

H-France Review Vol. 11 (May 2011), No. 104

Keith Mann, *Forging Political Identity: Silk and Metal Workers in Lyon, France, 1900-1939*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2010. xv + 264 pp. Tables, illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$95.00/£58 (hb). ISBN 978-84545-645-0.

Response by Keith Mann, Cardinal Stritch University.

Professor Steven Zdatny's review of my book *Forging Political Identity: Silk and Metal Workers in Lyon, France, 1900-1939* takes issue as much with the school of labor history of which the book is a part as it does with my particular rendering of that genre. Professor Zdatny begins his review by curiously misidentifying my work as belonging to the "old social history." In fact, my book was initially inspired by the "new labor history" of the 1970s and 1980s (which today might be termed the "old new labor history"). That new labor history was inspired by social history's project of "history from below." For labor history, that meant abandoning the traditional institutional focus on labor organizations in favor of studying workers' everyday experiences. Some focused on workers' experiences at the point of production. Others focused on working class communities. Much of that literature explored the role of collective action in working class formation.

I would situate my book as both being in that tradition but going beyond it in three essential areas. First, I consider gender not only to be a "useful category" to paraphrase Joan Scott, but an essential one to labor studies.[1] I consider social experiences involving labor to be gendered at all levels, from the productive process to the structure of politics. That perspective informed my study of silk and metal workers in Lyon. Second, while the new labor history veered away from politics, my book is part of a trend among some labor historians over the last fifteen years to combine social and political labor history. Third, many of those otherwise fine labor histories of the 1970s and 1980s assumed a base superstructure model from which I explicitly break, in favor of a richer, more refined materialist class analysis. It might not be Professor Zdatny's *tasse de thé*, but authoritative social historians like Geoff Eley and Keith Nield have recently issued an elegant defense of precisely this type of historical sociology.[2]

Throughout his essay, Professor Zdatny suggests that my historical vision has been compromised by my "ideological dispositions." I'll leave it to readers of my book to determine if it has been. But Zdatny seems to have his own ideological axes to grind. How else for example, can one explain his bristling at my discussion of how capitalist rationalization in the 1920s and 1930s was harsh and brutal, and the argument (which in fact I did not advance) that employers might be somehow morally responsible for the terrible working conditions and exploitative nature of industrial work at that time?

Professor Zdatny takes issue with my entire view of industrial development. I seemed to have not only "ignore(d) the 'employers' perspective," but have unfairly imputed to them the worst of motives. "Were the people who owned and ran Lyon's Berliet auto works," asks Zdatny rhetorically, "motivated solely by the desire to deskill their workers, reduce their wages, and arrange industrial accidents?" I would answer that they were motivated by the interrelated goals of maximizing profits, fending off market competitors, and wresting and asserting management authority on the shop floor from and over their workers. They did this through methods that included deskilling and wage cutting. The frantic search for increased production and profitability involved speed-up drives that unquestionably led to increased

industrial accidents. This has nothing to do with reducing capitalist industrial behavior to a “simplistic morality tale” as Zdatny charges. Rather, I would argue, employer-worker relations reflect deep social struggles that are rooted in material social relations and interests.

Professor Zdatny sees “two predictable blind spots” with “historians who write this sort of labor history *engagée*....First, the author focuses much of his indignation on the way that the rationalization of production tended to *deskill* workers” (Zdatny’s italics). My book supports the work of other labor historians and industrial sociologists who have shown how skilled workers during the twentieth century experienced deskilling. Together, our work supports Harry Braverman’s contention that deskilling is a fundamental feature of industrial capitalism.[3] Deskilling is also part of a larger process of proletarianization which helped stimulate and shape modern collective action and contentious politics. Michael Hanagan writing on France, Victoria Bonnell on Russia, Michael J. Neufeld on Germany, Laura Lee Downs on England and France are only a few of the many historians whose work has linked capitalist rationalization, deskilling, and collective action in the second industrial revolution. Zdatny acknowledges that “machines replaced human skills.” But then he tells us that “machine work often created its own need for different kinds of skilled labor.”[4] Does Professor Zdatny mean to suggest that deskilling was somehow offset by the creation of new skilled occupations in France during the period in question? If he does, he hasn’t shared that information with us. Industrial sociologists have identified and analyzed cases of *enskillment* such as in the North American paper industry, but I found no cases of new skilled jobs created in Lyon’s silk and metal working industry for the years I studied, nor am I aware of any such cases elsewhere in French industry.

Zdatny complains that I have not shown the evolution of wage rates as a way of demonstrating that workers did indeed experience deskilling. But wage rates could very well have reflected many things including inflation, government monetary policy, sectoral differences between and within industries, the effect of international competition, fluctuating prices of raw materials, and other variables. Since I was looking to chart the effect of industrial change on skill, I looked closely at the evolution of occupations over time. In table 5.1 on page 120 and table 8.1 on page 199, I demonstrate that entire skilled trades disappeared between the turn of the century and the 1930s. I also demonstrate that the percentages of skilled workers to semiskilled workers in the various factories I studied sharply declined nearly everywhere. While fin-de-siècle metalworking shops were dominated by skilled workers aided by a few unskilled helpers, semiskilled workers came to gradually take their place and eventually heavily outnumber skilled workers. By 1920, there were already as many semiskilled machine operators as there were skilled workers at medium sized metalworking factories like the General Magnet Company in Lyon (p. 201).

This deskilling provoked collective resistance. In *Forging Political Identity*, I offer detailed information on the content of strike demands in both the silk and metal trades. Like other labor historians before me, I argue that strikes, protests, and complaints against piecework, speed-ups, dangerous working conditions, et cetera, reflected both the rationalist and Taylorist onslaught on worker shop control and the worker resistance it stimulated.

Professor Zdatny feels that my “indignation” at this deskilling reflects “a romanticized view of the control that workers exercised in the preindustrial workshop and of the job satisfaction they subsequently lost to machines and foremen.” He goes on to claim that “(l)abor troubles in the preindustrial silk trades suggest that skill had neither given silk workers control of the production process nor produced much job satisfaction.” Here Professor Zdatny has both misread the evidence I have presented and either ignores or rejects an extensive literature in labor history that has underscored the high degree of skilled worker control prior to the second industrial revolution. In particular, it is hard to believe that anyone with even passing familiarity with the social and labor relations and work conditions surrounding the famous preindustrial Lyonnais silk worker, the *canut*, could question their high degree of control over the labor process. As skilled workers laboring in their own homes working on their own tools (hand-powered looms) the *canuts* and their male and female helpers had virtually total

control over the labor process. There were no foremen, no assembly lines that could be sped up, nor any other direct constraints on, or surveillance, over the pace and intensity of work. Conflict in the silk industry stemmed from the control of the merchant capitalist who distributed orders and raw silk over the rate (tariff) paid per order. The capitalists sought continuously to lower those rates which provoked some of the most furious labor struggles of the first half of the nineteenth century, such as the uprisings of 1831 and 1834.

The other silk occupations I studied, dyers and finishers, more closely resembled skilled workers on the eve of the second industrial revolution in France and elsewhere. Working in small, often family-owned shops, these workers enjoyed far less shop floor control than the *canuts*. But they often came and went as they pleased, frequently owned their own tools, and enjoyed far more control over the pace and rhythm of work than was the case for a later generation of industrial workers. This world of work was vastly different from that which followed: an industrial work environment based on Taylorist rationalization including assembly lines, a sharply increased division of labor, and a shop floor regime that included fines, speed-ups, and threats from aggressive foremen and guards.

Professor Zdatny's second complaint with the school of labor history of which this book is a part is my/our "idealization of the working classes" which led me to "close" my "eyes to the diversity of working-class identities in favor of my "notion of what the working class *should* be." In fact, I do acknowledge in the book that workers had multiple identities, many of which were not those of class or occupation (p. 6). But I also argue that then, as now, significant numbers of workers in France bore distinct political identities. The two political identities that I described were of course not born by all workers, but abundant evidence does more than suggest that they were very widespread, that these were indeed *mass* phenomena. Politics and labor protest, including strikes and mass public demonstrations, were part of working class life. Workers were constantly exposed to the organizations and symbols of class-based politics at work and in their residential communities. The programs and ideologies these represented were part of the political opportunity structure (POS) that interacted with industrial social relations (ISR) to shape working class political identity. Unfortunately, Professor Zdatny's characterization of my theoretical framework distorts my explanation of how POS and ISR effected political identity formation.

Zdatny's doubts about whether these working class political identities actually existed beyond the fantasy of the left-wing imagination echoes postmodern critiques of materialist class analysis. A more sophisticated version of Zdatny's argument drew on the analytical tools of French literary criticism to make a similar claim. Scholars applying the "linguistic turn" to labor studies argued that the working class is merely a discursive construction. This challenge had an initially salutary effect on labor history by stimulating attention to some of the weak spots of material class analysis as it was practiced by labor historians at the time. However, these have not led to sustained or significant studies of workers as discursive creations. Class analysis on the other hand, remains a fruitful arena of interdisciplinary research.

Professor Zdatny "imagines" that most workers were "tired, busy, apathetic, or Catholic" and even "far right." Tired and busy? Certainly, especially women wage workers faced with the "double shift" of wage work and domestic work. Apathetic? While it is true that relatively small percentages of workers in France did actually belong to unions, collective action around labor and political issues was a *mass* working class phenomenon in France. As a group, French workers then and now have been particularly active in public affairs. The huge mass mobilizations that protested government plans to increase the retirement age last fall, which were in fact worker demonstrations organized by labor unions, continue a long tradition of mass working class political mobilization in France. Zdatny holds that "not a few must have gone into the streets for Boulanger or the anti-Dreyfusards or voted for Poincaré or followed de la Roque." In fact, the historical record indicates that far right-wing workers, at least until more contemporary times, have been few indeed. The far right *ligues* of 1930s France and their fascist co-

thinkers in Italy and Germany were remarkably unsuccessful in attracting working class support. It is curious that a European and French historian such as Professor Zdatny would not be aware of this. Perhaps he has confused industrial workers with the independent artisans that have been the object of his own research. French artisans were a notable component of the reactionary, far right-wing Poujadist movement in the early 1950s, a period later than that covered in my book.

Professor Zdatny also takes issue with my approach to strikes. Once again, I am accused of letting my ideological preferences distort the actual role of strikes in working class life. Strikes we are told “lacked the support of the majority of workers.” Accordingly, it “seems” to Zdatny to be a “misreading of labor history to see these rare and short-lived moments of activism and solidarity as the natural state of things.” Yet, for much of the period under study, labor protest including strikes, far from being “rare” was in fact quite ubiquitous. Industrial protest was particularly heavy during the years I studied and those struggles were largely provoked by employer rationalizing drives. The 1920s saw a sharp dip in strikes, but this was due to employer and state repression, not to worker “apathy.”

Finally, Professor Zdatny accuses me of only a perfunctory attention to gender. Worse, I don’t look for “its two main manifestations: in the machismo of the labor movement and in the unions’ scant attention to and weak defense of women workers.” My intention, however, was not to focus on the “manifestations” or representations of gender, but on the way that gender *structures* industrial production, skill, collective action, and politics. The intersections between these are explored in all the chapters devoted to silk and metal workers and the Popular Front.

Here, as elsewhere, our differences reflect fundamentally different approaches, methodologies, and interpretations of French social and labor history. But if workers didn’t bear distinct political identities, if deskilling didn’t occur, if militant working class collective action and politics were largely the preserve of a *minorité agissante*, if those struggles didn’t help shape political identities, what does Professor Zdatny offer as an alternative agenda for French labor studies? The closest he comes to proposing an alternative to the type of book I have written is a lament that labor and business history haven’t dialogued enough with each other. Then, he provides a list of labor historians whose work might somehow contradict mine, but hélas, we are not told how.

## NOTES

[1] Joan Scott, “Gender: useful category of historical analysis,” *The American Historical Review*, 91/5(December 1986): 1053-1075.

[2] Geoff Eley and Keith Nield, *The Future of Class in History* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007).

[3] Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capitalism: The Degradation of Work in the 21st Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974).

[4] Michael P. Hanagan, *The Logic of Solidarity: Artisans and Industrial Workers in Three French Towns, 1871–1914* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980); Victoria Bonnell, *Roots of Rebellion: Workers’ Politics and Organizations in St. Petersburg and Moscow, 1900–1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); Michael J. Neufeld, *The Skilled Metalworkers of Nuremberg: Craft and Class in the Industrial Revolution*. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1989); Laura Lee Downs, *Inequality: Gender Division in the French and British Metalworking Industries, 1914–1939* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1995).

Cardinal Stritch University  
[kamann@stritch.edu](mailto:kamann@stritch.edu)

Copyright © 2011 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172