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## *Introduction*

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## *Prologue*

Sabel and Zeitlin, in their seminal article “Historical Alternatives to Mass Production,” discuss the triumph of a vision of the future based on mass production and a corporate economy rather than on small-scale economic organization in twentieth-century Europe. Echoing the views of an increasing number of historians, they argue that capitalism followed no necessary laws of development. The belief in the inevitability and superiority of mass production represented an ideological victory as much as an economic one, for other alternatives were branded as unrealistic. Especially puzzling to Sabel and Zeitlin was the acceptance of this new industrial model in the 1920s by French craft workers, who had advocated federalist control of production in the late nineteenth century. These workers not only dropped their opposition to large-scale industry; they came to embrace it enthusiastically. As Sabel and Zeitlin write, “It was almost as if Proudhon himself had awoken from a sleep of fifty years to discover not only that the world had enacted the ideas of his opponents, but that he approved of what they had done.”<sup>1</sup>

For many left-wing militants in the post-World War I era, this new orientation had unfortunate political consequences. Council communism, based on decentralized worker control, swept parts of Germany and Italy, but had little resonance among the union leadership in France; and France was key to any European transformation.<sup>2</sup> In 1919–1920, French workers went on strike in great numbers, but this militancy did not translate into a movement for federalist worker control of production. France, the home of Proudhon, Sorel, and direct action revolutionary syndicalism, the birthplace of a decentralized vision of worker socialism, and a seemingly most appropriate place for council communism, did not follow the lead of its supposedly less radical neighbors. The reasons for this lack of response are indeed complex. Historians have pointed to the power of the postwar French state in crushing worker mil-

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itancy, and the refusal of the leadership of the major French union, the *Confédération Générale du Travail* (CGT) to adequately coordinate and encourage the strikes that did occur.<sup>3</sup> Yet why was the leadership of the CGT so unprepared for the postwar militancy that arose in France and throughout Europe, and frightened rather than exhilarated by it? Why did the tradition of direct action and federalism fail to influence the leadership at that time?

The answer lies in the history of French labor between the time of Proudhon and the end of World War I, and its relationship to the various republican, socialist, and economic discourses formulated in the French public sphere. In the wake of the June Days of 1848 and the Paris Commune of 1871, workers and republicans split into often-opposing camps. The particular “language of labor” formulated in France during the nineteenth century informed the revolutionary syndicalist wing of the CGT, which controlled the organization between 1902 and 1918.<sup>4</sup> Though the prewar CGT was relatively small in numbers (approximately 700,000 members in 1912), its advocacy of direct action helped make worker strikes and demonstrations a part of everyday life in the Belle Époque, and promoted the rise of the social question to public prominence. After World War I, the union ballooned to over two and one-half million members by 1920.<sup>5</sup>

However, the ostensible revolutionary syndicalists Léon Jouhaux and Alphonse Merrheim, who came to power within the CGT in the years after 1909, guided the movement away from some major themes of its fin-de-siècle, anarchist-inspired vision. By the immediate prewar years, French syndicalism’s leadership feared social change because of its anxieties about upsetting France’s economic equilibrium. Jouhaux and Merrheim formulated a productivist doctrine that emphasized increasing material output through the efficient, expert direction of the economy, rather than the federalist themes of worker mobilization and the ethical dimensions of labor’s control of the workplace.<sup>6</sup> This orientation emerged out of an elaboration of syndicalism’s concept of labor in the context of the weaknesses of its revolutionary approach, as the movement entered a crisis and rethought its legacy. Its new theory of industrial society also converged with the rise of a Taylorist and productivist discourse attractive to many republican and capitalist elites, and an emerging cultural vocabulary that recognized the psychological and social complexities of social solidarity.

After World War I, the CGT participated with many elites in attempting to form a new understanding of labor’s role in public life, which drew extensively on productivist themes. This new doctrine

differed not only from fin-de-siècle syndicalism, but from the *solidarité* of Emile Durkheim and Léon Bourgeois as well. As these viewpoints faded, what was lost was not so much a revolutionary moment in European history, but rather a democratic vision of a more egalitarian, morally solidary Third Republic organized along principles other than corporate capital or a state bureaucracy.<sup>7</sup> A major argument of this book stresses that social changes alone cannot explain this transition. Only an examination of the dynamics of the CGT's public discourse and its subtle relations with the liberal public sphere from the Belle Epoque to the postwar era can illuminate these processes.

This accent on public discourse intersects with major theoretical innovations within the historical profession. Several commentators have remarked on the discursive turn in historical analysis.<sup>8</sup> For example, many historians now see the French Revolution as an explosion of new languages and a crisis of meaning rather than the outcome of a clash between a rising bourgeoisie and a reactionary aristocracy.<sup>9</sup> Yet this new linguistic orientation often conflicts with historians' noted concern for clarity. As with many terms associated with the postmodern lexicon, attempting to define "discourse" is akin to the plight of Tantalus, for its meaning seemingly remains inevitably beyond our grasp.

If closure about the definition of discourse is not possible, and in fact contravenes the spirit of the open-ended conversation so favored by postmodernists, some different positions have been mapped out in the context of historical investigation. Scott's poststructuralist approach sees discourse as the inherently political, exclusionary, and hierarchical cultural vocabulary that societies use to frame the world and construct social identities.<sup>10</sup> Sewell, following Geertz, renames discourse "ideology," and defines it as the collective symbols which create and maintain a specific sense and image of life.<sup>11</sup> Habermas views discourse as rational-critical debate about validity claims.<sup>12</sup> Despite this diversity, some guiding themes emerge. Discourse consists of shared public meanings; it does not derive from the isolated thoughts or actions of individuals. These cultural meanings frame conceptions of identity. They do not in any simple way reflect class position, for social groups are themselves created in large part through language.<sup>13</sup> Social power operates through the use of these collective meanings. Scott and Habermas emphasize the epistemological dimension of discourse, for it invariably advances specific knowledge claims. Social power is based on particular forms of knowledge as much as on ownership of capital or class relations.

Many French labor historians, such as Scott and Reddy, have become increasingly concerned with the function of discourse and culture in

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framing working-class action and interests.<sup>14</sup> This most recent linguistic turn, though more radical in its conception of the autonomy of discourse than previous studies, nevertheless builds on the ground swell of earlier literature documenting the distinctiveness of working-class traditions. These studies crystallized in the 1980s into what Traugott calls a “new orthodoxy.”<sup>15</sup> Following Thompson’s pathbreaking work on the critical potential of popular radicalism in England, this New Orthodoxy focuses on artisanal culture as the source of labor militancy, dismissing the Marxist reverence toward the emancipatory potential of the factory proletariat.<sup>16</sup> Though concentrating on such objective practices as proletarianization and state formation, this approach demonstrates that these processes did not mechanistically deskill workers and destroy their communities. Rather, worker culture, ranging from leisure life in taverns to traditions of workplace autonomy, provided the symbolic and material resources for novel forms of labor radicalism. Labor historians of the United States, Britain, and France argue that culture furnished the interpretive framework and motivational reserves for worker militancy.<sup>17</sup>

Several of these authors contend that labor organizations built on these cultural traditions in order to create distinctive types of socialist and syndicalist public discourse so as to legitimate worker claims.<sup>18</sup> Of particular importance for many labor movements was the synthesis of working-class and republican themes that Montgomery designates “labor republicanism.”<sup>19</sup> Though intersecting and sometimes competing with Marxist and Jacobin discourses, Vincent argues that different shades of labor republicanism informed much of the doctrine of the turn-of-the-century French left, from syndicalists to socialists. Lasch sees this as a distinctive type of working-class culture influencing labor movements in Britain and the United States, as well as France.<sup>20</sup>

France and Britain developed relatively popular socialist or labor-oriented political parties, and the United States did not. No doubt there were differences in the worker organizations in each country. The timing of industrialization and the emergence and decline of labor republicanism varied within each nation. Labor republicanism in the United States did not critique small private property and was more sympathetic to religion than in France. In Britain, collective action was oriented toward suffrage. In France, direct action and an anti-state orientation on the part of workers often predominated.

However, much working-class resistance to capitalism was remarkably similar in the three countries. Drawing on a shared belief in the nobility of artisanal work, labor organizations in France, Britain, and the United States combined this producerist vision with a strongly democratic orien-

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tation. Workers (or producers) were seen to be the carriers of the best parts of the democratic tradition. The British commonwealth tradition informed the radicalism of the Chartists and later the Guild Socialists; the French CGT and the American Knights of Labor drew on their respective republican heritages.<sup>21</sup> In each country, labor republicans critiqued the “egoism” that they saw corrupting society. They stressed the necessity of worker participation in both state and economic institutions, tying worker control to labor emancipation. Each group also attempted to build distinctive working-class organizations that embodied the principles of democracy and emancipated labor; fearful of the anti-democratic effects of bureaucracy and centralization, they looked to decentralized worker organizations as the path to working-class solidarity. They viewed the public gathering as the major forum for the forging of a shared perspective, rather than the back-room meetings of elites that privatized power and corrupted the democratic tradition.<sup>22</sup>

The movements also confronted events that shook the viability of their vision of artisanal labor and producerism. They had to legitimate their perspective in terms of a scientific public discourse that arose with the second Industrial Revolution of the late nineteenth century. These working-class organizations had to face actions on the part of the state that promised, and often delivered, social reforms which were justified in the language of social interdependence, efficiency, and economic growth. The progressive movement in the United States, the Radical Republican Party in France, and the Liberal Party in Britain all sought to renovate society in the name of science and progress.<sup>23</sup>

Explanations for the decline of this distinctive worker discourse usually focus on state repression, industrialization, and the development of an unskilled working class through mass production.<sup>24</sup> More discerning observers of this decline, such as Lears, Trachtenberg, Gerstle, and Jones, see cultural hegemony at work. According to these authors, workers adopted the values of the hegemonic culture, thus blunting their oppositional perspective. Republicanism is seen as the culprit in some form, whether defined as Americanism or, in Jones’s work, the radical English tradition. Workers came to accept the principles of parliamentary government, gradualist visions of social change, and eventually individualistic and nationalistic definitions of social life. They did not sufficiently develop a unique cultural alternative that could withstand pressures toward integration.<sup>25</sup>

This explanation cannot completely account for the French case. A form of labor republicanism was institutionalized in revolutionary syndicalism after the Knights of Labor and Chartism had declined. Further, French

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syndicalists never fully embraced parliamentary government and the political culture of individualism. Despite its defense of the Republic in World War I, the CGT's path to cultural integration did not follow from its republicanism. Rather, its incorporation into French society developed in large part from its leaders' interpretation of industrial society, social science, and the nature of social knowledge, which had many affinities with the views of many French elites. An analysis of public discourse that stops at the level of shared political values among workers, and their articulation in everyday life and in movement doctrines, misses crucial aspects of cultural change. In particular, labor historians tend to refrain from probing the epistemological dimensions of worker discourse, for that leads into realms of philosophy and theory that seemingly depart from the veracity of the empirical.

However, in the process of creating union doctrine, worker elites reflexively examined their social conditions. In so doing, they fashioned an implicit and not always consistent epistemology, a way of illuminating, knowing, and evaluating the world. A focus on political values neglects the more subtle ways in which cultural consensus works. In fin-de-siècle Europe, by privileging particular types of knowledge over other ways of knowing, cultural constructions legitimated particular interests which claimed the mantle of science. Workers, like everyone in society, shared in this epistemological discourse. Many union leaders mimicked capitalists in developing productivist strategies of rationalization that could be used to "modernize" society. By adopting this point of view, they developed the productivist implications of their model of labor and subordinated the participatory, consensual, and pragmatic claims of the radical republican tradition to the demands of industrial progress. In sum, as Rabinbach states, to grasp these issues labor historians must investigate

the constricting effects of productivism on the movement's vision and practices – the ways that labor movements helped workers to adapt to industrial processes, accelerated improved techniques of production, and excluded significant dimensions of culture and politics not central to production. Most importantly, the ways in which scientific ideas, epistemological frameworks, and reform strategies redefined labor (and its practical consequences) eluded most social historians because they did not emerge directly from class conflict.<sup>26</sup>

Rabinbach then notes that social philosophers associated with the Frankfurt School, such as Habermas, have long stressed the instrumental and productivist tendencies of working-class theorists, especially Marxists. Rabinbach devotes his work to unraveling the vision of labor



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as a “human motor” developed by European scientists from the late nineteenth century to the post-World War II era. Lasch, as a cultural historian sympathetic to this approach, perceptively recognizes that the ideologies of progress and science helped undermine worker autonomy; however, he concentrates largely on how this was played out in the work of intellectuals sympathetic to labor movements such as Sorel and Cole.<sup>27</sup> In sum, the ways that a scientific and productivist vision developed within labor movements, how it both drew from and contrasted with other visions of the future (such as labor republicanism), and why it triumphed still remain to be investigated.

Examining public discourse within a cultural frame that draws on, while recasting, Habermas’s theory can shed some light on these issues, as well as providing a preliminary answer to the problem posed by Sabel and Zeitlin at the beginning of this chapter. Habermas is well known for his concern with epistemology and rationality. His pragmatic approach to knowledge critiques instrumental, “scientistic” rationality while offering a communicative alternative. Though Habermas examines these issues primarily within the context of philosophical debates, his work is rich in implications for the study of public discourse and social movements. For example, Johnson has recently discussed in general terms the potential significance of Habermas’s distinction between lifeworld and system for the exploration of labor history.<sup>28</sup> Further, though Habermas’s classic work on the public sphere does not investigate the role of social movements in challenging the constitution of a bourgeois political culture, he has recently realized the importance of the “plebeian” public realm as an alternative source of communal meanings.<sup>29</sup> As Postone states, social movements “were certainly constitutive of new forms of public discourse at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century and . . . were engaged in a struggle to reconstitute the public sphere.”<sup>30</sup>

Nevertheless, Habermas’s abstract perspective must be situated in specific social and cultural contexts in order to adequately account for the dynamics of labor movements. His theory of developmental rationality grounded in language overlooks the complex interplay of knowledge claims, metaphorical vocabularies, and particular cultural traditions. Moreover, Habermas’s approach to public discourse neglects issues raised by Bourdieu’s perspective on culture, such as the internal organizational structuring of public spheres and the distinctive power struggles within such publics.<sup>31</sup>

A focus on revolutionary syndicalism in France is particularly propitious for such an endeavor. A suitably historicized Habermasian



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perspective can contribute to a linguistically sensitive analysis of the rise of an instrumental productivism in French syndicalism, and its interaction with more communicative alternatives and the dominant public sphere. The high point of the syndicalist movement coincided with the rise of Durkheimian social science and the political doctrine of *solidarité* to prominence in France. Though Durkheimian sociology and syndicalism were not directly linked, they shared certain family resemblances, so to speak. They formed the right and left wings of a democratic spectrum in fin-de-siècle France, which, despite fundamental differences regarding issues such as class struggle and state-sponsored social reforms, shared concerns with creating a more democratic, participatory, and morally solidary society. They faced the similar problematic of synthesizing scientific and republican themes into a viable theory of social solidarity and economic growth, while facing the crisis of positivism. Further, their respective moral and participatory dimensions faded as a more conservative and productivist vocabulary slowly became prominent in France.

Syndicalist discourse shared dominant conceptions of science and industrial progress. These ideas, combined with the weakness of its revolutionary theory and its internal *ouvriériste* assumptions, helped lead the CGT to gradually replace the vision of a federalist socialism of skilled workers with an image of industrial society like that of many elites. This new conception consisted of large, centralized worker unions participating in social progress defined in terms of an ever-expanding production, which was guaranteed by a new type of state capitalism based on corporatist bargaining between unions and the government. Though the corporatist outlook was slow to develop in France, by World War I the CGT was one of its most ardent proponents.<sup>32</sup> An integral component of this outlook, shared by syndicalists and many republican and capitalist elites, was that positivistic science offered an insight into the natural order of production, and could lead to a healthier and more productive workplace.<sup>33</sup> Syndicalists' adoption of this vocabulary was not simply imposed on them, but derived in large part from an elaboration of their own labor-based discourse in the context of a crisis of revolutionary ideology and belief. The experience of World War I reinforced this productivist doctrine.

In addition, this volume's attention to the theories of Bourdieu and more importantly, Habermas, raises specifically theoretical issues. The relevance of sociological theory for historical investigation will be discussed at different points throughout the book. I will touch on the modern/postmodern debates in which Habermas has been involved. While avoiding Habermas's strongest rationalist and evolutionary claims, I

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also do not wish to validate the excessive deconstructionist equation of all forms of rationality with an exclusionary power. My examination of the complexity of the historical context of the Third Republic demonstrates that different pathways for the very shape of modernity were at issue in debates between and among syndicalists and solidarists. Their visions of the world were not necessarily determined by the evolution of a differentiating system that tended to marginalize more radically democratic concerns, as Habermas would have it; nor were they just another dimension of a disciplining and imperialistic rationality tied to the social sciences, as deconstructionists argue. Rather, their discourses were contingently tied to the concrete problems that they confronted, and depended on their particular interpretations of the cultural traditions at their disposal. Finally, the study of syndicalism can also help illuminate many of the questions confronting today's new social movements, such as gay, lesbian, and ecological movements. Like them, revolutionary syndicalism faced issues including the balance of democracy vs. bureaucracy, and the relationship of movements arising in civil society to political parties.

Yet this study has a limited focus in many ways. This book does not address in detail other social movements and public spheres, such as the women's movement, that were developing in the Belle Epoque.<sup>34</sup> While touching on the Socialist Party, the CGT's principal competitor within the proletarian public sphere, it does not thoroughly examine the discourse and dynamics of French socialism. The study does not analyze in great depth the non-verbal "language of labor," such as strikes. Finally, it concentrates on the discourse of the leaders of the CGT, and does not attempt to probe the everyday life of workers. Yet the significance of the CGT should not be underestimated. There is no a priori reason to believe that the leaders of revolutionary syndicalism did not represent significant segments of the French working class. Most importantly, like other unions, the CGT was a major institution which, to paraphrase Johnson, filtered social relations of production and realized organized struggle.<sup>35</sup>

Chapter 1 sketches the relationship of revolutionary syndicalism to social and cultural trends in the Belle Epoque. Part I explores theoretical issues involved in the study of French syndicalism and the public sphere. Chapter 2 examines historians' perspectives on French syndicalism, and then critiques the more theoretically informed approaches to labor, including Tilly, extensions of the New Orthodoxy by Calhoun and Sewell, and the poststructuralist claims of Scott. Chapter 3 discusses