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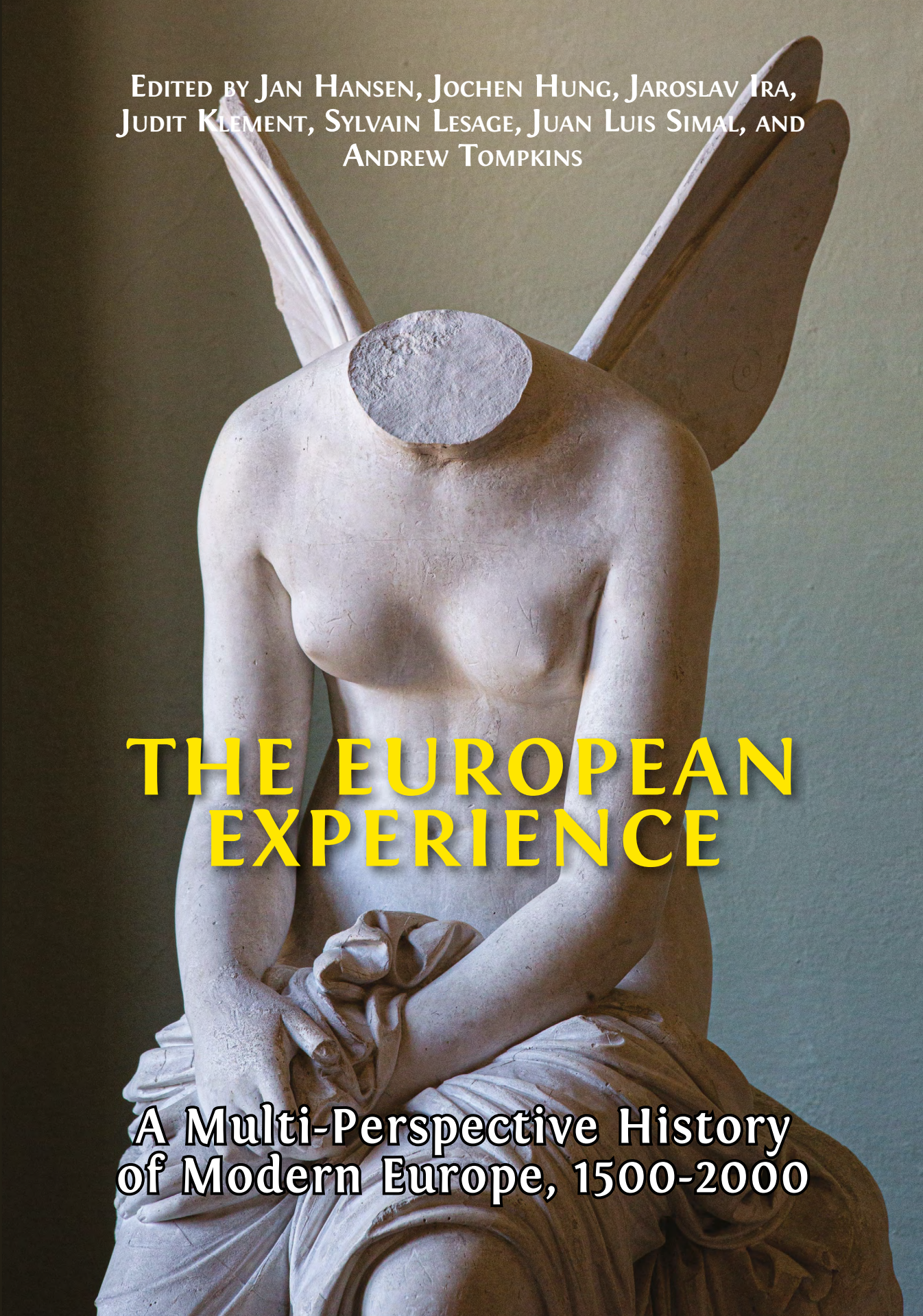

The European Experience

A Multi-Perspective History of Modern Europe, 1500-2000

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5.4.2 Labour in Modern History (ca. 1800–1900)

Corinne Boter and Jürgen Schmidt

Introduction

Nineteenth-century Europe witnessed momentous changes in the character and organisation of labour. The secondary sector of production and manufacturing—in contrast to the primary, agricultural sector, and the tertiary sector of services—expanded as more and more countries embarked on industrialisation, which eventually led to an expansion of the tertiary sector as well. While for most of human history the majority of people's livelihoods had been based on their own means of production, working for wages became the norm as industrialisation progressed. This increasing dependence on wages spurred the development of labour movements, which had the goal of protecting the wage labourer against mistreatment by their capitalist employer. Indeed, working conditions in both agriculture and industry significantly deteriorated during the early stages of industrialisation, which would eventually lead to protective labour legislation. These changes have been thoroughly researched by labour historians who, in trying to make sense of the complex term 'labour', have arrived at different definitions. First, work can be paid or unpaid. The former includes all types of work that are performed for a (financial) reward, including both self-employed and waged labour. The latter is performed without any type of remuneration, such as domestic labour within one's own household or voluntary work. Second, labour can be unfree, semi-free, or free. Unfree (or forced) labour is a work relation in which people are put to work against their own wishes. Modern Europe relied heavily on unfree and semi-free labour in the form of slavery and coolie labour, but mostly outside the borders of Europe itself, in the countries it had colonised (such as on the plantations in the West and East Indies). Although semi-free labour also existed within Europe in the form of serfdom, most labour within Europe was considered 'free', although the extent to which factory labours actually

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enjoyed freedom can be debated. Third, historians distinguish between blue-collar and white-collar work, the former being physical work in agriculture, industry, and crafts, and the latter being non-physical service work. Using these distinctions, this chapter will give an overview of the most important changes that took place in the agricultural, manufacturing, and service sectors as well as the social and political consequences of these shifts.

Fig. 1: The Atelier of Mór Erdélyi, Bean peeling (1908), Fortepan 86885, Magyar Földrajzi Múzeum [Hungarian Geographical Museum], https://fortepan.hu/hu/photos/?id=86885.

Agriculture

During the nineteenth century, the European agricultural sector underwent drastic changes in labour organisation, technology, and output. Between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, an 'agricultural revolution' took place in Britain, with increasing agricultural output and rapid population growth as a result. Many historians believe that this agricultural revolution paved the way for the Industrial Revolution (further discussed in the next section), because it freed up labour due to rising productivity per farmer. However, this argument is not uncontested. For instance, other historians have emphasised the gradual nature of agricultural change and speak of an evolution rather than a revolution. According to them, agricultural development was a sequence of innovations and inventions, including the introduction of the four-field rotation system and land enclosures during the early modern period and the invention of artificial fertiliser in the nineteenth century. There is nonetheless consensus on the fact that these developments had a profound impact on agricultural productivity, with Britain leading the charts up until at least the turn of the

twentieth century. However, during the nineteenth century, countries in continental Europe started to catch up—especially the Netherlands, Denmark, and Belgium—and Southern and Eastern European countries also experienced significant increases in agricultural output.

Because of these changes the relative share of the total labour force working in the agricultural sector significantly decreased in nineteenth-century Europe. The rapidly expanding industrial and service sectors absorbed large chunks of the agricultural labour force, and this decline in agricultural employment was made possible by the aforementioned increases in agricultural productivity. The world-wide relative decrease of the agricultural labour force happened gradually, starting in Western Europe roughly around 1800. For instance, in Britain this share dropped from forty percent in 1800 to less than ten percent in 1900, and in Belgium from sixty-two percent to thirty-eight percent in the same period. Southern and Eastern European labour markets remained dominated by agriculture for much longer, but here too the agricultural labour force would eventually shrink—although by 1900, the agricultural sector was still the most important employer in these regions. It is important to realise that an *absolute* decrease of the agricultural labour force did not occur until much later, but roughly followed the same pattern as the relative decline, i.e., starting in Western Europe around 1850 and slowly moving to other countries during the subsequent century.

Besides the regional differences in the relative and absolute size of the agricultural population, there were also notable differences inside Europe in the way labour was organised—particularly in the use of free and unfree labour. The medieval institution of serfdom, which tied agricultural labourers to the land on which they worked in exchange for protection, was gradually abolished in Western and Central Europe during the early modern era and many countries officially abolished this practice during the period of the French Revolution. Conversely, in some Eastern European countries, serfdom persisted for much longer. For instance, in Russia serfdom was only abolished in 1861, a change that had been set in motion when the country found itself on the losing side of the Crimean War (1853–1856). Right before the emancipation of the serfs, almost half of the rural population of European Russia was legally bound to the land they worked, although there were considerable regional differences. It has been argued that the abolishment of serfdom was an important reason for the surge in Russian agricultural productivity during the second half of the nineteenth century. According to this argument, peasants were incentivised to work harder and more effectively, for instance by making better use of technology. Therefore, one must bear in mind the great social and economic impact of the abolition of serfdom in Eastern Europe. Elsewhere in nineteenth-century Europe, the use of unfree labour was rare. People either

worked for wages on a large farm or ran their own agricultural business. Whether large-scale farms with an extensive wage-labour force or small(er) family businesses without wage labourers dominated the labour market varied in different periods and from country to country.

Fig. 2: David Octavius Hill, St. Rollox Chemical Works at the opening of the Garnkirk and Glasgow railway (1831), Public Domain, Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:StRolloxChemical_1831.jpg.

The Industrial Revolution and the 'Social Question'

As mentioned above, the 'Industrial Revolution', which started in Britain halfway through the eighteenth century, instigated important economic and social changes in nineteenth-century Europe. Although the timing, causes, and even the term 'Industrial Revolution' itself are heavily contested, it is accepted that all over Europe, albeit at different moments in time and in varying ways, economies and populations were affected by rapidly changing production techniques, propelled by technological innovation. The steam engine was the most important of these technological advances, making it possible to use heat, as opposed to raw muscle power, to produce motion. These economic and technological changes in turn affected economic structures, labour organisation, and social legislation all over Europe.

During the first stages of industrialisation, the share of employment in manufacturing expanded while the relative agricultural labour force shrank. Developments in the primary and secondary sectors went hand-in-hand, although the direction of causality is debated. It has long been argued that increasing outputs in British agriculture freed up a considerable workforce to

move to industry. Others have argued instead that it was the relatively high-paid industrial activities which pulled people from the countryside to cities, which in turn forced the agricultural sector to modernise and mechanise, a process which even further accelerated urbanisation. No matter the exact causation, economic structures in most European countries changed dramatically. During later stages of industrialisation, the service sector gained in importance as well. Intensifying bureaucratisation boosted the demand for white-collar workers such as secretaries, which opened up new jobs for (mostly young, unmarried) women. Moreover, improved methods of communication—including railroads and the telegraph—created new possibilities for the global movement of people, products, and ideas, which likewise expanded work in the service sector.

These economic changes also had major consequences for the ways in which labour was organised. Manufacturing was largely displaced from homes and small workshops and moved to large factories. Modern machinery simply took up too much space and required vast capital investments, something only wealthy entrepreneurs could do. Consequently, an increasing number of labourers became dependent on wage labour as opposed to their own means of production. With the spread of the factory system, the production process became more specialised and formalised. One worker became responsible for only one specific part of the production process, a system which significantly lowered the costs of labour. Seeing that labour was increasingly concentrated in factories, it was possible to coordinate a specialised work force. These changes initially met resistance from labourers: the Luddites, a famous example, were a group of textile workers who destroyed machinery because they felt the equipment would make their skills useless.

Even though most European economies grew significantly as a result of their growing manufacturing sectors, there were serious downsides to these developments. As a result of rapid urbanisation and population growth, living conditions in exploding factory cities, such as the English textile city of Manchester, were very poor. In Manchester, the small houses which sheltered the new industrial workers were built closely together and lacked proper sanitation systems or clean drinking water. The working conditions in factories were equally bad, with unhygienic working environments and insufficient regard for workers' safety. Moreover, poverty and unemployment were widespread. The dismal working and living conditions of the working class could, at a certain point, no longer be ignored by governments or higher social classes. It came to be seen as a problem to be solved, and was referred to as the 'social question'. Protective legislation was one of the ways in which governments tried to improve the living standards of the working class. The first laws were designed to protect women and children, curtailing their

working hours and prohibiting very young children from working in factories entirely. Most of these early laws, however, did not apply to women and children working in agriculture. Furthermore, labourers were increasingly protected against misfortune as a result of accidents, unemployment, and old age (pensions).

Initiatives to solve the social question often had a heavily moralising tone, aiming to 'civilise' the working class. One important aspect of this mission was to keep the married woman at home, making sure that her family was well taken care off, while her husband was out earning money. These shifting social norms changed the organisation of labour within households. All over Europe, women's *formal* labour force participation decreased during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. However, research has shown that the transition to a 'male breadwinner society', in which the husband was the sole wage earner, was far from complete by the start of the twentieth century, and married women found other ways to generate an income besides working full-time outside their homes. Such work could include labour in the home industry or the cultivation of a plot of land. Indeed, despite the increasing importance of wage labour, subsistence agriculture remained an important additional resource for many households throughout rural Europe. Moreover, the expanding service sector also opened up new job opportunities for unmarried women whose educational attainment had improved significantly in most European countries over the course of the nineteenth century.

Labour Movements

The labouring class did not stand idle in the face of the fundamental processes of structural change, industrialisation, urbanisation, and the social question. Although labour movements have a very long tradition, and activities like strikes had been long-practiced, during the nineteenth century labour unions emerged all over Europe. These unions eventually developed into strong organisations with mass membership and economic, political, and social influence. The factory labourer became the symbol of the suffering working class, forced into dismal conditions of life and employment by capitalist entrepreneurs.

Throughout the nineteenth century, different actors participated in the process of improving the situation of the working classes and in finding answers to the social question. The nation state began with legal regulations, elements of the middle classes advocated for more humane conditions, employers offered paternalistic support, and the workers organised themselves to stand up for their own interests. In the first three quarters of the nineteenth century, mainly young journeymen (with their knowledge of handicraft organisations) built

the core group of the movement in associations, trade unions, and parties. In the first half of the century, journeymen and workers in the putting-out system were active in Luddism—that is, following the example of the Luddites and destroying machinery—as forms of action beyond associational models. Later in the century, factory workers increasingly participated in these organisations as well. Especially in the labour parties, which emerged in the 1860s, left-wing intellectuals also played an important role.

The ideological groundings of the labour movements were shaped by intellectuals as well as labourers. In France and Germany, so-called 'craft socialism' became very prominent, promoting the idea that a just and equal society could be 'crafted'. Likewise, the demands of the democratic Chartist movement in England, which aimed to give the labouring class a political voice by pleading for universal suffrage (for men), were formulated and carried by skilled workers. Such socialist/communist ideas culminated in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, a pamphlet written by the German philosophers Karl Marx (1818–1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820–1895) and published in 1848. The Manifesto was above all an analysis of past and present class struggles and of how the capitalist society would eventually evolve into a socialist society.

The influence of the manifesto would remain limited for decades after its publication, but its ideas were ultimately adopted and used as the foundation of labour movements across Europe, albeit in different ways. For example, in Great Britain a closer connection between labour and liberals existed, while in Southern Europe anarchist movements gained influence. The aims and values of labour movements were threefold. First, they aimed at improving working conditions through higher wages, shorter working hours, and valuing (physical) work. Second, their political demands focussed on participation, democratisation, and freedom. Third, an equal society, solidarity, and a vision of a 'classless society' represented the social aims of the labour movement. In the fight for respect as worker and citizen these aims coalesced and found symbols, metaphors, and cultural expression. The aims of white-collar organisations, which developed very late in the nineteenth century, however, concentrated much more on preserving their already privileged positions in society and at work.

To achieve their aims, the labour movement possessed a great variety of practices and actions. Luddism as a direct form of violence disappeared in the first half of the nineteenth century due to more effective forms of protest and more durable and powerful organisations. Instead, strikes became a powerful weapon, ranging from small-scale events on the shop floor to nationwide mass strikes. In the organisation of these strikes, trade unions played an important role, although they sometimes shied away from using this weapon where futile strikes could imperil their organisations. Besides grassroots activism and trade

union organisations, political engagement and political associations came to the fore. Although political labour parties faced state persecution throughout Europe, their success in many countries demonstrated that persecution was not the answer to this political-societal rise of the labouring class. In addition, mutual help and insurance fostered solidarity among the workers and was an important starting point for national insurance schemes against the risks of illness, unemployment, work accidents, and old age beginning from the late nineteenth century. Finally, international cooperation strengthened the power of the labour movements and demonstrated the importance of transnational networking—that this ideal of transnational cooperation would ultimately collapse in 1914 with the outbreak of the First World War was not foreseeable in the nineteenth century.

Despite their success, labour movements contained unsolved problems. Because the labour unions and parties had their origins in craft traditions and associational organisation patterns, they mainly represented skilled workers. In striving for respectability, the 'lumpenproletariat'—as the lowest societal strata had been called by Marx and Engels—was excluded. Moreover, a consciousness of the suppressed in colonial peripheries only partially developed and many labour movement leaders believed in a European, imperial civilising mission. Nonetheless, there was criticism of colonial regimes and slavery put forward by the labour movements. Finally, labour movements were shaped by male behaviour and membership. It took a long fight for female workers to be accepted as comrades on equal terms and not as rivals on the labour market. Since this fight was only partially successful, female labour organisations developed in parallel with the men's organisations

In conclusion, European labour movements achieved both successes and failures in the nineteenth century. Despite the rhetoric of class struggle, a socialist revolution did not take place in Europe, except the short-lived Paris Commune of 1871—an upheaval of the left-wing, republican, proletarian Paris population against the conservative-monarchic government leading to the first political instance of a council republic. The supporters favoured republicanism and advocated radical socialist change. The Commune was ultimately destroyed by the French Army in a massacre which killed thousands. In general, nineteenth-century revolutions were liberal, middle-class actions fighting for parliamentarism, democracy, and political freedom. These were also the aims of the labour movements. But the labour movement's fight for social equality and against exploitation and alienation did not turn into revolutionary reality. The level of political power achieved by the working class also remained limited. In Great Britain, the cooperation between liberals and labour helped the trade unionists enter parliament. In France, individual

socialist politicians only briefly participated in bourgeois government. In Germany, with the biggest labour movements in Europe, working-class organisations were strong, but due to the political system only had limited influence. In Russia, socialists continued to be persecuted. At the same time, throughout the nineteenth century an integration process occurred in which labour movements became much more closely attached to their nation states, gained influence on the municipal level, and helped to improve the economic-social situation of the working class.

Conclusion

The composition and character of European labour markets changed drastically during the nineteenth century as a result of increasing agricultural productivity and industrialisation. The expanding industrial and service sectors absorbed large parts of the agricultural labour force and wage labour, as opposed to self-employment, became increasingly important. Initially, these developments had a negative impact on working-class people, who more often than not lived in unhealthy houses, worked in dangerous places, and did all of this without any (financial) protection against misfortune. During the second half of the nineteenth century, labourers all over Europe started to organise themselves into labour unions and eventually managed to influence government policies, which ultimately resulted in protective legislation and increasing social welfare systems.

Discussion questions

1. What was the 'social question' and what role did the changes in the labour market in nineteenth-century Europe play in it?
2. How did the role of women on the labour market change during the nineteenth century?
3. Is the *Communist Manifesto* still relevant today? Why? Why not?

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