

H-France Review Vol. 7 (March 2007), No. 21

Yves Lequin, et. al., *Ouvriers, villes, et société: autour d'Yves Lequin et de l'histoire sociale*. Paris: Nouveau Monde éditions, 2005. 296 pp. Introduction, bibliography. €34.00 (pb). ISBN 2-84736-142-1.

Review by Frieda Fuchs, The College of Wooster.

This volume, which celebrates the work of the French social historian Yves Lequin, will be welcomed by scholars on both sides of the Atlantic. The limited exchanges between North American and French scholars can be disappointing, especially given their interest in many of the themes that preoccupied Lequin. Many of these themes—from labor and urban history to the impact of the Great War on French public opinion—are explored in this volume. In investigating them, Lequin made a point of familiarizing himself with British and American scholarship, thus avoiding the frequently self-referential quality of French historical scholarship (p. 274).

The scholar whose work this volume honors defies easy categorization. Although formally trained as a labor historian—his colleague Michelle Perrot referred to him as “the French E. P. Thompson” (p. 88)—his work is highly eclectic and interdisciplinary. As such this volume should be of interest not only to labor historians, but also to urban historians, demographers, sociologists, historically-oriented political scientists, and anthropologists.

Lequin was born in 1935, the year preceding the formation of Léon Blum’s Popular Front, a political event that he referred to frequently in his writings. Having acquired the coveted *agrégé en histoire* (1960), Lequin became an *attaché de recherche* at the CNRS (1967-71) and obtained a *docteur ès-lettres* from the University of Lyon (1975). For the next two decades, Lequin was a professor of contemporary history at the University of Lyon-II (1977-1997) (p. 285). In this capacity he helped direct the Centre Pierre Léon devoted to commissioning studies and surveys of workers in the Lyon region. (p. 10). In addition, between 1992 and 1997, Lequin held the Senior Chair in the Comparative History of Industrialized Societies (nineteenth and twentieth centuries) at the Institut Universitaire de France (p. 285).

Having trained several generations of young French historians and collaborated with scholars in the United States, Lequin established a distinguished reputation. The influence of his work on those who were privileged to study or collaborate with him is apparent from this book. Although not a *Festschrift*, it is a work that honors the contributions of an eminent scholar, mentor, and colleague. The book is divided into two parts, each one of which has two subsections. The first subsection of each part contains a selection of Lequin’s original essays; the second subsection contains critical essays, commentaries, and elaborations on Lequin’s work by other scholars. The book’s organization leaves something to be desired, however, as it is only after reading the work in its totality that the connections among the subsections and the relationships of individual authors to Lequin’s work become more understandable.

The first subsection of the first part of the book (“La Formation de la Classe Ouvrière”) brings together Lequin’s earlier writings on the working-class history of Lyon, including an excerpt from his impressive two-volume study *Les Ouvriers de la région lyonnaise dans la seconde moitié du XIXe siècle* (1977), the work that established his reputation as an important labor historian. Lequin’s research highlights how the Lyon region was an important center of trade and commerce even before the Industrial Revolution. Furthermore, it was home to several branches of industry, such as silk weaving, coal-mining, metallurgy, automobiles, and printing. The region experienced several cycles of industrial boom and

bust as well as demographic shifts caused by migration from the surrounding countryside and from Italy. Lequin's essays emphasize the heterogeneity of the region's working class, both in terms of its relationship to the production process and cultural orientation. The seasonal nature of work, the roots of the workforce in the countryside, and the constant mobility of this workforce in Lyon and presumably other parts of France, call into question the notion that there was a category called the French working class with a unified perspective or clear developmental trajectory. The essays in this part of the book also highlight the divergence between the official working-class history of the *Confédération Générale de Travail* and the *Parti Communiste* centered in Paris and the local roots of the working class in a complex socio-economic and cultural landscape. The main conclusion--that the working class was shaped more by cultural than economic forces, as testified by its identification with middle-class values rather than by class interactions with fellow members--displays the strong influence of E.P. Thompson and his emphasis on the crucial role of culture in shaping working-class identity.

Although Lequin's work is informed by quantitative sources, from birth records to marriage licenses, strike activity, and dietary habits--a clear testimony to the influence of Fernand Braudel--Lequin goes well beyond Braudel's framework. Thus, in his essay "À la recherche d'une mémoire collective: les métallurgistes retraités de Givors," he discusses the value of oral interviews as a way to get at what hard statistics and traditional social or political history often leave out: the role of specific categories of workers as bearers of collective memory (its presence, for example, among the Lyon metal workers and its absence among glass workers). The essay is methodologically interesting as it deals with issues of content validity, sample size, and other methodological concerns, thus self-consciously echoing E. P. Thompson's Anglo-Saxon method.

The second sub-section of the first part of the book is entitled, "Regards-I," and includes interpretative essays by Michelle Perrot and John Merriman. Both essays are extremely valuable as they offer insight into Lequin's intellectual genesis as well as his place in French labor historiography. Perrot, it should be pointed out, is an old collaborator, having shared with Lequin the economic historian Ernest Labrousse as a mentor (p. 8). Her essay, for its part, systematically explores the impact of E. P. Thompson's work on Lequin's *Ouvriers de la région lyonnaise*, his connection to the Annales School and Charles Tilly's Center for Quantitative History at Cornell University, and his rejection of Marxist methodology and accounts of working-class history (pp. 88-90).

Merriman's essay--the only one in the volume written by an American scholar--explores Lequin's connections to Anglo-American scholarship, from E. P. Thompson to Theodore Zeldin, Charles Tilly, Richard Sennet, Joan Scott, Lynn Hunt, William Sewell, Elinor Accampo, and others. In addition, Merriman draws comparisons between Lequin's work and that of his European counterparts who either collaborated with him or helped lay the foundation for urban histories that examined the complex interaction between industrialization, urbanization, and working-class consciousness. From this interdisciplinary and international effort has emerged, for example, Accampo's study of Saint-Chamond, Pierre Aycoberry's study of Cologne, Daniel Jalla's examination of Turin, and Merriman's own work on Limoges.

This part of the book also includes an essay by art historian François Loyer in which he investigates the resistance of architects to nineteenth-century public building codes that regulated the physical features of urban middle and working-class housing in Paris. This struggle between state officialdom and a professional group is symptomatic of the larger conflict between a hierarchical state intent on imposing its vision of public good (order, hygiene) and a society intent on preserving its individual autonomy. In arguing thus, Loyer builds on some of the urban history themes that Lequin explored in *Histoire de la France urbaine*, his three-volume *Histoire des Français (XIXe-XXe siècles)*, and articles in the journal *Le Mouvement Social*.

Françoise Cribier's essay--the final one in this part of the book--addresses another theme that interested

Lequin: the life trajectories of a generation of male and female workers born between 1906 and 1912 in the Paris region. A geographer by training, Cribier's essay focuses on the regional origin, education, social mobility, and quality of life of this generation of workers based on a representative survey sample of 1,370 workers (the data were collected in 1974). The diverse social experiences of these workers defy easy generalization. In addition, the essay calls into question the notion of progress in areas such as public health, as it demonstrates a continued disparity in the life expectancy of workers and the general population. According to Cribier, it was easier to lower general mortality rates than to eliminate the differences between social classes. Nevertheless, while such inequalities have persisted for half a century, the essay also highlights the inter-generational mobility of working-class children born in the post-World War Two era, most of whom entered the growing middle class (pp. 139-40).

The second part of the volume follows a similar structure. Its first subsection, entitled "L'épanouissement des sociétés industrielles et urbaines," is a compilation of Lequin's writings on a number of wide-ranging topics, from his path-breaking 1967 essay "1914-1916: l'opinion publique en Haute-Savoie devant la guerre" (1967) which appeared in *Le Mouvement Social*, to his essays on the history of work and apprenticeship, and an excerpt from the three-volume *Histoire des Français* that he helped edit and write together with a group of colleagues and students.

Lequin's seminal article on public opinion in Haute-Savoie was motivated by the opening of departmental archives that contained a survey of public attitudes towards the declaration of war in 1914. The survey was carried out by the French medievalist Petit-Dutaillis in response to a government inquiry. Originally envisaged as a nationwide survey, it ended covering only two regions, Dauphiné and Haute-Savoie (Lequin's observations were confined to the thirty six communities of Haute-Savoie). Despite its narrow geographic scope, Lequin's conclusions challenged conventional wisdom: the wave of patriotic enthusiasm was not manifest in this part of the country. The ambivalence of the local rural population, many of whose members joined the ranks of the working class, and the persistence of traditional religious orientations in this region, contradicts the thesis of Marxist scholars about the growth of left political orientations in France's rural areas and highlights the "absurdity of positing a collective working class consciousness independent of its local economic and social structures" (p. 155).

Lequin's essay on apprenticeship "L'Apprentissage en France au XIXe siècle: rupture ou continuité," examines the persistence of apprenticeship throughout the nineteenth century, despite technological factors (greater mechanization) that militated against it. The continuation of arcane rites and rituals of initiation in the modern setting of the textile industry, the transposition of old job categories onto new hierarchies in mining, and the continued demand for traditional expertise, testify to the persistence of old cultural forms and call into question theses about the deskilling of labor in a period of industrialization.

The second part of part two, entitled "Regards-II", contains a series of reflective essays: Jean-Jacques Becker's piece on Lequin's debunking of the myth of French patriotism; François Caron's essay on apprenticeship; Patrick Fridenson's essay on the history of consumption, focusing on automobiles; an interpretative essay by Antoine Prost on Lequin's vision of social history; and Serge Bernstein's essay, "De l'histoire sociale à l'histoire de la société."

It is only appropriate that Prost's and Bernstein's essays occupy the final place in the volume. As one of the most famous political historians of the twentieth century, Prost gives the final word on the work of Lequin as the master social historian of the nineteenth century (although Lequin also wrote on the twentieth century, his historical work by and large explores the roots of contemporary developments in the previous century). Prost places Lequin in historiographical context, arguing that Labrousse and E. P. Thompson exercised the greatest influence on his work (p. 274). Prost further argues that together with Roland Treppe and Michelle Perrot, Lequin is to be counted as the major social historian studying the impact of demographic shifts from the countryside to the city (pp. 273-74). Bernstein's short essay

concludes with a theme that runs through many of the essays; Lequin's argument that the French working class was a fluid and complex group that was drawn to conservative and liberal doctrines as well as to socialism (pp. 281-82).

If I were to give a short guide to reading this volume, I would suggest that the reader first take a look at the brief introduction, and then move onto the interpretative essays by Perrot, Merriman, and Prost, Lequin's own essays, and, finally, the research articles that were inspired by his work. Ideally, this should have been the way in which the book was organized. In addition, it is hard to see why the selection from Lequin's work could not have been expanded to include his works on immigration, disease, and public health. Furthermore, the chronology of Lequin's academic career, though extremely helpful, could have been accompanied by a short biographical essay by the scholars (presumably his students, although even this remains unclear) who edited this collection of essays. Finally, the book could have profited from a synthetic concluding essay that would have brought its various sections together. However, there is a useful bibliography of Lequin's writings.

In conclusion, the reader is likely to be both impressed and frustrated by this volume. On the positive side, the book gives us a strong sense of the significance of Lequin's work, the complexity of his research, the breadth of his scholarship, and the extent of his intellectual influence. On the other hand, the book's organization could have been more transparent, while the editors could have drawn out some of the broader theoretical implications of Lequin's work more explicitly. Nevertheless, this challenging book will appeal to both labor historians and the broader historical and social-scientific community interested in the social effects of industrialization in France and beyond.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Sophie Chauveau, Bruno Dumons, Olivier Faron, Gilles Pollet, Michelle Zancarini-Fournel,
"Introduction"

Part One: "La formation de la classe ouvrière"

Yves Lequin, "Les ouvriers de la région lyonnaise (1848-1914)"

_____, "Á la recherche d'une mémoire collective: les métallurgistes retraités de Givors"

_____, "Ouvriers dans la ville (XIXe et XXe siècle)"

_____, "Jalons pour une histoire de la culture ouvrière en France"

_____, "Á propos de l'identité des groupes ouvriers aux XIXe et XXe siècles: statut social ou engagement politique?"

"Regards-I"

Michelle Perrot, "Yves Lequin et la formation de la classe ouvrière"

John M. Merriman, "L'historiographie récente des identités urbaines au XIXe siècle"

François Loyer, "La forme urbaine et ses raisons: deux siècles de tradition réglementaire à Paris"

Françoise Cribier, "Ouvriers et ouvrières dans une cohorte de salariés parisiens du secteur privé retirés en 1972"

Part Two: "L'épanouissement des sociétés industrielles et urbaines"

Yves Lequin, "1914-1916: L'opinion publique en Haute-Savoie devant la guerre"

_____, "Histoire des Français"

_____, "Sociale (Histoire)"

_____, "L'apprentissage en France au XIXe siècle: rupture ou continuité?"

_____, "Le métier"

"Regards-II"

Jean-Jacques Becker, "Yves Lequin et la Grande Guerre"

François Caron, "L'innovation collective en histoire des techniques"

Patrick Fridenson, "Histoire et consommation: hommes et femmes en France devant l'acquisition d'automobiles en l'an 2000"

Antoine Prost, "L'histoire sociale selon Yves Lequin en 1984"

Serge Berstein, "Yves Lequin, de l'histoire sociale à l'histoire de la société"

Copyright © 2007 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

H-France Review Vol. 7 (March 2007), No. 21

ISSN 1553-9172