or transformed consciousness of itself. Although our methods and our locus of research were different from those of the older institu-

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tional labor historians, we continued to pursue the same larger question: the emergence and development of working-class consciousness. It was our ambition, however, to understand such transformations of consciousness as the life experiences of complex communities of workers, rather than as purely doctrinal or institutional events played out against a vague background of suffering and exploitation. Once again, the new style of history can boast of real achievements. The best local studies have succeeded in making much firmer and more complex connections between political or ideological events and social and economic processes. But it is by no means clear that they have adequately explained – or even adequately grasped – the ideological transformations that these events embodied and brought about.

This problem can be illustrated by my own study of the workers of Marseille. The Revolution of 1848 marked a fundamental turning point in the history of Marseille's workers. Once well known for their quiescence and conservatism, Marseille's workers turned revolutionary in 1848 and have remained consistently on the left ever since. I undertook my largely quantitative investigation of the working class with the intention of illuminating this great transformation of workers' consciousness. My hopes were not entirely disappointed. I was able to demonstrate that unskilled trades and those skilled trades that recruited mainly from within the native-born artisan community of Marseille remained politically apathetic or conservative, whereas those skilled trades that recruited their members from a wide geographical area – nationally, as it were – were also more receptive to national revolutionary politics. I could explain differential rates of participation in the revolutionary movement with unexpected precision; yet I found myself quite incapable of explaining why such a movement had come into existence in the first place or why it took the form it did. In Marseille, at least, the Revolution of 1848 and the ideology of democratic socialism appeared suddenly and unexpectedly from the outside. Like other local historians, I could explain the reception of a new ideology, but explaining its shape and content seemed to lie beyond my powers as a social historian.<sup>13</sup>

Part of the problem, clearly, is that the process of ideological development transcended local communities. To explain the content of the ideology of Marseille's workers in 1848, for example, we would have to look both at the intellectual development of socialist theory in the course of the 1840s and at the revolutionary agitation of Parisian workers in the spring of 1848, because these were the major sources of the ideas taken up by Marseille's workers. Although certain aspects of economic, demographic, and social structure can be studied most profitably at the local level, a history of workers' ideology can scarcely avoid taking a national perspective. In France, ironically, this means that one local community – Paris – must be examined with particular care. The extreme centralization of French political life meant that events taking place in Paris were by definition national

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events. The actions of Parisian workers, especially in the great revolutionary upheavals of 1789–94, 1830–34, and 1848–51, are crucial to an understanding of national ideological developments.

But the strictly local perspective of most social histories is only part of the problem. An inability to come to grips with workers' ideological experience is also built into the research procedures of the new social history. In borrowing methods and theories from sociology, historians have tended to pick up the sociologists' pervasive assumption that quantification yields "hard" or "scientific" knowledge, whereas other sorts of evidence are "soft" or "impressionistic." Few historians have gone so far as to adopt the common sociological practice of defining research problems so that they can be pursued exclusively by quantitative means – in part because we do not have the option of administering questionnaires to the dead. But social historians have frequently been led to emphasize those aspects of social experience that could be described quantitatively or systematically over such seemingly ineffable matters as consciousness, attitudes, currents of opinion, sentiments, and the like. Among labor historians this sociological prejudice has sometimes been reinforced by the Marxist distinction between the material "base" and the ideological "superstructure," which also assigns a greater solidity to social and economic than to "mental" phenomena, and sometimes by a populist suspicion that the study of ideas is inherently "elitist," whereas the study of economic and social conditions is inherently democratic. Hence the mental or ideational aspects of working-class social experience have generally been slighted in favor of economic and social structures, leaving social historians ill-equipped to handle ideologies when these make an appearance in their locality.

The obvious place for social historians to turn for help and inspiration would be intellectual history. There are, for example, some important and useful works on the history of socialist thought that bear on the problem of workers' ideology in nineteenth-century France.<sup>14</sup> But on closer inspection, they are only of limited utility. These works analyze the ideas of particular theorists or recount the transmission and transformation of ideas from one theorist to another. But they fail to engage the issue of *workers'* consciousness. Intellectual histories of ideology can tell us a great deal about the formally expressed ideas that were available to workers, but they are virtually silent about the workers' own ideas, which were often very different from those of the theorists. Nor are the methods employed by most intellectual historians very useful. Here the main problem is the analytical primacy of the author in intellectual history. Intellectual historians are trained to see thought as emanating from the minds of authors, and thus to continually refer ideas back to the authors and their biographies. This method is quite workable in dealing with complete and considered texts that can be fit into the corpus of known authors. But it breaks down when confronted



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with collective movements of thought of the sort that characterize transformations in workers' consciousness. In trying to make sense of the workers' agitation following the revolutions of 1830 or 1848, for example, the ideas we are pursuing were stated partially and in fragments, written down in the heat of action, often by unknown persons or by groups of persons, and are available only in the most heterogeneous forms – in manifestos, records of debates at meetings, actions of political demonstrators, newspaper articles, slogans, speeches, posters, satirical prints, statutes of associations, pamphlets, and so on. In such situations the coherence of the thought lies not in particular texts or in the “work” of particular authors, but in the entire ideological discourse constituted by a large number of individually fragmentary and incomplete statements, gestures, images, and actions. The key problem thus becomes not the delineation of the thought of a series of authors but the reconstruction of discourse out of fragmentary sources.<sup>15</sup> In reconstructing such discourses, the skills of the intellectual historian are, of course, indispensable. But it is notable that the most impressive studies of collective and quasi-anonymous ideological discourse have been carried out not by intellectual historians but by the Marxist social and political historians Albert Soboul, Christopher Hill, and E. P. Thompson.<sup>16</sup>

It is hard enough to reconstruct workers' discourse even in periods of revolutionary outbursts – such as 1793–4, the early 1830s, or 1848 – when the usual restraints on working-class political voice were broken and revolutionary struggles created endless occasions for oratory, polemic, manifestos, and demonstrations. The problems are greatly multiplied in “normal” periods of repression and political quiescence. In times of intense ideological discussion, workers' consciousness is at least accessible – even if it takes hard work to tease it out of the available documents. But what of periods when ideological discussion ceases or goes underground? Are we then thrown back on a purely economic and social analysis of the working class? Must our understanding of the workers' mental life be limited to those rare and privileged moments when workers' discourse flows into a public space that is normally denied to them?

It need not be, certainly, but it must be pursued by methods very different from those of either conventional social history or conventional intellectual history. In recent years, historians dissatisfied with the economic, social-structural, and quantitative biases of the “new social history” have increasingly turned to cultural anthropology as a source of inspiration.<sup>17</sup> Social historians have sensed a certain affinity between the anthropologists' concerns and their own. Ethnographic methods were originally developed in the study of nonliterate people, and the anthropological concept of “culture” as a collectively held pattern of symbols and beliefs suits the social historian's requirements much better than the concept of biographically informed “ideas” that are the stock in trade of the intellectual historian.

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Moreover, the anthropologist's use of a wide range of materials and customs in establishing cultural patterns – not only explicit statements about people's beliefs but rituals, iconography, the spatial patterns of villages, dietary taboos, agricultural and hunting practices, myths, rules of kinship, sexual division of labor, incantations, forms of address, systems of classifications, semantic and grammatical properties of the language, and so on – suggests many new avenues for investigating the mental universe of ordinary men and women in the past.

## HISTORY AND CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Most attempts to apply anthropological insights and methods to history have dealt with such typically anthropological subject matter as popular religion, magic, witchcraft, rituals, and festivals – just as the “new social history” has dealt with such classical sociological topics as social mobility, urban ecology, demography, and occupational structure. These new anthropologically inspired studies have given us access to entire ranges of experience that were previously closed to historical inquiry. But the enthusiasm for anthropological *subject matter* must not lead us to forget the deepest and most powerful message of cultural anthropology: not only that certain kinds of activities can be analyzed to reveal popular beliefs and preconceptions but that the whole of social life, from such symbolically elaborate practices as religious festivals to such seemingly matter-of-fact activities as building houses or raising crops, is culturally shaped. “Ideas” or “beliefs” are not limited to certain classes of activities or to certain classes of people. They are woven into the very fabric of the everyday life of ordinary people; “all experience,” as Clifford Geertz puts it, “is construed experience.”<sup>18</sup>

The problem, then, is to understand how people in the past construed their experiences. Here historians are at a disadvantage, because they cannot employ the ethnographers' procedure of living among the people they study, of participating in their daily activities and continually asking them to explain what they are doing and why they are doing it. If anthropologists' knowledge of cultures were, as is sometimes supposed, a matter of putting themselves into the skin of people they study, of internalizing their culture by a kind of osmotic process, then historians who wished to imitate anthropologists would be in serious trouble. But as Clifford Geertz has recently pointed out, ethnographers never actually achieve a unity of perception with their informants; rather they learn what informants “perceive ‘with,’ or ‘by means of,’ or ‘through.’” The ethnographer succeeds in grasping an alien culture “by searching out and analyzing the symbolic forms – words, images, institutions, behaviors – in terms of which, in each place, people actually represent themselves to themselves and to one another.”<sup>19</sup> Although