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Ludovic Frobert, *Les Canuts ou la démocratie turbulente. Lyon, 1831-1834*. Lyon: Tallandier, 2009. 224 pp. Annexes, notes, illustrations, and index. 25 € (pb). ISBN: 978-2-84734-570-4.

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The past several decades have been marked by a rich harvest of new scholarship on the Lyon *canuts* (or silkweavers) and their world, much of it produced by American historians such as George Sheridan, Jeremy Popkin and Mary Lynn Stewart-McDougall.[1] But the most numerous and most recent contributions have been the work of Ludovic Frobert, a *directeur de recherches* with the CNRS at Lyon. Over the past six years Frobert has published numerous articles on the *canuts*, organized conferences, and put online the entire body of the Lyon's working-class press for the early July Monarchy, the period of the two great Lyon insurrections of 1831 and 1834.[2] The book under review is the culmination of this work.

The title is a bit misleading. For the book does not offer a general history of the silkweavers during this period, and Frobert does not tell once again the stories of the revolts of November 1831 and April 1834, during which the *canuts* came down from their workshops on the height of la Croix-Rousse to take control of the city.[3] Rather Frobert's aim is to describe the attempt on the part of Lyon's silkweavers to elaborate what he calls "une économie politique originale" in the 3000 pages of newspapers the silkweavers published between 1831 and 1835.

Much the most important of these newspapers was the *Echo de la fabrique*, a weekly created by a group of stockholders consisting largely of *chefs d'atelier* or master weavers. Although *chefs d'atelier* owned their own looms and often employed weavers themselves, they were generally regarded as workers. Thus the *Echo de la fabrique* could, and did, present itself as representing the point of view of the weavers. And this despite the fact that at the outset both the principal editors were men of letters: Antoine Vidal, a poet known as "le Béranger lyonnais," and Marius Chastaing, a legal representative and a republican who was at the beginning of a long career as a pioneer of working-class journalism. The first issue appeared on October 30, 1831 in the midst of the agitation over the *tarif* or piece-wage, which led to the *canuts'* rebellion three weeks later. It was the first significant working-class newspaper to be published in France.

For four years this weekly newspaper and its successor the *Indicateur* were, in Frobert's words, to provide a forum in which silk weavers could "s'entendre, s'informer, débattre, prendre voix" week after week "to try to adapt the complex structure of the Lyon silk industry to ongoing industrial change in such a way as to preserve their autonomy and their liberty" (p. 23). The Lyon silk industry had resisted the movement toward industrial concentration, and it was wedded both to a decentralized business model and to handicraft methods of production. Over the years the master weavers had also developed traditions of organization, mutual aid and self-government, which were in some ways unique among French workers in the period of early industrialization. The urgent question confronting them was how much of this could be maintained in the new industrial world that was coming into being. Thus for four years, the *Echo de la fabrique* and the *Indicateur* were full of articles and arguments concerning "l'économie

sociale,” “l’association industrielle” and “l’enseignement mutuel.” There were also recommendations concerning good “proletarian readings” and articles on contemporary social and political theories and on the sessions of the *conseil des prud’hommes*, the arbitration council that regulated disputes within the Fabrique. In addition, readers sent in poems and chansons, while regular correspondents crossed swords with rival journals, including the *Courrier de Lyon*, which was backed by the prefect.

What is most interesting and original in Frobert’s analysis of the *Echo de la fabrique* and Lyon’s other working-class journals is his subtle and nuanced discussion of the efforts made by the *canuts* to assimilate and make use of contemporary social theories and political ideologies such as Saint-Simonism, Fourierism and republicanism. The first of these in time was Saint-Simonism. As early as the spring of 1831 Pierre Leroux and Jean Reynaud had organized a Saint-Simonian “mission” to Lyon, preaching to sufficiently large and responsive audiences that the civil authorities could later accuse them of having inspired the November insurrection. In fact, the Saint-Simonians were in Frobert’s words “taken by surprise” by the violence of November (p. 44). A few weeks later the *Echo de la fabrique* reprinted long excerpts from an article by Michel Chevalier describing “the canon-fire at Lyon” as “the first signal of a great work to be accomplished,” the “sainte et religieuse” work of “pacifying, harmonizing and binding together all the industries and all the workers of the globe.” In the course of the next year, the *Echo de la fabrique* reprinted numerous articles by the Saint-Simonians and reported at length on their activities at Paris and their subsequent “missions” to Lyon. Nonetheless in January 1833 Marius Chastaing could write: “We are not Saint-Simonians. Their mystical ideas, their system with regard to women, their blind submission to a single man considered as the judge of the capacities of his disciples—these are the motives of our estrangement from the doctrine.” Like the Saint-Simonians, wrote Chastaing, the *Echo* sought the liberty and the dignity of workers, but by different means.

Frobert’s final assessment of the influence of the Saint-Simonians on the *canuts* is nuanced. He writes that the journalists of the *Echo* transformed the intuitions of the Saint-Simonians and made them their own. In the writings of the Saint-Simonians, he argues, “the *canuts* could find . . . an invitation to make industry a central concern of politics” (p. 47). They were excited by the Saint-Simonian vision of industrialization as offering “vectors of physical and moral emancipation” for the working class, and they also came to share the Saint-Simonian hope that, if conflict could not be entirely suppressed in the new industrial world, it could be put to good use. At the same time, however, the *canuts* were fearful of the Saint-Simonian preference for centralization and hierarchy. For this threatened their effort to imagine a future in which dispersed workshops would remain the basis of production.[4]

The second major ideological influence on the *canuts* was republicanism. Frobert argues that the period from August 1832 to August 1833 was marked by an alliance between the editors of the *Echo de la fabrique*--notably Marius Chastaing--and a republican movement revived after the Parisian *journées* of June 1832. As Gabriel Perreux was to point out, Lyon at this time was “the first republican city of France.”[5] But Frobert argues that the republicanism that flourished at Lyon was federalist in style, emphasizing not only freedom of the press but also the autonomy of the provinces with regard to the capital and hostile in some respects to the centralism of the Parisian republicans. During this period there was a strident tone to the articles in the *Echo*, and its history was marked by what Frobert describes as “a long litany of repression: interdictions, condemnations, trials” (p. 81). By the late summer of 1833 the editors were asserting that there could be no significant social reform without the prior establishment of republican institutions. At the same time however, the *canuts* became increasingly suspicious of the emphasis on centralization in republican discourse--on the role to be played by an omniscient and

omnipotent “puissance centrale et protectrice” and on the vision of industrial concentration and rationalization “underlying their emancipatory rhetoric” (p. 94).

Frobert’s third phase in the history of the *canuts* begins in the fall of 1833 with the buildup of tensions that was to culminate in the violent insurrection of April 1834 and the harsh repression that followed. This period was marked by what Frobert calls the “implosion” of Lyon’s working-class press and the concomitant split of the silkweavers into two rival groups. On the one hand, there were the *mutuellistes*--the master weavers who were also members of the Société de Devoir Mutuel, the mutual aid society created in 1828 by Pierre Charnier, which had become by the end of 1833 an important center of resistance against the *maîtres marchands* who controlled the silk industry. On the other hand, there were the followers and allies of Marius Chastaing who, after being fired as editor of the *Echo* in July 1833, went on to create a series of new working-class journals, most notably the *Echo des travailleurs*, which claimed to reach an audience consisting of “all classes of workers” and not only the *canuts*.

In the end it was the mutualists who won out. Having taken over the *Echo de la fabrique*, their movement grew rapidly during the winter and spring of 1834. By the time of the April 1834 insurrection, the number of *chefs d’atelier* in the Société de Devoir Mutuel had reached around 2500. And Frobert writes that after the repression of the insurrection, “even though stifled by the authorities, mutualism went underground and sought to renew itself and to continue its action” (p. 123). The alliance established earlier between mutualists and republicans was maintained. But henceforth the *chefs d’atelier* were more conscious of the autonomy of their movement and the specificity of their demands.

It was at this point, in the wake of the crushing of the April insurrection, that the ideas of Charles Fourier found an influence among the silk weavers. Frobert’s handling of the question of the appeal of Fourierism to the *canuts* is sensitive--and particularly interesting in light of the fact that it has often been argued that Fourier’s ideas had little influence among the working class.[6] Frobert discusses not only the appeal of the major themes of Fourier’s thought but also the response of the *canuts* to Fourier’s “tone”--Fourier’s radical break with existing doctrines and the apparent practicality of his thought, his insistence on putting his ideas to the test. But Frobert’s main contention is that a crucial element in the appeal of Fourierism to the *canuts* was the idea of “attractive work.” Unlike the Saint-Simonians and republicans who asserted that a new religion or new political institutions would bring the emancipation of workers, Fourier had argued that liberation would come within the world of work. Thus in addition to their critique of commerce and of the abuse of women in contemporary society, “the Fourierists offered the *canuts* a doctrine indicating how, on the basis of their economic activity as associated producers, they could emancipate themselves politically, regain control of the setting of their wages, and become once again the authors of their lives and their condition” (p. 125). More than this, Frobert argues, Fourier’s doctrine--as reworked by his Lyonnais disciples such as Jacques Rivière cadet and Michel Derrion--helped the *canuts* to articulate their defense of the system of dispersed workshops and to propose concrete means to loosen the hold of the merchants on the whole industry.

Frobert’s book concludes with a discussion of the most significant and enduring of these experiments in practical Fourierism: Michel Derrion’s creation of a network of consumers’ cooperatives intended to free working people at Lyon from the grip of the large merchants. In June 1835 with the help of the master weaver Joseph Reynier, Michel Derrion opened his first cooperative grocery store on the Montée de la Grande Côte, leading up to la Croix-Rousse. This experiment in “truthful commerce,” directly inspired by the ideas of Charles Fourier and initially “conceived under the gunfire” of April 1834, was in fact the first in a long line of French consumer cooperatives. It inaugurated a tradition that is still very much alive.

What emerges from this original and thoughtfully conceived study is a picture of the *canuts* that emphasizes their creativity and resourcefulness. Frobert's *canuts*, the *canuts* of the *Echo de la fabrique* and its various successors, are not the desperate, impoverished and barely literate rebels celebrated in 1892 in Aristide Bruant's memorable "chanson des canuts." Nor are they the menacing barbarians evoked by Saint-Marc Girardin in a famous article in the *Journal des débats* in December 1831. They are resourceful, energetic, curious about the world, and eager to reflect on their own condition and their own possibilities. Frobert sees them as engaged, through their press and through their collective life—through the creation of associations such as the Société de Devoir Mutuel—in an "original experiment in democracy" (p. 173). He describes it as a "turbulent" but also an "inventive" democracy in which the *canuts'* great concern was to maintain the system of dispersed workshops while adapting it in such a way as to shield them from both old and new forms of dependence and finally to gain some measure of autonomy and control over their lives and the conditions in which they worked.

This is an impressive book. It might be said that it does not tell us much about the material history of the working-class press at the beginning of the July Monarchy. Probably due to the absence of appropriate sources, there is little on the printing, circulation and readership of the *Echo de la fabrique*, its successors and its rivals. But what we do find here is an original, thoughtfully conceived, carefully researched, and elegantly presented intellectual history of the efforts of the Lyon silkweavers to imagine and achieve a better life during the period in which they were at the forefront of the French labor movement.

NOTES

[1] George Sheridan, Jr., "Craft technique, Association and Guild History: The Silk Weavers of Nineteenth-Century Lyon," *Guilds and Association in Europe, 900-1900*, eds., Ian A. Gadd and Patrick Wallis (London: Centre for Metropolitan History, Institute of Historical Research, 2006), pp. 147-168, and *The Social and Economic Foundations of Association among the Silk Weavers of Lyons, 1852-1870*, 2 vols. (New York, Arno Press, 1981); Jeremy Popkin, *Press, Revolution and Social Identities in France, 1830-1835* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002); Mary Lynn Stewart-McDougall, *The Artisan Republic: Revolution, Reaction, and Resistance in Lyon, 1848-1851* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1984).

[2] <http://echo-fabrique:ens-lsv.fr>

[3] Fernand Rude, *Le Mouvement ouvrier à Lyon de 1827 à 1832* (Paris: Domat-Monchrestien, 1944) and *Les Révoltes des canuts (1831-1834)* (Paris: La Découverte, 2007); Robert Bezucha, *The Lyon Uprising of 1834. Social and Political Conflict in the Early July Monarchy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974); Maurice Moissonnier, *Les Canuts. "Vivre en travaillant ou mourir en combattant."* Paris: Messidor/Editions Sociales, 1988).

[4] Frobert's comments on the canuts' appropriation and criticism of Saint-Simonism dovetails in interesting ways with Michèle Riot-Sarcey's richly suggestive analysis in *Le Réel de l'utopie* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1998), 167-201 of the insurrection of November 1831 as a moment of intellectual awakening in which Saint-Simonian and other radical ideas acquired new life and meaning when taken up and discussed by individuals seeking concrete solutions to specific social problems.

[5] Gabriel Perreux, *Au Temps des sociétés secrètes: la propagande républicaine au début de la Monarchie de Juillet, 1830-1835* (Paris: Reider, 1931).

[6] See for example Hubert Bourgin, *Fourier, Contribution à l'étude du socialisme français. (Thèse)* (Paris: Société nouvelle de librairie et d'édition, 1905), p. 424, where Fourier's disciples during the 1830s are described as "des propriétaires tranquilles, des conservateurs prudents ou des libéraux timides: c'étaient des bourgeois attachés aux bases de la société par les liens de leur naissance, leur situation, les conditions de leur vie."

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