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Xavier Vigna, *Histoire des ouvriers en France au XXe siècle*. Paris: Perrin, 2012. 395 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. 24.00€ (pb). ISBN 978-2-262-02887-9.

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“Let no one misunderstand me: this book does not intend to be the umpteenth handful of earth thrown on the badly closed coffin of the working class” (p. 9). On this colorful and rather defensive note Xavier Vigna opens his sweeping history of French labor during the twentieth century. A seasoned historian of working class France, Vigna brings to his subject a breadth of knowledge and an energetic writing style.[1] As he makes clear, a key theme of this study is to explore what it means to write labor history and to conceive of the working class as an entity worthy of historical study, at a time when labor is under siege. Does one adapt the perspective of rise and fall, or search for underlying continuities? Does the trajectory of the French working class parallel or mirror that of the twentieth century as a whole, and if so how? Perhaps most important, what does a survey of this history reveal about labor’s prospects for the future in France? In other words, is labor history?

In this well-researched and thought-provoking study, Vigna addresses these questions and more, providing a fine survey of a field that has been relatively neglected by historians of France in recent years (a phenomenon that forms part of his history).[2] *Histoire des ouvriers* tackles its subject from a few key vantage points. At its center is a focus on what Vigna calls “working class centrality.” In brief, he argues that during the twentieth century workers became a central, if not dominant, part of the French nation. Not only did working people constitute a large percentage of the national population by mid-century, but socially and politically they seemed in a position to influence and perhaps even decide the fate of the nation as a whole. This concept most closely fits the paradigm of rise and fall, since Vigna concludes with a detailed analysis of the decline of labor since the 1970s. More generally, it explains what was special about the labor history of the twentieth century, as well as contributing to the overall history of France in the contemporary era.[3]

In examining this idea, Vigna takes three primary approaches. First, in the best traditions of social history, Vigna considers both working class movements, mostly although not entirely unions and left-wing political parties, and at the same time working class social, cultural, and community life. While he pays a great deal of attention to life on the job, especially the issue of rationalization as a key factor in twentieth-century French workplaces, he also considers issues of religion, leisure and entertainment, and in particular education and training. Second, while underscoring the importance of working class life and consciousness, he also attends carefully to internal differences within that class. In particular, he not only notes the presence of working women and immigrant laborers, but perhaps more significantly examines how their particular histories nuance broader narratives of French labor history. He also pays significant attention to regional differences, comparing the Paris area, older industrial regions like the Nord, and more recently industrialized areas like Brittany. In doing so, Vigna confronts the significant challenge of explaining how a social formation could be both extremely diverse and yet a unified entity at the same time. The result is a complex portrait of working class France, one that underscores the many different types of experiences it contains without losing sight of the broader picture. Finally, *Histoire des ouvriers en France* systematically places the history of French workers in European

perspective, in particular making comparisons with British and Italian labor. Many of the key events in French labor history, such as World War II and May 1968, look significantly different when considered from this angle.

Histoire des ouvriers en France proceeds chronologically, beginning with the Belle Epoque and concluding with the economically troubled present. The book's structure suggests periodizing French labor's twentieth century in three main segments: from the Belle Epoque to the outbreak of war in 1939; the Second World War and the *trente glorieuses* until the mid-1970s, and the final quarter of the century. At the beginning of the century, workers had emerged as the largest occupational group in the country, surpassing farmers for the first time in the 1911 census. However, the term "working class" covered a wide variety of experiences, ranging from industrial cities to small towns, and including many rural workers at home. Vigna's discussion of this early period does not cover the intensive strike waves of the Belle Epoque, spurred on by inflation, government intransigence, and events like the Courrières mining disaster of 1906; attention to these issues would further buttress his claims about working class centrality in the twentieth century.

World War I proved a major landmark in working class history, not only increasing industrial development and proletarianization but also developing new government initiatives targeting labor, such as the eight-hour workday, as well as giving rise to a new working class politics symbolized by the birth of the Communist Party. Vigna underlines the exceptional nature of the revolutionary years 1919-1920, noting the strong employer reaction against working class militancy and political radicalism during the interwar years. The other major event in this period, the Popular Front, nonetheless highlighted the survival and growth of militant labor consciousness in France, marking an important stage in the rise of working class centrality. For example, Vigna underscores the importance of working class images in the cinema of the 1930s as an example of how the experience of labor to an important extent was that of France as a whole.

The period from the 1940s to the mid-1970s marked the apogee of working class centrality in France. It started in agony, with the collapse of the Popular Front in 1938 followed by the defeat and occupation of 1940. Vigna explores the ambiguities of working class attitudes to Vichy and the Resistance, while also noting how the struggle against fascism gave French labor new national prominence, symbolized above all by the spectacular rise of the Communist Party. For Vigna, this sense of ambiguity characterizes this middle period in general. During the thirty years known as the *trente glorieuses*, workers' percentage of the active population rose to nearly 40 percent, in large part thanks to the decline of agriculture, and the Communists became and remained one of the largest political parties in France. The period also saw a heightened intellectual concern with labor and class, especially in sociology, not to mention the passage of important social legislation that significantly improved working class living standards. At the same time, this period of prosperity began with the defeat of Tripartism and the massive strike wave of 1947-1948, and the effective political ghettoization of the PCF. Workers might live better and have a larger presence in national life, but to an important extent they remained a class apart. Vigna's extensive analysis of the strikes of May and June 1968, the largest strike wave in French history, underscores this sense of alienation and the continued difficulties of life in the industrial workplace. 1968 represented both the ultimate example of working class centrality in France and its last hurrah.

Vigna concludes his study with an extended analysis of French labor since the 1970s. He underscores the fact that this era has constituted one of the longest periods of general economic downturn in the modern era, even more than the Great Depression of the late nineteenth century. In his story, the impact on French labor has been brutal: workers have declined from nearly 40 percent of the active population in the 1970s to 25 percent by the end of the century. Certain industries and industrial regions, like Lorraine and Picardie, have experienced declines of as much as 75 percent. Vigna notes that this decline of labor has had an intellectual component, with a decreased interest among sociologists and historians in working people and class in general. The traditional working class institutions, the PCF

and CGT, have seen their numbers and influence virtually collapse during the same period. Vigna considers how working people have adapted to these hard times, often with bitter but usually unsuccessful resistance, concluding that while workers still exist, the phenomenon of working class centrality has come to an end with the twentieth century.

This brief outline hardly does justice to the richness of Vigna's study. Throughout he demonstrates an in-depth knowledge of working class life and the ways in which it has changed since 1900. He considers, for example, shifts in working class culture, and the ways in which cultural practices differ according to gender, generation, region, and nationality. At one point Vigna gives a fascinating discussion of *la perruque*, the practice of taking industrial materials on the job and crafting them into objects of beauty and political symbolism. In another example, he describes how Peugeot workers saluted the Socialist victory on May 11, 1981 by only making red cars that day. Vigna also describes in great detail the leisure practices of French workers, their tastes in sports and music, and the rise and fall of working class subcultures. Crucial subjects like housing and education also received extensive discussion. All in all, *Histoire des ouvriers* is a detailed and perceptive guide to a key part of the history of twentieth-century France.

Vigna is also careful throughout to consider the experiences of women, youth, and immigrant workers. He notes that young workers since the 1950s have been shaped by formal education to a much greater extent than their parents, giving them at times very different perspectives on working class culture. He also compares the experiences of women in the factory occupations of 1936 and 1968, observing how they played a much more prominent role in the latter than in the former. For immigrant workers, he shows how the Popular Front did much less for them than for workers in general. At times Vigna could extend his analysis of working class difference further, especially in the realm of culture. He notes, for example, that much of working class public culture was very masculine, but he might also consider specific practices of working class women, both on and off the job. Similarly, there is little attention here to the many cultures of working class immigrants, ranging from Jewish garment workers and Polish miners in the interwar years to the postcolonial migrants of the postwar period. It would be interesting, for example, to compare the cinema of the Popular Front with the so-called *banlieue* films of the 1990s, a very popular genre focused on the experiences of working class "second generation immigrant" youth (and young men in particular). Developing such perspectives would of course be a major undertaking, one that suggests avenues for future research.

In sum, Xavier Vigna's *Histoire des ouvriers en France au XXe siècle* is a very valuable study that makes a major contribution not just to labor history but equally to the history of twentieth-century France. Engagingly written and very well researched, it makes the case for rescuing French workers from the invisibility to which both capitalist globalization and much postmodern scholarship have consigned them. Specialists in the history of modern and contemporary France will find this book a worthy addition to their collections.

NOTES

[1] Xavier Vigna, *L'insubordination ouvrière dans les années 68. Essai d'histoire politique des usines* (Rennes: Presse universitaire de Rennes, 2007).

[2] For example, a survey of H-France reviews by subject reveals 23 on studies of labor history, as opposed to 168 on intellectual history, 159 on colonialism/imperialism, 119 on literature, 102 on gender, 95 on art, 75 on women's history, 38 on immigration and refugees, and 24 on theater.

[3] For some important recent studies of labor in contemporary France, see Keith Mann, *Forging Political Identity: Silk and Metal Workers in Lyon, France, 1900-1939* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010);

Anne-Sophie Bruno, *Les chemins de la mobilité: Migrants de Tunisie et marché du travail parisien depuis 1956* (Paris: Editions de l'Ecole des hautes études en sciences, 2010); Laura Levine Frader, *Breadwinners and Citizens: Gender and the Making of the French Social Model* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008); Patrick Fridenson and Benedicte Reynaud, *La France et le temps de travail, 1814-2004* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2004); Michael Seidman, *The Imaginary Revolution: Parisian Workers and Students in 1968* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004); Laura Lee Downs, *Childhood in the Promised Land: Working Class Movements and the Colonies de Vacances in France, 1880-1960* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002); Leslie A. Schuster, *A Workforce Divided: Community, Labor, and the State in Saint-Nazaire* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 2002); Michael Torigian, *Every Factory a Fortress: The French Labor Movement in the Age of Ford and Hitler* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1999).

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