REDESCRIPTIONS
Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory

Conceptualisations of Labour and the Making of the French Working Class in the 1830s

RESEARCH

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HUP HELSINKI UNIVERSITY PRESS

ABSTRACT

The emergence of the working class as a unified subject in France at the beginning of the 19th century was linked to transformations in the conceptualisation of work. At the beginning of the July Monarchy, two distinct conceptions of labour emerged within the nascent liberal and socialist movements. What they had in common was that they saw the working class as a single, unified entity, over and above the trade differences that had organised labour before the 1789 Revolution. But they differed in important respects. For the liberals, labour, as a social activity, put workers at risk of being influenced by immoral doctrines and examples of vice. In contrast to property, which led the middle classes to political moderation, work was seen as potentially radicalising workers, who therefore had to be kept under the supervision of the state and employers. For socialists, on the other hand, labour was an all-encompassing activity that should make the working class a hegemonic subject.

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KEYWORDS:

Labour; Working-class; July Monarchy; Socialism; Liberalism; Associations

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Hayat, Samuel. 2022. "Conceptualisations of Labour and the Making of the French Working Class in the 1830s." *Redescriptions: Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory* 25(1), 5–26. DOI: https://doi.org/10.33134/rds.378

Redescriptions: Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory
DOI: 10.33134/rds.378

On 22 September 1830, the first issue of *L'Artisan. Journal de la classe ouvrière* was published in Paris. Its anonymous editors, who presented themselves as workers, intended to make it 'a platform for the working class'.[1] The phrase 'working class' (*classe ouvrière*) was then rarely used, in English or in French, except by a few social reformers, such as Robert Owen and William Cobbett who mostly used the plural form (working classes), or in France by followers of Henri de Saint-Simon.[2] In his last book, in 1825, Saint-Simon had called for a 'New Christianity' devoted to 'improving the existence of the poor class, (...) the largest'[3] – a call that had led to the creation of the Saint-Simonian Church by some of his disciples after his death (Pilbeam 2000; Picon 2002). The motto of Saint-Simonians was clear: 'the improvement of the moral, physical and intellectual lot of the largest and poorest class'.[4] The same phrase was used in the first sentence of the first article of *L'Artisan,* showing a Saint-Simonian inspiration, but with an important nuance: the working class was defined as 'the largest and *most useful*' class. Why useful? Because 'without it, capital has no value, without it there is no machinery, no industry, no trade. All classes rely on it, profit from its labour (...).' For *L'Artisan*, and for many other militant workers in the early 1830s, what defined the working class as a unified subject was a common human activity, the most useful one: labour (Rancière & Faure 2007; Jakobowicz 2009: 257–278).

The history of the French working class and the history of the concept of labour have rarely been considered together – as if the former purely concerned social history and the latter intellectual history.[5] My contention is that both histories are intertwined, and deeply political, in the sense that they are utterly linked with a political event, the revolution of July 1830. The making of the French working class and its distinctiveness regarding other patterns of class development have been heavily debated by social historians since the 1980s (Merriman 1980; Katznelson 1986; Hanagan 1989; Noiriel 1990; Berlanstein 1992; Magraw 1992). Industrialisation, mechanisation and the ensuing proletarianisation, though diverse in their forms and rhythm, were affirmed as central factors (Aminzade 1984; Johnson 1992; LaFrance 2020), the role of skilled urban craftsmen has been underlined (Moss 1976), as well as the popular sociability of trades and neighbourhoods (Gribaudi 2014; Guicheteau 2014), the legal impossibility for workers to keep their traditional organisation by trade after the 1791 Le Chapelier

1 *L'Artisan*, September 22, 1830, p. 1.

2 Robert Owen, *Two memorials on behalf of the working classes*, London: Lanark, 1818; William Cobbett, *Cobbett's poor man's friend or, Useful information and advice for the working classes*, London: William Cobbett, 1826. For an example of an early use of "*classe ouvrière*" by Saint-Simonians, see Pierre Isidore Rouen, "De la classe ouvrière", *Le Producteur, Journal philosophique de l'industrie, des sciences et des beaux-arts*, 1826, t. III, pp. 304–318 & t. IV, pp. 292–316.

3 Henri de Saint-Simon, *Nouveau Christianisme: dialogues entre un conservateur et un novateur*, Paris: Bossange, 1825.

4 *Doctrine de Saint-Simon: exposition, première année, 1828–1829*, 3rd ed. Paris: Bureau de l'Organisateur, 1831, p. 54. In this text, the real manifesto of the movement, they used indifferently "*classe ouvrière*", "*classe industrielle*", "*classe des travailleurs*" and "*classe des prolétaires*".

5 There are exceptions, such as the classic studies (Chevalier 2002; Rancière 2012), the edited volume (Kaplan & Koepp 1986) or the unpublished dissertation (Powers 2015). Gender history has also played an important role in reopening discussions about the working class and the concept of labour (Tilly 1981; Tilly & Scott 1987; Scott 1999). Finally, one should mention (Rosanvallon 1998), in which the author makes a conceptual history of the representation of the people, studying the contradictions between various meanings of representation (as mandate and as figuration) and the people (as the universality of citizens and as a society divided in classes). Yet, debates about labour, and hence the uniqueness of the working class, are not really taken into consideration.

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law (Kaplan & Minard 2004), or the distinctiveness of the complex legal contractual system, the *louage d'ouvrage*, in which merchants hired workers that remained legally independent (Cottereau 2002; Didry 2016).

These structural factors are of paramount importance to understand the long-term history of the making of the French working class. But once we pay attention to the conceptual history of 'working class' and 'labour' in France, i.e. how the terms were used, by whom, with what definition and how their uses aggregated into properly defined concepts, the revolution of July 1830 appears as a turning point. As William Sewell has established, immediately after the July revolution, corporative idioms were transformed by some militant workers – who admittedly represented only a fraction of workers (Hunt & Sheridan 1986) – into a coherent and emancipatory class rhetoric (Sewell 1980a). Workers of many different trades claimed the right to collectively negotiate the price of labour (*tarif*) with merchants and asked the state to intervene in the case of conflict. In Lyon, silk weavers reframed their identity, until then mostly defined by their trade, as 'proletarians', members of the 'working class', a new 'Third Estate', 'exploited' by a 'bourgeois aristocracy' and seeking 'emancipation'.[6] Facing popular unrest, even insurrections in 1831, 1832 and 1834, liberals in power reaffirmed their understanding of labour as a commodity, and employment as a strictly contractual relation, denying the workers any collective capacity, in the name of the 'freedom of work'.[7] But in the meantime, they also tried to understand and to control this 'working class', by commissioning studies on the nature of labour, its organisation and the reasons for persistent workers' poverty.

So the emergence of the working class as a political question after the revolution of 1830 went together with debates about what labour was, as a distinctive social activity, as well as many discourses, pamphlets, articles and studies about workers, not to mention the burgeoning literature depicting them (Perrot 1972; Lyon-Caen 2004; Kalifa 2010). These debates were quite unprecedented in France: while the word labour (*travail*) had always been part of French language, especially since the 17th century when *travailler* replaced *ouvrer* and *labourer* (Febvre 1948), it was then just slowly emerging as a concept, defining a unified activity that could be studied as such (Méda & Vendramin 2013: 7–54). The debate suddenly took on new importance with the revolution of 1830 – which might explain why it initially remained relatively closed to other national contexts. Of course, Adam Smith was already well-known in France, as well as his conceptualisation of the division of labour as a central mechanism in the creation of economic value – but Smith had not really investigated what labour was as an activity. And while in England, David Ricardo's labour theory of value proved influential and spread the idea that labour was the determining element of the value of a commodity, this idea was quite resisted at first by most French economists, starting with Jean-Baptiste Say (Béraud & Faccarello 2014). Hegel was known, at least by name, but the central role given to labour (*Arbeit*) and the master–slave dialectic in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* was mostly ignored until the 20th century (Baugh 1993), as the debates raised by his later considerations on the rabble (*Pöbel*) and poverty in the *Philosophy of Right* (Melamed 2001). When it came

6 All these terms were used in "Du progrès social", *L'Echo de la Fabrique. Journal industriel et littéraire de Lyon*, year 3, n° 23, June 9, 1833, p. 1–2. On this newspaper, see Frobert (2010a).

7 Freedom of work (*liberté du travail*) was a central theme for liberals, especially economists such as the "industrialist" Charles Dunoyer who forcefully refused any form of regulation of the economy (Staum 1998).

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to facing the 'social question', i.e. the situation of the working class, by investigating what labour was, French thinkers and militants were largely self-centred, at least in the 1830s.[8]

Divergent conceptualisations of labour thus were born from opposite political projects regarding the working class after 1830, considering it as an object of policies or a subject of politics. On the one hand, facing social unrest, unemployment and soon a cholera epidemic (Kudlick 1996), the liberal government turned the working class into an object of policies, defined by its poverty and dangerousness for society, a political problem whose solution meant reaffirming the principle of freedom of work while investigating how labour was organised. On the other hand, socialists and militant workers, soon joined by republicans, drawing on the active role of Parisian workers during the July revolution, started to try to organise workers, presented as unjustly excluded from institutional political – thus turning the working class into a new political subject. This went with a conceptualisation of labour as the most useful activity and of its reorganisation as the solution to the social problem – in particular through workers' associations. As a result, the signifier 'working class' (*classe ouvrière*), and the social reality it intended to represent, were constructed in France on different, and often opposite, conceptualisations of labour, as a distinctive form of industrial activity. What they had in common was that they saw work as a distinct and unified activity, mostly masculine (while a third of industrial workers were women, not to mention domestic labour), and they gave the economic sphere a central role in the resolution of the social question – but their visions of how labour should be organised and of the role of the working class were diametrically opposed.[9]

To highlight the role of the divergent concepts of labour in the making of the French working class, I will focus on two corpuses that explicitly articulate a distinctive conceptualisation of labour and a discourse on the working class as an object of policies or a political subject. First, from the governmental side, I will consider the studies on workers commissioned in the 1830s by the newly founded *Académie des sciences morales et politiques*, especially the ground-breaking *Tableau de l'état physique et moral des ouvriers employés dans les manufactures de coton, de laine et de soie* written by the physician Louis-René Villermé, published in 1840. This classic source has been largely commented on, precisely because it was influential – but no specific attention has been given yet to Villermé's conceptualisation of labour. Then, to understand how the working class started to be considered as a political subject, I will focus on texts by the typographer Jules Leroux, brother of the socialist Pierre Leroux, an early activist for workers' associations and the probable author of *L'Artisan, Journal de la classe ouvrière*. Jules Leroux was one of the first socialists to thoroughly study political economy, which led him to write most economic articles (including '*Travail*') in the *Encyclopédie nouvelle*, a collective endeavour born in the Saint-Simonian movement to gather all modern knowledge. These two texts are not

8 It rapidly changed in the 1840s, after Eugène Buret's seminal comparative study of the French and the English working class (*De la misère des classes laborieuses en Angleterre et en France*, Paris: Paulin, 1840) and the development of major social surveys in England, especially after the 1842 official *Report on the sanitary conditions of the labouring population of Great Britain*.

9 The relation of early liberalism and socialism is still a debated question, especially when one considers the most industrialist trends of both ideologies. Saint-simonism certainly irrigated both currents, and Saint-Simon himself was greatly influenced by liberals (Stedman Jones 2006). Again, the revolution of 1830, like the later revolution of 1848, played a definite role in exacerbating what may initially have been small differences.

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necessarily representative of liberal and socialist opinions on labour, but they were produced from central positions in these nascent movements – the terms 'liberalism' and 'socialism' started to be used in this sense in the early 1830s. More importantly, they took place in parallel endeavours to understand the link between labour and the 'social problem', making the working class a key element in its resolution.

I—TURNING WORKERS INTO OWNERS: LABOUR, PROPERTY AND POLITICAL ENFRANCHISEMENT

The idea that the working class was a unified group defined by a commensurable activity called labour was not uncommon amongst French early liberals. It was a central feature of 18th-century Physiocratic thought, which distinguished between three classes: the 'productive', the 'proprietor' and a third class, called 'sterile', defined precisely by non-agricultural labour (Piguet 1996). Later, this view of society as divided between classes defined by their position in the process of production became a core concept in the notion of history developed by liberal historians such as Augustin Thierry, and more importantly François Guizot. They linked the development of modern political institutions, namely representative government, with the rise of the 'middle classes' (*classes moyennes*), i.e. the bourgeoisie, defined in opposition to nobility but also by the fact that they had access to property, which was supposed to lead them to political moderation. Contrary to Scottish and British economists, such as Smith and Ricardo, most French liberals did not give a central economic role to labour in the creation of economic value. This was true for Say, but more generally for the members of the liberal movement that arrived in power with the revolution of July 1830.

This disdain for labour as an economic activity went together with a disbelief in the political capacity of the lower classes. During the Restoration, after the fall of Napoléon in 1815, liberals opposed ultra-royalists mostly by addressing the educated urban bourgeoisie, through newspapers, associations, meetings, banquets, etc. A group of thinkers and politicians, the Doctrinaires, and in particular François Guizot, can be credited with having formulated the positive political project of the liberal party: representative government, an expression used in France since the Revolution but only very roughly defined until the Restoration. According to this political theory, government was not thought of as a separate entity from society, the latter being forced to bow to the rule of a law which had been conceived separately from it, but rather as a political power embedded in the social fabric of opinions, passions and interests (Rosanvallon 1985: 42). Against the king's absolute sovereignty, liberals advocated relative freedom of society, the separation between civil society and the state, and liberal ways to regulate society through its representation. However, only the *capacités*, i.e. the ablest members of society, were supposed to have the resources necessary to represent society. Not only were workers members of a 'sterile class', but they were also thought as utterly unable to exert political power, at least not until they could, by getting richer and more educated, join the 'middle classes'. Thus, early French liberals did not really pay attention to workers nor gave them a political role when they were in the opposition to ultra-royalists.

It all changed with the revolution of July 1830. In reaction to the ordinances of Charles X, published on July 25, 1830, which challenged the liberal principles of the constitutional Charter of 1814 and the voters' choice of a liberal assembly, the Parisian masses rebelled. In three days, the restored monarchy was defeated, the

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Duke of Orléans, urged on in particular by Adolphe Thiers, took the place of Charles X, and François Guizot entered government (Pinkney 1972; Collingham & Alexander 1988; Pilbeam 1991). But as soon as liberals arrived in power, they started to face a new problem, the 'social question' i.e. the situation of workers, for three reasons (Castel 2002; Stedman Jones 2005; Case 2016). First, it was clear that the revolution had been done mostly by Parisian workers, who then proved to be the best supporters of liberal values and agenda – an unexpected turn from previous liberal revolutionary attempts, most importantly the *carbonari* plots of the early 1820s where the rank and file was composed of students and soldiers (Spitzer 1971). Second, the economic situation was deteriorating, leading to emergency social measures that constituted what Giovanna Procacci called the 'government of poverty' (Procacci 1993). Third, workers unrest rapidly spread in the first months of the new regime, especially in Paris and in Lyon, until the Lyon silk weavers (*canuts*) uprising in November 1831, the first insurrection in French history to be made in the name of the working class.

These events turned labour and the working class into a central concern for liberal elites. In December 1831, in the *Journal des Débats*, the liberal scholar Saint-Marc Girardin summed up the sentiment of many liberals:

> This proletarian revolution (...), the Lyon sedition revealed a grave secret, that of the internal struggle that takes place in society between the possessing class and the non-owning class. Our commercial and industrial society has its wound like all other societies; this wound is its workers (*ouvriers*). (...) Look up in each manufacturing town the relative numbers of the industrial and merchant class and the labouring class (*classe manouvrière*), and you will be frightened at the disproportion. Each manufacturer lives in his factory like the planters of the colonies among their slaves, one against a hundred; and the sedition of Lyon is a kind of insurrection of Saint-Domingue. (...) Today, the Barbarians who threaten society are not in the Caucasus or in the steppes of the Tartaric region; they are in the suburbs of our manufacturing cities. We must not insult them; they are, alas, more to be pitied than blamed: they are suffering, misery is crushing them. (...) The middle class must know what the state of things is; it must know its position. It has beneath it a population of proletarians who are restless (...). That is where the danger of modern society lies; that is where the barbarians who will destroy it may come from.[10]

The notion of class struggle was not new, but speaking of a 'proletarian revolution' certainly was, as well as comparing the 'labouring class' with rebellious slaves and barbarians. This comparison was not only the expression of a bourgeois fear but also an appeal to the 'middle class', and to the government that represented it, to take the workers' problem seriously, and thus to make it an object of policies. Saint-Marc Girardin's solution to deal with these modern barbarians was twofold. On the one hand, the government should 'refuse to let the stream of proletarians into the national guard, into the municipal institutions, into the electoral laws, into everything that is the state', which would lead not to a republic, but to a 'proletarian democracy'.[11]

10 Saint-Marc Girardin, *Journal des Débats*, December 8, 1831. This article made a strong impression when it was released. Among the responses, we can note that of the typographer Jean-François Barraud, *Étrennes d'un prolétaire à M. Bertin aîné, rédacteur-gérant du "Journal des débats"*, Paris: Imprimerie de Demonville, s. d.

11 Ibid.

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Indeed, in order to be a citizen, one must first and foremost be an owner, as 'it is against the maintenance of society to give political rights and national weapons to those who have nothing to defend and everything to take'. But, on the other hand, government should not remain inactive but develop ways for workers 'to access industry and property', and therefore political rights – rights they would use as owners, not proletarians.

As we can see, this notion of citizenship gave economic roots to political enfranchisement, yet what allowed people to be treated as active citizens was not labour in itself, but property, in line with the establishment of private property, originating in labour, as the central political principle during the revolution of 1789 (Sewell 1980b). Only if labour turned workers into owners could it be considered as politically relevant. The liberal solution to the problem of workers' unrest was thus to give everyone the possibility to enrich (hence the famous phrase by Guizot in 1843, '*Enrichissez-vous par le travail, par l'épargne et la probité, et vous deviendrez électeurs*'), without giving any rights to the poor, since they could use them against society. Yet, the liberal belief in free trade drastically limited the kind of available policies that could 'enrich' workers, especially when they were considered as characterised not by their productive labour, but by their poverty. The 'erudite concern for the poor' (Procacci 1993: 207) triggered by the revolution of 1830 and the subsequent worker's upheavals did not really lead to an interest in the complex mechanisms of industrialisation and proletarianisation or in the juridical framework of labour relations. Both in their policies and in their studies, liberals considered workers as a whole, a defective and threatening social class. Liberals used the same techniques of poor relief that had existed before, such as rescue workshops (Pinkney 1965). But these workshops quickly became known as sites of incitement to political unrest, and, because of their very high cost, they remained limited in number (the first to be eliminated were those comprising women, children and provincials), before being completely dissolved on January 27, 1831. By being a factor of government action and a tool for social and political control, labour was treated not as a productive activity (that of the rescue workshops was negligible) but rather as a tool for raising moral standards and control workers; as a result, the specific trade of labourers was of no interest, because workers were considered as making up a unified group of poor people. The need for specific policies addressing the difficulties of the working class was recognised, but liberals in power did not have the knowledge or the tools needed to understand this class, except as an aggregation of poor people.

II—STUDYING WORKERS' POVERTY

This limit was soon recognised by government officials such as Thiers, then minister of the interior, who in 1833 created a new office, the *Statistique générale de la France*, headed by Alexandre Moreau de Jonnès, responsible for coordinating all state statistical production (Desrosières 1998: 151–54; Chanut et al. 2000), an endeavour aligned with the development of multiple studies on public opinion (Karila-Cohen 2008). In parallel, members of elite learned societies close to liberals in power started in the mid-1830s to consider the working class as a topic for investigation (Rigaudias-Weiss 1936; Perrot 1972; Geerkens et al. 2019). In 1834–1835, the *Académie des sciences morales et politiques* commissioned one of its prominent members, the physician Louis-René Villermé, to conduct a vast study on the 'the physical and moral status of the working classes'. The Academy had been founded in 1832 by François

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Guizot, then minister of public instruction, on the model of the second section of the 1795 *Institut national*, closed in 1803 (Leterrier 1995). When its members decided to investigate the working class, they selected Villermé, a member of both this Academy and the Academy of Medicine. After a long career in the army and a study on jails, he had participated in founding an important journal in 1829, the *Annales d'hygiène publique et de médecine légale*, in which he had published in 1830 a ground-breaking comparative study on death rates in Paris that showed the role of poverty in the abnormally high mortality rate in certain neighbourhoods (Villermé 2008). He was then at the forefront of the new movement of hygienist reformers who intended to diagnose the ills of society ('*infirmités sociales*')[12] as they did for human bodies (Coleman 1982; La Berge 1984). They started by dealing with crimes, madness and immorality, but after the revolution of 1830, they were requested to investigate the poor, using the same methods, the same vocabulary and the same moral posture.

Indeed, throughout his study, Villermé developed a conceptualisation of labour that was in part inspired by his previous work on prisons. His book on this topic, published in 1820, strongly criticised the current penitentiary system as inhumane and ineffective. But most importantly, it put forward the importance of labour (especially solitary labour) as the main way to cure prisoners of their vices.[13] This moral notion of labour was not entirely new. One of the first studies on labour, *Le Mérite du travail et labeur, dédié aux chefs de la police*, published in 1602 by Barthélémy de Laffemas, had already insisted on labour as a remedy for idleness – an idea that was later picked up by the economist Montchrétien and by Colbert (Jacob 1994). It was not either a strictly French phenomenon: in the United Kingdom, the generalisation of workhouses with the 1834 New Poor Law entirely changed the poverty relief system, with debates on labour aligned with the French ones (Fraser 1976). But Villermé was distinctive, in that he based his notion of labour as a disciplinary means on a large ethnographic study, which allowed him to give 'a literary form to a vision of the working class, based on the authority of eyewitness accounts, that fit perfectly with the presuppositions about unregulated trade in labor' (Reddy 1984: 171). The idea of using ethnography to investigate the poor had been itself developed a few years before by one of the founders of modern ethnology, the Baron of Gérando, author of the first French ethnography handbook in 1800. In 1824, he had published *Le Visiteur du pauvre*, in which he had used the methods developed to study so-called primitive societies to investigate poor neighbourhoods, in order to distinguish the good poor from the immoral idle (Christen, Chappey, & Moullier 2014; Rodriguez 2018). His book was a success, especially after the revolution of 1830 and the general concern for the 'social question'. Villermé's book was thus at the crossroad of these movements: the growing fear of liberals for the workers, the transformation of a branch of medicine into a social science serving governments, the development of ethnography and statistics to investigate workers' condition, and the diffusion of a notion of labour as a disciplinary means to educate deviants (Rabinow 1995: 60–63).

In the first pages of his study, Villermé explained he intended to investigate the causes for workers' 'poverty' (*misère*) and 'misconduct' (*inconduite*).[14] He denied

12 *Annales d'hygiène publique et de médecine légale*, prospectus, 1829.

13 Louis René Villermé, *Des Prisons telles qu'elles sont et telles qu'elles devraient être, ouvrage dans lequel on les considère par rapport à l'hygiène, à la morale et à l'économie politique*, Paris: Méquignon-Marvis, 1820, p. 60.

14 Louis René Villermé, *Tableau de l'état physique et moral des ouvriers employés dans les manufactures de coton, de laine et de soie*, Paris: Jules Renouard, 1840, vol. 1, p. VI.

that these problems could have economic origins: workers were better than ever, but since the Revolution, they had developed the notion that they had the right to access wealth. More importantly, according to Villermé, as he repeated throughout the book, they were lacking the needed moral values to become richer, and often were 'only wretched by their own fault':[15] 'Working but enjoying (*Travailler mais jouir*) seems to be the motto of most of them'.[16] The aim of Villermé was therefore to determine the origins of this evil, through a careful study of workers and their environments, in the textile industry of many different cities. In the book, some patterns come back again and again to explain poverty, such as drunkenness, local backward cultures, poor hygiene and the dissolute sex lives of young women. The register of moral indignation is constantly used to describe a working class captured above all in terms of its misery (Reddy 1984: 171–84). But most importantly, Villermé developed in his study a certain conceptualisation of labour as a morally ambiguous activity. On the one hand, he found in labour a remedy for idleness: to prevent workers from developing vices, their whole lives should resolve around labour, and they should never have free time. In that sense, workers should not be left unoccupied on Sundays, they should never have vacation or suffer temporary unemployment, they should not be paid by the task but only by the day or week, so that employers may control how they spend their time, and workers should be forced to have a logbook (*livret*). But, on the other hand, labour is the very activity through which workers may become vicious and get contaminated by dangerous ideas, not because of labour itself, but because it is a social activity. In Villermé's study, the workplace appears as full of dangers, especially large workshops and factories, in which many workers meet. Labour should be done in families, in small workshops, preferably situated in rural areas and in factories workers should not be allowed to communicate. In the same vein, any form of workers' organisation should be discouraged, such as journeymanship (*compagnonnage*), except under strict control by the Church or employers.

In his book, Villermé's idea of labour was entirely centred on its effects on the body and souls of workers, considered mostly as poor people. His insistence on the dangers of labour led Villermé to defend philanthropic measures, such as limiting children labour to prevent them from being morally corrupted by this activity, when done in large workshops – his report inspired the 22 March 1841 law which forbade the (very few) firms employing more than 20 workers to hire children under eight. But such measures have to be related to a more general idea: the workplace, when it allows workers (especially of different genders) to meet, and experienced workers to influence younger ones, is essentially immoral and dangerous. This notion of labour put Villermé at odds with the burgeoning workers' movement, of course, but also with employers themselves, who considered workers first and foremost as workforce. In his report, the physician harshly criticised employers who did not care for the moral and physical welfare of their employees, who 'far from wanting to give the working class good habits',[17] accepted to hire drunkards, 'nomadic workers, foreigners, journeymen, single men',[18] and to allow women to work in the same workshops as men, which inevitably led to debauchery and prostitution. To Villermé's dismay, most employers seemed to consider workers as 'mere productive machines',[19] whereas they should

15 Ibid., vol. 2, p. 351.

16 Ibid., vol. 2, p. 34.

17 Ibid., vol. 2, p. 75.

18 Ibid., vol. 2, p. 64.

19 Ibid., vol. 2, p. 55.

DOI: 10.33134/rds.378

have consideration for their workers and pay them enough to save them from poverty. Against most employers, Villermé was even in favour of mutual aid societies, saving banks and even industrial tribunals (*prud'hommes*) in which workers could have representatives who would then become moral examples for the other workers, but always under the strict control of manufacturers and philanthropic bourgeois.

While employers mostly considered labour as an abstract productive force, Villermé saw in labour a social activity that had effects on workers, either reinforcing their docility or on the contrary plunging them into vice. Liberals such as Villermé considered workers as a class characterised by its moral frailty, mostly sane but easily corrupted, either by some of its more vicious members or by subversive doctrines, such as socialism or radical republicanism. By giving them false hopes, these doctrines, anchored in a dangerously flawed interpretation of 1789 principles, could turn the working class into an inflammable social substance susceptible to agitation and even riot – as it had happened in Lyon in 1831 and 1834, and in Paris in 1832. Not only Villermé proved incapable or unwilling to understand what was at stake during these upheavals, in terms of claims for collective autonomy and regulation of the labour market; he also participated in reinforcing the tendency of the liberal elites to regard the working class exclusively in terms of its poverty – especially insofar as this made it fundamentally dangerous to the bourgeois social order. In this sense, Villermé participated in the broad movement to make workers the objects of public policies, but only policies of social control.

III—THE WORKING CLASS AS A POLITICAL SUBJECT

This homogeneous treatment of industrial workers by liberals, irrespective of trade differences, considered mostly as poor people, potentially constituting a danger for society, or at least as a problem, was matched by a comparable move from their adversaries, but with opposite intentions. The belief in the existence of a unified working class, defined by their exclusion and poverty, became rapidly shared, at the beginning of the 1830s, amongst the opposition to the liberals, especially the republican opposition. Still, at first, the question of the usefulness of labour was not the main angle from which the social question was understood by republicans. For them, what mattered most was that workers were politically excluded and faced poverty, making it necessary for the new republican movement to defend their rights.

The working-class uprisings of 1831 and 1832 constituted key episodes in the development of a republican discourse on workers. As Jean-Claude Caron notes, 'before the insurrection of the *canuts lyonnais*, the social question itself [...] was almost non-existent in most programs, projects, manifestos and other professions of faith in Republican societies' (Caron 2006: 36). It existed in the *Société des Amis du Peuple* (*Friends of the People*), an important association because of its radical and early opposition to the July régime, but only due to the influence of a Saint-Simonian minority, which was quickly excluded. The uprising of the *canuts* in Lyon in November 1831 brought change, and, in December 1831, the *Amis du Peuple* published an article entitled *La Guerre Civile*, signed by the author as N.L.-B. (most probably Napoléon Lebon), who interpreted the uprising in Lyon in terms of class struggle:

> *Order will reign in Lyon.* [...] They want to castigate the unfortunate workers by making them hunger [...] They see in these uprisings the partial demonstration of an evil felt by many. The citizens, who should be

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> united in the common quest for freedom and happiness, are divided by the opposing interests of classes and individuals. Society, through actions made possible by its laws, has made wealth fall into the hands of a select few instead of dividing it constantly so that everyone is given a piece. On the one side are the haves; the others, the have-nots, resign themselves to either obeying or rebelling. A civil war then breaks out. Some fight on one side to overthrow what are called privileges, while others fight to keep what are called acquired rights. [...] The profit made from work must be given back to the workers. Men must no longer be used as instruments for other men![20]

Although the author did not explicitly take the side of the insurrectionists, he interpreted their actions not only as the result of widespread poverty but also as a particular time in the battle between two sides that had opposite interests and ideas regarding the distribution of profit. The conception of the working class as the 'have-nots', treated by 'a select few' as 'instruments', was consistent with republican principles. Consequently, recruitment of workers developed within the *Amis du Peuple* in a fraction created by Caunes, called *Les Droits de l'Homme* (*Human Rights)* to express their support for Robespierre's declaration of rights. Many branches of the *Amis du Peuple* quickly adhered to the *Droits de l'Homme,* and the whole organisation had joined by the end of 1832 (Perreux 1931: 63–68). Their discourse was directly oriented towards the poor, considered as a whole:

> The association will rely chiefly on the support of those who, robbed of their political rights and scarcely protected by civil laws made by and for the rich, succumb under excessive work and the burden of public duty; on the support of those whom nature forces them to recover their title and dignity as men and citizen, if only for the sake of their children.[21]

Once again, workers were mostly defined negatively, as 'robbed of their political rights'; but the *Droits de l'homme* also mentioned as a goal 'the emancipation of the working class',[22] when the *Amis du Peuple* had only claimed to defend 'all the interests of the lower classes of society'.[23] Initially composed largely of members of the *petite-bourgeoisie,* the *Droits de l'homme* later comprised many workers after the victory of the *montagnards* of the Lebon committee in the autumn of 1833 and the subsequent democratisation of its statutes, which gave equal power of decision to members of all its sections (Faure 1974: 84). The references to the working class were modified accordingly. In a letter to the republican newspaper *Le National*, in August 1833, a letter signed by Jean-Jacques Vignerte, a lawyer and mathematician of bourgeois origins who yet described himself as a '*prolétaire*', and collectively approved by the *Droits de l'homme*, claimed that 'it is in this beautiful class of proletarians that reside the hopes of the fatherland and the future of humanity'.[24] Vignerte was prosecuted for this text, as was the republican bookseller Pagnerre for having published it. Their

20 N. L.-B., "La guerre civile", 1831, pp. 2–4.

21 *Exposé des principes républicains de la Société des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen*, s.d., pp. 11–12.

22 Ibid., p. 6.

23 *Manifeste de la Société des Amis du Peuple*, Paris: Delaforêt, Rouen frères, Delaunay, 1830, p. 17.

24 Jean-Jacques Vignerte, *Société des Droits de l'homme et du citoyen. Au rédacteur en chef du* National, Paris: Imprimerie de Herhan, 1833, p. 2.

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pleadings on February 22 1834 illustrated the state of mind in which the republicans found themselves at the time. Vignerte proclaimed that 'the laws which organise property have the aim of exploiting the workers for the benefit of a privileged class [and] that the sovereign people alone is capable and competent to abolish this exploitation',[25] linking together class struggle and sovereignty – and thus incidentally keeping women's work in a blind spot. As for Pagnerre, he asked

> that the political proletariat be freed, and [it] will accomplish the emancipation of the social proletariat. The proletarian, having conquered the consecration of his title of citizen, will demand the consecration of his title of man. He will say: "(...) Encourage, protect, honour work; for work is the sole source of social wealth. (...) Free the social proletarian, tear him away from the tortures of misery; for it is he alone today who guards and cultivates the soil; it is he who fertilises commerce and industry; it is he who produces everything by his labour.[26]

As liberals, republicans considered the proletariat as a 'wound', but their solution radically differed. Only by giving the workers political rights, which they deserve as members of the sovereign people and as productive workers, could the social problem be solved. For republicans, 'proletarian' progressively acquired a new meaning: not solely a political identity defined by the exclusion from suffrage, but a class identity that transcended the boundaries of particular trades, was marked by its exploitation by the bourgeoisie, but should become a political subject – something that could only happen in a Republic.

However, making the solution of the social problem conditional on a political revolution could not be to the liking of either the authorities, who could rightly show that this project was subversive, or the militant workers, who could not wait for a hypothetical revolution to see their condition improved. Consequently, while the trials against the republicans multiplied, until the republican idea itself was forbidden by liberticidal laws in 1834, some militant workers engaged in another way: founding workers' associations. For many workers, but also republicans and socialists, the notion of the association, which 'has a clearer political connotation, that of challenging the social order' (Gueslin 1987: 135) that the terms 'corporation' or 'organisation', acquired the status of a 'Messianic formula' (Loubère 1959: 422) – maybe thanks to the diversity of its possible interpretations. Even when it came to specifically working-class associations, there was a wide range of possibilities (Christen, Fayolle, & Hayat 2021). For some, such as Efrahem, member of the *Société des Droits de l'homme* and organiser of a 'reunion of shoe-makers', the idea of a workers' association was to create a centralised union gathering workers of all trades, because 'the rights, the interests of the workers, whichever *corps* [i.e., trade] they may belong to, are always the same'.[27] According to Efrahem, only a centralised committee could help workers of different trades in their strikes, because if 'a worker, disgruntled by the masters, demands an increase in salary; the central committee of this global association will defend the rights and interests of this worker, [...] the committee will aid and support him against the masters, until they finally yield and meet the legitimate claims of

25 *Procès des citoyen Vignerte et Pagnerre, membres de la Société des Droits de l'homme et du citoyen*, Paris, Imprimerie de Herhan, p. 4.

26 Ibid., p. 13.

27 Efrahem, *De l'association des ouvriers de tous les corps d'état*, 1833, pp. 1–2.

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their workers'.[28] Therefore, a workers' association meant for Efrahem an instrument of combat at the service of all the workers; a way, in a word, to be a unified collective subject, outside the State. But other militant workers took the idea of workers' association in another direction: since only labour was productive, why not associate to organise it, not against the masters, but apart from them?

IV—JULES LEROUX'S SOCIALIST CONCEPT OF LABOUR AND WORKERS' ASSOCIATIONS

The idea that workers could themselves associate in cooperatives to organise labour has long been seen as a distinctive feature of the economic thought of the physician Philippe Buchez, the direct inspiration of several associations and later of the workers of the newspaper *L'Atelier*, founded in 1840 (Cuvillier 1914a; 1914b; Desroche 1981; Gilormini 2016; Ternier 2019).[29] However, in the fourth and last issue of the short-lived newspaper *L'Artisan. Journal de la classe ouvrière*, on 17 October 1830, an article entitled '*De l'association comme moyen de remédier à la misère des masses laborieuses*' (*On the association as a means to remedy the misery of the working masses*) defended the collective purchase of machines by workers to improve 'the condition of the working class'. Maybe had the author been influenced by a talk given by Buchez to the *Amis du Peuple* in August 1830 (Ternier 2019: 310–312). In any case, Buchez and him have probably drawn this idea from the same source: a reinterpretation of the thought of Saint-Simon.

Saint-Simon's theory of classes, developed most specifically in *Le Système industriel* (1821) and *Catéchisme des industriels* (1823), broke with the physiocratic idea that industrial labour was essentially sterile. On the contrary, in his analysis of the Ancien Régime, he distinguished between three classes: the feudal class (nobility and clergy), the intermediary class and the industrial class, the latter being composed with engineers, industrialists, scientists and workers. To Saint-Simon, the Revolution had been incomplete, as the industrial class had not been able to organise autonomously against the two other classes, whereas they were the only useful class. When the Saint-Simonian Church really emerged, after the death of its founder, some Saint-Simonians found in the industrial association the best way to realise this project. This was the case for Buchez, who had been part of Saint-Simonian circles until 1830, but also for the probable author of the article in *L'Artisan*: the typographer Jules Leroux, the younger brother of the typographer and philosopher Pierre Leroux, the first author to use and popularise the word 'socialism'.

Pierre Leroux had taken part in the liberal movement during the Restoration, then had joined Saint-Simonism, before breaking with the Church after the schism between Enfantin and Bazard in 1831 – Enfantin was imposing a mystical understanding of Saint-Simonism that Leroux, as many, refused. Pierre Leroux's work is well-known, but he had borrowed most of his economic ideas from his younger brother Jules (Frobert 2010b; Frobert & Drolet 2022). Jules Leroux was an active proponent of the association of workers, like Efrahem. But he was much more explicit in combining a defence of association and a distinctive notion of labour, itself included in a larger socialist understanding of the economy – and his concept of association entailed the creation

28 Ibid., p. 3.

29 Cf for example his article "Organisation industrielle" in *L'Européen, journal des sciences morales et économiques*, 14 April 1832, tome I, n° 20, pp. 309–311.

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of workers' cooperatives. In 1833, on the occasion of a typographers' meeting in Paris, Leroux published a brochure, *Aux ouvriers typographes. De la Nécessité de fonder une association ayant pour but de rendre les ouvriers propriétaires des instruments de travail* (*To typographers. Of the need to found an association with the aim of making the workers owners of the working instruments*) in which he developed his concept of association. First, he refuted the importance of trade differences and defined workers as sharing a common condition:

> Our cause is (...) the cause of all the working classes, even those whose works seem the furthest from ours. Workers, whatever their profession, have a fate equal to ours. They are all, in the hands of their masters, instruments of fortune; they are all subject to the various chances of competition; they all have a miserable existence, a precarious and insufficient wage.[30]

This shared condition was not liberty, but 'isolation', due to the fact that 'we do not have, as before the Revolution, a union chamber nor a corporation. We are free from each other; no ties unite us'.[31] As a result, 'the class does not exist, only individuals'.[32] This puts workers in competition, while they should collaborate, which allows employers to lower wages. In order to go beyond this isolated condition, workers had to understand the real nature of labour and wages: they were the *property* of workers. In this sense, workers were no different from other owners, and their labour should be protected the same way as other kinds of property:

> Wages are our heritage, our property; and property is not to depend on anyone in the world, only on the owner. (...) Where does it come from that this property is not recognised? Where does it come from that it is not protected against the forced encroachments (...) of the master class? Isn't depriving a worker of labour the same as expropriating an owner?[33]

So to Leroux, the association of workers was not solely a defensive association of workers against masters. It was also a way for workers to emancipate by taking back their property, through associations of production. The solution to isolation was therefore for workers to collectively become masters, which would solve all the problems induced by machines that allowed employers to reduce salaries:

> The mechanics, the clichés, the stereotypes [moulds enabling the same text to be printed on multiple presses at the same time], the training of apprentices are harmful to us only because all this is the property of the masters, because it all comes between them and us. Our industry is not ours, we have no right to its results: we are being replaced by inert instruments, or our numbers are being abused. So let's make sure that our industry is ours, that only we can dispose of it as we see fit. Together with

30 Jules Leroux, *Aux ouvriers typographes. De la Nécessité de fonder une association ayant pour but de rendre les ouvriers propriétaires des instruments de travail*, Paris: Imprimerie de L.-E. Herlan, 1833, p. 9.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid., p. 11.

33 Ibid., p. 11.

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> the classes that preceded us on the road to emancipation and well-being, let us form a broad association.[34]

We can see here how three different ideas are related: the need for workers' associations, the unity of the working class and the redefinition of labour as collective property. The working class can unite because they are already unified by the same kind of property, namely labour, which they should have the right to merge in an association of production, since property is an alienable right. Incidentally, this idea of labour could justify political enfranchisement, as they defined workers as owners, and therefore as politically capable as any other kind of owners.

Jules Leroux developed this understanding of labour in the article '*Travail*' in the *Encyclopédie nouvelle*. The *Encyclopédie* was a formidable unfinished project edited by Pierre Leroux and Jean Reynaud, another Saint-Simonian who followed Bazard in 1831.[35] With its first brochures published in 1833, the *Encylopédie* was conceived as a source of universal knowledge, both material and spiritual, aiming at the people, especially workers. Jules Leroux wrote most economic articles, such as '*Banque*', '*Bourse*', '*Capital*', '*Change*', '*Commerce*', '*Concurrence*', '*Consommation*', '*Douanes*', '*Economie politique*', '*Smith*', '*Emprunts*' and '*Sully*'. But he really developed his notion of labour in '*Travail*', which makes it an invaluable source to understand the conceptual basis of his defence of workers' associations. It was published in the 8th and last tome of the Encyclopedia, in 1841, after several years of important republican protests and social unrest (Gourvitch 1914; Caron 2002). Leroux was then living in Tulle (Corrèze) and had become quite distant from the main editors of the Encyclopedia, and closer to communist papers such as *La Fraternité* by Richard Lahautière – which should indicate that the entry was probably written long before its publication. His vocabulary is sometimes obscure, mystical, full of doctrinal digressions, which makes it difficult to grasp its aim and political consequences. Yet, the article contains many elements of a socialist concept of labour.

In his article, Leroux starts by defining labour as any act done by a subject on an object to obtain a result. But in contrast with John Locke's labour theory of property (Waldron 1991), it does not in itself gives the worker an absolute right on the product of his work. Indeed, the labour is at the same time individual – the subject is the individual – and collective, as the objects and results are 'the product of the immensity of works, of the radiant waves of the infinite multitude of past, present and future creatures'.[36] But the currently existing society is based on the sole recognition of 'finite labour', i.e. individual labour, to the detriment of 'infinite labour', i.e. the collective production of all beings. This false concept of labour leads to a false concept of property, according to which individuals add new 'organs' to themselves, acquiring the right to use the things and persons they own as they wish.[37] Against this '*régime propriétaire*', Leroux advocates for a recognition of the 'true nature of labour': the encounter between a subject and an object to produce a result. But while the worker is the owner of the

34 Ibid., p. 13.

35 Ignored for a long time by most historians, with the notable exception of (Forcina 1987), the *Encyclopédie nouvelle* has recently been the object of new research, most importantly by the ANR Projects "Utopies 19" and "Saint-Simonisme 18–21".

36 *Encyclopédie nouvelle dictionnaire philosophique, scientifique, littéraire et industriel, offrant le tableau des connaissances humaines au XIXe siècle SAP-ZOR*, t. 8, Paris: Charles Gosselin, 1841, p. 524.

37 His brother Pierre developed similar ideas in his 1840 masterpiece, *De l'humanité*.

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subject of labour, the bourgeois is the owner of the object of labour, and the state guarantees their encounter produces a result. So labour is not a characteristic of the worker, it is the result of the encounter between workers, bourgeois and the state. To the conception of the division into classes as a necessity stemming from the division of labour, Leroux substitutes the idea of a fundamental unity of humanity beyond the division into classes — not because only labour (as an activity of the working subject) would be productive, but because the result, that is, the product of labour, is inseparably attached to both the subject and the object of labour. The division into classes is then not a matter of production, but a simple social relation born of a juridical division:

> What makes the proletarian different from the bourgeois, the bourgeois and the proletarian different from the king, is only the mode, different for each, by virtue of which they are all three owners of the result of the subject's action on the object. The title of property of the proletarian on the result is to be possessor, master of the subject and of his action, that is to say of labour, to be able to use and abuse it at his ease; the title of property of the bourgeois on this same result is to be possessor, master of the object, that is to say of capital, to be able to use and abuse it at his ease; the title of property of the king on this same result is still to be possessor, master of the subject, of his action, i.e. of labour, and of the object, i.e. of capital, in the sense that he alone makes them possible, that without him the bourgeois and the proletarian could not exist.[38]

As he had already written in the entry 'Économie politique', property without use is 'theft' – an idea that would become the core of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's work. The alliance between labour, property and political power, under the '*régime propriétaire*', is inherently unfair and untrue to the real concept of labour. This leads Leroux to observe:

> Society is therefore without unity! Three forces are tearing it apart in three different directions; and none of these forces can triumph over the other two. (...) Does a society organised in this way (...) have the characteristics, I will not say of goodness, of a true society, but of duration, of stability? (...) The question is to know whether this society is not, in its turn, the precursor of another society.[39]

Here, we find the fundamental Saint-Simonian idea that, just as the present society is born from the class imbalances of the old regime society, the industrial order will be born from the resolution of present class conflicts. Labour, therefore, does not only create metaphysical time through the sequencing of work processes and results. It also creates, through the imbalances it engenders, history itself. And in the present case, the discovery of the true nature of labour will necessarily lead, according to Leroux, to the end of class differences. We can see here how this notion of labour justifies his endeavours to develop workers' associations of production: only the collective property of the means of production is aligned with the true nature of labour as a collective, all-encompassing phenomenon. Workers' association is therefore not another way to organise labour, but the only way to do so without hurting its true nature. Leroux's radical conception of labour does not consider the working class as one class amongst others, perhaps the class to be privileged, but as a hegemonic

38 Ibid., p. 526.

39 Ibid.

class, a non-class, which is a class only because the property regime has arbitrarily separated it from the rest of humanity and in particular from the owners. This is a conception of labour that, seen from a distance, can be seen as irenic: after all, in a way, Jules Leroux preaches against class struggle. But it is because his conception of work aimed at nothing less than the fusion of classes and the realisation of communism.

CONCLUSION

At the beginning of the July Monarchy, two distinctive notions of labour emerged from the burgeoning liberal and socialist movements. They had in common to consider the working class as a unified entity, mostly masculine, going beyond the trade differences that had organised labour before the Revolution and were still largely organising it in the economic realm. They also considered work as a single activity, irrespective of what context it was used in, an activity that should lead workers to become owners. But they differed in the way they perceived the political role of this working class and the link between labour and property that it entailed. For liberals, labour was considered as defining a working class essentially characterised by poverty, a class that needed to be controlled through specific public policies, because as a social activity, labour was putting workers at risk of being influenced by immoral doctrines and examples of vice. Contrary to property, which led the middle classes to political moderation, labour was considered as potentially radicalising the poor, who should be maintained under the surveillance of the state and the employers. Only through individual labour could members of the working class become owners – thus not belonging anymore to this utterly inferior class. As to the socialist notion of labour as an all-encompassing activity that should turn the working class into an hegemonic subject, it rapidly spread amongst republicans, on the basis of a common recognition that workers were collectively harmed by the rule of the owners. After the republican revolution of 1848, this emancipatory understanding of association led to different projects and to the formulation of a radical republican ideology, the *République démocratique et sociale* (Hayat 2015). Even if the June days and the mass repression that followed the workers' uprising challenged this notion of working-class emancipation, it became a long-term basis for the social movement, not only in France, but internationally.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Previous versions of this article were presented on several occasions, in particular at the Cambridge Political Thought and Intellectual History Seminar in 2020, the seminar of the ANR research group on Industrial Citizenship (CITINDUS) in 2020 and the International Conference on the History of Concepts in 2022. The part on Jules Leroux was first presented separately at the seminar 'Encyclopédie nouvelle' at the Maison française d'Oxford in 2020. I am deeply thankful for all the comments I received during these presentations, which helped me immensely. The first and third parts of the article were originally translated from French by Manon Faron. Finally, special thanks to Vanessa Caru, Célia Keren and the two anonymous reviewers for their invaluable comments on the version initially submitted to the journal.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:
Hayat, Samuel. 2022. "Conceptualisations of Labour and the Making of the French Working Class in the 1830s." *Redescriptions: Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory* 25(1), 5–26. DOI: https://doi.org/10.33134/rds.378

Submitted: 07 June 2022
Accepted: 25 June 2022
Published: 04 August 2022

Redescriptions: Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Helsinki University Press.

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