

Exorcising Exceptionalism

Christopher H. Johnson

Volume 23, 1989

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/11t23re03>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Johnson, C. H. (1989). Exorcising Exceptionalism. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 23, 247–254.

Exorcising Exceptionalism

Christopher H. Johnson

Ira Katznelson and Aristide Zolberg, eds., *Working Class Formation: Nineteenth-Century Patterns in Europe and the United States* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press 1986).

UNLIKE MANY CROSS-NATIONAL COLLECTIONS of essays, this book is truly comparative and truly collaborative. Katznelson and Zolberg met with the other authors (William Sewell, Michelle Perrot, and Alain Cottureau on France; Amy Bridges and Martin Shefter on the United States; and Jürgen Kocka and Mary Nolan on Germany) and together they hammered out a common approach "free of teleology and sociological abstraction" (vii) that would place the experience of working-class formation in these three countries in comparison with Britain, whose evolution, they felt, was sufficiently understood to be omitted from detailed treatment. Both Katznelson and Zolberg nevertheless include it in their comparative essays introducing and concluding the volume. Although remaining within a paradigm that may be described as Marxist, the editors' fundamental purpose is to challenge two inter-connected hypotheses with long and continuing Marxist pedigrees: 1) that there is an essential uniformity to the process of class formation derived from the broadly similar impact of industrial capitalism; and 2) that the objective formation of a class, rooted in the changing structure of the mode production, leads to the development of class-consciousness, a consciousness, if "true," that will be "revolutionary."

They argue that despite disclaimers, much Marxist theoretical emendation (and consequent debates over political practice) and virtually all Marxist historiography have been caught up in attempting to explain "exceptions" and "failures" rooted in "false" consciousness. The most notable culprit in this way of thinking has been the working class of the United States and the study of "American exceptionalism" has long been a left-wing scholarly cottage industry. In the last decade, especially in the pages of *International Labor and Working-Class History*, a series of fruitful discussions have significantly reoriented the question, which has been transposed from "Why wasn't (or isn't) this (or that) working class revolutionary?" to "What, in fact, was (or is) the working class and how has it, and its consciousness, developed?" The questions of what it might be or ought to be and

Christopher H. Johnson, "Exorcising Exceptionalism," *Labour/Le Travail* 23 (Spring 1989), 247-253.

how it has been contained or coopted or accommodated or, indeed, integrated — certainly important — must be rooted in an understanding of this prior question. Its correlate is another question, “how many working classes?” or as Zolberg entitles his conclusion, “how many exceptionalisms?” How different were class experiences in the four main capitalist states in the nineteenth century and why? This is the quite concrete task that this volume sets for itself.

It should be said from the outset, however, that there was nothing stupid or uninformed about these legions of early-twentieth century Marxists who *did* expect revolutionary consciousness to flow more or less automatically from the objective circumstances of working-class existence and then laboured so arduously to explain why the European revolution in the wake of the October Revolution failed. For the concept of revolutionary class consciousness was not a hoax. As Charles Tilly has written: “Revolutionary class consciousness is to labor history as frictionless motion is to elementary mechanics: Neither has ever truly existed, but both underlie vast theoretical constructions and wide-ranging empirical inquiries. Physicists, however, have the good sense not to waste their time looking for frictionless motion or, worse yet, striving to prove that it fails to characterize one real situation or another.” The same, of course, might be said about class itself or the market or any of the guiding abstractions in social theory. For the generation of Lukacs, Bloch, and Gramsci (one might also include Trotsky), the abstraction of revolutionary consciousness (and its failure to come to fruition in 1918-20) in fact laid the foundation for the transformation (and salvation) of twentieth-century Marxism. They were forced to come to grips with the tenacity and resiliency of twentieth-century capitalism while at the same time displacing the socialist transformation in the West to a future whose realization would be anything but automatic. Thus the realism — laudable, I think — displayed by the authors of this book would not have been possible, unless they were to be regarded merely as apologists for liberalism, without the theoretical flexibility engendered by the new Western Marxism.

How successfully do Katznelson and Company fulfill their task? Within the limits they set, very well indeed. The scope is quite specifically the nineteenth-century. Only Sewell ranges somewhat further back, and although Zolberg, in his sweeping and generally solid conclusion, is concerned with “outcomes,” his endpoint is the World War I era. This leaves the reader with difficulties making his/her way both fore and aft. The overall argument is straightforward: while the paths taken by the working class in major capitalist states were quite different, they all ended up in more or less the same place: they were classes with some degree of cohesion that had demonstrated and would continue to demonstrate considerable militancy, but which were in the majority non-revolutionary and became integrated (“negative” in the case of Germany) into the political system of their nation. The book does an immense service in attacking the notions that the United States working class was “exceptionally” moderate, that the French working class was “really” revolutionary, or that the German working class was merely “betrayed”

by its leadership.

The first difficulty, however, is that in stopping *before* the war and the Russian Revolution, they are relieved of grappling with the upheaval of 1918-20 and the processes of containment and stabilization so expertly analyzed by Charles Maier (*Recasting Bourgeois Europe*) thereafter. And in the longer run, one is left with the impression that the two moments of formation — roughly the proletarianization of artisans under the first phase of industrialization and then the impact of mass production and the corporation (or finance capitalism, if your will) — are *it*. Current changes in global economic and political structures auguring new crises, revolutionary potentials, and/or new integrations (Gorz's farewell, Gordon *et al.*'s new social structure of accumulation, Ellen Wood's or Mike Davis's restructured and revitalized working class, Sabel's and Piore's new industrial divide, etc., etc.) make the conclusions reached at least incomplete, possibly anachronistic.

The other large problem is the failure to stretch the analytical framework sufficiently backward in time. Whether or not one wants to call it "proto-" industrialization (and one probably does not), the changing structure of the rapidly evolving world economy created increasingly capitalistic relations of production in country and town in the eighteenth century that must be seen as the first great round of proletarianization, despite the absence of significant technological innovation. Its greatest negative effect, however, was not on the outworkers or *chambrelans*, but on both master and journeyman artisans facing its competition. Simultaneously, popular, egalitarian social values and political activities punctuated eighteenth-century life and provided the foundation for the "artisan" republican ideologies so widespread in the Atlantic northwest during the 1790s. Here France, England, and the United States must be differentiated from Germany where the tougher fiber of central European absolutism largely kept democratic impulses from surfacing. In this book we do not get a sense of the depth (both in time and emotional intensity) of the populist mentality that pre-dates the advent of industrial capitalism, a mentality so well delineated in the works of (among others) Daniel Roche, Sean Wilentz, and E.P. Thompson. This mentality, of course, crossed "class" lines — masters and journeymen alike shared a united antagonism to "aristocracy" and "speculators" and a sense of virtue and self-sacrifice for the community — and while much of what Sewell and Bridges have to say about the rise of class-consciousness has to do with the emergence of a wage-earners' adaptation of this artisan republicanism (Bridges is less clear on this than Wilentz, whom she resolutely avoids citing), the fact remained that the older sans-culotte, "free-born-Englishman," or mechanics'-republic link between master (even the entrepreneurial type) and wage-earner had considerable staying power and created important ambiguities in French, English, and American worker political loyalties.

These did not exist in Germany. One of Kocka's central themes is the strength of master/man antagonism in the German world of work — manifested in 1848 (as Noyes showed long ago) in the exclusivism of the journeyman's movement and later in the rapid progress of Marxism. Zolberg points to this, but it remains

unexplained comparatively. It might well be one of the explanatory keystones to the whole "outcome" issue. The persistence of "Jacobin" strains in working-class political ideology and of substantial worker support for Radicalism into the twentieth century in France and the constant retooling of a politics of trans-class citizenship in the United States certainly owe something to this deeper tradition. Obviously the variety of nineteenth-century economic and political factors (discussed below) influencing class formation contributed mightily to the shape of class and consciousness by 1914, but cross-class populism rooted in the eighteenth century proved remarkably durable. In Gramscian terms, it has been one of the key elements in the ideological apparatus of bourgeois hegemony and should have received greater elucidation — along with its socio-economic foundations in late merchant capitalism. Nevertheless, within its nineteenth-century preview, this book provides a coherent corrective to the "single-engine"/"exceptionalist" modes of analysis so prominent in past Marxist literature (as well as much explicitly anti-Marxist literature that has made such hay by assuming that it was *the* Marxist mode of analysis).

The organizing framework and the book's most important theoretical contribution is Katznelson's "four levels of class." Although connected, they do not necessarily follow one from the other and are "above all meant to be aids to concrete description and explanation." (14) The first is the "structure of capitalist development," the economic reality of proletarianization, of becoming wage labour. The second is the "social organization of society," "ways of life" (work-place relations, labour markets, living situations, and all other concrete social circumstances conditioned by one's status as a wage labourer). These two levels define class as an objective phenomenon, but have nothing to do with how that existence is experienced. The third level is defined as "dispositions to behave," the ways in which people "share understandings of the social system" or, more broadly, "share values of justice or goodness." This is the most interesting point because it distinguishes ways of perceiving the world and proclivities to act upon them from behaviour itself. The last is the fourth level, which encompasses organization and action, in short, what is called the labour movement. The problem that is overcome with this classification is the leap that is often made from level one to level four or, more generally, the tendency to collapse levels one and two together, ignore three and assume that four is determined by the first two. Ultimately Katznelson argues for a complex process in the study of class in which the content of each of the four levels and the connections among them are examined in detail. The critical importance of this framework is that it helps the historian avoid making assumptions about how class consciousness develops and what its content might be. At the same it overcomes the often pointless arguments about whether or not class exists by simply responding "at what level?"

The three case studies utilize Katznelson's taxonomy to great advantage. Space does not permit anything like a detailed reconstruction of the arguments of the seven writers, so let me focus on a few points beyond those examined earlier

that I found especially significant.

The French section is extremely well done. Although I still think Sewell's nearly exclusive focus on artisans and the "corporative idiom" is too narrow, there is no question that he identifies the mainstream of the developing French working class when he roots it in the slower structural changes in skilled production of quality goods, proletarianization of artisans in such crafts (along with building), dispositions stressing corporative ties and values inherent in that world, and behaviour reflecting a corporative organizational base and revolutionary action founded upon the traditions of '93. A bifurcation, (similar to that occurring in United States artisan republicanism) between those on different sides of the wage bargain existed in their "trade socialism," but in political practice the vast majority of small and medium masters lined up with wage earners.

Perrot and Cottureau provide quite important insights into the "second moment" of French working-class formation. Both take a truly national perspective. Perrot stresses three essential characteristics of the French labour movement: it was sporadic with major problems in maintaining permanent organization; it was highly localized, the basis of France's tendency to develop "municipal socialism" as well as the "city-central" (to use a United States term) character of the *Bourses du travail* movement; and it was highly politicized, characterized by strong revolutionary rhetoric which was rarely matched, however, by violent behaviour, despite the inheritance of the violence perpetrated by the state in 1848, 1851, and 1871.

Cottureau then explains why in an essay of breathtaking synthesis. His main point is that French workers exhibited an astonishing variety of "cultures of resistance" and all kinds of effective action for asserting control or influence over the work process in face of "productivist pressures" in a quite variegated economy. As all three authors stress, the tightness of the French labour market (due to the structure of peasant land holding and consequent family limitation, a situation predating but accentuated by the French Revolution), a tradition of quality production, and the British lead in common goods production gave rise to a less mechanized, more skilled, more decentralized industrialization than in England or Germany. Simultaneously, labour shortages meant that married women's work also figured more prominently in less-skilled jobs. Industry, in effect, went to where the labour was to a much greater extent than in England or Germany (though this invites comparison with the early US industrialization). The enhanced bargaining power of labour allowed forms of resistance short of trade union formation or socialist political affiliation. Cottureau's detailed study of the supposedly quiescent and conservative Fougères (Brittany) shoe worker population demonstrated that they maintained remarkable control of their work situation by the simplest of means — movement from one shop to another, a phenomenon, based in a "group ethical code," that became a kind of "collective game." Cottureau gives a number of other examples (and researchers like Tessie Liu and Whitney Walton are finding still more), and we are left with a convincing picture of the bases of localism and sporadicism in the French labour movement at least to World War I. Who needs

organization or a change in the system if we can handle things informally on our own? (One thinks here of Susan Porter Benson's marvelous study of United States department store clerks.) But there were also problems, of course. Nevertheless, given the precarious footing of many capitalists in the labour market, these were often not permanent; so a loud bark filled with class hatred and illusions of hangings by the entrails of others would often suffice. (Not discussed by anyone is the fact that there were major pockets of permanent industrial decline — for example, the Southwest — but there misery led to cross-class regional boosterism). At the same time, it must be remembered that the French industrial working class was a distinct minority, a fact reinforcing its localism as well as its often noisy behaviour. Overall, this was as illuminating a read as I have had for a long time in a field I consider my own.

I am somewhat less secure in assessing the articles on American history, though I am struck by the interesting parallels between French and United States developments. Pretty clearly the character of the labour market (also rooted in "democratic" land ownership but where slavery and stolen land provide the explanation rather than the Bloch/Brenner feudal transition) and a revolutionary republican tradition contribute significantly to the artisan character of the movement, which was also localized and sporadic. Obvious also were significant areas of worker control (à la David Montgomery) until late in the century. What was different about the US? Above all, two factors are stressed by both Bridges and Shefter: a political system where white male workers had long possessed the vote and massive waves of immigration that loosened the labour market and undermined class politics at two crucial junctures, the later forties and fifties and the 1880s and 90s. Both authors show how *machine politics of the mainstream Democratic Party* absorbed working-class political initiatives with transformist aims. Shefter stops short of proving his thesis, although Zolberg picks up the period after 1900 and develops a convincing analysis of the skill-segmented work force and ethnically-segmented urban population that made machine politics possible. The moderate reforms of benefitting labour during the first Wilson administration seemed to demonstrate that the traditional political system could respond to what were formerly radical demands, thus undercutting both socialism and syndicalism. Finally, a point little discussed, it must be recalled that the American industrial working class was even more a minority (31 per cent of the work force in 1910) than the French (33 per cent). This fact alone explains a great deal about the history of both.

Germany was another story of course — by 1914 the working class was approaching a majority (though not as close as Britain) in a rapidly growing industrial economy. It also was highly organized both economically and politically. Its party, the SPD, was the largest in the Reichstag. Class lines were more clearly drawn in Germany than anywhere, Britain possibly excepted. It was the living proof of Marxist theory. Kocka does an excellent job showing the foundation of this situation, the tradition of journeyman dishonour being perhaps the most important

point illuminated by comparative analysis. But is up to Nolan to explain why this happy picture was more apparent than real. Her key points are as follows. Like all working classes, the German was segmented by skill, but the more highly skilled (a majority) were the organized and politically active workers. Most fundamentally, however, Nolan stresses that the religious split in Germany — with a large Catholic minority — seriously divided the working class. The Catholic Centre Party (persecuted like the socialists, after all, during the *Kulturkampf*) had a militance of its own and took a pro-labour, if paternalist, position especially after *Rerum novarum*. The SPD was thus formed on the basis of the “Protestant,” primary-sector working class, which unlike Catholic workers, accepted its relative isolation in German society and built on it. Marxist theory accentuated this circumstance, stressing a narrow definition of the working class (industrial proletarians); no compromises on religion; democratic politics without a political programme (“ambiguous parliamentarism”); heavy economic determinism and waiting for capitalist contradictions to “ripen;” and an “alternative culture” (Lidtke) that reinforced the idea of a class apart. The Free Trade Union Movement paralleled this structure, and both party and union built so well that they feared (mortally as it turned out) destroying their marvelous organizational base by doing anything rash. Thus they became a massive economic-interest group that was neither a revolutionary instrument nor a share-of-the-pie movement. They were “negatively integrated.” Only with and after the war would they become part of the neo-corporatist state in Germany. But the orientation was fixed well beforehand. Nolan in the long run sees a dialectic between the mass base of the movement and the leadership, not simply a betrayal. It is a sobering, convincing perspective.

In general, despite my concerns outlined earlier, this is a book that should be read by all thoughtful students of social change in the modern world. Those involved in work on other countries (such as Canada) will draw insight after insight as they think through the parallels with the history they know best.

Capitalism & Nature Socialism

A Journal of Socialist Ecology

The only international theoretical and political journal of socialist ecology—including ecological Marxism and feminism

Contents of issue one include: An Introduction to Ecological Marxism
Ecological Crisis: The Case of Cotton
Imperialism and the Crisis of Nature in Central America
Discourses on Forest Crisis in Canada
Technology and Its Discontents • Lukacs' Construction of Nature

Contents of issues two and three include:
What Is Socialist Ecology? (CNS Group) • Ecology and Democracy
(A. Demerovic) • Environmental Crisis and the Crisis
of Environmentalism (D. Faber & J. O'Connor) •
Ecology and Oppression of Women in India (B. Rao and M. Goldman)
• History of Ecological Marxism (J. Alier) • The Production of
Human Nature (R. Lichtman) • Nature and Construction
in California (B. Laurence) • Health in German Cities
(M. Rodenstein) • Ernst Bloch's Nature (J. Ely) •
Discussions and Debates • Poems • Reviews • Conference Reports

Sales

\$5 per issue—individuals;
\$12 per issue—institutions.
Foreign airmail: add \$2 per issue.

Direct orders to:
CNS
P.O. Box 8467
Santa Cruz, CA 95061, USA.