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The Night of the Proletarian Families: Child Labor, Compulsory Education, and the Making of the Working Class around 1830

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Abstract

The article analyzes a period when public officials withdrew children from the labor market and assigned them to the school system. While existing research delves into the reasons behind this process, focusing on sociopolitical reforms, economic factors and changing concepts of childhood, there is limited understanding of how working-class families responded. The article aims to fill the gap by examining the social impact on families when their children were barred from factory work by political-administrative authorities, shedding light on class formation and political subjectivation. Inspired by Jacques Rancière's book *Proletarian Nights* the article specifically investigates the Swiss canton of Aargau, where the clash between industrial child labor and liberal school reforms around 1830 provides a unique perspective. The conflict prompted the mobilization of proletarian families, compelling them to organize, unite politically and collectively advocate for their children to rejoin the labor market.

Keywords: child labor; education; working class; makeshift economies; labor movement; proletarian struggles; capitalism; Switzerland

Maybe it was Christmas, maybe a little later than that. It is unclear exactly when 36 factory workers decided to address a petition to the Aargau parliament. What is clear, however, is what prompted them to do so. After the July Revolution in Paris in 1830, a new liberal elite came to power in the Swiss canton of Aargau, one which claimed a state monopoly on education and immediately set about reorganizing the school system. One important issue concerned already existing compulsory education. To enforce it, children up to the age of 13 were to be forbidden from working in factories. It was against the planned ban on factory work that the petition of 1835 was directed.

It is indeed “noble, praiseworthy, and commendable” that the state is addressing education, the petition read. “Diligent school attendance, better education for children

is desirable, but, Dear Sirs! The stomach must first be satisfied before the head can be expected to do anything.”¹ The ban on factory work would endanger their existence. No family could cope with the threat of losing wages. “Whoever is familiar with the hardship that the poor householder has to struggle with will easily be able to think of the feeling of distress that the prospect of such a legal provision must evoke within him,” the petition continued.

The workers’ request for special treatment for the so-called factory children went unheard, the ban was implemented.² And yet, this action forms the backdrop for my article: the moment when political authorities withdrew children from the labor market and assigned them to the school system. Analysts of capitalism have coined the unwieldy term decommodification, which, according to the sociologist Claus Offe, means “dropping out of the commodity form.”³ Anthropologists like Anna Tsing or Arjun Appadurai use similar phrases.⁴ Others often speak normatively of the social enclosure or social embedding of markets.⁵ Not all children and young people were equally affected. Among the first to be removed from wage labor in the early nineteenth century were boys and girls working in textile mills. This was true in all of the industrializing societies in the West.⁶ Only later did child workers in the mining, smelting, cottage industries, and trades get pulled from the ranks. Decommodification is a selective process.⁷ Moreover, it does not have sharp caesurae; rather, it is incremental, as can be seen from the fact that at the end of the nineteenth century, children in all Western countries were still (illegally) working in factories in large numbers.

Historical studies have focused intensively on this form of decommodification. Three strands of research can be identified. First, social welfare historians point to the multifaceted political reform impulses behind the protective measures and emphasize the role of the state as a legislator and control authority.⁸ Second, economic historians highlight technological development and rising real wages, which made children’s labor expendable for both industrialists and families.⁹ Finally, cultural historians draw attention to changing concepts of childhood, which corresponded with an age of consent under labor law and a gradual division of schools according to age and gender.¹⁰

In sum, we know much about how and why children were removed from factories and incorporated into the school system. However, little is known about how parents and the children themselves responded. How did proletarian families behave when their children’s labor was curtailed by public officials and the resulting lack of wages put a strain on the household budget? What forms of socialization did decommodified labor relations unleash? And what political processes of subjectivation did they initiate?

By exploring these questions, the article aims to contribute to the social history of the early labor movement. The inspiration for this came from the book *Proletarian Nights* by the French historian and philosopher Jacques Rancière.¹¹ The poetic-sounding title is to be taken literally. It is about the nights when the parents of factory children did not rest, but instead got together and helped each other, when they discussed common demands, even wrote petitions, and thus developed a sense of belonging and a specific working-class identity.¹²

In order to trace the familial origins of the labor movement, so to speak, I will keep the geographical focus and present a small case study on the canton of Aargau. It is here that the relationship between industrial child labor, political power and

social mobilization can be analyzed particularly well. Aargau was one of the most industrialized areas in continental Europe around 1830, and home to huge cotton mills which employed hundreds of children.¹³ At the same time, the canton, with its democratic constitution of 1831, was among the pioneers of regeneration, combining compulsory education early on with a ban on factory work.¹⁴ Hence, the “schooling of society” collided head-on with a flourishing cotton industry.¹⁵ It was this political-economic constellation that mobilized proletarian families, prompted them to organize themselves, and let them appear as political subjects with their own demands; demands that—as the petition cited above already indicates—aimed at reintegrating their children into the labor market.

My interest is twofold. On the one hand, it is my intention to introduce a new perspective on the making of the working class. At the same time, I will demonstrate why this has not occurred before. The article is divided into three parts. To start off, I will sketch out the emerging industrial social conditions around 1830. Using petitions, inspection reports, surveys, and official documents, I will then show how the decommodification of factory-based child labor unleashed social and political forces that pushed children back into the wage labor system. Finally, I will offer some reflections on why these developments in the labor movement were caught up in and written out of history.

Aargau around 1830

It is perhaps surprising that contemporaries spoke of the “cotton canton of Aargau” in the mid-nineteenth century, but there are explanations for why so many spindles were turning in this rural area between Basel, Bern and Zurich. Sven Beckert provides these in his book *Empire of Cotton*. Starting in Lancashire in northern England, he analyzes the uneven global development of the mechanical processing of cotton. He finds that production sites such as Flanders, Alsace or Saxony fulfilled three historical conditions: they all had a tradition of textile production, in some cases going back many years; they had a well-functioning putting-out system that subcontracted work to the surrounding rural areas; and they had natural resources that could be harnessed.¹⁶

All three conditions were fulfilled in an almost ideal way in the canton of Aargau. Handweaving and hand spinning organized through the putting-out system were firmly established proto-industrial economies, particularly in the western part of the canton.¹⁷ It was here that the first mechanized spinning mills were built during the period of the Continental Blockade. However, the biggest production sites developed in the eastern region, at the confluence of the Aare, Limmat and Reuss rivers, where water power made the mechanical processing of cotton in factories all the more possible. As in other parts of the world, industrialization in nineteenth-century Aargau also took place outside of urban centers.¹⁸

The capital came from the Zurich Oberland, where the natural resources for investment had been exhausted.¹⁹ In 1828, the Bebié brothers (Caspar, Heinrich, and Rudolf) built a six-story spinning mill in an almost uninhabited area along the Limmat river bend near Turgi, which was canalized by a weir.²⁰ Two years later, Heinrich Kunz, known as the “Spinner King,” established a spinning mill in the small village of Windisch that drew its energy from the Reuss River, which was directed into a specially

constructed factory canal by means of a double plank weir.²¹ Both establishments were part of cotton industrial empires that were among the largest in Europe.

Mechanized spinning mills required many new workers. Due to costs and the fact that the various steps involved in production required little skill or physical strength, cotton industrialists primarily recruited women and children, both girls and boys. A newspaper advertisement from 1827 read, "If poor, honest households wish to employ several, or at least four to five children in a spinning mill, [...] they can apply to the Bebié brothers."²² The cotton industry functioned like a huge magnet. While some workers came from the surrounding villages, where agriculture was the only source of income, the majority migrated from former homeworker areas and southern Germany to Turgi and Windisch, where factory owners built boarding houses. Some less well off communities encouraged these movements by forcing poor people into factories. The contracts secured a labor force for factory owners while allowing communities to confiscate a certain amount of wages to support family dependents who stayed behind.²³ In the spinning mills, young children were typically employed as "piecers" who tied threads that broke as they were being spun back together, "doffers" who replaced spools of thread as they emptied or "bobbing girls or boys" who carried spools between frames.²⁴ But they also picked up cotton waste, prepared fibers for carding and oiled and cleaned machines, usually self-acting (automatic) mules. The latter tasks were disastrous, as the rare testimony of a cotton mill worker from Windisch demonstrates:

Our work was the most unappetizing and, as I later realized, the unhealthiest work in the factory. [...] Under the machines, the body could only move with difficulty; often the forehead or nose came into painful contact with the hard metal of the machines. Oil and grease dripped on the face and clothes; in short, it was a most painful job that we could only perform while shuddering.²⁵

Their treatment by supervisors was just as bad, they were repeatedly beaten and disciplined by foremen.

The expansion of the mechanized cotton industry relied on capital and technology, but it also required resources and a human labor force. Within this context, Sven Beckert speaks of a process of "inner colonialization."²⁶ This refers to the exploitation of a previously unused natural area and the subjugation of the population that is living on it or attracted to it. State authorities brought about such inner colonialization by providing factory owners with a labor force. But what Patrick Joyce calls "the work of the state" also inhibited these processes.²⁷ Above all, compulsory education, which had been in force since 1822, stood in the way of recruiting factory children.

When the major Zurich cotton industrialists expanded into the canton of Aargau, children ages seven and up were obliged to fulfill the minimum hours of instruction set by law (three hours a day), either at a public elementary school, a state-recognized private school, or via homeschooling.²⁸ They were released from school after successfully passing an examination. In the wake of the July Revolution and under pressure from the liberal bourgeoisie, the canton tightened these regulations. Humanistic educational demands and military recruitment concerns set the pace.²⁹ "The state shall see to perfecting the education of the youth and public instruction," read the newly revised cantonal constitution of 1831.³⁰

The corresponding law of 1835, mentioned in the introduction, declared that school could be attended free of charge and that there would be newly regulated compulsory education. While under the old school law children were dismissed from school once they achieved a certain degree of knowledge, the new law redefined the conditions for leaving school and set a sharp age limit: children ages seven to 13 had to attend the “Alltagsschule” (everyday school) and 14- and 15-year-olds the “Fortsetzungsschule” (continuation school). At the same time, children under 13 were forbidden to work in factories. According to the enforcement decree, “No factory owner may put a child to work unless he or she has presented him with his or her certificate of dismissal from the everyday school.”³¹ For control purposes, the parliament implemented means to supervise state schools in the form of local “Schulpflegen” (school boards), regional “Bezirksschulräten” (district school councils), and a “Kantonsschulrat” (cantonal school council).

The School Act of 1835 was the result of the Enlightenment. The liberal dictum “people’s education is people’s liberation,” coined by the pedagogue and politician Heinrich Zschokke, paved the way for its passage.³² At the same time, it was an important lever in regulating child labor. Vehemently, and with success, Zschokke campaigned in parliament for the liberation of the “little labor slaves.”³³ Such strident abolitionist rhetoric, accompanied by moral discourses on neglect that featured many voices, exclusively addressed the predicament of factory children.³⁴ The reason for this lies in the reorganization of child labor in the factory system.³⁵ Children had always worked as agricultural laborers, artisan apprentices, industrial homeworkers, helpers in retail establishments, or domestic servants.³⁶ But around the turn of the nineteenth century, when industrialization took off, the nature of work changed for some children. While child labor in the *ancien régime* was carried out on farms or within family homes under the supervision of parents, centralized manufactories constituted new, separate and collective spheres of labor where children toiled for wages alongside strangers. Accordingly, child labor became not only more regular, continuous and intensive but also more visible and conspicuous, and subsequently, a public issue, one that generated new knowledge about children and their way of life. Apart from being a new form of work, the sheer public visibility explains why industrial child labor first became the object of pedagogical criticism and state influence.³⁷

The specific organization of child labor in the factory system alarmed educational elites, who implemented a legal ban in order to enforce compulsory education and thus regulate industrial labor relations for the first time. At the same time, the new constellation of requirements mobilized proletarian families who saw their personal claim to their children being threatened.

Precarity, proletariat, and politics

In 1835, Aargau banned factory work for children under 13. At that time, no other canton had gone so far with its legislation.³⁸ The English Factory Act of 1833 and the Prussian Regulativ of 1839 set an age limit, though one that was significantly lower—nine years old.³⁹ But implementation proved difficult. For a long time in Aargau, the political authorities lacked the ability to enforce the ban. The Swiss Factory Act of 1877 grappled with the same problem.⁴⁰ Even at the end of the nineteenth century, children

were working in factories. However, the slow decommodification can also be read as an indication of the high economic value of child labor for families, as this labor was vehemently defended by parents.

The first to notice this were school inspectors. Their reports document the broad opposition to the ban on work from the parents of factory children.⁴¹ Perhaps it is appropriate at this point to leave the canton of Aargau very briefly in order to emphasize how widespread the phenomenon was. In the aforementioned Zurich Oberland, where the Swiss cotton industry had its origins, the governor of a municipality summed up the proletarian attitude toward schooling as follows:

The poor fathers of families, who are burdened with many children, would gladly send them to the factory; if one points them to the school law, the general reasoning is: We are not in a position to comply with it, what good does it do to us and our children that they are taught in this way [...]. Every year that we send our children to school only robs us of nice sums of money from which we could procure necessary and indispensable things.⁴²

Authorities and school inspectors had sometimes more, sometimes less sympathy for the proletarian primacy of makeshift economies and the resulting critical attitude toward education. The same is true for the various “strategies of survival” with which parents sought to secure the earnings of their children.⁴³ One of these began where the authorities had the greatest problems with oversight: mobility. Proletarian families without a permanent residence repeatedly changed their workplace, not only because of their economic situation but also to avoid state control and sanctions. In terms of migration theory, compulsory education was a push factor; the contemporary expression for it was “school flight.” In addition, the ban on child labor created disincentives. To stabilize their family economies, many parents sent their children to the factory before the age of seven. This was facilitated by “all sorts of tricks and ploys,” as a government report put it—keeping children hidden during inspections, giving false age information, negotiating fines, or accepting a prison sentence for not paying them.⁴⁴ Families with children working in factories often simply priced the school absenteeism fines into their budgets.⁴⁵ Given the low fines, this was “easy,” complained a school inspector who calculated that a “child earns as much in one day” as a month’s worth of fines.⁴⁶

In addition to individual strategies, proletarian families also took a proactive, collective approach. Immediately after the introduction of the new school law in 1835, some families in Turgi founded a private school and hired a teacher at their own expense.⁴⁷ This was possible in the canton of Aargau, which did not have compulsory schooling, only compulsory education. Not much is known about the school, but the motivation behind this initiative seems clear: to remove their children from the supervision of the school authorities. Instead of sending them to the community school 2 km away, they were taught autonomously onsite in the factory village. This distancing had an emancipatory effect, created free space and made it possible to continue sending the children to the factory. At the same time, it enabled them to better fulfill the working requirements set by the Bebié brothers. Immediately after opening their spinning mill, the Bebiés implemented their own rigid schedule with a work day of 14.5 hours.⁴⁸ At the

center of the time regime was the factory clock, which was set based on the position of the sun. In Turgi, the sun always rose at 6 o'clock in the morning.⁴⁹ That meant that the time-consuming and costly lighting of petroleum lamps, which illuminated the factory halls, albeit rather poorly, could be limited to the evening. The factory time schedule conflicted with school hours, which were aligned with church clocks. Teachers repeatedly complained about the lack of punctuality and the school absences of Turgi's factory children, as did the parish priests whose religious students were late for classes "because of the factory clock."⁵⁰ By founding a private school in the immediate vicinity of the factory, proletarian families synchronized two different time tables and enabled their children to get to the factory on time.

The founding of the school was not an isolated incident. In nearby Baden as well, families joined together and empowered themselves by founding their own private school.⁵¹ Although these schools hardly left a trace, they mark an early form of proletarian self-organization. Similar to later associations and trade unions, proletarian families made their precarious living conditions and experiences a common point of reference.⁵² In doing so, they demonstrated resistance to the political authorities through their own initiatives. Obviously, they were motivated by economics, still the founding of private schools was also a sign of their reserve and mistrust toward the liberal school project of the bourgeois elites. Finally, the self-organized schools consolidated social relations and created potential for identification. It was precisely the spatial separation of public and private schools and the social segregation of children, in other words, their exclusivity, that institutionalized a class-specific togetherness, and probably also the associated consciousness.

While liberal elites spoke of freeing "little labor slaves" from the yoke of factory work, parents sought ways to secure their earnings and thus their own existence. Extra income from children's work was essential for survival. This becomes clear when looking at the numerous petitions to school boards through which proletarian families raised their voices in the 1830s. The petition mentioned at the start of the article is just one example of how they articulated their proletarian existence and made themselves known as a social collective. It is a characteristic of this transformation that the "we" to be constituted did not yet give itself a specific name. The handwritten petitions do not speak of "We workers" but exclusively of poor "Hausväter" (house fathers) or "Familienväter" (family fathers). Thus, petitioners referred to traditional patriarchal householder rights, which they saw threatened. In this respect, it is hardly surprising that widows with children also signed the petitions. Parental care and supervision united the signatories, not their gender or class. However, the petitions should also be read as an expression of political subjectivation. They are testimonies of proletarian class formation, which both pushed and signified the identity-forming transformation from a "class in itself" to a "class for itself."⁵³ A good example of this is the petition of 106 men and seven women from Windisch, where the Spinner King's cotton mill was located. The new school law, they complained, had "formally cut off" their children's earnings.⁵⁴ As a result, their families had fallen into abject poverty. In order to get out of it, the petitioners demanded that their children be exempted from compulsory education on a half-day basis and be allowed to work in the factory, because "we have to work if we want to eat." They justified their demand as follows:

Why should our children not be allowed to work and earn something, like what the children of the Freiamt are able to do by constantly weaving straw? Are we not citizens of the same state? Do we not have the same rights? – Or why are the children of the Oberaargau allowed to work unhindered at the loom and bobbin wheel, but ours are not? Because the constant sitting while straw weaving and spooling must be more detrimental to the youthful body than moderate movement doing very light work. Why is it that the often-weak child of the farmer is allowed to do his heavy work, but our children are not allowed to do their light work?⁵⁵

The petitioners made a two-pronged argument.⁵⁶ On the one hand, they complained of being treated less favorably than other proletarianized occupational groups of different origins and claimed personal rights. What they criticized was arbitrariness; what they demanded was equal rights. In this way, they joined early socialist demands for a universal right to work, which since the July Revolution had been put forward with increasing frequency in Europe.⁵⁷ The French theorist Charles Fourier and the Saint-Simonians in particular argued eloquently for a *droit au travail*, sometimes on naturalistic grounds, sometimes on religious.⁵⁸ The petitioners next made their case based on the relatively light physical labor of children in factories. The criticized subordination to others is thus supplemented and substantiated by an activity-related accusation of discrimination. While the categories “light” and “heavy” later paved the way for gendering labor markets, parents used them to claim a right to factory work for their children.⁵⁹ Physical demands is a very vague criterion open to definition; it can justify a claim for both integration and exclusion.

The petition was never heard by the cantonal school board, but success is not a very useful category for labor movement history. More meaningful are the contents of the petition itself, wherein proletarian families identified and positioned themselves as political subjects. In doing so, they transformed common experiences of injustice into collective demands that revolved around the right to factory child labor. While the political authorities did not grant them this right, their demands, not surprisingly, were embraced by factory owners. Kunz and the Bebié brothers warned school authorities on several occasions that strict implementation of the school law would lead to “great hardship,” by which they not only meant poverty and dependence on welfare but also raised the specter of the criminality that the impoverished workers would be forced to engage in.⁶⁰ The latter scenario enabled them to position the factory as an educational authority and to present themselves as charitable and caring factory owners. Some petitioners even explicitly stated that they had received help and support from factory owners, as can easily be seen in the language of the appeals. It was precisely this interplay between labor and capital, this “Ausgleich” (balance), according to the contemporary term, that was shortly thereafter caught up in and written out of history.

Caught up in history: Class in struggle

The Aargau families were not alone in their associations and demands. In many early industrialized areas, workers reacted to the legal regulation of child labor with

self-organization and political formation. And yet, the initiatives and positions of *Ausgleich*, as they might be called, were subsequently passed over and overwritten. This primarily has to do with the fact that a little later another, a class-antagonistic position gained influence in the labor movement, one which explicitly distanced itself from the harmonious coexistence of labor and capital. It should be clear that we are talking here about historical materialism.

The *Communist Manifesto*, published in 1848, castigated the early socialist positions as “utopian” and declared that they stood in “an inverse relation to historical development. In proportion as the modern class struggle develops and takes definite shape, this fantastic standing apart from the contest, these fantastic attacks on it, lose all practical value and all theoretical justification.”⁶¹ History, so the argument goes, delegitimizes utopian socialism, and the emerging class antagonisms relegate it to a preliminary stage. By the second half of the nineteenth century, it was pilloried, talked down, and even became the target of various types of polemics.

The most famous attack was probably made by Marx’s son-in-law Paul Lafargue in his book *The Right to Be Lazy*, published in 1883, in which he accuses the early labor movement of having submitted to the religion of work:

A strange delusion possesses the working classes of the nations where capitalist civilization holds its sway. This delusion drags in its train the individual and social woes that for two centuries have tortured sad humanity. This delusion is the love of work, the furious passion for work, pushed even to the exhaustion of the vital force of the individual and his progeny.⁶²

The labor movement, he criticized, had fallen for capital and succumbed to the discreet charms of the bourgeoisie. Socialists had become advocates of labor, which benefited the owners of capital. Those who think this way suffer from “mental aberration,” Lafargue scolded.⁶³ Marx and Engels were friendlier and claimed that “they still dream.”⁶⁴

The teleological conception of the history of so-called scientific socialism also rubbed off on the historiography of the labor movement. Instead of being interested in the precarious lives of families who mobilized socially and organized politically in response to child factory work bans, the focus was on strikes and machine breaking. In Switzerland, for instance, historians routinely recall the first spontaneous factory workers’ strike in 1813, which, not coincidentally, took place in the cotton canton of Aargau.⁶⁵ Another frequently cited event is the so-called Uster Fire of 1832, in which Zurich Oberland home workers destroyed a mechanical spinning mill.⁶⁶ The conflict between labor and capital is of interest, not their harmonious merging and *Ausgleich*. This prioritization is even prominent in *The Making of the English Working Class*, despite E.P. Thompson’s departure from determinism. Although he is aware of utopian ideas of early socialists, he disqualifies them. The philanthropist and social reformer Robert Owen, for instance, is branded as “a preposterous thinker” by Thompson. “There comes through his writings not the least sense of the dialectical processes of social change, of ‘revolutionising practice.’”⁶⁷ While the history of the early labor movement duly acknowledges the heterogeneous composition of the working class (based on profession and qualification, social and regional background, gender, age, marital

status, etc.), it tends to standardize and homogenize the process of class formation.⁶⁸ “The identification of employers as the principal enemy [...] contributed to the forging of class unity,” argues Michelle Perrot.⁶⁹ Global labor historians such as Dipesh Chakrabarty and Marcel van der Linden also commit themselves to this perspective.⁷⁰

If proletarian initiatives against the ban on child labor in factories receive any attention at all, they are judged as false consciousness. Rudolf Braun, a perceptive pioneer of social history, provides a good example of this. Factory workers who demanded a right to work were “hardly aware of their object situation.” His assessment is that they are “bound in an endless cycle to the potter of their working world” and that “their dull revolt is directed against the state, which still wants to diminish and endanger their so pitiful existence.” He concludes by saying that, “It is not a self-confident demanding, but a pleading born of helpless need.”⁷¹ The fact that factory workers ultimately stood with factory owners on the same front against the state was “for our present-day sensibilities a rather strange liaison.” Other historians simply overwrite the resistance to the introduction of compulsory education by drawing attention to the benefits of elementary school for the labor movement itself. According to Jürgen Schmidt, literacy corresponded to the mobilization and organization of workers.⁷²

One might say that the Marxist history of the (early) labor movement produces its own desideratum. But my point here is not to criticize the heuristic blindness or even to speak of a heretical counter-history. Such a “heretical historiography” is the project of Rancière, mentioned in the introduction.⁷³ Rather, I would like to conclude by asking what historians of the labor movement can achieve that also critically engages with their own foundational ideas and epistemological interests.

Conclusion

As a poet who sympathized with the working-class once phrased it: first comes food, then morality.⁷⁴ How the fight for this order of needs is interpreted is a matter of recognizing historical subjectivity and agency, and thus ultimately a matter of social place assignment in history. It can be read as testimony to a lack of intellectual penetration of an economic situation, yet also be interpreted as self-empowerment in the face of a thoroughly precarious mode of existence. In this article, I argue for the latter. Against the background of oppressive wage dependency and a lack of economic alternatives, children’s earnings were indispensable for many proletarian families. Accordingly, they advocated for their children to remain in factories. They varied their survival strategies in order to escape the control of the authorities, but they also joined together, founded schools and articulated common demands against the state ban on industrial child labor.

This integrative stance speaks to one of two aspects that could be starting points for a renewed social history of the early labor movement. What families with children working in factories concocted night after night in the first half of the nineteenth century is more diverse than what a retrospective view through the teleological lens of the concept of class struggle suggests. Of course, this is not meant to deny the inhuman oppression and exploitation of labor forces within the factory system or to trivialize the resistance of the workers against it. Rather, it is necessary to recognize the actual contradictory nature of proletarian struggles for emancipation. Workers gained their identity and

tested their activism in revolutionary struggle against the bourgeoisie, but they also did so in dialogue, and in the adoption and appropriation of bourgeois-capitalist principles. The modes of confrontation and demarcation were directed against both the capital and the state.

A second, closely related facet concerns the genesis of political ideas. As the article has shown, proletarian families articulated a right to work against a concrete material background. Whether they read the early socialist literature of Fourier or the Saint-Simonists, we do not know. What is known, however, is that their politicization was closely linked to their precarious way of life, which was further destabilized and threatened by state authorities. Given this fact, it seems appropriate to integrate experience as a political medium into the history of labor movement more systematically. In this respect, ideas are appropriations of concrete socioeconomic situations and prevailing power relations rather than culturally mediated ideologies and utopias. Ideas are generated “from below” and not simply discoursed into the minds of workers. In this respect, the observation attributed to Klemens von Metternich, “When Paris sneezes, Europe catches a cold,” could not be more wrong.⁷⁵

The contradictory dynamics of proletarian emancipation and experience as a political medium are two entries in a research agenda that can be used to remeasure the contexts in which the labor movement emerged. There needs to be a discussion about how compatible such an agenda really is, especially with regard to the history of the movement in the second half of the nineteenth century. However, I do not want my findings to be understood as simply indicating that the labor movement was divided and atomized. Rather, they should once again stimulate the search for common rationale among social movements. Such logic could lie in its transitory nature, as proletarian emancipation has a tendency toward self-dissolution. Whether workers demanded a right to work and thus argued for bourgeoisification and social inclusion of the proletariat, or whether they committed themselves to communism and advocated for a classless society: all their hopes, desires and struggles were ultimately aimed at making the working class itself disappear.

Notes

1. State Archives Aargau (StAAG), AG 34.627 (Petition to the parliament, February 19, 1835).
2. “Vollziehungsverordnung zum Schulgesetze vom 21. März und 8. April 1835, §113,” in *Neue Sammlung der Gesetze und Verordnungen des Kantons Aargau*, vol. 2 (Aargau, 1835), 144.
3. Claus Offe, *Contradictions of the Welfare State* (London: Hutchinson, 1984), 124.
4. “Moving out of the commodity form” is what they call it. See Anna Tsing, “Sorting out commodities: How capitalist value is made through gifts,” *Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 3, no. 1 (2013): 26; Arjun Appadurai, “Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value,” in *The Social Life of Things. Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 13.
5. Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001 [1944]), cp. 6; Gøsta Esping-Andersen, *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).
6. For a global overview see Myron Weiner, *The Child and the State in India. Child Labor and Education Policy in Comparative Perspective* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 109–15.
7. See Matthias Ruoss, “The Prohibition of Child Labour in Factories Revisited. Towards a Social History of Decommodification in the Early Nineteenth Century,” *International Review of Social History* 69, no. 1 (2024): 25–45.

8. Lee Shai Weissbach, *Child Labor Reform in Nineteenth-Century France: Assuring the Future Harvest* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989); Elisabeth Anderson, *Agents of Reform. Child Labor and the Origins of the Welfare State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021).
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27. Patrick Joyce, *The State of Freedom. A Social History of the British State since 1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), cp. 5.
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32. Heinrich Zschokke, *Volksbildung ist Volksbefreiung! Eine Rede, gehalten in der Versammlung des schweizerischen Volksbildungs-Vereins zu Lausen den 10. April 1836* (Sissach: Aktion-Buchdruckerei, 1836). For Zschokke see Ruedi Graf, "Zschokke, Heinrich," *HLS*, accessed August 29, 2023, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/de/articles/005532/2014-02-24/>.
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39. Robert Gray, *The Factory Question and Industrial England, 1830–1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 60; Elisabeth Anderson, "Ideas in action. The politics of Prussian child labor reform," *Theory and Society* 42, no. 1 (2013): 81–119.
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44. *Rechenschafts-Bericht des Kleinen Rathes pro 1837* (Aargau, 1838), 83.
45. For school absenteeism see Michael Ruloff, *Schule und Gesellschaft um 1800. Der Schulbesuch in der Helvetischen Republik* (Bad Heilbrunn: Klinkhardt, 2017), 62–7.
46. StAAG, DE01/0355 (Report concerning the work in factories and the attendance of the everyday school, by Joseph Wendolin Straub, May 14, 1838).
47. See also Sarah Brian, *Fabrikschulen im Kanton Aargau: "Wunder Fleck im Erziehungswesen"* (unpublished MA thesis, University of Zurich, Zurich, 1999), 46–8.
48. See also E. P. Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," *Past & Present* 38, no. 1 (1967): 56–97.
49. Dominik Sauerländer and Andreas Steigmeier, "Wohlhabenheit wird nur Wenigen zu Theil." *Aus der Geschichte der Gemeinde Gebenstorf* (Gebenstorf: Gemeindekanzlei, 1997), 79.
50. StAAG, R03 P03 0482 (Report concerning the factory conditions, September 30, 1849, 33).
51. StAAG, DE01/0355 (Letter to the government of the canton of Aargau, May 19, 1840).
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53. See Jürgen Schmidt, *Brüder, Bürger und Genossen. Die deutsche Arbeiterbewegung zwischen Klassenkampf und Bürgergesellschaft* (Bonn: J. H. W. Dietz, 2018), 20.
54. StAAG, DE01/0355 (Petition to cantonal school board, August 4, 1840).

55. The Freiamt is a region in the southeast of the canton, the Oberaargau is a region in the southwest.
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58. Ahlrich Meyer, *Frühsozialismus. Theorien der sozialen Bewegung 1789–1848* (Freiburg, München: Karl Alber, 1977), 59–114.
59. Ulla Wikander, Alice Kessler-Harris, and Jane Lewis, eds., *Protecting Women. Labor Legislation in Europa, the United States, and Australia, 1880-1920* (Urbana, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995).
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61. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” in *Collected Works*, vol. 6, 2nd rev. ed., eds. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (Moscow: Progress Publisher, 1977), 71.
62. Paul Lafargue, *The Right to Be Lazy* (Chicago: C.H. Kerr & Co., 1907 [1883]), 9. See also Alastair Hemmens, *The Critique of Work in Modern French Thought, from Charles Fourier to Guy Debord* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), cp. 3.
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71. Braun, *Sozialer und kultureller Wandel*, 118.
72. Schmidt, *Brüder*, 65.
73. See Suter, *Thorn*, 81; Sternad and Mattl, *Apropos Rancière*.
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75. Jörg Bong, *Die Flamme der Freiheit. Die deutsche Revolution 1847/1848* (Köln: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2022), 27.