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0521347793 - The Rise of Market Culture: The Textile Trade and French Society, 1750-1900 - William M. Reddy

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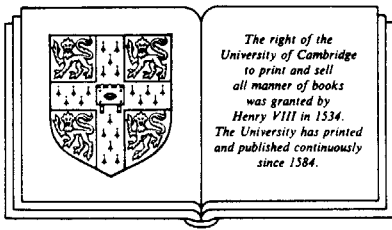
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# The rise of market culture

## The textile trade and French society, 1750–1900

WILLIAM M. REDDY



CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE

NEW YORK NEW ROCHELLE

MELBOURNE SYDNEY

EDITIONS DE LA MAISON DES SCIENCES DE L'HOMME

PARIS

Cambridge University Press

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## To Charles

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP  
32 East 57th Street, New York, NY 10022, USA  
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1984

First published 1984  
First paperback edition 1987

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Reddy, William M.

The rise of market culture.

Includes bibliographical references.

1. Textile industry – France – History. I. Title.

HD9862.5.R43 1984 381'.45677'0944 83-25232

ISBN 0 521 25653 4 hard covers

ISBN 0 521 34779 3 paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2003

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## Abbreviations

ADHR	Archives départementales du Haut-Rhin
ADM	Archives départementales de la Marne
ADN	Archives départementales du Nord
ADSM	Archives départementales de la Seine-Maritime
AMR	Archives municipales de Roubaix
AN	Archives nationales
BN	Bibliothèque nationale
BSIM	Bulletin de la Société industrielle de Mulhouse
ERDP	France, Ministère du commerce, <i>Enquête relative à diverses prohibitions établies sur l'entrée des produits étrangers, commencée le 8 octobre 1834 sous la présidence de M. T. Duchâtel, Ministre du commerce</i> , 3 vols. (Paris, 1835)
<i>Gaz. Trib.</i>	<i>Gazette des Tribunaux</i>

## Preface

The history of the industrial revolution has been rewritten in the last twenty years. The focus has shifted away from factory workers toward artisans, and the character of the social crisis has been rethought. It was not so much a decline in the standard of living, not the drudgery of machine-tending, nor the poor housing of factory towns that afflicted society during the early phase of industrialization, but a loss of independence, the violation of old moral standards by unrestricted competition, the displacement of skilled by unskilled, the disruption of shop custom, insecurity of status. Conscious *laissez-faire* reform played as much a role in overturning the old order as expanding commerce; technological advance, while important, was limited in its impact. The per-capita growth rate of France was as great as that of England in the first half of the nineteenth century, and artisan experience in both countries was extremely similar.<sup>1</sup>

Even the new factory workers of Lancashire can no longer be seen as the faceless proletarians of legend; their grievances, on closer examination, appear to have been nearly the same as those of artisans. Machine tending in the early days was organized like artisanal labor; and the operatives struggled (in the end with moderate success) to keep it that way.<sup>2</sup>

This study examines the parallel experiences of French mill operatives; but it also aims, at the same time, to push the whole discussion of the nature of industrialization a step further. A detailed study of the French textile trade seems well-suited to the accomplishment of this latter aim for two reasons. First, the case-study method lends itself to the kind of methodological experimentation required by the current state of the social-historical art. A picture of the aggregate has been built up; reevaluation of the abundant sources requires that one set arbitrary limits on the scope of any single inquiry. Second, the significance of textiles within the whole process of industrial transformation cannot be emphasized enough. No trade employed more people outside of agriculture in the



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pre-industrial period; no trade was more profoundly reshaped than textiles by the swelling current of international commerce in the eighteenth century. This was as true of the French case as it was of the English. After 1816, French textiles experienced a rapid, if belated, industrial revolution of its own: mechanization proceeded apace, output mushroomed, prices to the consumer dropped dramatically – all the characteristics of rapid transformation were present. The French textile trade is therefore perfectly suited to an inquiry into the gamut of change that industrialization brought to European society.

A number of northern regional centers in France spearheaded the drive to mechanize in the early nineteenth century: Rouen, Reims, Lille, Roubaix, Armentières, Saint-Quentin, Mulhouse and their dependencies became the miniature Manchesters that brought France into the age of steam between 1816 and 1848. They specialized in mass-production goods of cotton, linen, and wool. The great bulk of this study is devoted to occurrences in these towns. Lyon, the center of an international luxury silk trade, had a very different historical experience; the town's silk weavers led the French working-class movement for a time. They have been the subject of numerous studies and receive only passing attention here.<sup>3</sup> The woolen centers of the south, expanding in the eighteenth century, stalled and stagnated in the nineteenth; Christopher H. Johnson is currently engaged in research on this area, and it too will be referred to here only as a point of comparison.<sup>4</sup> The transition to mechanized factory production and all its attendant cultural and social changes are the subject of this study. The northern focus was therefore a natural choice; and the unity of experience in these northern centers emerged clearly in the course of research.

None of the methodological approaches employed in this study are new in themselves. Social historians have been particularly active of late in attempting to apply the methods of cultural anthropology to their work, and it was within the now broad streams of mutual influence between anthropology and social history that the present research project was originally formulated. The idea was to collect information about the forms and occasions of social conflict in a single trade over a long period and, by careful anthropological interpretation, to trace the transition from a precapitalist to a capitalist culture. The author believed from the outset that this transition extended over a longer period and raised greater difficulties than is normally supposed. The evidence uncovered, however, suggested a startling alternative, that is, that this transition was never accomplished, at least not in the manner originally envisioned. French textile laborers failed to develop a social identity commensurate with the idea of wage labor, even by 1900.

It was at this stage that recent research in the economics of labor

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distribution came into play. Many economists appear now to believe that the market model – or the model of marginal productivity – has only a limited utility in explaining labor distribution in industrial society.

The theory of segmented labor markets is by now quite well established and has attracted widespread attention. This theory denies that modern industrial economies have a single market for labor. Instead, labor is seen as divided into distinct segments within which laborers have quite different expectations as to pay, working conditions, and job security. Competition between these segments is muted.<sup>5</sup>

Closely associated with the study of market segmentation has been the investigation of institutional employment practices and the attempts by economists to fit nonmarket models to them. Such models have been popularized most effectively by two economists, Michael Piore and Lester Thurow. The former expounded the concept of the “internal labor market” over twelve years ago; the latter, his theory of the “labor queue” in 1975.<sup>6</sup> In both of these theories, empirically identified hiring practices are analyzed and shown to fit only poorly the model of competitive bidding inherent in the classical notion of the market, and both Piore and Thurow propose specific alternative models of hiring and labor-use practices that seem to fit the evidence better.

Here lay a possible explanation of French textile laborers’ persistent failure to develop a fully mature identity as wage earners: Their real relationship with their employers had never been a wage relationship pure and simple because the competitive exchange of labor never developed along the lines of classical economic theory. This conclusion about the economics of labor distribution, in turn, had consequences for the interpretation of culture and for understanding the structure of politics in industrial communities.

The study, therefore, is intended to make a contribution on several fronts at once. In interdisciplinary work like this there is always the danger of sounding a false note from time to time, but the potential benefits seem well worth the risk. The reader’s indulgence is therefore requested in advance for the unavoidable confusions that arise, especially over terms like culture, market, labor, ritual, entrepreneur – all of which are used here in very specific ways. Every effort has been made to clarify their use in advance; occasionally a purposeful effort is being made to change or add to the usual resonances these terms have. This was an inevitable consequence of trying to break new ground.

The author has accumulated many debts since he began this project. Four institutions have contributed materially to its completion. A Duke University travel grant and two brief fellowships at the Max-Planck-Institut für Geschichte in Göttingen, West Germany, were a great help in the later stages of writing. The bulk of the research behind the study

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was made possible by a Fellowship for Independent Study and Research from the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1979–80. The original conception of the study stems from a year as Member of the School of Social Science at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton. Archivists and librarians of numerous institutions including particularly the Bibliothèque nationale, the Archives nationales, and the Archives départementales du Nord, contributed their unending and patient help.

The individuals who have helped with their ideas and reactions are too numerous to list here. Fellow participants in a seminar on cultural anthropology at the Institute for Advanced Study in 1975–6 helped in the initial formulation of method and of questions to be answered. Among them the author began to find at last an intellectual home. Conversations about the project with Michelle Perrot, Pierre Deyon, and Serge Chasagne were extremely useful at an early stage. Significant portions of the manuscript have been read by David Sabeau, Hans Medick, Alf Lüdtke, Gerald Sider, Gary Kornblith, James Epstein, Sarah Maza, John Cell, Sydney Nathans, and David Brent, as well as members of the Triangle labor history seminar – all of whom gave significant ideas and criticisms, often well beyond the author's ability to respond. Several others have contributed by example and by active support in a special way, including Joan Scott, Robert Bezucha, Eva Gumprecht, Dorothy Sapp, Donna Slawson, and most particularly William Sewell, whose unstinting help and criticism over a long period provided a fixed compass point by which a young scholar navigated through uncertain seas.