
H-France Review Vol. 9 (June 2009), No. 74

Matt Perry, *Prisoners of Want: The Experience and Protest of the Unemployed in France, 1921-45*. Aldershot, England and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007. xiv + 296 pp. Notes, appendices, bibliography and index. \$99.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-7546-5607-4

Review by Laird Boswell, University of Wisconsin-Madison.

The history of unemployment is not the most vibrant of fields. Changing historiographical concerns, the declining interest in social and especially economic history, the difficulty of writing about those whose traces are few have all contributed to the relative paucity of the literature. Unemployment, however, remains critical to understanding the nature of work and social identity in contemporary societies, the growth of the welfare state, and the forging of new social movements. The development and persistence of mass unemployment in France since the mid-1970s spurred social scientific investigations of the phenomenon in the contemporary period. The historical literature — the one concerned with the pre-World War II period in particular — has remained somewhat stagnant since the publication of the pathbreaking works by Christian Topalov (*Naissance du chômeur*) and Robert Salais et al., (*L'invention du chômage*) in the 1980s and 1990s.[1] Matt Perry's study of the interwar years, *Prisoners of Want: The Experience and Protest of the Unemployed in France, 1921-45* thus appears to be a welcome intervention in the field.

Unemployment in interwar France never reached the peaks that it did in neighboring industrial nations, nor did it follow the same chronology: it attained maximum level in 1935, four years after Great Britain and Germany. France's some 500,000 unemployed (1935) paled in comparison to the close to 6 million without work across the Rhine a few years earlier. The statistics, however, only tell part of the story. Perry believes that the official figures underestimate the phenomenon and argues that unemployment, because it is a transitory phenomenon, affected a substantial proportion of France's workforce. But Perry is not primarily concerned with the debate concerning the definition, nature and extent of unemployment, nor is he concerned with the more intriguing question of why, comparatively speaking, French unemployment remained low by Western European standards (though he does provide a useful summary of the discussion). Instead, he turns his attention to the unemployed who organized (and were organized) in defense of their interests. In Perry's view, the movement of the unemployed has been unjustly neglected by historians and deserves revision. Part rehabilitation, part militant history, part historical analysis, Perry's book seeks to restore the unemployed to their rightful place. The *chômeurs* are Eugène Pottier's true *forçats de la faim* (prisoners of want), on the lips of all those who struck up the International in the 1930s, and whose place in collective memory has long disappeared.

The movement of the unemployed was not nationwide in nature, but rather a series of partly autonomous movements that mimicked the uneven distribution of unemployment across France. Perry is more successful at describing the movement's geographical diversity than he is at explaining it. Particularly strong in the industrial North and the Pas-de-Calais, the movement also struck roots around Lyon and St-Etienne, the Seine Inférieure, the Loire Inférieure (St-Nazaire, Nantes), and the Paris region, though it was less present in other key industrial regions (Alsace-Lorraine for example). The movement developed during the economic downturns that marked France's interwar experience. Perry carefully traces these recessions (1921, 1926-27, 1932-on) — though he does not explain why it

makes sense to analyze them together -- and chronicles the slow emergence of associations of unemployed. The first *Comités de chômeurs*, which saw the light of day in 1927 under the aegis of the French Communist party (PCF) and the CGTU (Confédération générale du travail unitaire), were short-lived. The Depression gave birth to a more structured movement of the unemployed, one that would gather steam in 1932 and remain in the spotlight until the Popular Front reached power. The *Comités de chômeurs* were, by and large, the creation of Communist party militants and sympathizers; tensions (that are too little explored by the author) grew between grass roots members and professional militants in charge of carrying out the line of the Communist party and the International.

What, then, did the associations of unemployed do? Their actions varied across time and space, often including protests against evictions from rental housing, demands for better services from non-communist municipalities (summer camps, housing, food, subsidies), and the expansion and reform of unemployment funds. But the signature form of unemployed protest, one that lies at the heart of Perry's analysis, was the Hunger March, a strategy copied from the British, German and American examples. The Hunger Marches focused public attention on the plight of the unemployed in ways that ordinary demonstrations could not. The most famous took place between Lille and Paris in late December 1933 and was firmly in the hands of the Communist party. The 120 participants -- including a substantial number of PCF militants and cadres -- played cat and mouse with police as they made their way to the Paris region where they were joined by large numbers of demonstrators in Saint-Denis' *Stade de l'Unité*.

The analysis of the hunger marches and of other forms of unemployed protest does not, however, live up to the book's initial promise. Perry's exhaustive research is not to blame: he has read widely in the secondary literature, consulted vast numbers of prefectural reports on the unemployed and the PCF, and tracked down an impressive number of *chômeurs* newspapers. But he is overwhelmed by the minutia of his research and poorly served by his prose. His central chapters are too descriptive and read more like a catalog of unemployed protests than an analysis of their significance. The level of detail is a hindrance to the narrative and a barrier to analysis. The hunger marches share much in common in terms of their course and structure. It would have been more profitable to place the marches in a broader interpretive framework rather than recapitulate each single march in detail. Perry does present judicious analyses and questions commonplace interpretations -- but these moments are too often buried at the end of chapters rather than placed front and center.

This is not a book about the social movement of the unemployed. *Prisoners of Want* is far less concerned with "the experience and protest of the unemployed" than it is with the Communist party's attempt to organize and instrumentalize them for its own purposes. Of the experiences of those without work we learn little. And protest movements located outside the orbit of Communist influence play second fiddle in the analysis-- a pity given that some of the book's strongest and most intriguing pages are devoted to the role of Socialists, Anarchists, Catholics (the Jeunesse ouvrière chrétienne), and trade unionists (the Confédération générale du travail) -- not to mention unemployment associations established by Jews, Armenians, Chinese, and Poles. Perry does not always clearly distinguish among those parts of the movement firmly in control of the PCF and other parts that enjoyed more autonomy. Paradoxically, while Perry is sometimes critical of the Communist party's twists and turns, he often conflates the perspective of the Party hierarchy with the grass roots movements of the unemployed and ends up presenting the PCF as the embodiment of the broader social movement. Perry celebrates the movement's decentralized nature, but portrays it as controlled by the PCF's centralized apparatus. By and large, the Communists used the unemployed movement to further certain strategic goals that were far removed from the daily concerns of the unemployed. Surely this created tensions with membership at the grass roots and accelerated the movement's demise.

Perry devotes little attention to assessing the political and social impact of the unemployed movement on its participants. If there is any reliability to the figures cited in appendix 11 (p. 264) (and I suspect

they are highly inflated), then close to 30 percent of the French unemployed (some 135,000) belonged to *Comités de chômeurs* in 1935 – a number that surpassed Communist party membership handsomely. The vast majority of those who joined PCF-aligned *Comités de chômeurs* were not Party members. Whether their short-lived association with this “mass organization” had an impact on their social and economic vision remains unexplored. The more interesting question, one that remains unanswered in these pages, is why the social movements of the unemployed remained weaker in France than in neighboring countries. Finally, some of Perry’s broader arguments concerning the movement’s impact on society and the causes of its decline are open to question. The claim that the movement of the unemployed contributed markedly to Communist party electoral and membership gains is not substantiated in the book, and the proposition that the movement fostered the “remaking” of the French working class (by bringing together immigrants, industrial workers, and new ones from rural areas who lacked experience with “struggle”) is tenuous. Equally problematic is the argument that the Popular Front (and later the Resistance platform) contributed to the institutionalization, sclerosis, and ultimately the marginalization of the movement.

There is considerable material in this book to help us recast the history of French communism in the 1930s, trace the genesis of new social movements and reflect on how and why they fail. Perry stops short of addressing these questions and proposing interpretations that could reframe the historiography. But readers who are willing to put in the effort will find a solid corpus of evidence in this book to think about these issues.

NOTES

[1] Christian Topalov, *Naissance du chômeur, 1880-1910* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1994); Robert Salais, Nicolas Baverez and Bénédicte Reynaud, *L’invention du chômage: Histoire et transformations d’une catégorie en France des années 1890 aux années 1980* (Paris: PUF, 1986).

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ISSN 1553-9172