

Response to J. Rancière, “The Myth of the Artisan”

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Jacques Rancière, in “The Myth of the Artisan” published in the Fall, 1983 number of *ILWCH*, challenged the view that revolutions are carried out by well-organized artisans proud of their status. According to Rancière, “if one were to multiply the case studies, one might very well be led to a complete reversal of the prevailing opinion, and show that militant activity is perhaps inversely proportional to the organic cohesion of the trade, the strength of the organization and the ideology of the group.” (4) Citing the work of Christopher H. Johnson to show that the loudest voices of revolutionary protest came from tailors and shoemakers, Rancière showed that these were “the lowest of the low, ‘vile and abject’ ” (2) and unlikely to have either pride in their work or cohesion.

Both Christopher Johnson and William H. Sewell, Jr. demonstrated in their responses to Rancière that these “vile and abject” trades, joined by others less abject like the cabinetmakers, *did* have corporate cohesion: they were organized into *compagnonnages* and they were unified in their protest against new methods of production, such as ready-made clothes, that were threatening their livelihoods. To this we should add that the artisans, despite the evidence to the contrary cited by Rancière, had a strong sense of class-consciousness and class pride.

Rancière noted that many workers grumbled about their work, which “had nothing in it which could have created a strong professional pride,” (3) and that artisans changed jobs too often to become proud of their crafts. Yet quotations abound (I have over a hundred pages of them) from workers’ songs and from poems by workers stating that “I’m a worker and proud of it.” Charles Poncy, the mason and poet from Toulon, left his trade and became a wealthy real estate broker during the Second Empire, yet he never stopped boasting proudly (if illogically) that he was a “proletarian.” Worker-poets wore the starched collars and immaculate suits and ties of bourgeois dress-up whenever they got their pictures taken and they wrote their poems and songs in a similarly dressed-up, refined style; they neither dressed nor wrote in the ordinary manner of their profession or of their class. But this does not show that they were ashamed of their status as workers. On the contrary, they were determined to show that the workers were as good as anybody else and that they could dress, write, and behave “correctly.” The worker-poets and worker-writers were, as Rancière said, “a marginal group at the frontier of encounters with

the bourgeoisie." (11) As a marginal group, they were determined to be truly representative of the aspirations and the capacities of their class. One need only follow the goals of the workers as expressed in the last century-and-a-half of strikes, elections, and reforms to see that the worker-poets were indeed in touch with the inner soul and the true desires of their class.

There is one more aspect of working-class pride that neither Rancière nor Sewell nor Johnson mentioned, and that is the workers' devotion to their fatherland. The worker-poets felt that they *were* France, providing their country with both its wealth and its armies. In their songs they criticized the pusillanimous foreign policy of the July Monarchy more often than they criticized its callous social policies, and this no doubt reflected the attitudes of most workers. A major victory over "perfidious Albion" would have done more to win public support for the Guizot ministry than either electoral reform or a minimum wage law. Here again, the worker-poets of the July Monarchy in France proved that they could see into the hearts of their fellow workers accurately. As democracy has gained ground throughout the world in the past century, so has militant nationalism.

Rancière is correct in saying that artisans often grumbled about their work and that they moved upwards into middle-class jobs whenever possible. But this does not prove that the workers had no pride in their class and in their status as workers. Their solidarity, their pride in their status both as craftsmen and as Frenchmen, and their fear of the threat to their status as artisans posed by the new modes of production would be the major source of instability in France and elsewhere throughout the Industrial Revolution.