

**Revolutionary Unions and French Labor:  
The Rebels behind the Cause;  
or, Why Did Revolutionary Syndicalism Fail?**

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**The Higher Ideals of the Labor Movement**

Since its publication in 1971, Peter Stearns's *Revolutionary Syndicalism and French Labor: A Cause without Rebels* has haunted French labor history.<sup>1</sup> Rejecting the popular image of French workers as revolutionaries, devotees of the period's most radical union movement, Stearns argues that revolutionary syndicalist activists were out of touch with French workers. Vigorous producers of "distinctive and abundant rhetoric," syndicalists "did not characterize French labor in their heyday and they did not set an enduring trend." Instead, their "image lives in the minds of those historians who wish that workers had been what they were not."<sup>2</sup> For Stearns, revolutionary syndicalism mattered only because it hindered unionization by inhibiting the organization of effective unions.<sup>3</sup> Lacking support among workers, the movement collapsed in a *crise syndicaliste* before World War I. By 1910, Stearns argues,

there was growing talk of a crisis of syndicalism. The crisis resulted not from a basic change in the character of French labor, but from

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The author is grateful to Sam Cohn, Jean-Pierre Dormois, Stanley Engerman, Michael Hanagan, Jean Heffer, Bernard Moss, Charles Rearick, Charles Tilly, and anonymous referees for advice, and to Karen Graubert for research assistance. Research support was provided by the German Marshall Fund of the United States.

<sup>1</sup> Peter Stearns, *Revolutionary Syndicalism and French Labor: A Cause without Rebels* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1971).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

the syndicalists' growing understanding of what this character was . . . the syndicalists' realization that they had never had a chance with French workers.<sup>4</sup>

Stearns's book is a tour de force, weaving together quantitative and qualitative information to make a revisionist case against revolutionary syndicalism. Beyond its scholarship, however, *Revolutionary Syndicalism* owes its success to its application of an economic model of the labor movement borrowed from two American labor economists, John R. Commons and Selig Perlman. Best known for their studies of American labor history, Commons and Perlman were theorists justifying the narrow and conservative policies of the American Federation of Labor.<sup>5</sup> Discounting any higher ideals of the labor movement, they explain unionization solely in terms of the workers' material interest in protecting their jobs and raising wages. Exceptional circumstances, such as a charismatic leader or anger over repressive state policies, may allow radicals to dominate some unions for short periods. Commons and Perlman predict, however, that, over time, unions will adopt a businesslike focus on jobs and wages that matches the workers' own narrow concerns.<sup>6</sup>

Commons and Perlman developed their argument in studies of American trade unionism—studies that have since been challenged by generations of labor historians.<sup>7</sup> But even if their assertions about American unions are accepted, their broad claims about worker ideology are weakly grounded if they rest only on the United States. The French labor movement has posed a particular problem for advocates of business unionism because of the apparent success radical unions and extremist doctrines enjoyed among French workers.<sup>8</sup>

Stearns's book is therefore an essential building block in a broader argument, not about French labor alone, but about all workers in mod-

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Selig Perlman, *A Theory of the Labor Movement* (New York, 1928), and John R. Commons et al., *History of Labor in the United States*, 4 vols. (New York, 1966).

<sup>6</sup> See Perlman, *Theory of the Labor Movement*, 237–53. For a similar view, see Lenin, "What Is to Be Done?" in James E. Connor, ed., *Lenin on Politics and Revolution* (Indianapolis, 1968), 40–41. (Note the citation to Lenin in Perlman, *Theory*, 8 n. 1.)

<sup>7</sup> General reviews of this literature can be found in R. Sean Wilentz, "Against Exceptionalism: Class Consciousness and the American Labor Movement," *International Labor and Working Class History* 26 (fall 1984): 1–24; Michael Shalev and Walter Korpi, "Working Class Mobilization and American Exceptionalism," *Economic and Industrial Democracy* 1 (1980): 31–61; and Ira Katznelson and Aristide Zolberg, *Working-Class Formation: Nineteenth-Century Patterns in Western Europe and the United States* (Princeton, N.J., 1986). For a recent discussion drawing on comparisons with France, see Kim Voss, *The Making of American Exceptionalism: The Knights of Labor and Class Formation in the Nineteenth Century* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1993).

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Samuel Gompers's introduction to French unions in his *Labor in Europe and America* (New York, 1910), 249.

ern capitalism. He makes a layered attack, denying that French unionists behaved as revolutionary syndicalists and insisting that, where they did, they were ineffective because they lacked support among workers. Stearns supports his case with anecdote, some quantitative data on strike patterns, and persuasive writing. But his work depends on the Commons-Perlman assumption that workers are uninterested in radical social change because Stearns actually provides little systematic evidence that French workers rejected revolutionary syndicalism.<sup>9</sup>

Stearns needs more than assumption and anecdote. He needs an argument about the attitudes and behavior of large numbers. Hypotheses about social phenomena involving large numbers of individuals are subject to straightforward *quantitative* tests. Were revolutionary syndicalist French unions smaller than business unions in France and elsewhere? Did French workers reject revolutionary syndicalist leadership in their labor disputes? And were revolutionary syndicalist unions less effective than business unions in conducting strikes?

This article confronts these questions directly by using quantitative data to compare the membership rates and strike behavior of revolutionary syndicalist-led and other unions within France and of unions in France and in the United States and other countries with more conservative union movements. After a discussion of the meaning of revolutionary syndicalism for union organization and behavior, comparisons are made between membership in revolutionary syndicalist-led and other unions in France and elsewhere, including the United States and the United Kingdom, where business unionism was dominant. The comparisons show that revolutionary syndicalist unions attracted members, especially among workers in modern, large establishments. Analysis of strike data also reveals that French workers accepted revolutionary syndicalist leadership in their strikes. Finally, this study shows that revolutionary syndicalist-led unions were as effective in conducting strikes as were American business unions and were more effective than other French unions.

By themselves, the comparisons do not explain the pre-World War I decline in revolutionary syndicalism. However, revolutionary syndicalists laid the seeds of their movement's decline by alienating needed allies outside the working class. This article explains the rise and fall of revolutionary syndicalism dialectically by including the response to worker militancy of state officials and employers. Revolutionary syndi-

<sup>9</sup> As might be expected for a work that challenges prevailing beliefs and uses theories developed in other disciplines, Stearns's book met with a chilly reception. See, for example, the reviews in *Labor History* 13 (winter 1972): 161-63; and *American Historical Review* 77 (Apr. 1972): 527-29.

calism flourished during a particular political alignment in the early Third Republic when officials supported worker organization in the hope that unions would incorporate labor into the existing republican order, mobilizing the working class to defend the republic against its aristocratic and big business opponents. But revolutionary syndicalism undermined the conditions of its own success by antagonizing republicans and driving them into an alliance with employers against worker militancy. The syndicalist *crise* after 1906 reflected increasing repression by state officials hostile to revolutionary syndicalism rather than a rejection of revolutionary syndicalism by French workers.

### What Did Revolutionary Syndicalism Mean for French Unions?

After 1900, French unions acquired an international reputation for radicalism. The very name of their national confederation, the *Confédération générale du travail* (CGT), became synonymous with extremism, militancy, and violent revolution.<sup>10</sup> Sociologists and philosophers studied the CGT, seeking in its program of revolutionary syndicalism the future of worker militancy and the possibilities for social revolution.<sup>11</sup>

In searching for a coherent program, however, scholars chased a shadow. Believing that the working class had to achieve a social revolution on its own, revolutionary syndicalists emphasized their working-class roots and disdained intellectual involvements, even rejecting association with radical intellectuals openly sympathetic with revolutionary syndicalism.<sup>12</sup> Instead of forming an organized movement with a unified and coherent program, syndicalists distinguished themselves from other labor activists by holding more general beliefs: notably, the need for a social revolution to be achieved by the workers themselves through a general strike. Their commitment to independent

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Earl C. Ford and William Z. Foster, *Syndicalism* (Chicago, 1911); Wayne Thorpe, *"The Workers Themselves": Revolutionary Syndicalism and International Labour, 1913–1923* (Dordrecht, The Netherlands, 1989), 14–15.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Robert Michels, *Political Parties*, trans. Eden Paul and Cedar Paul (New York, 1959); Georges Sorel, *Réflexions sur la violence* (Paris, 1906); Célestin Bouglé, *Syndicalisme et démocratie: Impressions et réflexions* (Paris, 1908). For one study among many, see Alan Spitzer, "Anarchy and Culture: Fernand Pelloutier and the Dilemma of Revolutionary Syndicalism," *International Review of Social History* 8 (1963): 379–88.

<sup>12</sup> Victor Griffuelhes, leader of the CGT, boasted to Edouard Dolléans that he was unaware of Sorel. Dolléans quotes him as saying, "I read Alexander Dumas, . . . showing the annoyance he felt for theoreticians" (*Histoire du mouvement ouvrier, 1871–1936* [Paris, 1939], 126). Griffuelhes was almost certainly being disingenuous. Both he and Sorel wrote for Hubert Lagardelle's journal, *Le Mouvement socialiste*, where Sorel's *Réflexions* first appeared. Griffuelhes's attempt to hide his intellectual involvements was probably intended to highlight his wish to stress the practical, materialist, worker roots of his activity.

working-class revolutionary action set syndicalists apart from both business unionists and orthodox socialists because it implied some specific positions. In supporting a union movement independent of electoral socialism, for example, revolutionary syndicalists were allied with business unionists against Marxist socialists. The alliance did not extend, however, to syndicalist campaigns against militarism, patriotism, and capitalism. Those views united syndicalists and political socialists. But unlike the Marxist socialists, who disdained the gains to be won through economic action, syndicalists and business unionists believed strikes were the central tool of working-class collective action. Superficially, revolutionary syndicalist strikes were indistinguishable from those of business unions; they differed only in their ultimate goals. Business unionists struck to raise wages and improve working conditions. For syndicalists, however, strikes, including strikes for higher wages and better working conditions, were valuable because they taught the benefits of solidarity and collective action. Syndicalist unions were more than vehicles for improving life under capitalism; they were schools of a new, proletarian political economy, organizing centers for the social revolution.

To be sure, few revolutionary syndicalists were optimistic enough to expect that a revolutionary general strike was imminent. As a goal, however, the image of a revolutionary general strike focused their minds and led them to direct their energies to advance the revolution by promoting working-class solidarity through union action involving all workers. To Commons, Perlman, and Stearns, this is a futile task; they assume that immutable craft egoism and a jealous hostility to workers of other crafts, industries, and regions will forever prevent the development of class-wide solidarity. Such attitudes did not discourage revolutionary syndicalists because they thought dialectically. For them, attitudes are variable, products of experience and subject to change by socializing experience. Participation in solidaristic unions and collective actions, then, will teach new values.<sup>13</sup>

Without an imminent revolution, revolutionary syndicalism was a union program more than a revolutionary tactic. In practice, revolutionary syndicalists were “practical revolutionaries” interested in forming strong unions.<sup>14</sup> For revolutionary syndicalists, unions and *Bourses*

<sup>13</sup> This view of human perfectibility through education was widely shared among republicans in the first half of the Third Republic. See, for example, Katherine Auspitz, *The Radical Bourgeoisie* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982). See also Fernand Pelloutier, *Les Syndicats en France* (Paris, 1897), 11, and the discussion in Spitzer, “Anarchy and Culture,” 384–87.

<sup>14</sup> For a similar analysis, see, for example, Barbara Mitchell, *The Practical Revolutionaries: A New Interpretation of the French Anarcho-Syndicalists* (New York, 1987).

*du travail* (buildings granted by municipal governments to serve as headquarters for unions in a locality) were “schools of social economy,” and strikes were training grounds for socialism, “revolutionary gymnastics” teaching solidarity.<sup>15</sup> Beyond the details of doctrine, revolutionary syndicalists agreed on the importance of involving workers in unions and strikes across craft and industry lines and without regard to skill, gender, or national origin.<sup>16</sup> Through participation in working-class institutions and actions, workers would learn to be revolutionaries.

Dreams of a social revolution did not distract revolutionary syndicalists from attempts to improve the conditions of daily life within capitalism.<sup>17</sup> On the contrary, they emphasized daily struggles because they believed that achieving reforms would advance the revolution both by empowering workers and by giving them confidence in the power of united, working-class action.<sup>18</sup> If inclusive, solidaristic unions were clearly ineffectual in strikes, then revolutionary syndicalists would have faced a difficult dilemma. They were spared the choice between doctrine and successful practice because *both* theory and experience taught them that strikes are won by increasing the number of workers participating rather than by increasing the union’s organization and financial resources. “Before growing capitalist concentration,” Léon Jouhaux, longtime head of the CGT, declared to the 1909 unity congress of the metal trades federation, “[our] conclusion must be to realize the concentration of the workers’ forces.”<sup>19</sup> Success in labor dis-

<sup>15</sup> Paul Delesalle, *Les Bourses du travail et la CGT* (Paris, 1909), 17; Emile Pouget, “Les Résultats du syndicalisme,” *Le Mouvement socialiste* 192 (1 Dec. 1907): 404.

<sup>16</sup> As explained below, such appeals to class solidarity may have been most important for the unskilled and semiskilled workers in larger establishments, workers who often lacked the group cohesion that comes from common sociability and training in common skills.

<sup>17</sup> Short of a revolutionary situation where the working class as whole is prepared to rise up and seize power, such as existed in Russia in 1905 and 1917, the strike demands made by revolutionary syndicalists resemble those made by business unionists. Both demand higher wages, better working conditions, and more control over the workplace because there is nothing else their unions can ask from individual employers. Revolutionary syndicalists may even be more prone than business unionists to make simple wage and hour, rather than work-rule, demands because wage and hour concessions can more easily be extended to all workers, skilled and unskilled, without promoting divisions among them. There is some evidence for this; work-rule demands were made in about 20 percent of French strikes, 1895–99 and 1910–14, compared with over 30 percent of American strikes, 1881–1905. In addition, the proportion of union strikes raising wage-and-hour issues is about 10 percent higher in French strikes in industries and departments where the dominant union was led by revolutionary syndicalists than in other industries and departments.

<sup>18</sup> For a discussion by a prominent syndicalist of the distinction between revolutionary and other reforms, see Louis Niel, “Les Réformes révolutionnaires,” *La Revue syndicaliste et coopérative* 4 (May 1909): 2–4.

<sup>19</sup> Jouhaux in *Fédération des ouvriers des métaux, Congrès unitaire . . . 1909* (Paris, 1909), 9. Georges Yvetot similarly asserted that “the success of a strike is more certain if a great number involve themselves” (*ABC syndicaliste* [Paris, 1908], 33). These claims did not pass without challenge, of course. See, for example, Victor Griffuelhes and Alexander Keufer, “Les Deux Conceptions du syndicalisme,” *Le Mouvement socialiste* 146 (1 Jan. 1905): 1–41.

putes, revolutionary syndicalists insisted, depended not on the unions' cashbox but on "the vigor displayed in the battle and the penetration of the revolutionary ideal among the workers."<sup>20</sup>

In practice, syndicalist unions were designed to mobilize large numbers of workers rather than enhance the bargaining leverage of small groups of craftsmen. Revolutionary syndicalists were organized for guerilla war and traveled light, with few benefit funds or paid officials. Most French unions had dues a fraction of those found in the United Kingdom, Germany, or the United States. Outside of printing, where the dominant union opposed revolutionary syndicalism, the average French worker paid barely half a franc a month in union dues, well under 0.5 percent of wages. This was a quarter of the 2-percent rate common elsewhere. Some lamented the lack of insurance benefits or paid union organizers, but others openly chose "to have 4,000 members at 0.50 [francs] rather than 2,500 at 0.75."<sup>21</sup> Some even applauded small union treasuries, fearing that more resources would allow some future conservative union leader to restrain rank-and-file militancy. Instead, the lack of large centrally controlled benefit funds on the Anglo-Saxon (British and American) or German model prevented French unions from putting any significant restraints on rank-and-file movements (see Figure 1).<sup>22</sup>

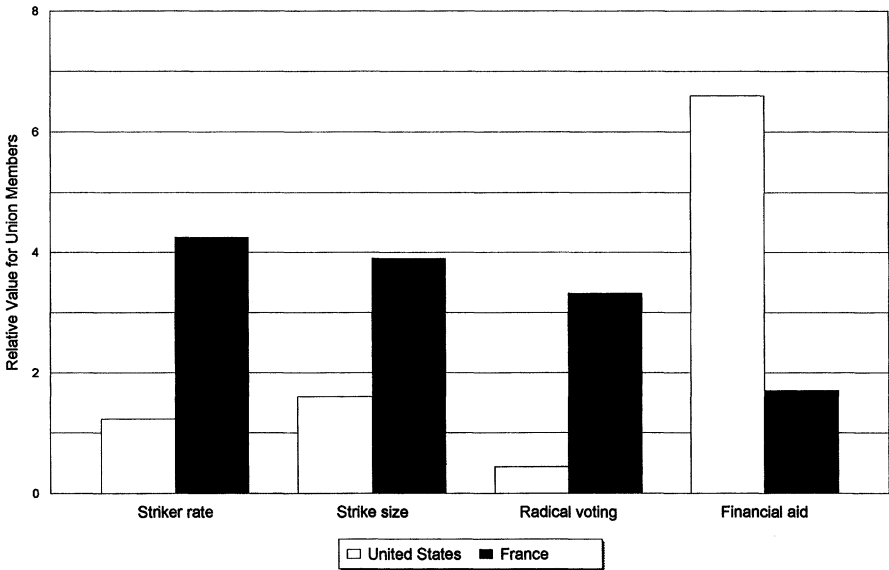
Revolutionary syndicalists also urged French unions to substitute industrial and regional unions emphasizing broad working-class solidarity for craft organization. The CGT promoted the amalgamation of craft affiliates into industrial and regional unions, leading to the organization in 1907 of a single building-trades affiliate and in 1909 of a

<sup>20</sup> Pouget, "Les Résultats," 401. The value of union benefit funds was a point of contention between syndicalists and their opponents. For alternative views see, for example, Léon de Seilhac, *Syndicats ouvriers: Fédérations, bourses du travail* (Paris, 1902), 119–129; Griffuelhes and Keufer, "Les Deux Conceptions du syndicalisme"; Charles Rist, "La Situation financière des syndicats ouvriers français," *Revue économique internationale* 1 (1911): 34–67; Rist, "Chronique ouvrière," *Revue d'économie politique* 21 (Feb. 1906): 229–42.

Syndicalists saw the value of large strike funds and even on occasion urged raising dues to finance them. But they feared that high dues would discourage union membership and inhibit militancy from fear of jeopardizing the funds accumulated. Some of their opponents favored high dues and large strike funds precisely to discourage strikes; see de Seilhac, *Syndicats*, 12–13; J. Lefort, *L'Assurance contre les grèves* (Paris, 1911), 114.

<sup>21</sup> Marlin in *Fédération . . . du Verre, Compte rendu du congrès . . . 1912* (Paris, 1912), 101. See also Pannetier in *Fédération des travailleurs . . . du bâtiment, Congrès unitaire du bâtiment . . . 1907* (Paris, 1907), 56. Only in the conservative printing trades unions were union dues significantly higher, around 2.5 francs a month, or between five and ten times the level in revolutionary syndicalist-led unions.

<sup>22</sup> As a result, there was a much closer association between unionization and strike activity in France than in, for example, the United States. (A notable exception is the printing trades where the *Fédération du livre* effectively restrained local strikes through central control over a large strike fund.) See the discussion in Gerald Friedman, *Republican Unions in Capitalist States: Politics and the Labor Movement in France and the United States, 1876–1914* (Ithaca, N.Y., forthcoming), chap. 5.



**Figure 1** The impact of unions in France and the United States around 1910.

Source: The striker rate for the United States is from estimates of the share of union members and nonmembers striking in manufacturing industries in twenty-three states in 1903 in the United States. The striker rate for France is from comparable estimates for industries in continental French departments, 1910–14. The average size of union and nonunion strikes for France is from the Shorter-Tilly strike file for strikes, 1910–14. The American data is for all union and nonunion strikes, 1881–1905, United States, Commissioner of Labor, *Annual Report, 1906* (Washington, D.C., 1906), 490–91.

The impact of unions on radical voting in France is estimated from data on union membership and voting on the arrondissement level for SFIO candidates in the 1910 parliamentary elections; see Gerald Friedman, “Capitalism, Republicanism, Socialism, and the State: France, 1871–1914,” *Social Science History* 14 (summer 1990): 162. The estimate for the United States is from a regression of the determinants of voting on the state level for Eugene V. Debs in 1900, including estimates of union membership.

The impact of unions on the probability of financial aid is estimated from regressions for individual strikes, 1881–94 in the United States and 1895–99 for France; see Friedman, *Republican Unions in Capitalist States*, chap. 3.

Note: This table gives the relative value of selected characteristics for union members compared with nonmembers in each country around 1910.

single metal-trades union.<sup>23</sup> Local CGT affiliates were also required to amalgamate regionally by joining municipal *Bourses du travail*, the backbone of the revolutionary syndicalist movement. Through the *Bourses*, local unions supported each other’s strikes and spread organization to

<sup>23</sup> The debate over industrial organization was quite contentious; see the CGT conventions of 1898 (Rennes, 1898), 1900 (Paris, 1900), and 1906 (Amiens, 1906), and the discussions over the organization of a Metal Workers Federation in Raoul Lenoir, “L’Unité Metallurgique: Pourquoi nous sommes allés à l’unité,” *La Revue syndicaliste et coopérative* 4 (July 1909): 65–70 and Edmond Kugler, “Pourquoi nous ne sommes pas allés à l’unité,” *La Revue syndicaliste et coopérative* 4 (July 1909): 71–75.



industries and crafts lacking labor unions. In contrast with craft and business unionists, it was common for syndicalist activists to be involved in unions and organizing drives in a variety of crafts and industries. Over half of French union leaders from this period, for example, were involved in unions in more than one industry, twice the rate found in the American union movement.<sup>24</sup>

Syndicalists were openly disdainful of parliamentary socialists and others who would elevate the working class by incorporating it into the institutions of bourgeois France. Nonetheless, the logic of their revolutionary stance made syndicalists natural allies of all radicals, including the Socialists. Despite proclamations of political independence, there was much overlap in the leadership of the syndicalist and socialist movements, and syndicalist propaganda and experience made workers more susceptible to Socialist appeals (see Figure 1). Over 80 percent of French union leaders before World War I were involved in some form of radical politics; half ran for elected office, including nearly 40 percent who won elected office as Socialists.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, outside of the printing trades, most of the opposition to revolutionary syndicalism came not from the business unionists emphasized by Stearns but from political socialists, including the leadership of the miners' confederation, the railway workers, and the textile workers. Those leaders would have placed Socialists to the left of the Anglo-Saxon labor movement.

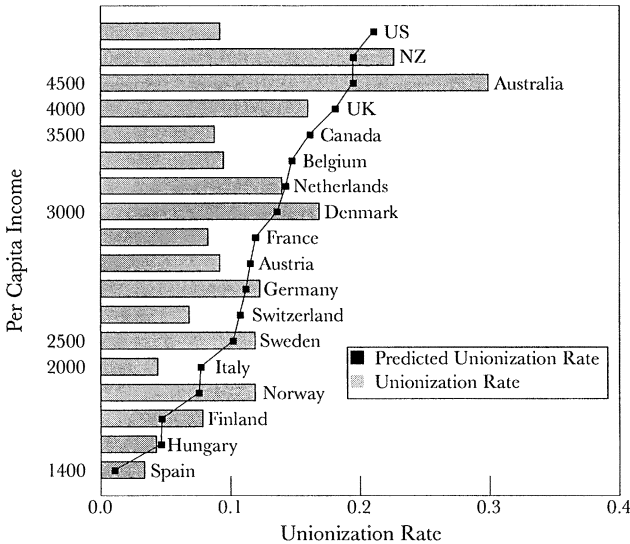
### **Did French Workers Reject Revolutionary Syndicalism?**

Sixty years before Peter Stearns's book, opponents of revolutionary syndicalism warned that radical propaganda discouraged French workers from joining unions. Moderates complained that the revolutionary syndicalists' radical politics and low-dues policy "discourages and weakens the attractive force of the union idea for the masses." They promised that political moderation would produce faster union growth, as in Germany and the United Kingdom.<sup>26</sup> Addressing the 1908 convention of the *Confédération générale du travail*, Guérard, of the railway workers federation, warned that workers shunned radical unions: "Have you

24 This is based on a study of 333 union leaders active in 1880–1914. Data on French leaders are for leaders with entries of at least one column in length in Jean Maitron et al., *Dictionnaire biographique du mouvement ouvrier français* (Paris, 1973–76).

25 This is based on the union biographies mentioned in n. 24 above. Even prominent revolutionary syndicalists, such as Victor Griffuelhes, sought elected office as Socialists.

26 Clément Mutschler, "Comment augmenter la force des syndicats," *La Revue syndicaliste et coopérative* 4 (Feb. 1908): 231; Edouard Dreyfus, "Le Mouvement syndical," *La Revue syndicaliste et coopérative* 1 (Oct. 1905): 124–28.



**Figure 2** Union membership rate of nonagricultural labor force and membership rate predicted from per capita income: Europe and European-settled countries c. 1914.

Sources: Union memberships in Belgium, Denmark, Italy, Germany, Sweden, and the United Kingdom are from Chris Cook and John Paxton, *European Political Facts* (London, 1978), 322–24; memberships in Finland, The Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden, are from Leo Wolman, *The Growth of American Trade Unions, 1880–1923* (New York, 1924), 124; memberships in Austria, Hungary, Spain, and Switzerland are from the Rand School of Social Science, *American Labor Year Book, 1916* (New York, 1916), 164, 198, 214, 219. Canadian membership is from *Historical Statistics* (Ottawa, 1984), series E175. Australian membership is from Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, *Official Year Book of the Commonwealth of Australia 7: 1914* (Melbourne, 1914), 905. New Zealand membership is from *Official Year-Book, 1914* (Wellington, 1914), 720. Memberships in the United States and France are from Friedman, *Republican Unions in Capitalist States*, chap. 1.

Data on the nonagricultural labor force for European countries are from Brian R. Mitchell, *European Historical Statistics, 1750–1970* (New York, 1975). Data on the nonagricultural labor force for the United States are from United States Department of Commerce, *Historical Statistics of the United States Colonial Times to 1970* (Washington, D.C., 1975), series D167, D170. Data on the Australian nonagricultural labor force are from Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, *Official Year Book of the Commonwealth of Australia 7: 1914*, 120, 446. New Zealand data are from *Official Year-Book, 1914*, 127. Canadian data are from *Historical Statistics*, series D4.

Per capita income in 1985 United States dollars is from Angus Maddison, *Dynamic Forces in Capitalist Development: A Long-Run Comparative View* (Oxford, 1991), 198–99, 229–33. Data for countries not included in Maddison are from Nicholas F. R. Crafts, “Gross National Product in Europe, 1870–1910,” *Explorations in Economic History* 20 (1983): 387–401.

Note: This figure shows unionization rates and per capita income for European countries, North America, and Oceania. The line is from a regression of unionization rates on income and shows the average unionization rate for each level of income. The regression is available upon request.

missed the striking fact that it is the organizations that one labels 'reformist' which have grown the most?"<sup>27</sup> Guérard was seconded by Renard, of the Textile Workers, and later in the CGT newspaper *Voix du peuple* by German and American observers.<sup>28</sup> Academics joined the chorus. Charles Rist, professor of economics at the École libre des sciences politiques in Paris, discounted contrary data to insist that revolutionary syndicalist unions lacked a large membership and were too weak to compel employers to bargain. Compared with their Anglo-Saxon or German counterparts, he concluded that French unions were ineffectual, rump organizations.<sup>29</sup>

Rist went through some contortions to conclude that radicalism restricted French union growth, because his data suggested a very different conclusion.<sup>30</sup> Unions were a minority phenomenon throughout the capitalist world at the beginning of the twentieth century (see Figure 2). It is always difficult to mobilize individuals for collective action, especially for new institutions formed against employer opposition. In this context, it is unreasonable to hold early-twentieth-century French unions to anachronistic standards for "success." The appropriate question is not whether French unions failed because they enrolled less than half the labor force, as do unions in the United Kingdom or Germany today, or even fewer than twenty percent, as French unions do now. Instead, the proper question is how did revolutionary syndicalist unions do compared with their contemporaries? By this standard, French revolutionary syndicalists succeeded reasonably well.

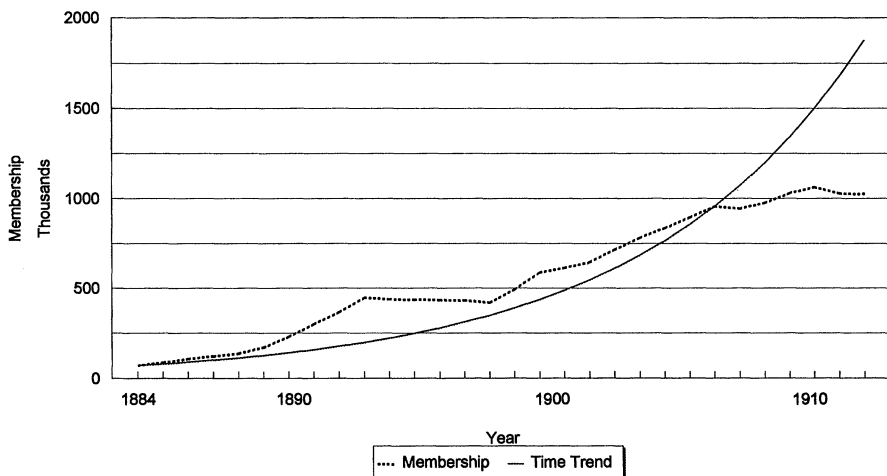
French unions grew slowly through the early 1880s because of state repression. Unions and professional associations were banned under the revolutionary *Loi Le Chapelier*, and this law remained a threat to worker organization until its repeal in 1884, half a century after unions were legalized in the United Kingdom and the United States. Prolonged repression contributed to the relatively low rates of French union membership entering the late-nineteenth century. But once legalized,

<sup>27</sup> CGT, *Compte rendu du congrès . . . 1908* (Montpellier, 1908), 208–9.

<sup>28</sup> Josef Steiner, "Les Résultats en France et en Allemagne," *Voix du Peuple*, 6–13 June 1909, 2; Samuel Gompers, "Discours," *Voix du Peuple*, 1–8 Aug. 1909, 2.

<sup>29</sup> Rist, "La Situation financière des syndicats," 39.

<sup>30</sup> Rist used the official reports of the Office du travail, the same data I use below. Data on union membership were collected as part of an annual filing by unions required by the Waldeck-Rousseau law of 1884 legalizing trade organizations. Because membership was reported by the unions themselves, the data may be inflated by union leaders hoping to enhance their union's influence and importance. There is no evidence of this, however. If membership numbers were arbitrary, then one would expect that they would not be subject to change from year to year and that they would cluster at large and round numbers. Instead, the great majority of unions report a low membership with little heaping on round numbers, and reported membership fluctuated, sometimes dramatically, from year to year.



**Figure 3** French union membership growth and time trend of growth, 1884–1913. Source: Membership for 1884–98 is computed from the annual membership data for individual industries in Ministère du commerce, Office du travail, *Les Associations professionnelles ouvrières* (Paris, 1899–1904). Membership for 1899–1913 is from Ministère du commerce, Office du travail (later Ministère du travail), *Annuaire des syndicats professionnels* (Paris, 1915). Additional members have been added based on the estimates of membership in unregistered unions discussed in Friedman, *Republican Unions in Capitalist States*, chap. 1.

French unions grew rapidly, gaining members through 1914 at an annual rate of over 9 percent (see Figure 3). Despite France's relatively slow population and labor force growth, French unions grew as quickly as did unions in Germany or the United States and over twice as fast as did unions in the United Kingdom or Italy.<sup>31</sup> Adjusting for differences in the rate of growth of the nonagricultural labor force, the unionization rate among French nonagricultural workers increased faster between the 1880s and World War I than did the unionization rate in the other leading industrial countries, twice as fast as in the United States.<sup>32</sup>

In 1914 French unions were smaller relative to their country's non-agricultural labor force than were unions in other industrial countries.

<sup>31</sup> French union membership growth was also more stable than growth in American unions. The mean annual growth rate of American union membership is only slightly higher than the mean for French unions, but the standard deviation in American growth rates is nearly triple the French figure; see Gerald Friedman, "New Estimates of Union Membership: The United States, 1880–1914" (unpublished manuscript, University of Massachusetts, Dec. 1994).

<sup>32</sup> The nonagricultural labor force grew between the 1880s and around 1910 by 2.4 percent in Germany, 1.4 percent in the United Kingdom, and 3.7 percent in the United States, compared with only 1.1 percent in France. See B. R. Mitchell, *European Historical Statistics, 1750–1970* (New York, 1975), 53, 54, 61; United States Department of Commerce, *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970* (Washington, D.C., 1975), 139. A more rapidly growing nonagricultural labor force means more workers available to join unions.

Of eighteen European and European-settled countries, France was thirteenth in the share of its nonagricultural labor force (employers and wage earners) belonging to labor unions. In addition to a history of state repression, the slow pace of French industrialization contributed to this relatively poor performance because union membership and per capita income are strongly and positively related. Adjusting for France's lower income, compared with the United States or the United Kingdom, reduces the French membership deficiency to a small and statistically insignificant level. (Compare the actual unionization rate with the rate predicted from the country's per capita income in Figure 2.)<sup>33</sup> The French shortfall is a fraction of that for a country with a conservative union movement, such as the United States, where the unionization rate is over five percentage points below the level that would be predicted.

Estimates of union membership of the nonagricultural labor force also exaggerate French unions' failure because of the unusually low proportion of wage earners in the French nonagricultural labor force. Into the twentieth century, French industry was dominated by small establishments, including an unusually large share of self-employed artisans. The average manufacturing establishment in France, for example, is only half as large as its counterpart in the same industry in the United States. As late as 1906, there were over ten million employers and self-employed artisans in France, a number surpassing that of wage earners by nearly two hundred thousand. Even outside of agriculture, employees made up only 64 percent of the labor force, compared with nearly 90 percent of the labor force in the United States.<sup>34</sup>

Since only wage workers join unions, the true measure of a union's recruitment success is the share of wage workers in the membership, not the union share of the total labor force. According to that criterion, French unions did as well as American unions overall, and within manufacturing they attracted a larger share of wage earners than did unions in either the United States or the United Kingdom (see Table 1). The overall unionization rate is higher in the United Kingdom than

<sup>33</sup> In regressions for union membership as a share of the nonagricultural labor force, the coefficient on per capita income is statistically significant. A dummy variable for France is negative, but not significantly different from zero.

<sup>34</sup> *Statistique générale, Résultats . . . 1906*, and United States Department of Commerce, *Census of Population . . . 1900*. In *The Growth of Mass Democracies and the Welfare State*, vol. 1 of *State, Economy, and Society in Western Europe, 1815–1975* (London, 1987), 500, Peter Flora reports that the employer and self-employed share of the 1906 French nonagricultural labor force is 31 percent (instead of 36 percent in my estimate). The discrepancy results from Flora's including the public sector and France's North African departments in his count. Employers and self-employed workers made up only around 11 percent of the labor force in England and Wales in 1911 and under 20 percent of the labor force in Germany in 1907; see Flora, *State, Economy, and Society*, 529, 515.

**Table 1** Union Members of One Hundred Industrial Wage Earners in Construction, Manufacturing, and Mining, around 1910

Industry	United Kingdom (%)	France (%)	United States (%)
Boots and shoes	29.6	13.9	14.4
Chemicals	1.8	22.0	4.5
Clothing	4.6	5.5	12.9
Construction	29.1	24.2	25.4
Fine metals	0.0	37.4	0.7
Food	3.6	14.0	14.2
Glass and pottery	7.2	17.2	11.7
Iron and steel	29.7	46.3	1.2
Leather	11.0	21.8	4.8
Metalworking	20.4	6.1	12.5
Mining	75.6	22.4	37.5
Paper	7.4	6.2	1.8
Printing	25.4	23.0	32.9
Textiles	3.3	15.0	2.7
Tobacco	9.6	100.0	31.0
Woodworking	24.1	12.5	6.0
All	22.8	15.2	15.2
Manufacturing	12.3	13.3	10.4

Source: Data for the United Kingdom are from Board of Trade, *Report on Trade Unions in 1908–1910 with Comparative Statistics for 1901–1910* (London, 1912) and *Census of Production: Final Report on the First Census of Production of the United Kingdom, 1907* (London, 1912). Data for the United States and France are from Friedman, *Republican Unions in Capitalist States*, chap. 6.

in France, but this is due to the disproportionate share of the British labor force employed in construction and mining, industries with high unionization rates in all three countries. In seven of sixteen industries, French unions enroll a higher share of the wage earners than do unions in either the United States or the United Kingdom. (By contrast, unions in the United Kingdom lead in six cases, and the Americans lead in only three.) French unions trail those in both the United States and the United Kingdom in only five industries, including the one (printing) where the leading French union's leaders looked for inspiration to British and American business unions.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Low dues may have contributed to the high unionization rate in France if, as revolutionary syndicalists in both France and the Anglo-Saxon (British and American) countries hoped, they opened membership to low-income workers unable to afford the high price of joining business unions. This does not mean, however, that French union members were less committed to their unions than were their counterparts in the United States or Great Britain. Dues are only a part of the cost of joining a union. French union members took the risk of losing a job because of anti-union employers and bore the cost of supporting strikes at least as much as their Anglo-Saxon counterparts did.

The pattern of French union membership was different from that found in countries dominated by business unions. There is a significant correlation around 1910 between union membership in the United States and in the United Kingdom, two countries with business unions.<sup>36</sup> But France was different. There is a significant positive correlation between union membership rates by industry in the United States and France in the 1880s, but this correlation declines sharply after 1890 with the rise of French revolutionary syndicalism and American business unionism until there is a negative correlation after 1900. American unions around 1900 were strongest in industries still employing skilled craftsmen in smaller establishments, such as construction or printing. By contrast, the French were stronger in modern industries employing specialized workers in larger establishments, including chemicals, steel, and textiles.<sup>37</sup> On average, American union members around 1900 were employed in establishments 30 percent *smaller* than the average for nonmembers. By contrast, French union members were employed in establishments nearly 80 percent *larger* than the average for nonmembers.<sup>38</sup> A different style of union movement in France led to different sources for union members.

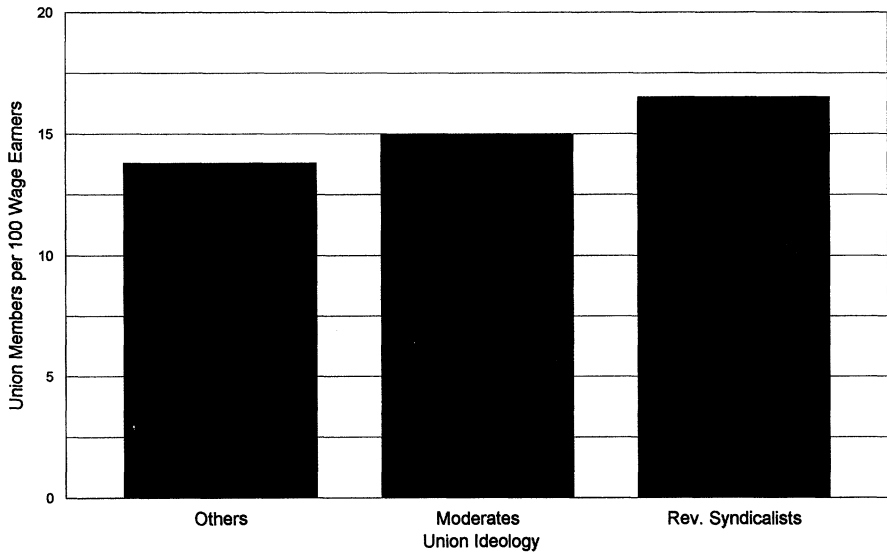
There is direct evidence that revolutionary syndicalist ideology contributed to the success French unions enjoyed in attracting members in large, modern establishments. French industries can be divided into three groups according to the political disposition of the industry's leading unions around 1906.<sup>39</sup> They include industries whose leading unions supported the CGT's revolutionary syndicalist leadership and program, those whose unions are "moderate" in comparison with revolutionary syndicalism, and industries classed as "other" where the leading unions were of mixed ideology. The "moderate" group includes some locales and industries with strong union movements regardless of ideology, including printers and miners and workers from highly urbanized departments in the North. As a result, the moderates enrolled a significantly higher share of the workforce than did revolution-

<sup>36</sup> Variations in union membership rates in one country explain about a third of the variation in membership rates in the other; the R-Squared statistic of a regression of the unionization rates in the United Kingdom and the United States in Table 1 is about 0.3. Tobacco is a state monopoly in France, and state approval accounts for union success there. Because of the unusual circumstances involving this industry, the statistics cited above and in the text are computed without including tobacco.

<sup>37</sup> See the discussion in Friedman, *Republican Unions in Capitalist States*, chap. 5.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 6.

<sup>39</sup> This analysis was based on union votes at the CGT conventions in 1904 (on the reelection of Griffuelhes to lead the CGT) and in 1906 (on the antimilitarism program); see CGT, *Compte rendu*, . . . 1904 (Bourges, 1904), 38; and CGT, *Compte rendu*. . . 1906 (Amiens, 1906), 302.



**Figure 4** Unionization rates by union ideology: France, 1898, 1905, and 1910.

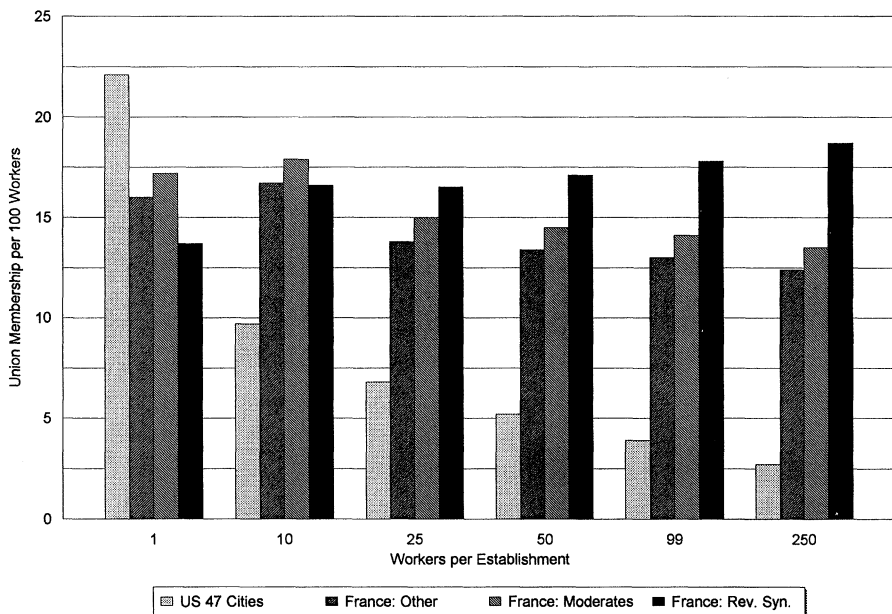
Source: Union membership is from my coding of union reports in *Annuaire des syndicats professionnels* (Paris, 1899, 1906, 1911). The number of wage earners by industry is from Statistique générale, *Résultats statistiques du dénombrement* for 1896, 1906, and 1911.

Note: This figure gives the share of wage earners belonging to unions by year in industries and departments grouped according to the ideology of the leading union.

ary syndicalist unions or unions in the “other” group (see Figure 4). But the moderates’ advantage was entirely due to their strength in small, artisanal establishments and in industries where unions were relatively strong regardless of ideology. By contrast, revolutionary syndicalist unions were more effective in attracting workers new to the union movement, including the semiskilled workers employed in modern, large establishments. In establishments with fewer than ten workers, for example, the share of workers is over twice as high in industries and departments where the unions are led by moderates, as it is where revolutionary syndicalists are dominant. But the moderate advantage falls to zero in establishments with more than twenty-five workers.

Regression analysis, controlling for location and industry, confirms that the moderates’ recruitment advantage holds only for smaller establishments. Moderate union ideology is associated with a 3.4-percentage point higher unionization rate (about 25 percent) in establishments employing one worker, but only a 1.4-percentage point edge (or 8 percent) in establishments employing ten workers. By contrast, among workers in establishments employing twenty-five workers, revolutionary syndicalist unions had a unionization rate 1.5 percentage





**Figure 5** Predicted union membership of one hundred wage earners by establishment size and union ideology: France, 1898–1910, and the United States, 1900.

Source: French union membership is from coding of union reports described in Figure 4 above. United States union membership reports for forty-seven cities in five states described in Friedman, *Republican Unions in Capitalist States*, chap. 6.

The predicted values are from weighted regressions where the dependent variable is the log-odds of the unionization rate. The log-odds is calculated as (1)  $LOD = \text{LOG} (UPR / (1 - UPR))$ , where UPR is the unionization rate calculated as (2)  $UPR = MEMB / WE$ , where MEMB is the number of union members in the industry within the department and WE is the number of wage earners. Where there are no union members, I have added 0.01 members. In a few cases there are as many or more reported members than wage earners; in these cases I have assumed there was actually one fewer member than wage earners. The weight used is (3)  $UPR * (1 - UPR) * (WE^{*.5})$ , where  $(WE^{*.5})$  is the square-root of the number of wage earners.

Note: This figure gives the predicted unionization rate for different establishment sizes predicted from regressions for industry unionization rates within manufacturing industries in forty-seven American cities in 1899 and continental French departments for 1898, 1905, and 1910. Independent variables include the logarithm of the average establishment size in the industry and department, the local socialist vote share, the logarithm of the size of the department's largest city, the proportion of the department's population living in urban areas, the proportion of males in the industry's labor force in the department or city, the proportion of immigrants in the department or city, the proportion of the French department's labor force employed in industry, the French department's illiteracy rate among its army recruits, and industry and regional dummy variables. The French regressions also include dummy variables for whether the dominant union in the industry in the department was associated with the moderate or the revolutionary syndicalist wing of the CGT and the interaction of those dummy variables and the logarithm of the average establishment size in the industry and department.

points (or 10 percent) higher than the rate for moderate unions, and the estimated unionization rate in very large establishments, those employing 250 workers, rises to 18.7 percent for revolutionary syndicalists compared with 13.5 percent for moderate unions, an absolute difference of over 5 percentage points or nearly 40 percent (see Figure 5).<sup>40</sup>

Much of the difference between patterns of unionization in France and the United States is caused by differences between revolutionary syndicalist recruitment in France and recruitment by business unions in the United States. In the United States and outside the revolutionary syndicalist sector in France, union membership falls with increases in establishment size (see Figure 5). The increase in unionization with establishment size within France, arguably the most striking difference between patterns of unionization in the two countries, is due entirely to the strength of this pattern among revolutionary syndicalist-led unions (see Figure 5).

### Did Revolutionary Syndicalist Strikes Fail?

Strikes were central to revolutionary syndicalism. There, workers were to learn the value of solidarity, not by passively belonging to a union but through participation in collective *action*. These were “revolutionary gymnastics,” teaching workers to “overcome habits of submission and passivity.”<sup>41</sup> But, of course, workers would learn their lessons in the power of working-class solidarity best from successful strikes.

By 1900, French workers had accepted revolutionary syndicalist

<sup>40</sup> The following discussion reports the predicted values from weighted regressions where the dependent variable is the log-odds of the unionization rate in an industry within a department for each of the years 1898, 1905, and 1910. The log-odds (LOD) is calculated as (1)  $LOD = \text{LOG}(\text{UPR}/(1-\text{UPR}))$ , where LOG is the natural logarithm and UPR is the unionization rate calculated as (2)  $\text{UPR} = \text{MEMB}/\text{WE}$ , where MEMB is the number of union members in the industry within the department and WE is the number of wage earners. Where there are no union members, I have added 0.01 members because the logarithm of zero is undefined. In a few cases, the number of reported members is as great as or greater than the number of wage earners; in these cases, I have assumed that there was actually one fewer member than wage earners.

The weight used is the following: (3)  $\text{UPR}*(1-\text{UPR})*(WE^{**.5})$ , where  $(WE^{**.5})$  is the square-root of the number of wage earners. Independent variables include the logarithm of the average establishment size in the industry and department, the local socialist vote share, the logarithm of the size of the department's largest city, the proportion of the department's population living in urban areas, the proportion of males in the industry's labor force in the department, the proportion of immigrants in the department, the proportion of the department's labor force employed in industry, the department's illiteracy rate among its army recruits, and industry and regional dummy variables. The regressions also include dummy variables for whether the dominant union in the industry in the department was associated with the moderate or with the revolutionary syndicalist wing of the CGT and the interaction of those dummy variables and the logarithm of the average establishment size in the industry and department. The regressions are available upon request from the author.

<sup>41</sup> Yvetot, *ABC Syndicaliste*, 51. See also Victor Griffuelhes, *Le Syndicalisme révolutionnaire* (Paris, 1909), 14.

leadership in their strikes. The number of strikers rose sharply in the late-nineteenth century from an annual average of sixty-four thousand in the early 1880s to over two hundred thousand after 1905, from six per thousand in the early 1880s to thirty-three per thousand after 1905. After striking much less frequently than their American counterparts in the 1880s and 1890s, French workers were 50 percent more likely than workers in the United States to strike after 1900.<sup>42</sup>

Workers did not need formal organization to strike, and many strikes throughout the pre-World War I period were conducted without unions.<sup>43</sup> With the rise of revolutionary syndicalism in the 1890s, however, a growing share of the increasing number of French strikers turned to unions to lead their strikes. As late as the mid-1890s barely half of French strikes involved a union. But the union share of strikes rose sharply with the rise of revolutionary syndicalism, reaching a plateau of over seventy-five percent by 1904.<sup>44</sup>

To continue to attract members, even to survive, unions have to do more than lead strikes, they must *win*. Revolutionary syndicalists were attacked for striking irresponsibly without an effective strike strategy. Critics charged they conducted strikes without adequate planning or financial reserves. After a European visit, Samuel Gompers declared that “the General Confederation of Labor [the CGT] in France is the furthest possible removed from the American Federation of Labor in both organization and methods . . . outside the domain of serious expectations in regard to constructive work.” A later AFL observer echoed Gompers, characterizing French unions’ strike strategy as “tin-foil propositions and wind-bag methods . . . [with] low dues, no defense fund to support strikes, but instead relying on communistic soup and tightening their belts as their stomachs shrunk.”<sup>45</sup> Revolutionary syndicalists vehemently denied that they lacked an effective strategy. Citing government statistics showing a high rate of strike success in

<sup>42</sup> The American striker rate remained at about twenty strikers for every thousand wage earners from 1880 through 1905. French strikes were shorter than American strikes, and they declined in duration by about a day (or by 15 percent) from the 1880s to after 1900. As a result, the relative volume of strike activity—(strikers\*duration)/wage earners—remained somewhat less in France than in the United States after 1900, despite rising much more rapidly in France.

<sup>43</sup> This was implicitly recognized in French law, which legalized strikes in 1864, twenty years before unions were legalized.

<sup>44</sup> The share of strikes before 1890 without union involvement is around 70 percent; see Michelle Perrot, *Les Ouvriers en grève* (Paris, 1974), 425. The share of strikes with union involvement is calculated from the updated Shorter and Tilly strike file; see Edward Shorter and Charles Tilly, *Strikes in France* (Cambridge, 1974), 372. Using the Shorter-Tilly strike file, one can calculate that the share of strikers in union-led strikes increased from around 60 percent in 1895 to over 80 percent after 1896 and over 90 percent for 1910–14.

<sup>45</sup> Gompers, *Labor in Europe and America*, 249, 252; James Duncan in AFL, *Proceedings of the Convention . . . 1911*, 149–50.

France, Victor Griffuelhes argued that “despite defeats . . . the French working class knows how to struggle.”<sup>46</sup> Emile Pouget agreed. He attributed rising strike success rates after 1900 to the growth of the CGT, “the spread of the revolutionary ideal among the French workers, and not to the power of their union reserves.”<sup>47</sup> Griffuelhes concluded that statistics of strike success were proof that “the concern for immediate gains is not obscured by the affirmation renewed daily for the revolutionary ideal.”<sup>48</sup>

Revolutionary syndicalist unions developed a winning strategy that allowed them to conduct effective strikes without large benefit funds because they were able to attract government support. All unions choose between a “narrow” strategy of providing small groups of workers with financial aid accumulated through high dues and an “inclusive” one of involving additional workers to maximize the general impact of a strike to attract public support. A commitment to working-class solidarity led revolutionary syndicalists to choose the “inclusive” strategy, and their unions attracted members because in France during the early Third Republic this was an effective strategy.

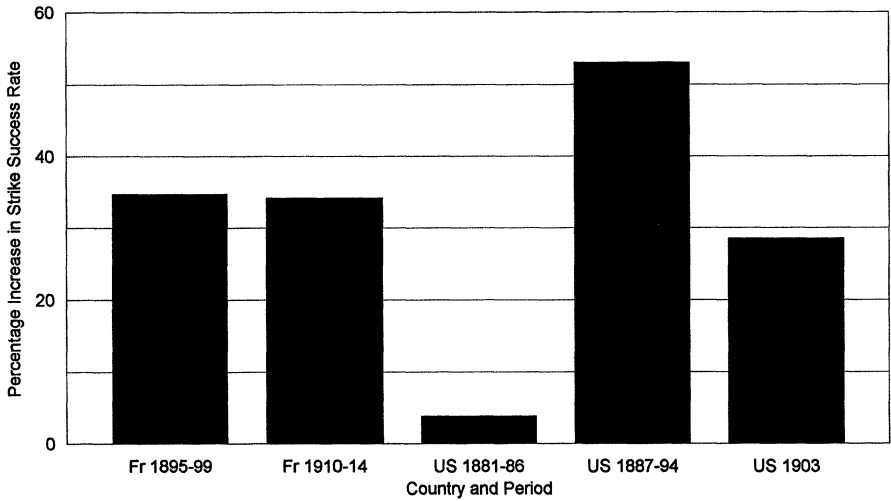
The French won nearly as many strikes as did workers in Germany, the United States, or the United Kingdom, winning concessions in over 53 percent of their labor disputes (including strikes and lockouts) compared with success rates of around 55 percent in American strikes.<sup>49</sup> Unions contributed to the success French workers enjoyed in strikes. Workers won at least some of their demands in 58 percent of disputes where there was a union involved in 1895–99, compared with 50 percent of other disputes, and 55 percent of disputes with union involvement in 1910–14, compared with 49 percent of other disputes. After

<sup>46</sup> Victor Griffuelhes, “Les Grèves et le syndicalisme français,” *Le Mouvement socialiste* 178 (15 Mar. 1906): 254. Strike “success” includes all strikes where the workers gained *any* of their demands. This is a crude measure. It may understate the effectiveness of some powerful unions who are able to win many concessions without striking and then only strike over relatively intractable issues. On the other hand, radical unions may appear ineffective because they strike frequently, using strikes as mobilizing devices even when the chances of winning immediate concessions are small.

<sup>47</sup> Pouget, “Les Résultats,” 400.

<sup>48</sup> Griffuelhes and Keufer, “Les Deux Conceptions du syndicalisme,” 11; Pouget, “Les Résultats,” 401. The quotation is from Griffuelhes, “Les Grèves,” 254. For a contemporary discussion along very similar lines, although without the logit regressions, comparing strikes by French and German, see Steiner, “Les Résultats en France et en Allemagne,” 2; and Merrheim, “Comment on opère pour faire repartir la puissance ‘d’action’ des syndicats en Allemagne,” *Voix du peuple*, 20–27 June 1909, 2–3.

<sup>49</sup> The American data include only strikes because data on lockouts were collected separately and are reported in an incompatible format. About 5 percent of American labor disputes are classified as lockouts and after the mid-1890s workers fared much more poorly in these disputes than in strikes. Including lockouts reduces the American success rate from 56 percent to 54 percent, nearly the same as the French success rate. Excluding lockouts probably inflates the favorable impact of American unions on strike success because unions were less effective in lockouts than in strikes.



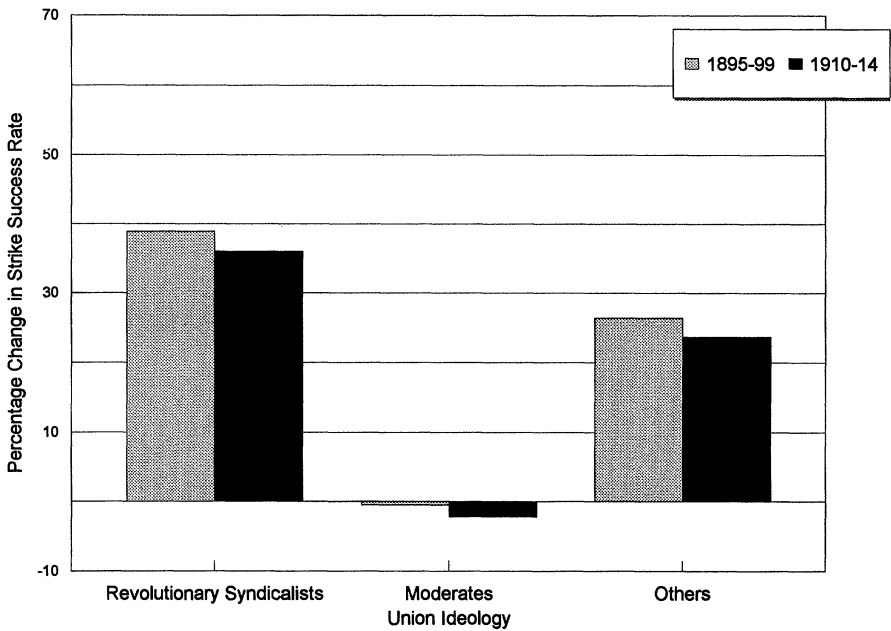
**Figure 6** Union impact on strike success rates: France and the United States. Source: The Shorter-Tilly data set of French strikes and samples of individual strike records in U.S. Commissioner of Labor, *Third Annual Report* (Washington, D.C., 1888), and *Tenth Annual Report* (Washington, D.C., 1895).

Note: This figure shows the percentage change in the probability that workers will gain at least some of their demands if they are represented by a formal labor union. The estimates are from logit regressions where the dependent variable is a dummy which equals 1 for strikes where the workers gain at least some of their demands and otherwise equals 0. In addition to the variable for union status, the regressions include the size of the struck establishment and dummy variables for the industry, the year, and the strike issue. The French regressions also include dummy variables for the presence of an employer association, for strikes in large urban areas, and for strikes in Paris. Also included in the French regressions are the weighted number of strikes in the department since 1890, the number of other strikers in the department in that year, and the percentage of the department vote cast for the Socialists in the last election. The American regressions also include the striker rate in the state.

accounting for other characteristics of union and nonunion strikes, the impact of unions on strike success in France after 1895 was much greater than that of American unions in the 1880s, less than that of American unions in 1887–94, and a bit more than that of American unions in the early 1900s (see Figure 6).

There is direct evidence that revolutionary syndicalists were responsible for the strong positive effect of union involvement on French strike success. The effect of union involvement on strike success has been estimated for unions with different ideologies.<sup>50</sup> In regressions controlling for other characteristics of the strike, French unions had almost no net effect on strike success in industries and regions where the unions were led by moderates, but had the greatest effect when

<sup>50</sup> The breakdown is the same as reported above for analyzing the effect of union ideology on unionization rates.



**Figure 7** Effect of unions on strike success rates by union ideology: France 1895–99 and 1910–14.

Source: The Shorter-Tilly data set of French strikes and samples of individual strike records in *Third Annual Report* and *Tenth Annual Report*.

Note: This figure shows the percentage change in the probability that workers will gain at least some of their demands if they are represented by a formal labor union according to the ideology of the major union in the industry and region. The estimates are from logit regressions similar to those in Figure 6 above.

they were led by revolutionary syndicalists (see Figure 7). In France, revolutionary syndicalism was a winning strategy.

Revolutionary syndicalist French unions enhanced their members' striking power in ways consistent with their values. After the collapse of the Knights of Labor in the 1880s, American business unionists learned to win strikes by concentrating on relatively small groups of skilled workers in a strong bargaining position. Organizing "better" rather than "more"—restricting the range of their strikes to skilled workers—enhanced American unions' strike success because they could win long strikes by limiting the cost of concessions to employers and by avoiding outside intervention. French syndicalists disdained this narrow approach because it divided the working class into a small privileged elite with scarce skills and an unfortunate mass. Instead, syndicalists promoted large strikes involving all workers regardless of skill.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Revolutionary syndicalist unions increased the number of strikers in a strike by about 25 percent more than did unions led by moderates.

An expansive strike strategy succeeded because French officials were prepared to intervene in strikes to support labor to limit the threat large strikes posed to the social order. Republican officials intervened in a fifth of French strikes before 1914. As in the United States, intervention was most common in large strikes that attracted considerable public notice and posed the greatest threat to public order. Unlike their American counterparts, however, French strikers benefitted from this notice because state officials used their leverage to settle strikes by forcing concessions from recalcitrant employers. State intervention is associated with a dramatic increase in French strike success rates. Strikers gain at least some concessions in over 73 percent of strikes with state intervention compared to only 48 percent of strikes without intervention.

Revolutionary syndicalists did better than other French trade unionists because their commitment to mobilizing large numbers of workers in collective action increased the probability of state intervention. The rate of state intervention was over twice as high (26 percent) in revolutionary syndicalist strikes as in strikes in industries and departments whose unions were led by moderates (11 percent). Revolutionary syndicalists won this state support by increasing the number of strikers by 25 percent and by increasing the proportion of workers in struck establishments joining the strike from 42 percent all the way up to 71 percent.

### **The Third Republic and Revolutionary Syndicalism**

The paradox of revolutionary syndicalism is that its success depended on state support, on an implicit alliance between them and a liberal state they despised. Revolutionary syndicalists believed that direct worker action was a substitute for political action, but when confronting powerful employers they depended on the state to gain concessions they could not win on their own. This led to a further irony: the syndicalists' reliance on mass strikes undermined the basis for their success because in the long run such strikes antagonized state officials and drove frightened employers to mobilize collectively in self-defense. By expanding the range of labor militancy, syndicalists convinced labor's liberal allies that their strategy of conciliation could not incorporate organized labor into the established republican capitalist order. But without state support, against an increasingly hostile state, revolutionary syndicalist unions could not flourish.

French officials did not intend to aid revolutionary syndicalism but neither did they use strike intervention to reward unions for ideo-

logical moderation. They intervened in strikes, subsidized municipal *Bourses du travail* and promoted unions and collective bargaining in hopes that involving workers in the existing social order would curb labor radicalism.<sup>52</sup> Few employers accepted this logic. But poor organization among French employers and their association with reactionary politicians and clerics weakened their influence in the early Third Republic.<sup>53</sup> Only for a short time in the mid-1890s did politicians friendly to business dominate the early Third Republic. As late as 1906, when Georges Clemenceau assumed office as president of the Council of Ministers, he led a Radical government supported by the Socialist Party and pledged to promote labor organization.<sup>54</sup> Against surging labor strife, Clemenceau promised that a true republican administration, one with no misgivings about protecting workers' liberties and right to associate, would contain labor militancy. By showing a proper respect for workers' republican liberty to associate freely, such a government, Clemenceau was convinced, would woo labor from revolutionary syndicalism, preserving capitalism and the right of nonstrikers to work without violence.<sup>55</sup> Experience soon convinced him otherwise.

Within a month of assuming office as president of the Council of Ministers, Clemenceau was ruthlessly crushing strikes. With his hopes of winning radical labor over to a moderate republic dashed, Clemenceau embarked on a repressive labor policy that he would follow throughout the rest of his administration.<sup>56</sup> His policy won him plaudits from the right, the sobriquets of "France's chief cop" and "strike-breaker," and the hatred of French labor militants.

<sup>52</sup> See the discussion in Gerald Friedman, "Capitalism, Republicanism, Socialism, and the State: France, 1871–1914," *Social Science History* 14 (summer 1990): 151–74. See also Shorter and Tilly, *Strikes in France*, 39–45. For contrasting views, see Sanford Elwitt, *The Third Republic Defended: Bourgeois Reform in France, 1880–1914* (Baton Rouge, La., 1986); and Peter Schottler, *Naissance des bourses du travail: Un Appareil idéologique d'état à la fin du XIXe siècle* (Paris, 1985). Among contemporary discussions are Office du travail, *De la conciliation et de l'arbitrage dans les conflits collectifs entre patrons et ouvriers en France et à l'étranger* (Paris, 1893); René Waldeck-Rousseau, *Conférence sur les syndicats professionnels: Faite à Roubaix, 30 Avril 1898* (Paris, 1898); and Paul Bureau, *Le Contrat de travail* (Paris, 1902).

<sup>53</sup> For conservative views, see Yves Guyot, *The Tyranny of Socialism* (London, 1894); the discussion of labor law in Messrs. Schelle, Limousin, Sabatier, Courcelle-Senceuil, and Feolde, "Discussion: Quels ont été les résultats des lois ouvrières pour la paix sociale?" *Journal des économistes* (Nov. 1907); and the citations in Gerald Friedman, "The Decline of Paternalism and the Making of the Employer Class: France, 1870–1914," in *Masters to Managers: Historical and Comparative Perspectives on American Employers*, ed. Sanford M. Jacoby (New York, 1991), 162–63.

<sup>54</sup> Clemenceau's program is given in Chamber of Deputies, *Journal officiel* (5 Nov. 1906): 2387.

<sup>55</sup> See, for example, AN 7 12773, memo from minister of the interior to departmental prefects on the use of troops in strikes.

<sup>56</sup> Clemenceau's policy is discussed in Arthur Fryar Calhoun, "The Politics of Internal Order: French Government and Revolutionary Labor, 1898–1914" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1973); Jacques Julliard, *Clemenceau: Briseur des grèves* (Paris, 1965); and David Sumler, "Polarization in French Politics, 1909–14" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1968).



After opposing Clemenceau, the conservative journal *Le Temps* praised his firmness against striking miners in March 1906: "M. Clemenceau the minister responsible for order and public peace," it wrote gleefully, "is already replacing the impetuous polemicist."<sup>57</sup> Conservatives were reassured when Clemenceau met the CGT's 1906 Mayday general strike by arresting the confederation's leaders and flooding Paris with thirty-five thousand troops. *Le Temps* declared contentedly that public fears about Mayday were exaggerated because, after a shaky start, Clemenceau had learned that "peace is in the hands of the government and that the state has the means at its disposal to maintain order without making concessions to revolutionary militants." Clemenceau, the paper declared, had shown that "when the government decides to fulfill its function, to oppose the rioters with sufficient force, sufficiently armed, the makers of trouble will retreat."<sup>58</sup>

Against Clemenceau's belated antagonism syndicalist mass strikes faced diminishing returns. Increasing strike size continued to provoke favorable state intervention in a diminishing number of departments, mostly those with little experience of strikes because there was a strong negative relationship between the cumulative number of strikers in the department and the probability that state officials would intervene in strikes. Every doubling in the cumulative number of past strikers in a department is associated with a reduction of 19 percent in the probability of intervention in a strike.<sup>59</sup> Revolutionary syndicalism antagonized the state officials it needed to sustain its movement.

Syndicalism also sparked a hostile employer mobilization in defense of property. Labor historians traditionally discount employers' organization by assuming constant and implacable employer hostility to unions.<sup>60</sup> In France, at least, this is a mistake. The organization of the French employer class was as problematic as the mobilization of the working class. The large number of employers and their dispersal among small, highly competitive establishments limited their ability to

<sup>57</sup> *Le Temps*, 18 Mar. 1906, 1.

<sup>58</sup> *Le Temps*, 3 May 1906, 1.

<sup>59</sup> This is from logit regressions controlling for industry, year, city size, radical voting, and the presence of unions and employer associations in the strike. The regression is available upon request.

<sup>60</sup> Merrheim is an exception. After 1906, he embarked on a serious study of employer organization in the iron and steel industry. While he focuses on labor, Peter Stearns is notable among the few labor historians to recognize the importance of employers and state officials. In addition to discussing their response to revolutionary syndicalism in *Revolutionary Syndicalism*, he has prepared seminal studies of employers and employer organization, including "Against the Strike Threat: Employer Policy toward Labor Agitation in France, 1900–1914," *Journal of Modern History* 40 (1958): 474–500; and *Paths to Authority* (Urbana, Ill., 1978). An important recent work dealing with the mobilization of employers in the United States is Voss, *Making American Exceptionalism*.

present a united face against labor. Divided by market circumstance, cultural values, and political position, French employers shared nothing but a common hostility to organized labor and to state policies favoring labor.

It was growing strike activity and the revolutionary syndicalist threat that led many French employers to band together in defense of property and their interests as employers. Membership in French employer associations grew sharply, increasing after 1895 even faster than union membership. Employer organizations were involved in barely 25 percent of strikes in 1895–99, but after a decade of revolutionary syndicalist agitation, they were involved in nearly half of strikes in 1910–14. To be sure, most employer associations were poorly prepared to support long strikes or lockouts. But they were more effective as political organizations able to restrain state interference in labor relations. By itself, the presence of an employer association has little direct effect on the probability that strikers will gain any of their demands. But the indirect effect is much greater because employer associations reduce dramatically the probability that state officials will intervene in strikes.<sup>61</sup>

Late-nineteenth-century French employer associations were a response to labor militancy. They were most common in strikes in localities where there had been a large volume of past strike activity. Every doubling in past strike activity in a department is associated with an increase of 15 percent in the probability that struck employers would belong to an association.<sup>62</sup> The mass strike that revolutionary syndicalists used to teach workers the benefits of solidarity taught the same lesson to labor's opponents.

### The Dialectics of Revolutionary Syndicalism

Revolutionary syndicalism never produced a revolution. Instead, it died a slow death in a pre-World War I *crise syndicaliste*.<sup>63</sup> The heady years of rapid membership growth and growing strike activity ended

<sup>61</sup> Employer associations also reduce sharply the positive effect of state intervention on strike issues. Their impact on state policy, as well as their impact on elections, reflected their electoral impact and their ability to lobby state officials in Paris; see the discussion in Friedman, "The Decline of Paternalism."

<sup>62</sup> This is from logit regressions including the year, industry, city and establishment size, strike issues, and the presence of a labor union. The regression is available upon request.

<sup>63</sup> The *crise* was much discussed in radical circles. See, for example, Georges Yvetot, "La Crise Syndicaliste: III," *Le Mouvement socialiste* 217 (Jan 1910): 57–62; Léon Marty-Rollan "La Crise Syndicaliste: IV," *Le Mouvement socialiste* 217 (Jan 1910): 63–65; Auguste Keufer, "La Crise syndicaliste," *Le Mouvement socialiste* 220 (April 1910): 262–74; Alphonse Merrheim, "Le Parlementarisation du syndicalisme," *Le Mouvement socialiste* 220 (April 1910): 241–245; Raoul Lenoir, "La Crise syndicaliste," *Le Mouvement socialiste* 222 (Aug.–Sept. 1910): 116–122; and Léon Jouhaux et al., "Déclaration à propos de l'action confédérale," *Bataille syndicaliste* (Aug. 27, 1913): 1.

with Clemenceau's administration, along with hopes of an impending revolutionary general strike. After rising at a steady rate of almost 9 percent a year from 1884 to 1907, membership dropped below that trend after 1907, until in 1913 there were barely half as many union members as would have been expected from past growth trends. As practical idealists, revolutionary syndicalists rethought their strategies. Some, like Griffuelhes and Merrheim, sought to strengthen union organizations by raising dues to provide larger strike funds.<sup>64</sup> Griffuelhes's successor at the CGT, Léon Jouhaux, also moved towards an alliance with reformist socialists. Others, angered by what they saw as a betrayal by both syndicalist leaders and radical republicans like Clemenceau, aligned themselves with antidemocratic movements of the right.<sup>65</sup> As a distinct movement, revolutionary syndicalism splintered, dividing the French labor movement into distinct blocs even before 1914. The revolutionary syndicalist vision of united workers overturning capitalism through their own efforts was lost with the collapse of the prewar years.

Revolutionary syndicalism failed because in their concern to mobilize workers its practitioners neglected the impact they had on state officials and employers. Concerned only with mobilizing labor, syndicalists forgot that labor is the weaker party in the class conflict and needs to nurture cross-class alliances against hostile and powerful employers. In this mistaken focus on workers the syndicalists have been followed by labor historians who approach revolutionary syndicalism's failure only from the workers' perspective, concluding from the *crise syndicaliste* that French workers had abandoned syndicalist aspirations to revolutionary action. But the *crise* was not caused by a withdrawal of working-class support; rather, it reflected the growing political isolation of France's extreme left, isolation due to the hostile reaction to syndicalism by state officials and by newly mobilized employers. French workers supported revolutionary syndicalist unions and strikes as much after 1906 as before. What changed was that the French state and French employers had exhausted their tolerance for revolutionary unionism.

<sup>64</sup> See, for example, Nicholas Papayanis, *Alphonse Merrheim: The Emergence of Reformism in Revolution* (Dordrecht, The Netherlands, 1985).

<sup>65</sup> This reaction is stressed, for example, in Zeev Sternhell, *La Droite révolutionnaire: Les Origines françaises du fascisme* (Paris, 1978).