

## A Reply

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I thank my “contradictors” for their kind and careful comments. I was pleased to feel some wide agreement on challenging a simplistic view of “artisan” or “skilled workers” socialism. I agree with most of their arguments. William Sewell is right in remarking that “skill” is a matter of social status rather than technical competence and Christopher Johnson correct in arguing that the feeling of “deskilling” should not be understood apart from the wider process of capitalist assault and proletarianization in the trades. There still remain many controversial points about applying this statement to particular case.<sup>1</sup> I shall restrict myself to the case of tailors, because it is the most relevant for answering Johnson’s implicit question: What is the crux of my analysis? Roughly speaking, I would answer: the point at stake is the democratic meaning of worker militancy. In my view this militancy is less a response to capitalist assault, rooted in workshop problems and values, than a demand for a widening of social life and the public sphere, as they were shaped by the “bourgeois” revolution.

Let us focus on the tailors’ movements and aspirations in the 1830s and the 1840s. The onslaught of ready-made attire, especially in the 1840s, is undebatable. Can we assume however, as Edgar L. Newman does, that tailors were “unified in their protest against the new methods of production?” It is the *masters* who prominently denounce ready-mades and try to unify the corporation against the common enemy. The workers’ concerns appear to be somewhat different. Their protests, regarding wages but also, very insistently, about work-time and hierarchical relations, derive from problems which were accentuated but not created by ready-made clothing. “Sudden speedup” and “long layoff,” cited by Johnson, were part of the traditional way of working in a trade linked to fashion and seasons — a way that ready-mades challenged directly. Anti-hierarchical protest for “*des rapports d’indépendance et d’égalité avec les maîtres*.”<sup>2</sup> followed the workers’ concentration in large shops where most of them were doomed to the “easy” and boring work of sewing pieces of cloth cut by others. That concentration was not an outgrowth of ready-mades; it stemmed from the trade’s prosperity of the 1820s. The activists of 1833 emphasized that they could not bear the behavior of masters who previously were their equals. Such consciousness originated first of all in the July Revolution.

There is no reason, I agree, to deny the link between innovations in the trades and militant protest. But there are good reasons to take a greater account of other factors. Among these was the emigration towards the towns in the 1820s and 1830s, which especially overcrowded the less attractive and the more widely open trades, such as tailors and shoemakers. These trades were also the most supportive of political action. Leaders of the shoemakers and tailors were republican militants first and the “*Société philanthropique des tailleurs*” was a politically motivated minority, which seems to have suffered prosecution sometimes from within the trade itself.<sup>3</sup> It has to be determined how far that specifically political commitment was related to patterns of sociability, cultural status, and symbolic representations proper to those trades.<sup>4</sup> Tailors, for instance, are often described as “young blades,” and it should be ascertained whether their demonstrations are related to the tradition of “*charivari*.” Far more relevant to me was their decided concern with matters of social appearance. Better than any other corporation, they knew to what extent “clothes make the man.” Not only did they try to attain bourgeois appearances, they had to wear suits when introducing themselves to employers. At other times they wore suits to play at being “fashionable,” as *clagues* in theatres. And in 1833 the strikers seriously put forward the demand that masters should take off their hats when entering the shops. This matter of suits and appearances, I assume, is no trifling matter. On the contrary, it is part of a feeling of social dignity, a claim to social equality, which might be somewhat different from “pride in work.” Their protests strongly challenged the masters’ words and manners and related them to other demonstrations of social inequality coming from judges, politicians, or journalists. They did not spend more than half of each year in their workshops and drew most of their experience from the wider scope of urban culture. Their aspirations were related to public opinion and social events; to displays of eloquence and national glory, fashion and stage performances, which characterized urban culture and shaped republican imagination.<sup>5</sup>

While emphasizing that the worker-poets proudly boasted about their tools (especially when they no longer had to use them!), E.L. Newman rightly states that the worker militants of the 1840s were far more concerned with patriotism than with any “social” problem. To me this means that their pride as “useful” workers could be justified insofar as it was linked to national glory (identified itself with a crusade for freedom and a challenge to Louis-Philippe’s pusillanimous “cheap government”). Worker militants expressed an aspiration to take a larger part in social and public life and even (or especially!) in its “conspicuous consumption.” There was some relationship between “conspicuous consumption” and “public life,” between dressing up and the republican struggle.

E.L. Newman stresses that the worker-poets wanted “to show that the workers were as good as anybody else and that they could dress, write, and behave “correctly.” In my view this matter of dressing up links the individual and cultural aspirations of the worker-poets to the militant and collective claims of the tailors much more than pride in work. Both acted first as plebeians and democrats in

search of *social* equality. Social equality is neither mere political equality, nor plain economic levelling. It is different from demands for higher wages but also from "workers' control." Militant leaders and worker-poets convey in diverse ways the same aspiration to being acknowledged as full participants in social life: people *individually* able to dress, talk, and write like members of other classes; people *collectively* able to share the same forms of debate and contract concerning general social interests. We misunderstand their view of *association* if we think of it apart from that ideal. It was not a germ of "workers' control" rooted in the practice and conscience of "skilled labor." It was part of an endeavor to introduce in the world of labor, as well as in any other social sphere, the republican patterns of reciprocity of rights and duties. The common reference to a "Proudhonist" tradition obscures that crucial point of their "social" program.

Such a program involved not only demands made of upper classes, but prior demands for self-education and self-control of the working class itself. In order to get due recognition workers were prepared to prove themselves as civilized partners in the highest circles of social life. Militant leaders from Troncin and Corbon to Monatte and Merrheim were unified in this educational demand. All were committed to inculcating in the rank and file that most demanding interpretation of social equality. That intellectual and moral elitism, which is the main feature of socialist militancy, was independent of skilled labor. Thus, many skilled and even organized workers remained rank and file, unable to understand the ethics of the "Rights and Duties of Man."

This brings us to the question: how representative were the militants? My answer is that they were not representative of opinion in the trades or corporative values. They were representative of the specific demands for social equality originating in the French Revolution and revived in 1830 and 1848. Such democratic demands could take various forms, more or less individual or collective, more or less harsh or refined. Militant leaders expressed the most refined and demanding way of conceiving the plebeian search for social equality. Their first concern was education of the worker as a man, not education of man as a worker. They were sons of the French Revolution rather than of corporative struggle; Julien Sorel's brothers rather than Poor Richard's.

The paradox is that those same militants finally assumed the standard theory of "worker humanism," rooted in corporative traditions and professional pride. Two main factors, in my opinion, account for this paradox. Firstly, they had to face, within the workers' movement, the strength of corporative thought and practice and had to compromise with it. Secondly, that popular democratic feeling, that aspiration for social life they conveyed was widely misunderstood and misinterpreted, first by bourgeois republican leaders and then by Marxist socialists. Internal pressure and external neglect compelled the workers' leaders to adopt a defensive view of workers' democracy, with an ambiguous and contradictory emphasis on the working-class' own values, culminating in revolutionary unionism and anarchosynicalism. They subscribed to a very questionable relationship between educational humanism and workers' culture. Subsequent events, better than any historian,

showed how contrived and deceptive it was. But the paradox continued: in Merrheim's interpretation, the thought of "skilled labor" serves as an explanation for its own failure.

Nicholas Papayanis rightly points out that Merrheim's elitism was not a mere political defense but followed directly from his whole experience in the world of labor. I agree with his argument, but I don't feel it contradictory to mine. Negative estimation of the rank and file and emphasis on education was the general feeling of worker leaders, regardless of whether they were revolutionaries or reformists. This position, however, had no necessary connection with skill-level. When analyzing the failure of the Renault strike in 1913, Merrheim identified "lack of education" with "unskilled labor." Later, he repeated this identification to account for the failure of unionism and the rise of communism. Revolutionary unionists like Pericat or Montmousseau, who became communists, conveyed exactly the same contempt for the rank and file, but they attributed the failure of revolutionary unionism to *wage-earning* rather than to *unskilled labor*. I agree that Merrheim's reasons were more practical and complex than my paper makes it appear. Anyway, his analysis played an important part in revealing the questionable identification between *militant* elitism and *professional* elitism, an identification which became the *credo* of so many sociologists, historians and politicians.

Should I emphasize that I *never* called Pelloutier or Monatte "proto-fascists"? I only tried, in another essay,<sup>6</sup> to explain how, during the Second World War, a *small minority* of unionists made use of the great tradition of worker humanism and anarcho-syndicalism to justify the Petainist and Nazi order. It does not prove anything against anarcho-syndicalism, but it might show that "worker-culture" is easily receptive to any kind of politics (Leninist, Hitlerian, reformist, or others). It might illustrate that the emphasis on the workers' own values (*and not only the obsolete ones*) is a very convenient way of subordinating workers to other political interests. It leads us to analyze more accurately the complex relationships between professional, unionist, democratic, and patriotic aspects of the working-class movement.

I hope that I have made clearer the main thrust of my analysis. In my view social history, in its old fashion but also in its new "cultural" approach, rests on a far too restrictive understanding of "social" struggle. It largely misunderstood and underestimated the importance of democratic feeling in the working-class movement. Cultural anthropology's main topic when applied to social history, is popular "resistance" to innovations coming from the top. It brings to light some of the one-sidedness in accounting for workers' aspirations to change. But the overestimation of workshop values has deeper roots. To some extent, we are facing in our research the same problems as worker leaders faced in their practice: we are caught between the narrowness of mere political democratic tradition and the erring ways of "workers' power." So we are readily prepared to reassume their compromise but in a sociological form. Another support for such a view comes from the specific ways in which we relate intellectuals to the so-called simpleness of popular thought.

Studying the discourse of the unionist collaborators of the 1940s made me feel

the ambiguity of a “cultural” approach to “association” and led me to reexamine its tradition from the beginning. So when Johnson asks: whom is Rancière arguing against, I could answer first of all against himself. Most of all, there is no personal ambition in my analysis. There is an attempt to reevaluate some ideas with which each of us has had to make his way. I think that my analysis is related to a wider reflection on some disappointing issues of the workers’ movement.

#### NOTES

1. For instance, Sewell focuses on two factors of typographers’ militance: their prominent access to political language and the threat of mechanical presses. But these presses did not threaten typographers, they threatened the printers strictly speaking, who were coarser workers hardly concerned with culture and political language.

2. Grignon, *Reflexions d’un ouvrier tailleur* in Faure and Rancière, *La Parole ouvrière* (Paris, 1976), p. 79.

3. See for instance this desperate letter from the Society of the tailors of Bordeaux to their brothers of Nantes: “Ce n’est pas aux hommes en dehors de notre société que nous pouvons réclamer du secours, puisque ces malheureux qui sont très nombreux (leur nombre excède de beaucoup celui de notre société) se rient eux-mêmes de notre résolution. Ils se joignent aux occupants pour nous perdre. Ils ont même eu la lâcheté de se faire délateurs,” 24 novembre 1836 (Archives nationales, BB 18/1366)

4. Unlike Johnson, I think that shoemakers had been a “maligned” trade for a long time. Testimonies of contempt against them, within the literate as well as the popular tradition, from Plato until the compagnonnages, are too numerous and persistent to be casual.

5. From that point of view we can understand the failure of communities. Cabet complained that his companions were republican activists, not communist workers. He had two main grievances against them: on the one hand they gave too much to family life, on the other they spent too much time reading and commenting on world news. We can acknowledge here the twofold aspiration to modern individuality in its relation to wider public life. Such was, I think, the real basis of their communist dream. It could hardly be satisfied within the narrow scope of a workers’ community. They felt, Cabet bitterly emphasizes, no “pleasure” in the community.

6. See J. Rancière “De Pelloutier à Hitler. Syndicalisme et collaboration”, *Les Révoltes logiques* 4 (Winter 1977).