

Cambridge University Press

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

William H. Sewell

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WILLIAM H. SEWELL, Jr.
UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA



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To Ellen

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I would like to restore to men of the past,
and especially the poor of the past, the
gift of theory.

Eric J. Hobsbawm

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page</i> ix
1. INTRODUCTION: SOCIAL HISTORY AND THE LANGUAGE OF LABOR	I
The paradox of corporate language	2
“The new social history” and the problem of ideology	5
History and cultural anthropology	10
Scope of the book	14
2. MECHANICAL ARTS AND THE CORPORATE IDIOM	16
Cities in an agrarian society	16
The mechanical arts	19
Corporations	25
Moral community	32
Varieties of corporations	37
3. JOURNEYMEN’S BROTHERHOODS	40
The Compagnie des Griffarins	42
Compagnonnage	47
Journeyman and the corporate idiom	55
4. THE ABOLITION OF PRIVILEGE	62
Mechanical arts and the Enlightenment	64
Corporations attacked – and defended	72
1789: the assault on privilege	77
The abolition of corporations	86
5. FROM GENS DE MÉTIER TO SANS-CULOTTES	92
Revolutionary corporations	93
The rise of the sans-culottes	100
Labor and property in sans-culotte ideology	109

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

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Contents*

6.	A REVOLUTION IN PROPERTY	114
	Property under the old regime	115
	Property in the Enlightenment	120
	Property in revolutionary legislation	133
	Property and the mechanical arts	138
7.	INDUSTRIAL SOCIETY	143
	French industrial growth	146
	The declining artisan?	154
8.	WORKERS' CORPORATIONS	162
	Institutional forms	163
	Varieties of workers' corporations	171
	Persistent themes – altered relations	179
	Corporate language	187
9.	THE JULY REVOLUTION AND THE EMERGENCE OF CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS	194
	The July Revolution	195
	The idiom of association	201
	The workers' movement	206
	“The confraternity of proletarians”	211
10.	THE PARADOXES OF LABOR	219
	Louis Villermé and the problem of demoralization	223
	Louis Blanc and the organization of labor	232
	Charles Poncy and the poetry of labor	236
11.	THE REVOLUTION OF 1848	243
	The February Revolution	245
	The Luxembourg Commission	251
	Corporations républicaines	256
	Toward class war	265
	After June	272
12.	CONCLUSION: THE DIALECTIC OF REVOLUTION	277
	A dialectical logic	277
	Class consciousness	281
	<i>Notes</i>	285
	<i>Bibliography</i>	318
	<i>Index</i>	329

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[More information](#)

Preface

I BEGAN THIS BOOK with the intention of writing a brief article on the ideology of French workers during the Revolution of 1848. The article was to explore an intriguing but little-noticed paradox: that the discourse of revolutionary workers in 1848 was laced with seemingly archaic terminology dating from the guild or corporate system of the old regime. By analyzing this use of corporate terminology, I meant to show that the new socialist vision the workers were developing in 1848 was founded on a very old sense of craft community. I quickly found that the subject was both richer and much more complex than I had imagined, and by the time I had finished a draft of my article it was more than twice as long as I had planned. More alarming yet, when I showed the draft to friends and colleagues, their opinion was unanimous: It had to be either cut and simplified or expanded into a book. I tried the first alternative, but after two months of work I found the essay longer and more complex than ever. Analyzing and explaining the workers' use of corporate language in 1848 seemed to lead me in all directions at once: to corporate institutions under the old regime, to the historical relationship between corporate and revolutionary forms of language and organization, to the changing work process in artisan shops, to the means employed by workers in struggles with their employers, to changes in property relations, to the impact of the Revolutions of 1789 and 1830, and so on. I finally decided the subject was too complicated to treat in an article and too important to abandon. The result is a book that attempts to recount and explain how French workers understood and acted in their world from the corporate communities of the old regime to the socialist experiments of 1848.

But for a five-year fellowship from the School of Social Science at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey, this book would never have been written. Only the prospect of an extended liberation from the normal commitments of academic life convinced me, during my first year at the Institute, that I could afford to put aside other work for a mo-

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ment to write my projected essay on workers' ideology. It was with this same sense of freedom that I began to expand it into a book. By the time I realized that it would be a very difficult book to write, I was too deeply engaged to turn back. Begun as a brief diversion from the main line of my work, this book has taken nearly all of my sojourn at the Institute to finish. I cannot imagine a more congenial place to have written it. The freedom and tranquility of the Institute have allowed me to give it my undivided attention, and the flow of stimulation from the annually renewed community of scholars has kept me in touch with the best thinking in contemporary social science. In the insistently interdisciplinary atmosphere of the School of Social Science I have had the privilege of exchanging my ideas with anthropologists, political scientists, philosophers, sociologists, and economists – not to mention fellow historians – and I believe that both my book and I have gained by these encounters. I therefore wish to express my deep gratitude to Carl Kaysen, director of the Institute when I first arrived, to Harry Woolf, his successor, and to the two permanent professors in the School of Social Science, Clifford Geertz and Albert Hirschman, whose continuing generosity and encouragement made this book possible.

I have benefited from the thoughts and suggestions of many colleagues. Portions of the argument of this book were discussed in seminars at the Institute for Advanced Study and at the Davis Center for Historical Studies at Princeton University. I have also had valuable readings of various portions of the manuscript from Ronald Aminzade, John Bossy, Natalie Davis, Sanford Ellwitt, Herbert Gintis, Stephen Gudeman, Stephen Holmes, Renato Rosaldo, Michelle Rosaldo, Quentin Skinner, Michael Stürmer, and Michel Vovelle. Cynthia Truant not only gave me criticisms of several chapters, but generously shared with me her unpublished research on *compagnonnage*. The entire manuscript has been read by Keith Baker, Robert Bezucha, Ronald Inden, William Reddy, Joan Scott, and Allan Sharlin. Their suggestions have helped me to clarify many obscure points in my argument and to avoid errors of fact and judgment. The lion's share of the typing has been done by Peggy Clarke with rare intelligence, efficiency, and good cheer.

My wife, Ellen, first convinced me to write this book, and she has lived it with me every since. She has read and commented on the entire manuscript twice and has read parts of it several times; she has been over nearly all of its arguments with me in discussions at all hours of the day and night; she has offered her insights, her enthusiasm, her learning, and her fine critical sense. For all this, I am grateful. This book is dedicated to her.

W. H. S.