

## **10. The Revolution Reconsidered: A Final Assessment**

---

This study has examined the labor movement in France from its inception to World War I. It has focused on four questions: the unions' response to women workers, peasants, direct action, and the state. The conclusion drawn is that through the period studied, syndicalism was a working-class movement practically aimed at achieving a thoroughgoing social change based on the ideological inheritance from the past and the economic, social, and political realities of the present.

The French revolutionary inheritance was rich, but oddly dualistic.<sup>(1)</sup> It glorified the centralization of political power and praised the state as an instrument of economic reform. The legacy also carried within it an anti-Jacobin strain, which aimed at political diffusion and placed the locus of reform in the will of the individual. The philosophers of the eighteenth century had insisted that man was rational and innately good, and social institutions were anachronistic and unnatural. The Enlightenment provided certainty for radical change: once artificial barriers were overturned, reasonable men would live forever in a just and natural order.

The Revolution of 1789 was both a practicum for testing the Enlightenment faith in the individual and the culmination of a process of political centralization begun two hundred years before. The king was overthrown, the absolutist state was seized in the name of the people, and the centralization process was accelerated. If the Revolution was a political success, it was a moral failure. When the social institutions were swept away, the people were revealed as being neither noble nor rational. They were merely brutes incapable of living under a reasonable order. The Revolution did not establish social justice. It created a centralized state that became a more effective instrument of popular terror than it had ever been under the kings. Three times during the nineteenth century the power of the state was challenged. Each time bloodshed and failure was the result. The Enlightenment idea of individual emancipation and the establishment of a moral and just society remained a promise unfulfilled.

The unfinished social revolution remained the legacy



for nineteenth-century philosophers, who sought to understand why the Revolution had degenerated. They found their answer by separating society into political and economic realms. The Revolution of 1789, they agreed, had been the work of the bourgeoisie, an economic class whose power had increased with commercial and industrial expansion. The Revolution had been directed toward gaining control of the monarchical state from a political class whose authority rested on historical fiction rather than on economic realities. The object of the revolution was to use political power to impose an economic tyranny on the producers so the possessing class could increase its wealth. It had been a political revolution for economic ends. If the Revolution had degenerated into barbarism, it was because the bourgeois class, which had gained control, was corrupt, and the producers were in disarray.

Bourgeois ethics were based on the law of the jungle. The middle class was parasitic and exploitative, living off the labor of the producers. A just society could be established only by ethical men. Who were these moral agents? Nineteenth-century theorists provided several suggestions. Utopian Socialists hearkened back to the Enlightenment in their conclusion that only reasonable men could establish a rational society. Others disagreed. Intellectuals could not bring about lasting change; nineteenth-century society was materialistic, not idealistic. The only true revolutionaries were the producers themselves. In this conclusion, both Marx and the anarchists concurred. Their major point of disagreement was based on different interpretations of how the industrial revolution had affected the producers. For Marx the proletariat, a new class of producers spawned by capitalist exploitation, was the natural medium of revolution. Anarchists believed that those uncorrupted by industrialism were the elect. To some it was the peasant still in a state of nature; to others, it was the artisan alone who possessed the necessary social virtues needed to overcome the atomism of bourgeois society.

Anarchists and Marxists assigned the carrying out of revolution to an economic class. But each disagreed on the mechanism by which this revolution would be achieved. For Marx the social revolution was inevitable. The political state reflected economic realities. Economic concentration and political centralization were conjoined. Industrialism had given birth to a new social class; capitalist exploitation guaranteed that this class would be revolutionary. No longer willing to submit to economic degradation, the proletariat would use the political state to gain control of the riches industrialism could generate. The bourgeoisie had used the state to expropriate the political class; the proletariat would use the state to expropriate the economic class. The political party would serve as the vehicle for challenging the bourgeoisie. As capitalist competition accelerated, the exploitation of workers would increase. Deepening misery would develop



class consciousness and increase the power of the working-class party in parliament. The weight of proletarian numbers would guarantee victory to the masses. The expropriation of political power would parallel the expropriation of the means of economic production. The political state would give way to the state of economic well-being and social justice.

In seeking to use the Jacobin state to carry out the revolution, Marx represented one strain of the French intellectual legacy. The anarchists represented the other. Marx emphasized state centralization; the anarchists looked to the individual will, which must be protected from moral suffocation. Marx preached the inevitability of the coming revolution, finding certainty in analyses of historical trends and economic data. Anarchists trusted neither to chance nor to historical determinism. For them the revolution could only be achieved by the individual acting ethically within his economic milieu. Anarchists and Marxists agreed that the social revolution depended upon moral agents working to achieve a just order. But to anarchists, the battle for control of a political state was a dangerous diversion. The state was a leviathan against which the individual will would feel intimidated and powerless. It was an immoral creation that would corrupt those who attempted to battle with it on its own terms. As the product of an exploitative class, the state was a parasite. Producers would expend their strength without ever really attacking the evil host. For anarchists there was no need to be sidetracked from the moral struggle by the charade of politics.

#### EMPHASIS ON INDIVIDUAL WILL AND ACTION

It was the anarchist route to revolution--individualistic and antistatist--which French revolutionary syndicalists chose. Marx had said that a change in the economic structure would result in political and ideological change. Syndicalists agreed. But they chose the union rather than the party as their vehicle for revolution. In France the political process led to confusion and political cooptation consonant with economic domination by the middle class. As instruments of the parliamentary process, parties were large brokerages designed to mediate and subvert individual demands. Syndicalism was not interested in strengthening the center; it sought to diffuse power and encourage individualism.

For syndicalists the bourses and unions were natural economic units. Unions had a continuity with the past. Workers grouped together by profession represented the traditional corporate organizations destroyed by the Revolution. The bourses organized workers by locale, thereby reflecting French parochialism and also providing an important point of reference in areas undergoing social and economic change. Together bourses and unions represented



elemental economic groupings of producers united by their work and the customs they shared. They were also social communities for the skilled and unskilled and for the farmers and industrial proletariat. The bourses and unions were also regarded as revolutionary units, where communalism replaced selfishness, and where the spirit of brotherhood flowed into the creation of class consciousness. Further, in a society that was an economic mosaic, the unions and bourses were organic units capable of responding naturally to the pace and variety of economic change. Reflecting local and individual needs, these small working-class units were designed to serve as the construction blocks of an enormous bastion of workers' strength, which would wrest economic advantages against employers on the one hand, and cow the political state on the other.

In this revolutionary edifice, the emphasis on individual rights and responsibilities was constantly maintained. Stearns makes much of the spontaneous nature of working-class action, and the fact that so much of it was directed toward limited and traditional goals. From this he concludes that syndicalism was incapable of undertaking modern forms of protest. But syndicalists intended that the union structure would be one in which individuals could work to achieve the most personal or local demands, such as getting a manager fired, or a dismissed comrade rehired.(2) The maintenance of professional integrity was a right carried over from the artisanal period and sanctioned by the Waldeck-Rousseau Law. But in this structure, insofar as syndicalist theory was concerned, each man's individual act benefited all. French history had clearly demonstrated that a lasting society of justice could not be obtained by mass action or by violence and bloodshed. The industrial revolution had provided the employer with an overweening power against the producers. Capitalist profits were derived from the value stolen from the individual's labor. The worker had the moral duty and the legal right to protect himself against further theft. The action of a single producer seeking to take back from the exploiter the value of his labor represented a powerful attack upon the entire capitalist structure. Direct action in the economic realm was a revolutionary act: deprived of that upon which it depended for its survival, the capitalist parasite would eventually wither and die. Individual action in the economic realm, therefore, was a way to carry out a revolution that was moral, legal, and superior to bombs and barricades.

Morality was a constant theme in the labor movement. Only just men could create a just universe. Society must be based on the ethics of labor and a reflection of the virtues of the producer. But the workers lived in an immoral world constructed by the bourgeoisie. Capitalism had taken away from the worker his means of self-determination, and had subjected him and his family to disgusting material conditions. Syndicalism preached the need for the producer to work toward his own moral emancipation by means of direct



action. Acting together the producers would then demand from the capitalist exploiter and his state reforms to improve the workers' material condition. These reforms were never regarded by syndicalists as palliatives. Reforms would reduce capitalist profits and give back to the worker a larger share of the value of his production. Reforms would also increase individual morality so necessary for revolution. More free time would allow the worker to enjoy his family; fewer working hours would preserve his strength, and he would not have to seek energy from cheap alcohol. Higher wages would mean that his wife could stay at home and be the moral guardian of the family; or at least, better working conditions would check the dehumanization of the worker and his laboring wife. Syndicalism's antipatriotic stand also had moral goals. The state was unethical, so could only teach injustice. It fostered militarism. In the barracks young men were corrupted and ruined as future producers. The state led youths to war, the most heinous act of brutality.

The union as a moral instrument of class revolution had to be preserved. Throughout syndicalism's history leaders of the movement fought to maintain the union of individual producers in the face of its étatiste enemies: party socialists, conservative politicians, the Catholic church, and the landowning aristocrats. The society of producers was fragmented. To survive, the unions had to be inclusionary rather than exclusionary. Direct action was a practical way to build unionism: it appealed to a wide variety of philosophical schools; it could be adapted to individual consciences and the needs of the moment. The constant reference to individual action was seen as the way to keep the individual from being subsumed by the organizational structure. The emphasis on the spontaneity of direct action was not an indication of syndicalism's backwardness. It was a perfect reflection of the localist and individualist nature of French society and of the weakness of the early syndicalist movement, which possessed few organizers and fewer funds. Strikes already in progress could be directed at critical junctures by a handful of militants who knew how to seize every advantage to build unionism. Further, the emphasis on spontaneity and the loosely organized structure of syndicalism meant that failures of the small locals to achieve their demands would not do irreparable damage to the reputation of the Confederal organization as a whole.

Of paramount importance to a better understanding of revolutionary syndicalism is the fact that while in the early days of unionism there was a greater stress on the spontaneous nature of direct action, as the power of the CGT grew, the definition of direct action became more concrete, finally centering on its two chief instruments of revolution: the general strike and antimilitarist activity. As has been noted in this work, the general strike was never clearly defined by syndicalists as to its nature or purpose. Such ambiguity did not make the general strike a



metaphysical act; only an individual one. For the artisanal element within unionism, the general strike was reminiscent of the guilds and compagnonnages. But the general strike was also regarded as providing a modern form of protest by building working-class solidarity among industrial workers of varying skills and employment. Further, as the economy centralized, the general strike became a practical way to attack a society increasingly dependent upon a few key industries for its survival. Antimilitarist activity became the other important weapon in syndicalism's arsenal. By appealing to the basic human emotions of parental love and the traditional peasants' hatred of conscription, it was a means to attract women and peasants to unionism. Antimilitarist propaganda was also a means to attack the capitalist state in the same way that the general strike was intended to be an assault on the capitalist employer, both of which were immoral and unjust.

The fact that working-class actions came increasingly to be directed away from spontaneous and localized demonstrations toward participation in general strikes and antimilitarist activity is a clear indication of the role of the CGT in organizing and leading the French workers. Stearns therefore errs in his conclusion that syndicalism had little effect on the working-class population and that its leaders were never representative of the needs and desires of the workers.(3) To illustrate his point, Stearns makes much of the fact that French workers seemed not to have heeded the antipolitical injunctions of the syndicalists.(4) Unfortunately, Stearns and other critics demonstrate a lack of understanding regarding the nature of direct action. As has been noted, the majority of syndicalists were also party socialists who had agreed to banish partisan politics from the union halls and stressed the fact that economic action was superior to the indirect action of electoral activity. Syndicalist leaders were always directed toward dealing with the realities of the French economic, political, and social order. As practical revolutionaries, they were always reflective of and united with the working class as a whole.

To achieve the revolution, union membership had to be increased and syndicalist independence maintained. The position of syndicalism on the woman question was designed not only to heighten the morality of the individual, but also to gain women supporters of unionism. Syndicalist populism was designed to educate the peasantry to the idea that morcellation meant economic serfdom, while collectivism would bring material benefits for all. Direct action was a means of building solidarity between town and country workers, and unionists involved themselves deeply in directing strikes and demonstrations in the countryside in order to punctuate the call for workers unity. The stand on the peasant question was also intended to appeal to followers of Proudhon and Bakunin, and to bourses members with their strong grassroots concerns. Antimilitarist activity and support of working women were also intended to



silence the reformists, who the anarchosyndicalists believed were bent on capturing unionism and delivering it into the hands of the party socialists.

The revolutionary syndicalist movement offered workers the means to achieve a social revolution based on the possibilities inherent in the French situation. Marx's concept of revolution reflected the need to group individuals in a society fragmented by the growth of the middle class and industrialism. For Marx, the phenomenon of common suffering would develop the class consciousness necessary to overthrow the bourgeois exploiters. Syndicalists sought the same revolutionary end, but rejected the Marxian notion of immiserization, which they believed would only further dehumanize and fragment the producing class. Instead, they believed that individuals fighting in common to achieve material well-being would grow as moral human beings, would increase the strength of unions, and would build working-class consciousness, while all the while whittling away at capitalism both from without and within. For Marx, the revolution was inevitable and the worker was determined by history. For the syndicalists, the individual must continue to exercise his free will, because neither chance, history, nor the electoral process could be trusted. Both sought moral regeneration in a morally unjust world. But syndicalists chose to carry out their revolution based on the exigencies of the French milieu. Thus, in their ability to adapt the goal of revolution to the French experience, the revolutionary syndicalists anticipated both Lenin and Mao, each of whom were also geniuses at translating the proletarian revolution into the people's vernacular.

## NOTES

1. In his study on Sorel, John Stanley takes note of another dualism in the French inheritance. The political system witnessed a high degree of state centralization and bureaucratization on the one hand, becoming unusually repressive in putting down labor disorders; but, on the other hand, the French economy remained stubbornly decentralized, which meant that union victories against the smaller business and industrial units ought to have been easier. Sorel misread this dualism, Stanley claims, believing that France was to be "the harbinger of a new historical tendency toward decentralization and local control rather than centralization." Both Sorel and Fernand Pelloutier regarded the FBT as the perfect organization to reflect the economic and political tradition in France. The bourses were localist, worker-directed, and were to be the incubators of French socialism. It was on this basis that Sorel's Reflections on Violence was posited. As we have seen, the FBT was eventually subsumed by the CGT. The French economy did undergo increasing centralization. The CGT, representing the French experience, also witnessed a



degree of centralization and more control over the working class. See Stanley's The Sociology of Virtue: The Political and Social theories of Georges Sorel (Berkeley, 1981); pp. 218-230; p. 219 for quote.

2. Peter Stearns, Revolutionary Syndicalism and French Labor: A Cause Without Rebels (New Brunswick, 1971), pp. 56, 61-62.

3. Ibid., p. 102.

4. Ibid., p. 4.