

## **Cornell Conference on Representations of Work in France**

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A conference on “Representations of Work in France: Place, Practice, Organization and Meaning,” organized by the Western Societies Program at Cornell University, took place on April 28–30, 1983 in Ithaca. Papers ranged from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries and discussed changes in the nature of work, changes in societal attitudes towards work, and the relationship between work, group solidarity, and social protest.

Everyone agreed that his was an exciting conference, well-organized and thoughtfully run. Many interesting papers were presented. Perhaps the most noteworthy feature of conference discussion was its pervasive iconoclasm. Shaken or at least challenged were the concepts of ancien regime corporate solidarity, proletarianization, and artisanal labor. The image of ancien regime corporate solidarity was criticized from many directions. Edward Sheppard Jr. demonstrated that eighteenth-century Dijon corporations, far from growing more exclusive and self-enclosed as the century wore on, actually became more open to outside entry. Using a comparison of Lyon and Nantes, Cynthia Truant revealed frequent and bitter conflict between journeymen and masters. While Michael Sonnenscher, drawing on the marvelous records of the *bureau de placement* of Rouen showed the extreme rapidity of job turnover among Rouennais *compagnons* and suggested that the corporate rituals which symbolized the solidarity of master and *compagnon* were not produced by shopfloor intimacy but rather were an attempt to ritually offset industrial instability. Much of the discussion that followed the presentation of these papers concerned how the reconsideration of relations between eighteenth-century masters and journeymen affected interpretations of the *sans-culottes* movements of the French Revolution.

Several papers touched upon the topic of proletarianization. Participants generally agreed that an intelligent discussion of proletarianization must draw on labor history, family history, and the history of women. During the discussion it became clear that people were interested in studying proletarianization for a diversity of reasons, some in order to understand the evolution of social conflict, others in order to understand changes in family roles and gender differences in the division

of labor. While these were related questions the priority assigned to these issues dictated important differences in emphasis. Joan Scott contrasted the attitudes towards work and family of early nineteenth-century utopian socialists with those of later nineteenth-century Proudhonian and Marxist socialists. Generally she found that the Utopian Socialists had a far more comprehensive understanding of the need to incorporate an analysis of the means of reproduction with that of the means of production than their political successors. She traced the roots of this difference to both changes in the nature of work and to the rise of new political ideologies. She noted that the narrow focus of late nineteenth-century socialists on changes in the means of production had served to make socialists oblivious to the needs of women and families and warned that a similar narrowness on the part of modern scholars would further obscure analysis of the evolution of relations between work and family.

The great attention that scholars have begun to give to class formation has uncovered the diversity and complexity of the process. In the course of this discussion of proletarianization Yves Lequin questioned the usefulness of the term. He noted that in the papers presented to the conference "proletarianization" has been used to describe the decline of the rural domestic workforce and its migration to the city, the ruralization of the Lyonnais silk industry, the breakup of the *atelier* and the domestication of tailoring. How could any one term, he asked, bear the weight of such contradictory phenomenon?

Finally, the meaning of the term "artisan" was a subject of great debate. Michelle Perrot's discussion of the memoirs of Norbert Truquin showed the relative ease with which the poorest of *journaliers* became a *canut*, a skilled Lyonnais silk weaver, after he had obtained the requisite capital. She wondered whether the skill required to enter the silk weaver's trade was not considerably exaggerated. Yves Lequin also suggested that "skill" itself had no meaning and that "artisan" simply indicated some degree of workers' control over entry into a trade. Most participants acknowledged the need to reevaluate the relationship between skill and craft restriction in the formation of "artisanal workers."

In the most controversial of all the papers, Jacques Rancière put forward the proposition that the concept of the "militant artisanal worker" itself was political fiction put forward by politically defeated sections of the workers' movement. Rancière argued that in order to rationalize their political defeat, such men as Joseph Barberet, Denis Poulot, and Maxime Leroy created the image of a golden era, just before the triumph of socialists, when workers had let their work experience and craft pride be their political guide rather than intellectuals like Marx, Guesde, or Lenin. Rancière focused largely on the memoir literature of working-class militants and argued that those workers who most talked about the rewards of work and the political conclusions to be derived from the work experience generally did not exhibit these characteristics in their own work life. Most people at the conference seemed to agree that pride in craft and a feeling of craft identity could be said to characterize the large body of craft workers if not the political spokesmen who articulated this feeling.

It will be a long time before the significance of this conference can be adequately judged. The dominant note of the conference was the criticism of existing conceptual frameworks. Its success will be measured by the extent to which it inspires the refining or the redefining of longstanding ideas in the field.

The agenda of this conference was really tightly packed with papers and meetings, and the above themes were only some of the more important discussed in a real marathon of discussion ably moderated by Stephen Kaplan. There is no for all the fine papers and interesting topics of interest to labor historians that were discussed. In addition to the above, a list of paper topics and authors follows: Ron Aminzade, "Patterns of Proletarianization and Industrial Militancy in Mid-Nineteenth Century Toulouse, Saint-Etienne, and Rouen"; Patrick Fridenson, "Les ouvriers de l'automobile en France et leur travail (1914-1982)"; Michael Hanagan, "Proletarian Families and Social Protest in the Stephanois 1840-1880"; Jeffrey Kaplow, "Parisian Workers at the Universal Exhibitions of 1862 and 1867"; Cynthia Koepp, "The Order of Work in *l'Encyclopédie*"; Yves Lequin, "Apprenticeship and Craft among French Industrial Workers of the Nineteenth Century: Technological Know-how or a Discourse of Resistance"; Anson Rabinbach, "The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue and the Orgins of the European Science of Work"; William Reddy, "The Moral Sense of Farce: The Patois Literature of Lille Factory Laborers, 1848-1870"; Daniel Roche, "Le Travail dans la culture de l'artisanat parisien au dix-huitième siècle: l'exemple de J.L. Ménètra, Vitrier"; William Sewell, "Visions of Labor: Illustrations of the Mechanical Arts Before, In, and After Diderot's *Encyclopédie*."