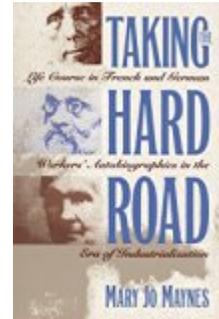


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Mary Jo Maynes. *Taking the Hard Road: Life Courses in French and German Workers' Autobiographies in the Era of Industrialization*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995. xii + 263 pp. \$23.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-4497-7; \$55.00 (library), ISBN 978-0-8078-2187-9.

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The historian who would give voice to the voiceless, uncover the hidden lives of submerged groups, be they peasants, slaves, minorities, or working men and women, faces the problem of the paucity of direct testimony they have bequeathed us. She has to confront a second difficulty: that of devising ways of bringing their real life out from under the shadow of much more abundant state and elite sources. Too much of the discourse in these sources invents the "other," attributing to it identities and patterns of behaviour that are not necessarily, or even usually, true reflections of reality.

In order to escape these dilemmas, scholars have been obliged to show considerable ingenuity in reading elite texts, in uncovering sources in which, as in court proceedings, the poor are given a rare and limited opportunity of bearing witness and speaking in the first person. Scholars must also devise methods to interrogate serial sources, usually created and preserved for other reasons, and make them reveal something about the lived experience of subordinate groups.

Some of the breakthroughs that have resulted from the discovery of new kinds of sources and the rereading of elite witnesses have been famously successful. This success has come not only because of the unexpectedly rich nature of some archives, but also because of the sensibility of some scholars in sniffing out human flesh, which Lucien Febvre rightly believed to be the essential first quality of the historian. Thus, the chance discovery of two trial proceedings of the Roman Inquisition, scrupulously transcribed verbatim by court notaries, allowed Carlo Ginzberg to gain insight into the cosmology of the sixteenth-century Friulian miller, Menocchio. At about the same time that Ginzberg's *The Cheese and*

*the Worms* appeared (can it be twenty years ago already? ) so did Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's *Montail-lou*. Ladurie's close reading of the detailed inquiry that Jacques Fournier, bishop of Pamiers, made into the suspect beliefs of the inhabitants of a small village in the haute-Ariege, gave us another portrait of popular attitudes and behaviour. Historical demographers using serial data have had no less success in revealing patterns of popular behaviour: their painstaking quantitative analyses of parish registers recording baptisms, marriages, and burials have revealed the existence in modern Europe of a unique biological model, characterized by late marriage, low nuptiality, and family limitation.

Whatever the achievements of studies based on elite sources such as these, they suffer important limitations. Ethno-methodologists (and others) have taught us to be wary of court testimonies which, however detailed and faithful the record, involve an element of constraint and restraint and of role-playing. Similarly, studies based on serial sources succeed only in lifting one corner of the veil that covers popular cultures, for they reveal something about behaviour but can only hint at the attitudes and relationships that subtend it. Whatever the successes historians have enjoyed in revealing something of the everyday life of the mass of humankind in the past, most of it remains beyond our reach.

Mary Jo Maynes now proposes to listen to authentic working people's voices during the long transition to industrial capitalism between the eighteenth and the twentieth centuries. She does so by analyzing a relatively large sample of workers' autobiographies and by attempting to contrast the experience of men and women in two different societal and economic contexts, France

and Germany. The promise of this study is considerable. Unable to use oral testimony, historians who work on this period have long called upon a very small sample of well-known autobiographies, such as those of Agricol Perdiguier or Martin Nadaud. North American undergraduates now also have a translation of extracts from a handful of familiar working-class autobiographies in Mark Traugott's 1993 anthology, *The French Worker: Autobiographies from the Early Industrial Era*. Maynes, however, has amassed a much more considerable corpus of ninety life stories. The promise of her study is all the greater in that, rather than attempting to cover entire lifespans, she concentrates her attention on the critical period of identity formation which is the transition from childhood to adulthood.

Her reading of these life stories is both sensible and sensitive, and she is especially insightful on how workers made sense of their lives. She is able to offer glimpses of affective relations within families, of the impact of still high mortality rates among urban workers, of how class and gender identities are formed under the influence of family circumstances and cultures (like so many historians of the working class, she acknowledges the influence on her approach of the late E. P. Thompson). She is also able to show how poverty and its stigma affected her biographers' attitudes and aspirations, because nearly all of them stress their determination to re-fashion their lives and create their own destiny. Her analysis further suggests that, if working-class sexual attitudes and behaviour were more "emancipated" than those of the middle classes, they were never casual or un-problematic and invariably reflected a concern for respectability. It also reveals the importance of critical moments in coming-of-age and of differences in the sense of self and identity between men and women. It even suggests, though her study here is far from convincing, that there were contrasts between Germany and France that resulted from different cultural, and especially educational contexts and from the more rapid pace of change

on the other side of the Rhine.

However suggestive the author's analysis, which puts flesh on bones, it has to be said that her contribution serves only to confirm through some direct individual witnesses what scholars already know about the lived experience of the working classes during industrialization and urbanization. There are two principal reasons why Maynes's study fails to go further. One is that the source base of ninety published autobiographies, drawn from two countries and from a period over two centuries long, is too small and scattered and cannot be regarded as representative. Its representativeness is further undermined by a perhaps inevitable imbalance between men's and women's voices, since two-thirds of the autobiographies are from men, and by the over-representation of labour militants and political activists, who make up 60 percent of the writers. The second is that reading these life stories is made more difficult by their exceptional character. These, like any texts, are not innocent, but written with a didactic purpose—by militants or by those who were successful in their individual life itineraries. Both groups wanted their lessons to be learned by others. They are, then, partial, coded rather than transparent, necessarily open to different and competing interpretations. They each require careful contextualization and careful reading of the kind that Daniel Roche successfully applied to the memoirs of Jacques-Louis Menetra, the eighteenth-century Parisian window-maker, or that Alain Cottureau used to reread a Parisian small master's late nineteenth-century account of workers' cultures of resistance (Denis Poulot's *Le Sublime*). Maynes is aware of most of these difficulties, as of the ambiguous relationship of all historians to their texts, but her scattered corpus and her method of reading do not allow her fully to surmount them.

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