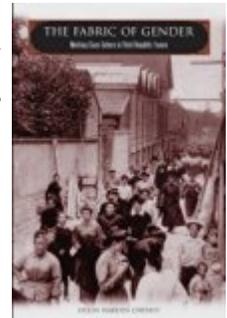


Helen Harden Chenut. *The Fabric of Gender: Working-Class Culture in Third Republic France.* University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005. vii + 448 pp. \$60.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-271-02520-9.



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The debate over when, where, why, and how a working-class identity developed in nineteenth-century France continues to be a concern for historians long after the publication of Karl Marx's classic texts on the subject.[1] In an effort to provide greater balance to an earlier historiography that presented a linear, progressive view of class relations deterministically driven by structural, material, or institutional changes, labor historians have addressed the political, social, and cultural, as well as economic, processes that transpire within and between classes. Helen Harden Chenut's recent monograph is a refreshing contribution to this trend in labor history that expands the conceptual and methodological parameters with which historians understand industrialization, capitalism, politics, and gender relations during France's Third Republic.

One need not be an expert on modern France or labor history to appreciate what this book has to offer. Although dense in archival research, the book eases the reader into an intricately woven fabric of its own, composed of various thematic threads ranging from gender and consumer poli-

tics to civic festivals and street protests. Chenut's case study of textile workers and mill owners in the northern French town of Troyes represents a "history from below" that places local social relations, economic institutions, and political structures within a larger national context. Bearing out a claim made by the local paper *Le Petit Troyen* in 1909 that "Troyes is to the knitted industry as Lyon is to the silk industry," Chenut highlights the importance of her micro-history to French labor historiography, but keenly points out where her work departs (p. 203). "The co-existence of two forms of production," the putting-out and factory system, "made it unique in relation to other textile regions" and formed the essence of a particular type of technical culture that was characterized by division and solidarity (p. 106).

Using a wide range of sources from oral testimonies, autobiographies, and family monographs to local newspapers, advertisements, estate inventories, and photographs, *The Fabric of Gender* reconstructs the impact of industrialization on the French working class through experience. As a mill town composed almost entirely of textile

workers, Troyes underwent two stages of mechanization from 1890 to 1945 that altered relations between the sexes, mill owners and their employees, trade unionists and socialists, and producers and consumers. Because industrial transformation evolved through an "uneven and piecemeal" process, the desires and needs of Troyes's diverse constituencies often came into conflict when issues of work, family, leisure, consumer culture, politics, and the community were concerned (p. 393).

Central to this project is the issue of gender and the ways in which patriarchal notions of authority and craftsmanship within the family structured a wider set of gender and labor relations within the community and the textile industry. Building on Tessie Liu's earlier case study of Choletais weavers in western France in *The Weavers Knot: The Contradictions of Class Struggle and Family Solidarity in Western France, 1750-1914* (1994), Chenut demonstrates that the economic vulnerability experienced by industrialists and workers, as a result of foreign competition and fluctuations in consumer demand, initiated a chain of victimization that descended down the social and gender hierarchy. Those most affected by the slow and gradual rise of the factory system were women textile workers who undertook a double occupation that blurred the boundaries between home and factory. Fulfilling household chores and factory-mandated quotas, women textile workers received lower wages, worked longer hours, and suffered from higher rates of mortality than their male counterparts.

These findings should come as no surprise given the recent scholarship on gender and the French working class, and yet, Chenut makes a significant contribution to this literature by asserting that familial, communal, and commercial interests in Troyes created a special set of conditions that encouraged, and eventually led to, a feminization of the knitted goods industry.[2] Mill owners, union militants, and bourgeois reformers

alike presented subcontracting as an "ideal solution" for all parties involved (p. 199). Working-class women could realize two cultural expectations of the female sex, "motherhood and home work," by performing manual tasks and using smaller, more specialized machines within a domestic environment (p. 192). An abundance of cheap female labor in the region afforded industrialists the opportunity "to decentralize production" and thereby evade working-class demands and strikes (pp. 176, 70). Consequently, a gendering of tools and a devaluation of feminine skills and domestic training prevented *bonnetières* from acquiring a professional status that would have enabled them to economically compete with male knitters. Those who flouted gender norms by working in the textile mills encountered further degradation as labor unions, working-class organizations, and political parties on both the left and the right continued to define the "worker" as male and insist on a double standard of morality that created a system of sexual segregation within the workplace. When significant disruptions to the gender order did occur, such as during the two world wars, women's conversion as knitters in a factory setting "was nothing but a parenthesis in their lives" that marked a temporary, almost insignificant, change in their work habits (p. 257). Despite reduced wages, overtime, and social stigma, women textile workers by-and-large upheld, rather than challenged, the ideal of the male artisan and the female domestique by emphasizing their feminine skills within a domestic tradition and by contributing to a "technological gap" between the sexes (pp. 98, 190). [3]

Regardless of their varying interests and experiences, male and female textile workers expressed a shared discontent over wage reductions, seasonal unemployment, and unfavorable working conditions through a political radicalism that developed in opposition to bourgeois capitalism. Whereas past histories have either overestimated or overemphasized the importance of socialism and unionization in creating a working-

class consciousness, Chenut reminds us that "only a fraction of the French working-class belonged to unions," 2.9 percent to be exact, and that in the Aube region this percentage was even less (pp. 144). Rather, the centrality of autonomy within family and community networks, Chenut notes, helps to explain why workers of Troyes turned away from Marxist-inspired socialism and organized their own working-class organizations and demonstrations. An analysis of three strikes, between 1900 and 1936, reveals how a working-class consciousness emerged, not as a result of socialist indoctrination by working-class elite organized as the Marxist *Parti ouvrier français* (POF), but in response to perceived threats to artisanal independence. Desiring to make their families less dependent on the workplace and industrial capitalists, workers embraced a particular vision of the body politic that found its best expression in revolutionary syndicalism.

A preference for direct action over general strikes suited these workers who, lacking confidence in the state or political parties to provide a more egalitarian state of existence, turned to labor unions, and later cooperatives, as an "alternative to the liberal, republican social order" (p. 2). The founding of *The Laborieuse*, a working-class cooperative that successfully competed against larger commercial department stores, provides the best example of how cooperative socialism united Troyes's workers under the motto "all for one, and one for all" (p. 239). In one of the book's most illuminating chapters, Chenut demonstrates how this nonprofit association promoted workers' interests by linking their right to work with a right to consume. Workers' exclusion from the marketplace, stemming from them having little to no disposable income, reinforced class differences within the community and became a source of tension as workers attempted to obtain a comfortable living wage and greater leisure time, remain committed to socialist goals, and yet express themselves as individuals. In this context, Chenut illustrates the ways in which the labor unrest of

the early twentieth century was not just an expression of widespread discontent concerning factory life, but also an expression of increasing frustration over workers' inability to consume the very products they produced. The worker owned and operated *Laborieuse* participated in the democratization of consumption by making a greater number of products accessible to a larger segment of the working-class population at a reduced cost. Working-class consumer practices, like strikes and protests were political acts and strategies of resistance that stressed the importance of social needs over profit.

As a history that incorporates a diverse range of social settings, actors, relations, and production arrangements that have either been ignored or marginalized, *The Fabric of Gender* has added an extra dimension to the economically deterministic Marxist model of labor by accounting for both cultural and economic changes in class formation. Chenut familiarizes her readers with key historical figures, on the national and local stage, whose lives shaped the social and political fabric of Troyes. One learns to identify with the ambitions, struggles, hopes, and fears of militant activists like Suzanne Gaulois and René Plard, and to understand the demands and pressures of mill owners like Léon Vitoux. It serves as a wonderful introduction to modern French labor history as it explains the rise and evolution of various political movements, the shifts from a craft to a factory system and from merchant to industrial capitalism, as well as defines, describes, and elaborates on the meaning of technical jargon and processes for a more general audience. If French labor history was ever in a state of "crisis," the intellectual vitality of this text, both in the breadth and depth of its scope, has put such fears to rest.

Notes

[1]. Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 1964); Karl Marx, *The Civil War in France* (New York: International Publishers, 1988); and

Karl Marx, *Class Struggles in France, 1848-1850* (New York: International Publishers, 1964).

[2]. Elinor Accampo, *Industrialization, Family Life, and Class Relations: Saint-Chamond, 1815-1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Lenard Berlanstein, *The Working People of Paris, 1871-1914* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984); Judith Coffin, *The Politics of Women's Work: The Paris Garment Trades, 1750-1915* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); and Laura Lee Downs, *Manufacturing Inequality: Gender Division in the French and British Metalworking Industries, 1914-1939* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

[3] "Technological gap(s)" is a term that Chenut borrows from Paola Tabet, "Les mains, les outils, les armes," *L'Homme* 19 (July-December 1979): 5-62.

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