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Xavier Vigna, *L'espoir et l'effroi: luttes d'écritures et luttes de classes en France au XX^e siècle*. Paris: La Découverte, 2016. 319 pp. Sources, acknowledgements, index, and table. €24.00 (pb). ISBN 978-2-7071-8689-8.

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Hope and fear: these are, according to historian Xavier Vigna, the two principal ideas around which writing about labor revolved in France during the twentieth century. In this lucid and engaging book, Vigna analyzes a vast array of texts written about the working class. In the process, he builds on his thesis of a “working-class centrality” in twentieth-century France, an idea he began developing in a previous book.^[1] According to Vigna, during the twentieth century workers became a central, if not dominant, concern in France, their fate being seen by many as tied to that of the nation. But Vigna does not stop there. With this new volume, he not only highlights the deep heterogeneity that has characterized the world of work in France but also the shifting meanings and values people attached to it, showing that underlying this working-class centrality, the notion of a “working class” itself was continually being constructed and deconstructed through writing. Thus, he is careful to point out that this book is not a cultural or social history of the French working class. Rather, his aim is “to locate the political debates and confrontations around labor [that took place] through writing, the ways in which [labor] was constantly evaluated, devalued, and judged, as well as the uses workers themselves made of writing” (p. 11). In the end, as the book’s subtitle suggests, this study examines how writing about labor in twentieth-century France functioned as an instrument of class struggle, providing both a tool of domination for elites and a means of emancipation for some workers.

One of the principal originalities of Vigna’s book lies in the material analyzed. Two sorts of texts comprise the vast corpus he studies: texts written *about* the working class by outsiders, including government reformers, police personnel, employers, the Catholic Church, and sociologists; and texts emanating *from* workers themselves in the form of personal accounts, autobiographies, and trade union leaflets and other documents. In this way, Vigna can be seen as taking up the torch of Jacques Rancière, in search of “*la parole ouvrière*.”^[2] Yet, unlike Rancière, who aimed to question the authority of those who claimed to speak on behalf of workers, Vigna is primarily interested in the political dimensions of the texts he considers—in other words, the strategies and practices of social positioning they both reflect and constitute. To this end, Vigna divides his book into two sections. The first provides a chronology of the writings over the course of the twentieth century, with chapters focused on key moments associated with various themes and practices in writing about the working class; the second analyzes some of the logics underlying the texts, including the tropes of essentialism and emancipation.

To begin, Vigna looks at writing that appeared during World War I, particularly administrative reports commissioned by the Ministry of Armament under the leadership of Albert Thomas. The purpose of these reports, Vigna notes, was to describe working conditions in order to devise and implement measures to increase production for the war effort. By highlighting the recourse to categories of workers (women, other European nationals, and colonial subjects) that had up until then occupied more marginal roles in

the French workforce, Vigna calls attention to the establishment of a classificatory system, placing native French men at the top of a gendered and racialized hierarchy of labor. This “ontology of different categories of labor,” he submits, would persist long after the war’s conclusion (p. 22).

During the interwar period, attention in writing about labor, Vigna explains, turned to new developments spurring intense social and political conflict. Whereas the increasing rationalization of production was often met with open arms by employers, workers’ reactions tended to be more varied, with at least one union leader describing Taylorism as a “curse” (p. 63). At the same time, the rise of communism not only panicked employers but also the Catholic Church, which decried a working class having lost all faith and values. Such fear, Vigna notes, was especially palpable in the writings of Jacques Valdour, a monarchist close to the proto-fascist Action Française. Valdour’s early experiments in participant observation led him to become a worker in order to better describe working-class life.^[3] Writings on workers during the Popular Front abounded, and the archetypal figure crystallized around the heavy industry worker. Generally French, although sometimes foreign, he was portrayed as willingly communist.

With the advent of the Cold War, state anti-communism, Vigna argues, turned into state “anti-workerism” (*anti-ouvriérisme d’État*) as a flurry of administrative reports, especially texts emanating from the police services, evaluated the French Communist Party’s influence on labor. At the same time, Catholic writing about workers, particularly the work of Michèle Aumont and Gilbert Cesbron, focused on working-class life through direct investigation of workers’ quarters, a mode of inquiry that had fallen out of favor since the rise of Durkheimian sociology.^[4] This literature’s aim to denounce poor working-class conditions in order to improve them, Vigna remarks, linked it to texts being produced simultaneously by trade union leaders and communists. Overall, Vigna argues that during the first decades of the Cold War discourse on the working class in France centered on fears that workers constituted “unconscious propagators of communism” (p. 119).

The events of May 1968 unleashed a tidal wave of writing about labor, much of it focused on the culture of strike activity. According to Vigna, a cacophony of voices, some old and others new, resounded. Joining the established presence of journalists, administrators, union leadership, and activists, ordinary line workers and politicized intellectuals expressed their views of the movement underway. If this surge in writing about labor demonstrated that a working-class centrality persisted in France, Vigna explains that it also exposed a decline in the sway of the Communist Party.

The theme of decline continued during the last decades of the twentieth century, but the focus shifted to that of the working class in general. After the economic downturn of the 1970s, a great deal of writing on labor examined the demise of the working class. Some texts, Vigna notes, maintained a sense of alarm, suggesting that the fear-provoking communist worker of the past had been replaced by the equally frightful blue-collar supporter of the extreme right. Other texts, the author explains, adopted a nostalgic tone, bemoaning the loss of a world of conviviality and solidarity. Increasingly invisible, even scorned, workers themselves took up writing as an act of resistance.

Alone, the first part of the book provides an invaluable, if understandably partial, inventory of the immense corpus of writing about workers that was produced in France over the course of the twentieth century—a veritable archaeology, in the Foucauldian sense, of labor’s diverse representations. The second part of the book builds upon the first through an astute analysis of the logics and values underlying these representations. Thus, drawing on Saïd, Vigna proposes the idea of “interior,” or what might be better translated as “domestic,” orientalism—that is, a form of class racism that sought to prove the intrinsic inferiority of workers by insisting on their supposed social, cultural and moral deficiencies. He demonstrates how sociological and administrative investigations into working-class life contributed to the construction of a working class likely to instill fear. Workers were frequently described as dangerous, licentious, indolent, smelly, and alcoholic. Rather than link such traits to workers’ material conditions of existence, authors, he notes, tended to ascribe them to ancestry, as did one writer in his 1910 doctoral

dissertation on the “mentality” of Limoges’s porcelain workers: “The porcelain workers are nearly all from Limoges or its surroundings. From father to son, the race is perpetuated without mixing” (p. 186). At the same time, through a careful reading of employer-produced documents Vigna shows how a hierarchy of workers was established, having at its base rural workers, women, and, especially, immigrants. These categories in turn were subject to further subdivision, he explains, with “Negros” (*Nègres*) being described as less desirable than “Arabs,” for example.

In response, writing by militant workers reflected class antagonism, relating the sense of domination workers suffered at the hands of bosses, foremen, and other supervisors. These texts attempted to overcome the stigma workers bore by highlighting workers’ positive qualities and by decrying the difficulties they encountered. Thus, Vigna explains how working-class hands became a symbol not only of working-class know-how, hard won through tough labor, but also of the continual fear workers faced of losing their hands—the chief instrument of their labor—because of the dangers associated with their jobs.

Such writing against the denigration of workers leads Vigna to consider in his final chapter workers’ relationship to the act of writing itself, which, despite increasing access to education, continued to represent an “immense obstacle in the world of labor” well into the twentieth century (p. 261). Workers who did write, Vigna explains, did so in many forms, including personal letters and accounts, autobiographies, works of fiction, and leaflets. However varied, these texts, Vigna argues, shared at least one aim—that of emancipation, whether individual or collective, from class subjugation. This conclusion leads Vigna to question the very idea of “proletarian literature.” If writing unavoidably changed the workers who undertook it, elevating them above their original class position, does it make sense to qualify the texts they produced as “proletarian”? This question in turn sets the stage for a fascinating discussion of language and authenticity, as Vigna highlights authors who attempted to reproduce or imitate working-class parlance and others who adopted “academic” French; both groups did so, he explains, in an effort to lend legitimacy to their texts.

In conclusion, in this thought-provoking volume Xavier Vigna methodically tackles thousands of pages written by or about workers over the course of the twentieth century in France. Through careful analysis and critical interpretation, he illuminates the varying logics, values, and practices underlying this massive corpus. With its focus on the political dimensions of these texts—that is, their role in the construction of a class system, whether through the tropes of domination or resistance—this book is likely to appeal to scholars in a variety of fields, including social, cultural, and political history, sociology, anthropology, and literary studies. More broadly, as the employment landscape continues to shift dramatically today, it invites reflection on contemporary representations of labor, both within France and beyond.

NOTES

[1] Xavier Vigna, *Histoire des ouvriers en France au XX^e siècle* (Paris: Perrin, 2012).

[2] Jacques Rancière (with Alain Faure), *La parole ouvrière, 1830-1851* (Paris: UGE, 1976).

[3] Jacques Valdour, *Sous la griffe de Moscou. Ouvriers de Paris (La Chapelle), de Billancourt et d’Issy. Observations vécues* (Paris: Flammarion, 1929).

[4] Michèle Aumont, *Les dialogues de la vie ouvrière* (Paris: SPES, 1953); *En usine, pourquoi?* (Paris: Fayard, 1958); *Femmes en usine. Les ouvrières de la métallurgie parisienne* (Paris: SPES, 1953); Gilbert Cesbron, *Les saints vont en enfer* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1962).

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