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Moral Communities

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Moral Communities

The Culture of Class Relations in the Russian Printing Industry 1867-1907

Mark D. Steinberg

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To my parents, Dina and Norman

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Introduction

Printers are a compelling subject for the close study of social relationships and values during the years of deepening change and crisis in Russia from the 1860s to the aftermath of the 1905 revolution. Class relations among printers underwent a dramatic transformation as the industry evolved from a small handicraft producing mainly for the state and the church to a large and technologically developed capitalist industry. Occupational involvement in the spread of knowledge and ideas and contact with official efforts to control these made printers more than usually sensitive to the country's contentious civic life. Printers' efforts to preserve social unity in the face of increasingly hierarchical relationships of wealth and power, their participation in strikes and class organizations, and their demands for political change illustrate the evolution and increasing fragility of Russia's social and political order.

For the historian, printers are generous subjects for study. Relatively high levels of literacy and familiarity with print encouraged employers, supervisors, and workers to leave an exceptionally rich record of their lives in trade papers, letters, poems, and memoirs. I have used these materials to investigate closely the social life in the industry as it evolved during this lengthy and vital period, examining all of the groups involved—owners, managers, foremen, and workers—and especially the relations between and among them. Most important, I explore printers' experiences and relationships

amidst the perceptions, moral judgments, and ideas with which they were intertwined.¹

The complex and variable ways that people have given meaning, especially ethical meaning, to their economic and social lives is a central theme in this study. Historians of class relations in Western Europe and North America have shown the importance of moral reasoning and judgment in the lives of workers and employers, especially in times of social change. Entrepreneurs, particularly when the authority and legitimacy of capitalism was still insecure, defended their honor and status by asserting a new ethic of work and individual success, but also by adapting customary notions of paternalistic authority and filial loyalty.² Workers, especially artisans, confronted the new marketplace ethos of individual liberty, competition, and acquisitiveness and on occasion social subordination itself with a moral arsenal stocked variously with customary notions of economic fairness and social responsibility, ideals of a corporative economic community, older manners of work and sociability, and newer conceptions of individual dignity, civic inclusion, and justice.³

In Russia, too, workers and employers responded to a changing society with the aid of both familiar and newly found values and standards. Recent studies of Russian entrepreneurs and merchants have revealed much about their business practices, their efforts to build corporative unity and to assert their needs before the state, as well as their deep and

1. The existing literature on social relations within the printing industry is small. Although a number of Russian and Soviet scholars, and more recently some Western historians, have examined Russian book publishing and journalism, there has been little attention paid to printing as an industry or to the social relationships within it. The only detailed economic study is B. P. Orlov's 1953 monograph on prerevolutionary printing in Moscow, *Poligraficheskaia promysblennost' Moskvy*. Three historical accounts of social relations in printing exist, written by union activists, and focusing on the emergence of trade unionism: V. V. Sher's 1911 study of Moscow printers, *Istoriia professional'nogo dvizheniia rabochikh pechatnogo dela v Moskve*; the 1925 study of the history of Petersburg printers through 1907 written by a collective of union members who had been active in those years, *Istoriia leningradskogo soiuzra rabochikh poligraficheskogo proizvodstva*; and the 1925 collection of historical sketches of printers' unions, *Materialy po istorii professional'nogo dvizheniia rabochikh poligraficheskogo proizvodstva (pechatnogo dela) v Rossii*.

2. Bendix, *Work and Authority in Industry*, ch. 2; Newby, "Paternalism and

Capitalism."

3. See esp. E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*; Joyce, *Work, Society and Politics*; Jones, *Languages of Class*; Moore, *Injustice*; Sewell, *Work and Revolution in France*; Rancière, *The Nights of Labor*; Gutman, "Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America, 1815-1819"; Dawley, *Class and Community*; Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*; and Katznelson and Zolberg, *Working-Class Formation*.

lasting fragmentation and isolation.⁴ We also know from these studies that many merchants and manufacturers, especially the most successful, tried to distance themselves from the image of the capitalist pursuing self-interest by representing themselves as patrons of culture, philanthropists, and benefactors of the poor. But we still have only a fragmentary picture of employers' relations with their own workers, and especially of the values that influenced managerial practice. These are the central concerns in my own study of employers in the printing industry.

Historians of Russian labor have recognized the need to better understand workers' cultural, intellectual, and moral life as a guide to interpreting workers' behavior and demands. During the 1960s a number of Soviet historians sought to broaden the Marxist concept of consciousness (*soznatel'nost'*) to include the notion of workers' *oblik*, or mentality, and suggested including under this rubric social psychology, cultural ideals, spiritual life, and moral norms, in addition to political attitudes and class consciousness.⁵ But with the partial exception of studies by Mark Persits of workers' atheism and by Vitalii Shishkin of "proletarian revolutionary morality,"⁶ very little empirical work appeared.

Western historians have contributed much to the understanding of workers' attitudes by focusing on the formation of social identities. Urban experience, literacy, occupation, gender, skill, ethnicity, and age have in different combinations been seen as influencing workers' class identification and political radicalization.⁷ Historians have also gradually begun to look beyond the experiences that made workers more or less class conscious and revolutionary to the complex and varying meanings that notions such as class, democracy, justice, and socialism actually had for workers.⁸ That moral outrage, for instance, influenced workers' perceptions of injustice may be seen in the demand, often

4. Owen, *Capitalism and Politics*; Rieber, *Merchants and Entrepreneurs*; Boiko, "K voprosu o sotsial'noi psikhologii krupnoi rossiiskoi burzhuzazii"; Guroff and Carstensen, *Entrepreneurship*; Ruckman, *The Moscow Business Elite*. See also the memoir by the merchant Buryshkin, *Moskva kupecheskaia*.

5. Ivanov, *Rossiiskii proletariat*, particularly the introduction and the essay by Iurii Kir'ianov, "Ob oblike rabochego klassa Rossii."

6. Persits, *Ateizm russkogo rabobego*; Shishkin, *Tak skladyvalas' revoliutsionnaia moral'*.

7. See esp. Haimson, "The Problem of Social Stability in Urban Russia"; Johnson,

Peasant and Proletarian; Koenker, *Moscow Workers*; Engelsrein, *Moscow, 1905*; Bonnell, *Roots of Rebellion*; Smith, *Red Petrograd*; Glickman, *Russian Factory Women*; Reichman, *Railwaymen and Revolution*; Surh, *1905 in St. Petersburg*.

8. As examples of such work, much of which is still unpublished, I would mention the papers on prerevolutionary labor presented by S. A. Smith, Reginald Zelnik, and myself at a conference on "The Making of the Soviet Working Class" in East Lansing, Mich., in November 1990. See also McDaniel, *Autocracy, Capitalism, and Revolution*,

(footnote continued on the next page)

described in accounts of labor protest, for polite address and generally for respect for workers' dignity.⁹ Reginald Zelnik's probing essays on workers in the late 1800s, based mainly on the interpretation of workers' autobiographies, are especially valuable for their portrayals of individual workers grappling with personal and social experiences and with ideas about self, society, and God.¹⁰ In this book, the norms, judgments, and ideas that workers applied in making sense of their lives are key themes.

In all such inquiries into the mental world of social groups we face the problem of defining the relationship between structured experiences such as poverty, economic dependence, and subordination and people's understanding of these conditions. Much recent social theory has focused on the same question. The most persuasive arguments, to my mind, avoid both the determinism that views human behavior as merely reflecting social and material structures and the relativism that interprets social reality as entirely constituted by language, belief, and symbol. Neither the material nor the evaluative can simply be reduced to the other in the construction of human experience.¹¹

The most telling illustrations of the intertwining of structure and meaning, and the most pertinent to this study, are the different ways that social groups have understood and appropriated common cultural materials, such that shared vocabularies, symbols, and beliefs may disguise self-interest and domination as well as subtle forms of resistance and defiance.¹² Evidence of such reworking of ideas and expressions

(footnote continued from the previous page)

chs. 78; and essays on the revolution and early Soviet years by William Rosenberg in Kaiser, *The Workers' Revolution in Russia*, chs. 56.

9. Placing particular emphasis on the importance in workers' protests of offended feelings of "humiliation and insult" (*unizhenie i oskorblenie*) are McDaniel, *Autocracy, Capitalism, and Revolution*, pp. 161, 169-74; and Haimson, "The Problem of Social Identities in Early Twentieth Century Russia," pp. 28.

10. Zelnik, "Russian Bebel"; idem, "Passivity and Protest in Germany and Russia"; idem, *A Radical Worker in Tsarist Russia*, pp. xiv-xxx; idem, "To the Unaccustomed Eye."

11. See esp. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*; Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*; E. P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory*; Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory*; Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*; Wuthnow, Hunter, Bergesen, and Kurzweil, *Cultural Analysis*; Sider, *Culture and Class in*

Anthropology and History; Rabinow and Sullivan, "The Interpretive Turn"; Chartier, *Cultural History*; Hunt, *The New Cultural History*, pp. 122. Pierre Bourdieu has written, in intentionally circular language, of the "dialectic of the internalization of externality and the externalization of internality." Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, p. 72.

12. Bendix, *Work and Authority in Industry*; James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, esp. pp. 3844, 30450; idem, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*. See also Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*; Chartier, *Cultural History*, pp. 95110, esp. p. 102; Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory*, esp. pp. 6, 148, 188, 19395, 20708.

was also to be found among Russian printers. Even before the coming of strikes, lockouts, and class organizations, employers understood and made use of ideals of moral community of employers and workers united by bonds of sentiment and common interest to strengthen authority, discipline, and productivity, while workers interpreted and used these same values to contest their own poverty and powerlessness. This is not to say that class domination and struggle were simply translated into the language of moral culture. Alongside the self-interested reworking of norms and muted dissent we see conformity and real community, even after open class struggle had erupted. Employers could promote their own power and position and, at the same time, seek to realize ideals of commonweal and social responsibility. Workers could fight for greater social autonomy and collective power and pursue integration into a community that transcended class.¹³ Like most people, printing workers, supervisors, and employers often thought and desired contradictory things, creating a tension that would resist easy resolution even in the heat of revolution.¹⁴ In this sense, though the polarization of Russian society is a part of my story, so is the ambiguity of that conflict.

I treat here both words and behavior and the relationship between what people said and what they did (and what they said they did) as necessary evidence of attitudes and values. Printers left records of the words they used in their everyday relations with others, in describing their lives publicly, in demanding improvements, and in envisioning changes in their lives. This language often plainly expressed speakers' intentions, but it also contained more subtly meaningful symbols and metaphors and revealed the intellectual and cultural influences on printers' views of the world. Printers also initiated and participated in a variety of actions as individuals and groups: festivals and rituals, dancing and drinking, reading and writing, attending meetings, joining strikes, and committing violence. In interpreting these behaviors, too, I have looked for both direct intentions and the implied meanings, often more complex and ambiguous, that such actions expressed within their own cultural and social frames of reference. A worker's starched shirt

13. Victoria Bonnell has similarly described a "dualism" and "ambiguity" in the claims of Russian workers, who simultaneously sought social acceptance and challenged the authority of those who denied it to them. Bonnell, *Roots of Rebellion*, esp. pp. 452, 455.

14. For some theoretical discussion of the notion of ambiguity, see Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, pp. 109, 13, 140, 43; Rabinow and Sullivan, "The

Interpretive Turn," pp. 56, 9; Sider, *Culture and Class*, pp. 311; Rancière, "The Myth of the Artisan," p. 14.

on Sundays, an employer's gift of a Christmas party for his workers' children, a bout of drunkenness, and a fight over higher wages each expressed ideas, rarely simple, about self, society, and morality.

Printers' words and actions also reveal the social fractures among them. As in the surrounding society, printing employers, supervisors, and workers represented significantly distinct social groups, but important differences of experience and interest also separated immigrant from native employers, owners of large factories from the proprietors of small shops, book publishers from job printers, compositors from pressmen, and men from women. Equally important were the more subtle distinctions, the rare rather than the typical experiences and perceptions, that led minorities of employers, supervisors, and workers to stand forward and speak out. Both the influence and the individuality of these activists need to be considered, especially since they produced much of the written evidence we examine. As leaders, they affected how others thought and acted, and they frequently initiated and led collective actions. But they also remained apart, often in the company of other outspoken and active men and women who shared the belief that it was their right to represent and guide others. This ambiguous relationship to their fellow employers, supervisors, or workers may also have encouraged their ambiguous vision of collective purpose as advancing both morality and material interest, as seeking both greater class benefit and justice for all.