15 Conclusion

Strikebreaking and the fault lines of mass society, 1880–1930

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History is often best viewed from the margins. That would certainly seem to be true of the forms of strikebreaking that occurred in the half-century from the 1880s to the 1930s. As the fascinating studies contained in this collection demonstrate, strikebreaking – and the myriad activities associated with it – were a pervasive feature of the many societies which experienced disruptive economic transformations, along with consequent social upheavals and crises of state authority, across the globe in this period. And yet as the novelty of this collection equally indicates, it is not a phenomenon which until recently has attracted sustained attention from historians.¹

Part of the explanation of this neglect lies in the simple difficulty of recovering its history from the archival record. As a number of the contributors to this volume remark, the activities of strikebreakers, of company trade unions, of volunteer vigilante groups and of groups committed to the defence of the freedom of honest workers (and, more especially, of employers) are an elusive historical subject. This was partly by design. Those operating on the edges of legality and illegality preferred to keep a low profile, often changing their location and identity with rather bewildering frequency. But it also reflects the discontinuous history of instances of strikebreaking. They were, in every sense, circumstantial phenomena, the transient character of which reflected the episodic nature of the strike or other incident that had caused them to come into existence. The history of labour relations is a notoriously challenging subject of research, which demands a close familiarity with the complexities of workplace structures, that is rendered all the more challenging by frequent gaps in the archival documentation.² But that difficulty is all the greater when one is dealing with the actions of those whose effectiveness often relied on their evasion of responsibility. Those who instigated confrontations with strikers or pickets, intimidated smallholders with threats of violence or recruited replacement labour to break an industrial dispute, left little by way of paper records and have to be glimpsed through the allegations of their opponents, or the often one-sided accounts provided by newspapers or state authorities.

This is all the more so when the actions of the strikebreakers and their allies occurred in distant, often marginal, locations. Disputes in mines and on rural estates in remote corners of Spain or Portugal, on the ranching lands of Wyoming

and still more on the ships of the *Messageries* sailing from Marseille to the Far East occurred out of sight of a mass public, or the visibility provided by press coverage. Moreover, even when the actions of strikebreakers occurred in more accessible locations, as in the case of the strikes in the ports of colonial-era Bengal, or the tobacco factories of Cairo or Athens, they remained opaque events, in which much about their genesis and true dynamics was hidden from view. The actions of strikebreakers and their allies consequently flit across the historical record, lacking the legibility and continuity of their socialist or communist opponents, or of the police or state authorities.

To these archival difficulties are added the relative anonymity of the actors themselves. There were few outstanding figures in the ranks of the strikebreakers, the volunteer civilian guards and the short-lived employers' associations, which proliferated in the early years of the twentieth century. The media celebrity transiently enjoyed by strikebreaking gang leaders in late Wilhelmine Germany was in this respect the exception to the rule; but even they were less significant in themselves than for the way in which the press attention given to their activities served as a means of giving voice to wider fears about criminality and the fragility of the legal order. Much more commonplace was the way that many of these anti-socialist activists and self-declared defenders of freedom proved to be opportunists, publicists and in a good number of cases simple rogues and criminals, whose grand rhetorical posturing belied the emphatically self-interested nature of their actions. Of course, in some contexts, the struggle against organised trade unionism and revolutionary socialism drew in more significant political forces, such as the nascent right-wing nationalist groups in Russia in the first decade of the twentieth century, or the communal politicians of interwar Bengal. But, as the studies in this collection demonstrate, these were essentially marriages of convenience that disintegrated as political circumstances changed. The history of strikebreaking in its manifold local forms was much more generally populated by a repertoire of figures of secondary importance, whose efforts at economic or political entrepreneurship, and unoriginal manipulation of rather empty slogans, served to display the opportunism of men – and they were overwhelmingly men – seeking to gain advantage from the rapidly changing winds of social and economic circumstance.³

And what was true of the leaders was of course even more true of the rank and file. The replacement workforces recruited during industrial disputes to work in Egyptian cigarette factories, to unload ships in the port of Calcutta, or to staff the boiler rooms and kitchens of the ships of the *Messageries*, remain for the most part obstinately anonymous in the archival records. At most, we can occasionally detect their confessional or ethnic character: foreign workers brought in to replace those on strike, but whose value and reliability for their employers rarely proved to be especially durable. These “scabs” – to use the offensive term of abuse invariably thrown at them in a multitude of linguistic variants – were the mute foot soldiers of these social disputes, imprisoned within the negative social resonances of community betrayal and the most basic motives of economic opportunism imputed to them by those on the other side of the picket lines.⁴ Those who broke strikes were in this respect the necessary antithesis. For the activists in labour

movements, the scab worker was always the opposite against which they defined their ethics of commitment, and more especially of kinship with their fellow strikers and union militants.⁵

The most profound cause of the marginalisation of strikebreaking in the history of the era is however perhaps not so much archival as historiographical. For all of the mediocrity of its actors and the litany of failed ventures and broken lives which it left behind it, strikebreaking had a global ubiquity and a scale which demands attention. And yet it sits uneasily within the established paradigms of the history of the era as one of globalisation, projects of political revolution, and mass warfare on an unprecedented scale. Amidst the tall trees of the emergence of a global economy, world war and the powerful surges in revolutionary socialism, it is tempting to regard strikebreaking as of no more than anecdotal significance, part of the undergrowth generated by other more powerful forces. This is perhaps especially so, given the dominant political template that is often applied to the era from the emergence of mass politics in the 1880s, through the revolutionary transitions of the early decades of the twentieth century to the bitter conflicts generated by the Great Depression of the 1930s. This template implicitly accords priority to the forces of the left in the social and political conflicts of the final years of the nineteenth century, and the first two decades of the twentieth century.⁶ Consequently, historians of the early twentieth century have, on the whole, been more preoccupied by the actions and motivations of those who went on strike, demonstrated or even marched on the citadels of state power, than those who remained loyal to the established structures of economic and political authority.⁷ But the same is also true of the subsequent development during the 1920s and 1930s of movements of the extreme right. The historiography of the right has long neglected the continuity of cultures of conservatism to focus on the specifically political and ideological dynamics of fascism, which within a few years propelled this new form of politics to the centre of state power.⁸

And yet as much recent work on left revolution and extreme-right counter-revolution in this era has served to elucidate, these instances of political success and failure were above all products of contexts that were much more than political in nature. Movements of left and right gained their definition and momentum less through their own actions than through the way that they were moulded by the complex interaction of economic, social and institutional forces that were specific to the contexts of place and time.⁹ This localising of historical perspectives challenges the generalisations inherent to phraseology such as “the Russian Revolution of 1917”, or “the rise of Italian Fascism” or of German Nazism and brings to the fore instead the irreducible diversity of the local contexts out of which they arose. Rather than a zero-sum game of the victory of one political force at the expense of the other, political outcomes were defined by the economic ruptures, social conflicts and challenges to state authority, out of which they arose.¹⁰

It is within this context-specific perception of European and global history of the era from the 1880s to the 1930s that strikebreaking and related activities acquire their importance. All of the essays in this volume are deeply embedded in the

particularities of place and time; and yet all demonstrate, too, the prevalence of a broader pattern of social, economic and institutional conflict. This is revealed above all by their remarkable synchronicity. The specific nature of the events was highly varied and not in any meaningful sense interconnected. And yet it is striking that the same chronologies return again and again within the individual chapters: the new forces of mass socialist organisation and trade unionism took shape in the 1880s, prompting a new era of labour militancy over the subsequent years, notably in key industries and public services, which reached an initial peak in the general strikes that occurred in many locations during the first decade of the twentieth century.¹¹ The fears (and hopes) that these generated of a wider social and political explosion were initially deferred by the outbreak of war in 1914. But they returned all the more intensely during the crescendo of state collapse, economic and ethnic conflicts and political polarisation that occurred in the era of military demobilisation (and political remobilisations) that accompanied the end of the formal military conflict in 1917–18 and continued to reverberate powerfully into the post-war years.¹²

The various forms of strikebreaking, volunteer vigilantism and semi-formal and informal acts of violence that multiplied across this period were direct, often jagged, manifestations of the conflicts that characterised this most chaotic era of global modernisation. They owed little to central direction, as the failure of the various attempts at federating vigilante groups within a national framework demonstrated, at least until Mussolini's partial unification of the *squadristi* groups within his Fascist movement in Italy in 1920–21.¹³ But they were all closely tied to the highly disruptive – and on occasions traumatic – impact of capitalist economic transformations. The emergence of long-distance global marketplaces, sensitive to all of the vagaries inherent to the circumstances of production as well as to shifts in demand, led to booms and crashes in the prices of basic commodities (including land) as well as of manufactured or semi-manufactured goods. Their impact was reinforced by the rapid pace of technological changes, which abruptly rendered craft-based processes of production obsolete, while creating new commercial opportunities for machine-based mass production. But they were exacerbated too by the volatility of stock-market prices and more especially of a banking sector, to which many individuals and companies were heavily indebted. The consequence was an economic context in which nothing could be regarded as certain, and where the exploitation of advantage, or at least the averting of disaster, depended on moving swiftly, and often ruthlessly.

These processes of change were directly visible in the patterns of strikebreaking which occurred. It was in sectors such as railways, ports or shipping, where time was everything, and the ability of workers to exploit their power to block trade was often most tangible, that the incentive was greatest for employers to resort to direct action. Strikers had to be removed, by force if necessary, and replaced by those who as a consequence of their dependence would be more reliably quiescent.¹⁴ But in other sectors too, notably mining and iron and steel production, as well as the commercial exploitation of agriculture, many of the same forms of economic conflict developed. Everywhere, it seemed, workers were alert to

the possibilities to exploit whatever transient leverage they possessed to demand higher rates of pay, less oppressive working conditions or the dismissal of unpopular foremen or managers. In response employers resorted to a wide repertoire of techniques to reinforce labour discipline, including the intimidation of union organisers or political militants, the recruitment of factory guards and the procuring of the services of groups of vigilantes or local members of the bourgeoisie. Direct physical conflict was never far away and was reinforced by the relatively easy availability in many locations of the guns and pistols being produced in unprecedented volumes by the small-arms industry. The consequence was a new militancy among employers. Convinced themselves they were confronted by the danger of a socialist revolution, they acted with more individual force within and without the law, but also with more collective resolve, creating sectoral and national federations to protect their interests and to make their voices heard in the arenas of state decision making.

The state was the third element in this volatile relationship of forces. Far from acting as the neutral arbiter between the interests of workers and employers, the state at its various hierarchical levels generally opted to side with the employers in the interest of the maintenance of economic production, or the wider and less tangible goal of the defence of the social order. Thus, the state authorities in tsarist Russia or colonial Bengal, but also in Wilhelmine Germany, deployed their judicial and administrative powers to prosecute union activists or deport them to distant locations, as well as using the uniformed ranks of the police, the national guard or *gendarmérie*, or *in extremis* the army, to break picket lines, protect replacement workers or forcibly clear agricultural day labourers off the land. The state was, however, rarely a reliable guarantor of social order and economic peace. The growth of modern police forces was too recent, their skills and resources too limited, and the willingness of populations to accept their authority too uncertain, for the state to be able to exercise its writ without challenge. Moreover, state officials were too jealous of their self-image as the impartial guardians of the national or public interest to rush too readily or visibly to act as the lackeys of the employers in an industrial dispute.¹⁵ A certain prudence, reinforced by the lobbying of elected Social Democratic officials, led policemen and army officers to hold back, notably in various areas of Austria-Hungary, from the unrestrained deployment of the forces of order. Consequently employers and landowners were obliged to appeal for the assistance of a wide range of less formal groups. This was the era of civil leagues, bourgeois associations, and after the First World War, of military reservists, *Freikorps* and *squadristi*, transferring their mentalities and practices of the defence of order from the military sphere to the town squares, factory gates and agricultural estates, of the post-war world.

Strikebreaking was therefore never a specific form of action, but a shorthand expression for the much larger reality of an era when economic power was fiercely challenged, contested and defended. The phenomenon was neither universal nor continuous. On the contrary, it tended to come to the fore at moments of economic crisis and along the fault lines of economic change, at the nodes constituted by transport hubs or in areas of recent and intense industrialisation. These were often

distant from more long-established locations of industry and of state authority – the wild west and the wild east of the global economy. But the underlying reality was everywhere the same, as was demonstrated by the multiplication of forms of vigilantism and paramilitary mobilisation which occurred in Catalonia, in the provinces of northern Italy and across the post-imperial territories of central-eastern Europe in the years following 1918.

It is this pervasiveness which also explains to a large degree why it came to an end. The forms of action analysed in this volume never went away. They continued through the prolonged economic depression of the 1930s and returned again in the 1970s and 1980s, most notably during the bitter Miners' Strike of 1984–85 in Britain. Moreover the authority of the state to regulate social and economic order was directly challenged through the actions of Resistance groups and trade unions in liberated Europe during the mid-1940s, and amidst the social upheavals of the later 1960s.¹⁶ But there was something distinctly different about these later practices. They operated within a structure of industrial relations which, though it certainly did not exclude the use of force and the infiltration and subversion of trade unions by employers and the state, was much more institutionalised, and on the whole predictable. Unions and employers alike had been drawn into a structure of corporatist negotiation, with each other and with the state, which had blunted the frontal confrontations that had taken place during the early twentieth century.¹⁷ In large part, this evolution was the consequence of changes in the structure of capitalism, which at least in the economies of the Global North had replaced individual structures of ownership with joint-stock companies, in which financial institutions often had the predominant influence. The obstinate individualism and preoccupation with short-term profit maximisation, which had long hindered attempts at coordination among employers gave way to the more cautious and corporate mentality of a professionalised class of managers. Only when this attitude changed once again in response to the economic crisis of the 1970s, and the dissemination of neo-liberal ideologies of the market, did employers revert to much more direct attacks on the authority of trade unions, including a return to the use of alternative labour forces, and the partisan deployment of the police in industrial disputes.¹⁸

The role of the state too had changed. The improvised and fragile forces of law and order evident in the early decades of the twentieth century were replaced by much more professionalised and better resourced police forces, at least in Europe, that could confront most challenges to their authority without recourse to large-scale violence. Nor were they challenged so directly. The stateless societies that developed in some areas of Spain during the early period of the Civil War in 1936–37, and more generally across many areas of occupied and liberated Europe during the latter years of the Second World War,¹⁹ were the last occasion when state authority was swept away within Europe. Thereafter such insurrectionary strategies were displaced from Europe to territories such as Palestine and Algeria, where the dwindling power exercised by European powers was contested by those imbued with the legitimacy of national liberation.²⁰ Within Europe, but also across Western states more generally, challenges to state power were replaced by

a pragmatic tendency on the part of individuals, communities and interest groups to seek their advantage by working within a state-defined regime of legality.²¹ The mentality of the state, and of those who staffed it, had changed too. The nervous concern of state officials to assert their authority at all costs had been replaced by a policy – well exemplified in this volume by the case of Sweden – of encouraging unions and employers’ organisations to collaborate in a wider process of social and economic managerialism. This creation of what Zygmunt Bauman termed the “social engineering state”²² was the dominant reality in Western Europe in the decades following 1945, creating a technocratic ethos which privileged Keynesian economic management and the construction of an inclusive welfarism over the brutal assertions of state power described in this volume.²³

These differences rest on a distinctive Western perspective. In many other areas of the world, and perhaps most notably in South Asia and Latin America, the direct confrontations described in this volume remained the norm. However, the more regulated and legalistic structure of industrial relations that emerged in Europe and in a number of other Western economies from the middle decades of the twentieth century onwards serves to underline the distinctiveness of the era from the 1880s to the 1930s. During that half-century, the volatility of the global economy, but also the uncertain relationships of power within it, created a potential for violence and conflict that often spilled beyond the formal frontiers of industrial disputes. Recent historical research has served to emphasise the importance of this phenomenon of unstructured violence in the military and political spheres. The warfare conducted on the battlefields of the First World War, and its many ancillary conflicts, notably in imperial territories, formed merely one part of a much more generalised culture of informal military violence which endured on a smaller scale in many areas of the world until at least the end of the 1940s. Similarly, in politics, the rituals of electoral contests and parliamentary politics coexisted with a much wider sphere of informal politics, where practices of streetfighting, ethnic violence and social intimidation were commonplace.²⁴ The prevalence of strikebreaking and other violent actions within the global economy across the same period extends this perspective into the sphere of labour relations. Thus, by reorientating attention towards the confrontations, social violence, and simple chaos that characterised many industrial disputes in these formative decades of the twentieth century, this volume brings what had formerly seemed marginal or secondary emphatically to the centre of the picture.

Notes

- 1 See, however, the special issue of *European History Quarterly* 49, no. 4 (2019), which arises from the same research project as this volume.
- 2 See, for examples of such work, D. Kalb, *Expanding Class: Power and Everyday Politics in Industrial Communities, The Netherlands, 1850–1950* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1997); H. H. Chenut, *The Fabric of Gender. Working Class Culture in Third Republic France* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005); D. Reid, *Opening the Gates: the Lip Affair 1968–1981* (New York and London: Verso, 2018); J. Clarke, “Work, Consumption and Subjectivity in Postwar

- France: Moulinex and the Meanings of Domestic Appliances 1950s – 70s,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 47 (2012): 838–59.
- 3 See also the portrayal of the fluid borders of espionage, criminality and commercial opportunism, in M. B. Miller, *Shanghai on the Metro: Spies, Intrigue, and the French between the Wars* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994). For a vivid fictional description of a similar reality, see E. Ambler, *Cause for Alarm* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1938).
 - 4 Matteo Millan, “Introduction: Strikebreaking during Europe’s Belle Epoque,” *European History Quarterly* 49, no. 4 (2019): 558.
 - 5 See the intelligent reflections in S. Lazar, *The Social Life of Politics. Ethics, Kinship and Union Activism in Argentina* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017), esp. 12–17.
 - 6 See, for example, G. Eley, *Forging Democracy. The History of the Left in Europe, 1850–2000* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), esp. 13–229.
 - 7 E.g. Victoria E. Bonnell, *Roots of Rebellion: Workers’ Politics and Organizations in St Petersburg and Moscow, 1900–1914* (Berkeley, CA and London: University of California Press, 1983); T. Kaplan, *Red City, Blue Period. Social Movements in Picasso’s Barcelona* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992); Leopold Haimson and Charles Tilly, eds., *Strikes, Wars and Revolution in an International Perspective: Strikes Waves in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
 - 8 S. Payne, *Fascism: Comparison and Definition* (Madison, WI and London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1980); R. Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (London: Pinter, 1991). But see also M. Blinkhorn, ed., *Fascists and Conservatives: The Radical Right and the Establishment in Twentieth-Century Europe* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990).
 - 9 K. Passmore, *From Liberalism to Fascism: The Right in a French Province, 1928–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); R. O. Paxton, *French Peasant Fascism: Henry Dorgères’s Greenshirts and the Crises of French Agriculture, 1929–1939* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); J. Osmond, *Rural Protest in the Weimar Republic: The Free Peasantry in the Rhineland and Bavaria* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1993).
 - 10 This approach, much influenced by sociological concepts, is evident in G. Luebbert, *Liberalism, Fascism, or Social Democracy: Social Classes and the Political Origins of Regimes in Interwar Europe* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); M. Mann, *Fascists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). For a stimulating study of the primacy of the local in socialist politics, see M. Van Ginderachter, *The Everyday Nationalism of Workers. A Social History of Modern Belgium* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019).
 - 11 That this effectively negates any lingering notion of a pre-1914 era of social peace is a point well made in M. Millan, “The Shadows of Social Fear: Emotions, Mentalities and Practices of the Propertied Classes in Italy, Spain and France (1900–1914),” *Journal of Social History* 50, no. 2 (2016): 336–61.
 - 12 Robert Gerwarth and John Horne, eds., *War in Peace: Paramilitary Violence in Europe after the Great War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); R. Gerwarth, *The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End* (London: Allen Lane, 2016).
 - 13 See G. Albanese, *The March on Rome: Violence and the Rise of Italian Fascism* (London: Routledge, 2019).
 - 14 For the analogous case of the recruitment of Polish miners to work in French mines in the interwar years, see the analysis in G. S. Cross, *Immigrant Workers in Industrial France: The Making of a New Laboring Class* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1983). I am grateful to Owen Coughlan for this reference.
 - 15 See the comments of Millan, “Introduction: Strikebreaking during Europe’s Belle Epoque,” 562.

- 16 T. Behan, *The Long-Awaited Moment. The Working Class and the Italian Communist Party in Milan, 1943–1948* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997); R. Hemmerijckx, *Van Verzet tot Koude Oorlog* (Brussels: Vrije Universiteit Brussel Press, 2003); G-R Horn, *The Spirit of '68. Rebellion in Western Europe and North America, 1956–1976* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 100–18.
- 17 M. Conway, *Western Europe's Democratic Age 1945–1968* (Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2020), 138–42.
- 18 R. Franzosi, *The Puzzle of Strikes: Class and State Strategies in Postwar Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 301–42. I am indebted to Matt Myers for his assistance with this point.
- 19 M. Vincent, *Spain 1833–2002: People and State* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 137–43; C. Pavone, *A Civil War: A History of the Italian Resistance* (London and New York: Verso, 2013); M. Koreman, *The Expectation of Justice. France 1944–46* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1999); M. Conway, *The Sorrows of Belgium. Liberation and Political Reconstruction 1944–47* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 48–51.
- 20 W. R. Louis and R. W. Stookey, eds., *The End of the Palestine Mandate*, 2nd ed. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012); M. Evans, *Algeria: France's Undeclared War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). But see also J. House and N. Macmaster, *Paris 1961: Algerians, State Terror and Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).
- 21 Conway, *Western Europe's Democratic Age*, 221–23.
- 22 Z. Bauman, *Memories of Class: The Pre-History and After-Life of Class* (London and Abingdon: Routledge, 1982), 165–67.
- 23 P. Nord, *France's New Deal: From the Thirties to the Post-War Era* (Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010); H. Chapman, *France's Long Reconstruction. In Search of the Modern Republic* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2018).
- 24 R. Gerwarth and M. Conway, “Revolution and Counter-Revolution,” in *Political Violence in Twentieth-Century Europe*, ed. D. Bloxham and R. Gerwarth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 140–75; C. Millington, *Fighting for France. Violence in Interwar French Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); S. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).