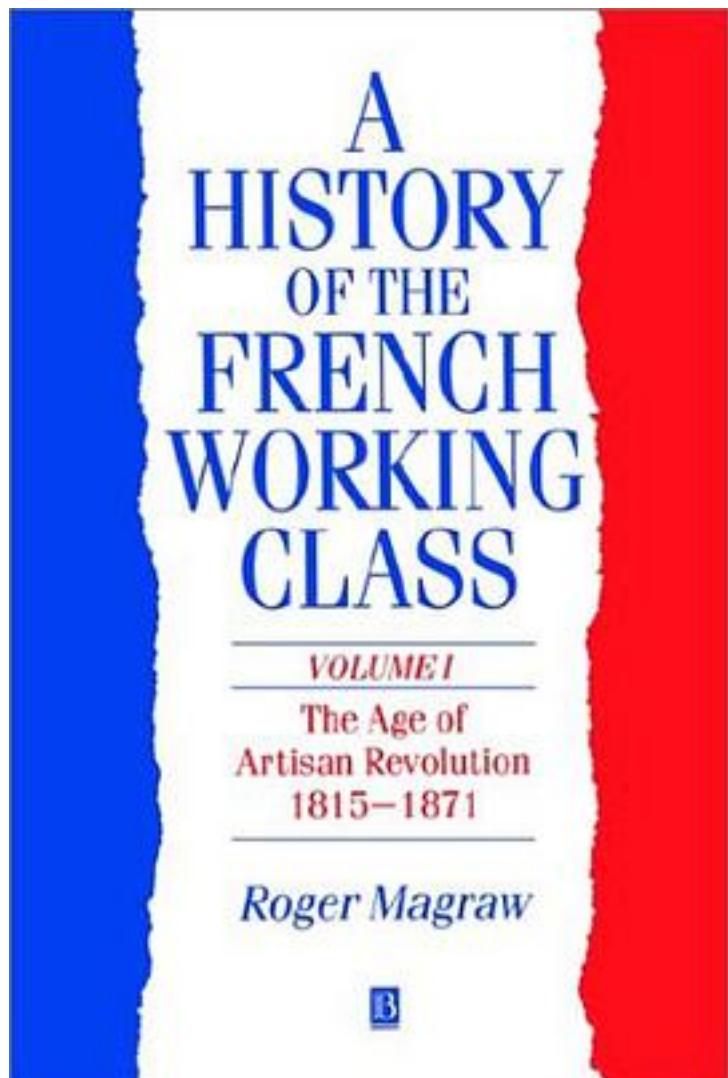


# A History of the French Working Class



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Marx's optimism about the revolutionary potential of the European working class derived from his observation of the Parisian and Lyonnais workers' revolts of the 1830s and 1840s. The 'new labour history' sought to explain such precocious class consciousness culture of artisans which, it argued, generated a 'trade socialism' which aspired to build a 'social Republic' around producer cooperatives.

More recently, the 'new labour history', a product of the ephemeral radical optimism of the 1960s, has come under assault from a revisionist historiography influenced by cultural anthropology, post-modernism and feminism, which questions such fundamental teleology of the 'rise of labour', the obsession with the 'skill' of male workers. Labour historians have been criticised for failing to integrate gender analysis or to analyse discourses about workers, for uncritical acceptance of the 'myth' of the artisan and for viewing the Ancien Régime uncritically as a lost Golden Age of craft skills.

In the face of this onslaught is it still possible to seek to describe the 'making of the French working class'? This volume attempts to grapple with the insights of the revisionists, while salvaging what can be salvaged from older labour historiography. It insists on the central importance of the national political context. The 'peculiarities' of French labour owed much to workers' participation in the 'Bourgeois Revolution' of 1789-1830. The shifting labour policies of successive royalist, Bonapartist and Republican regimes were key determinants of the style of labour politics - as was workers' ambivalent relationship with the anticlerical 'progressive' wing of the bourgeoisie.

However, on balance, the book re-asserts the importance of artisanal resistance to perceived threats to their work-culture. Moreover, it insists that although the 'objective' structural class-formation of the French working class was gradual and uneven, a hereditary proletariat was emerging by the 1860s.

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