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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. \$98/£58 (hb). ISBN 978-84545-645-0.

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Readers who miss the old social history will probably like Keith Mann's *Forging Political Identity*, a study of French workers' struggle against industrial capitalism in the silk and metalworking trades in Lyon from the fin-de-siècle through the Popular Front. A student of Charles Tilly and currently chair of the Sociology Department at Cardinal Stritch University, Mann applies the analytical tools of the social sciences in an "unabashedly structuralist, materialist, and Marxist" idiom (p. 246) to produce "a work of French labor history and historical sociology." (p. 2)

The book begins with the observation that politics saturated the working lives of the Lyonnais proletariat. In an ideological and political feedback loop, their occupational experience set the boundaries of their political identities. These identities then became the filter through which workers experienced their labor. The result is a sort of mathematical model, where Political Opportunity Structure (essentially the political context) plus Industrial Social Relations determines Political Identity: $POS + ISR = PI$. To summarize:

1. The most important fact in the working class's view of the world is its place in the organization of production;
2. That view is also affected by certain political traditions, which depend largely, but not entirely, on the details of working life;
3. The translation of "objective" experience and "subjective" tradition into a functioning political identity is necessarily shaped by the prevailing Political Opportunity Structure.

This amounts to a more subtle way of arranging things than the old Marxist model of sub- and superstructures, but it has the same moving parts.

Forging Political Identity attacks the history of silk and metal workers in Lyon in a more or less chronological fashion, with separate chapters for each sector. Before launching into his analysis, however, the author offers three contextual chapters. The first looks broadly at industrial social relations in France during the second industrial revolution, running from the last quarter of the nineteenth century up through World War I. Since the basis of Mann's analysis is the changing structure of production and the battle for control of it, this chapter lays out the contours of that process, paying special attention to rationalization and mechanization, as well as to worker resistance thereto.

The second chapter examines the development of the labor movement and its ambivalent relationship with the young Third Republic. Reaching back to the golden age of French labor history—to the classic work of Tilly, Shorter, Stearns, and Lefranc—Mann charts the early days

of political socialism and revolutionary syndicalism in Lyon, when the political traditions were established that defined the labor movement up to World War II. With his clear preference for a more assertive working-class politics, the author deplores the left-wing leadership that squandered the natural revolutionary tendencies of the working class, especially their support for war in 1914, but he takes some solace in the energy that infused the rank and file as wartime discipline and privation began to bite in 1917.

Chapter three focuses on the Political Opportunity Structure presented to the labor movement by the Third Republic, both nationally and in Lyon. The principal theme here is the shifting relations between working-class organizations and the Radical Socialists (RS) who mostly ran the city. The two sides made uneasy allies, since the RS moved back and forth between populist reform and the staunch defense of property, while the labor movement remained split between the “class collaborationist, nationalist” current, associated with the electoral strategy of the socialist parties, and the “class independence, anti-nationalist” wing, which found a home in the revolutionary syndicalism of the CGT.

The next several chapters get to the meat of Mann’s concerns, unpacking the process by which Industrial Social Relations and Political Opportunity Structure produced Political Identity in the silk and metal industries of Lyon. The two sectors followed starkly different trajectories, but Mann is very clear about what he sees as the essence of the process in both cases: industrial development is war. Capitalists were the aggressors, always trying to exert greater control of the labor process and make the workers’ lot more miserable, usually with the support of the state. Workers resisted this grinding aggression, defending their skills and the autonomy they provided, striking against piecework, speedups, nasty foremen, and the ravages of mechanization that threatened to turn everyone into an underpaid, semi-skilled operative.

Times were tougher in the silk industry, and they got worse in the twentieth century. Conditions in the factories and dyeing shops were horrible, wages low; skill counted for less and less. The dispersed and increasingly feminized workforce put up some sporadic opposition to the establishment of a “capitalist labor market,” but they had little leverage. Strikes had a dismal record of success. The war made matters worse, as it shifted capital and labor to more strategic industries. For all these reasons, silk workers developed a political identity that leaned toward socialist moderation.

The second industrial revolution transformed metallurgy more dramatically. The battles here often resembled those in silk. Employers sought to rationalize the labor process, which inevitably meant “deskilling.” They likewise sought to impose piece rates and seize control of training young workers. Metallurgy did *not* resemble silk in several important ways, however. For one thing, changes in technology and the organization of production advanced much more quickly in the former, while the stakes were higher in the more capital-intensive industry. For another, whereas silk had a large contingent of female workers, *métallos* were an exceptionally manly bunch: overwhelmingly men and very masculinized. In their case, ISR and POS added up not to a pallid and compromising socialism, but to a heroic and rambunctious taste for revolutionary syndicalism, although their more frequent recourse to strikes does not seem to have produced many more victories than in the silk industry.

For Mann, the Great War provided a particularly pointed moment of class conflict. He disapproves of the *Union Sacrée* and the “anti-German hysteria” (p. 45) that swept the country following the German invasion. He is more concerned, however, with the way the war made the French state a more determined and repressive supporter of capitalist rationalization, and with the CGT’s sellout to the cause of victory under the leadership of Merrheim and Jouhaux. When

the war was over, labor's bottled up resentment boiled over, although it could not deflect the long-term growth of "capitalist labor markets."

On the contrary, the war accelerated the pace of capitalist development at both the leading (metallurgy) and lagging (silk) edges of the second industrial revolution. In silk this meant mechanization, feminization, and continued decline (p. 164) even before the depression administered the coup de grâce. Prices fell, presumably wages stagnated (although the author does not provide this information), and the eight-hour day never arrived. Misery and desperation did not drive silk workers into political radicalism, though. True to their moderate socialist traditions, workers in the silk industry remained relatively immune to the appeal of communism.

The advance of the "capitalist labor market" in metallurgy was more complicated. *Métallos* had largely lost their battle for autonomy by the 1920s, despite the survival of several islands of skilled work in the modern factory system. Meanwhile, the intensification of work accompanied "constantly degraded conditions." Metal workers therefore switched the focus of their collective resistance from control of the labor process to higher wages. Yet even as they changed tactics, they carried their prewar political traditions into the postwar struggle. Revolutionary syndicalism no longer defined the "class independence, anti-nationalist" current, of course. That banner was now being carried by the PCF and the CGTU. The author does not notice the irony of the Communist Party denouncing industrial rationalization, and the CGTU did not attract a much larger portion of the working class than the revolutionary syndicalists had done a generation earlier. Still, his emphasis on the durability of political *tendances* seems to ring true.

The book's final chapter concentrates on the Popular Front years, when a sudden turn in the POS produced a profound shift in proletarian PI. Even the Communist Party joined in "a sort of class-infused patriotism" (p. 222) that grew out of a common opposition to fascism but also out of "the tenor of shop floor labor struggles" (p. 231) that found its ultimate expression in the wave of strikes that humbled "a previously arrogant and powerful employing class" (p. 234). What followed is familiar enough. Employers in the metal industry, feeling the gun at their heads, signed a collective contract calling for hefty wage raises and the rest of the Matignon package. But "as soon as they believed that the time was ripe," writes Mann, "... employers began to refuse to respect the collective bargaining agreements they had signed" (p. 237). The whole Popular Front episode ended in frustration and bitterness in November 1938, when the CGT called for a General Strike and nobody came. Well, hardly anybody. According to the author, 72.48 percent of metal workers nationwide participated--although it is hard to know where this figure comes from, since the appended footnote is blank (note 73, p. 245). In the end, the story Mann tells is both epic and tragic: epic in the long struggle of working people for dignity and a decent living; tragic in their failure to win it.

Forging Political Identity contributes to our understanding of the process of industrial development and of the defensive reactions of those who found themselves on the wrong side of history. It nevertheless has some substantial flaws. These are of two sorts: flaws common to the genre and flaws belonging to Mann's particular rendering of it. In the last several years I have reviewed three studies of French labor closely resembling Mann's^[1] and written my own study of labor in the hairdressing trades during the same period.^[2] So I have put some thought into the matter.

The main issue is this: Historians who write this sort of labor history *engagée* commonly exhibit a number of predictable blind spots. Two of Mann's "spots" will make the point. First, the author focuses much of his indignation on the way that the rationalization of production tended to *deskill* workers. It is true enough that machines replaced human skills and that the affected

humans fought that replacement with all the strength they could muster. Then again, machine work often created its own need for different kinds of skilled labor. In any event, the author's indignation rests on 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. Labor troubles in the preindustrial silk trades suggest that skill had neither given silk workers control of the production process nor produced much job satisfaction.

Second, Mann's idealization of the working classes leads him, *inter alia*, to close his eyes to the diversity of working-class identities. He prefers the heroic elements that fit his notion of what the working class *should* be. However, there were a lot more things going on at the level of proletarian identity than "class-independence, anti-nationalism [and] class collaborationist" moderation. The very weakness of the trade unions and the small proportion of workers who attended socialist meetings or supported strikes suggest that most laborers had other priorities besides revolution. Most, I imagine, were tired, busy, apathetic, or Catholic. Not a few must have gone into the streets for Boulanger or the anti-Dreyfusards or voted for Poincaré or followed de la Roque. But the author does not see them.

Strikes present a particular analytical problem for the heroic history of labor, since they represented the apotheosis of struggle between employees and employers but almost always ended in triumph for the capitalists. The reasons for this record of labor defeats are not far to seek: First, capitalists held the better hand. This may be unfortunate but is, after all, one of the reasons workers opposed capitalism in the first place. Second, however, strikes led by the most militant elements among the workers ordinarily lacked the support of the majority of workers. In other words, the cause was lost as much by labor's division or lack of interest as by capitalist perfidy and state repression. There were exceptions to this rule—for example in the immediate aftermath of World War I or the spring of 1936, when circumstances allowed some exceptionally successful strike activity. Yet it seems to me a misreading of labor history to see these rare and short-lived moments of activism and solidarity as the natural state of things.

If Neo-Marxist labor histories tend to overlook the inert majority of workers, they ignore capitalists almost completely. I have never comprehended how we could hope to get a full picture of industrial development without a view from the employers' perspective. Yet the wall between labor and business history seems as solid as ever. Were the people who owned and ran Lyon's Berliet auto works, to take one example, motivated solely by the desire to deskill their workers, reduce their wages, and arrange industrial accidents? That is certainly the impression Mann gives. Partly that reflects an ideological disposition; and it does not help that he uses the communist press as the main source of his insight into the capitalist mind. Without a careful consideration of capitalist motives and calculations, however, the bourgeoisie become a mere Malicious Principle and history is reduced to a simplistic morality tale.

It is revealing in this respect that, although Mann frequently refers to the degradation of labor, he provides no accounting of real wages in the two sectors he studies. It is entirely possible, I suppose, that industrial rationalization depressed wages as it destroyed old manufacturing skills and that, on top of discipline and alienation, it crushed workers under a more intense and less remunerative routine. My suspicion is that something rather different happened. Rationalization shook up the labor process and shook out the labor market. Some workers found their skills devalued, as factories filled up with machines and semi-skilled labor. Others simply lost their jobs as, for example, cotton and artificial fibers replaced silk. It would be callous to dismiss these misfortunes as mere unavoidable corollaries of "creative destruction" and disingenuous to argue that capitalists—or capitalism—were benign. But it makes a significant difference to the picture if the workers who remained in the metal and textile trades, or those who took jobs in rising industries, earned better wages and worked shorter hours than

previously, as almost certainly they did. Such hard figures about real wages in the silk shops and metallurgy factories would have told us whether and to what extent the second industrial revolution truly immiserated its workers. Alas, there are none.

On top of what I argue are the shortcomings of this sort of elegiac labor history, this book contains its own peculiar flaws. The author pays some perfunctory attention to gender. But he does not look for it in its two main manifestations: in the machismo of the labor movement and in the unions' scant attention to and weak defense of women workers. Whether it is inverting Waldeck Rochet (p. 226), confusing de la Roque's PSF with Doriot's PPF (p. 220), or leaving footnotes blank, the text could have been edited more closely. And it could have been more thickly researched. Much important work on the subject is missing from both the notes and the bibliography. Harry Braverman is here, as is Albert Soboul. Laura Lee Downs's critical study of women in the metallurgical industry appears briefly, but not the equally apposite work of Kathryn Amdur, Michael Seidman, Gary Cross, Ken Tucker, John Horne, or even John Barzman, whom Mann acknowledges as an old friend.^[3] Joan Scott's books on labor and gender appear in the bibliography but find no place in the notes or the text. Many of the citations are to quite old work: Jacques Kergoat, whose study of the Popular Front appeared in 1986, is cited as "one recent historian." (p. 233) In fact, aside from a respectable number of references to the departmental archives of the Rhône and the much more frequent citations to such left-wing journals as the *Progrès*, the *Métallurgiste*, and the *Voix du Peuple*, the notes are uncommonly full of masters theses. Twenty-three of the eighty-four notes in the long and critical chapter, "Metal Workers in Lyon, 1921-1935," for instance, cite the work of *maîtrises*. This does not in itself obviate the book's conclusions, of course. But it does appear to put them on a less dependable foundation.

NOTES

[1] John Barzman, *Dockers, métallos, ménagères: Mouvements sociaux et cultures militantes au Havre, 1912-1923* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de Rouen et du Havre, 1997); Helen Harden Chenut, *The Fabric of Gender: Working-Class Culture in Third Republic France* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005); Leslie A. Schuster, *A Workforce Divided: Community, Labor and the State in Saint-Nazaire's Shipbuilding Industry, 1880-1910* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2002).

[2] Steve Zdatny, *Fashion, Work and Politics in Modern France* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

[3] Kathryn Amdur, *Syndicalist Legacy: Trade Unions and Politics in Two French Cities in the Era of World War I* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986); Gary Cross, *A Quest for Time: The Reduction of Work in Britain and France, 1840-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Laura Lee Downs, *Manufacturing Inequality: Gender Division in the French and British Metallurgical Industries, 1914-1939* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995); John Horne, *Labour at War: France and Britain, 1914-1918* (London: Clarendon, 1991); Michael Seidman, *Workers Against Work: Labor in Paris and Barcelona during the Popular Fronts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); and Kenneth Tucker, *French Revolutionary Socialism and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

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