

THE CASE OF THE BODYLESS AMERICAN WORKER AND OF HOW HE ATE; A REFLECTION ON SELECTIVE BLINDNESS

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What do people (reporters/ historians, etc.) see when they describe what they have seen? The purpose of this paper will be to illustrate the hypothesis that *preconceived ideas shape the description of the facts reported as much as facts contribute to shape descriptions*. I intend to base my demonstration on two types of sources: the image of the starving worker in a reformist review of the late 19th century (*The Forum*), and the description of American workers' eating habits by a few French visitors to the US in the late 19th Century.

Everyone knows that the late 19th century was marked by numerous and violent labor uprisings. "The Labor Issue" or "the Social Unrest" constituted a permanent preoccupation for opinion makers, intellectuals and politicians. I have chosen to observe the treatment of this issue in *The Forum*, a magazine that was considered as "one of the best of its kind in the English language" by the *Review of Reviews*¹. Addressing itself to the elite, it was chiefly composed of contributions by the members of the American elite of the late 19th Century.² "To name the list of its contributors would be merely to call the roll of the leaders in all phases of the national life of that time" Burton Hendrick writes.³ *The Forum* exerted an influence that went far beyond the East Coast circles and at one point it appears that many local monthlies waited until *the Forum* came out each month before deciding what topic to deal with, considering that the magazine always sensed best what was of interest to the public. Every issue contained 10 to 12 articles,

¹ *The Review of Reviews*, April 1891, Vol. 3, p. 288.

² Arthur Hadley, F.A.P. Barnard Francis, Amasa Walker, Richard T. Ely, Two Presidents of the US, Governors, Senior Members of the Administration; about Forty Academics, among them the Founding Fathers of the American School of Economics, and William Graham Sumner, Lester Ward, Twenty Famous Churchmen, Including Bishops; Businessmen and Labor Leaders (few), etc., American School of Sociology

³ Burton J. Hendrick, *The Life and Letters of Walter Hine Page*, Heineman, London, 1928, p. 227.

about ten pages long and covering the major issues of the time. Over the 16 years of its existence (1886-1902), some 200 articles dealt with the various aspects of the Labor issue: social discontent, the strikes, the labor organizations, the workers' living and working conditions, the city, immigration, socialism, anarchy etc...

Yet, it could be said that all the articles were addressing more or less directly two major questions: How to account for the social unrest and how to cope with it and prevent it from ending up in revolution. Furthermore, the editors of the magazine had insisted that all the contributors, however famous or influential, should submit to strict rules of readability, and adopt a "positive approach", i.e. not yield to pessimistic considerations, but on the contrary try to suggest solutions to the problem under consideration. As a consequence, *The Forum* provides an excellent insight into the social ideas of the time. And, because of the quality of the contributors, the magazine offers precious information as to how the elite and the ruling classes perceived the labor question, and how the issue related to the fundamental questions concerning the state of American democracy .

The two editors of *The Forum* were clearly reformists in their outlook (W.H. Page was an active member of the New York Reform Club which had been founded by Grover Cleveland) and they were motivated by the sense of a mission: Loretta Sutton Metcalf, the first editor of the magazine, considered that the best way of serving democracy was to bring more enlightenment into the society by providing good information and careful discussions; and W.H. Page once said that

...the magazine in the US is the best instrument
...for affecting public opinion in our democracy. It
gives the only way in which serious men can reach
the whole reading public...The magazines have
told the American people more about themselves
in recent years than all periodical literature told
them in the previous century.⁴

⁴ Quoted by Burton J. Hendrick, *op.cit.*, p. 205.

The editors' ambitious purpose was rather successfully carried out on the whole. Yet, the best intentions may provide surprising effects.

I

1. The portrait of the workingman: a plea for the invisible man?

Because the labor issue was such a crucial problem in the 1880s and the 1890s⁵, *The Forum* published many descriptions and surveys of the workers' working and living conditions. But, although the articles provide ample information on the low wages, long working-hours, poor housing, etc - the workingman himself hardly ever appears in person; very little is said about what he looked like, or how he worked. The workingman is depicted with four major characteristics: 1/ he worked hard (when work was available); 2/ he bore "the factory mark" that had crushed his body since childhood; 3/ treated as "merchandise", he had been deprived of his very soul; and 4/ he was a member of "the masses", and definitely deprived of his identity.

The nearest thing to a portrait of the worker is to be found in flights of some eloquence on the theme of the toiling-man, broken by the hardships of his life, as for instance that of Bishop Huntington:

...Woe unto you poor men, hard-working-men, ill-clad men; men that are managed, bought, and sold; men at the mercy of capitalists and corporations; men dictated to, kept down, taken advantage of.⁶

In the same vein, Lester Ward portrays the worker with features that characterize the condition more than the man:

The underpaid labor, the prolonged and grovelling drudgery, the wasted strength, the misery and squalor, the diseases resulting and the premature

⁵ Bishop J.L. Spalding, "Social Questions are now Uppermost in Men's Minds as Political Questions Absorbed the Thought of the Eighteenth Century", *Forum*, July 1886. Vol. I, p. 406.

⁶ Bishop Huntington, "Social Problems and the Church", Sept. 1890. Vol. X, p. 128.

deaths that would be prevented by a just distribution of the products of labor...⁷

The dreary hopelessness of such lives is repeatedly stressed as being the lot of the workers from childhood - a sort of birth-mark or inherited status, in the same way as a child born to a slave woman had to be a slave:

...suppose the child has not been afflicted by many of the disorders - granulated eyelids, scrofula, rickets, heart disease - so prevalent among these children, what then awaits these boys and girls....A wilderness of ignorance, poverty, and crime; a moral desert, beautiless, joyless, utterly unsatisfying to all the best and noblest instincts of the hearts...⁸

It is only very incidentally that the reader will catch a glimpse of the way people actually lived. This occurred in passing, when the author happened to describe the life in the slum areas:

But when the summer heats are on, and men and women crowd together on the top of the house waiting for a breeze to come; when men sit all night on a seat in the park to escape the closeness of a room which has been burning hot all day (not for cooking, but to heat the irons for the laundry or the tailor's shop).⁹

Most portraits indeed, show the worker as a member of the "unprivileged masses". Sensing the deleterious power of words, Huntington carefully explains that:

⁷ Lester Ward, "False Notions of Government", June 1887. Vol. III.

⁸ Bishop Huntington, "Tenement-House Morality", July 1887. Vol.III, p. 519.

⁹ Bishop Huntington, *op.cit.*, p. 515.

The term 'unprivileged' is used for a class rather than other terms like 'lower', 'laboring' or 'proletarian' as being on the whole descriptive, fair, respectful and comprehensive.¹⁰

But, for all the good intentions, the worker is thus made to recede into the masses. And, as such, he stands as a metaphor of the socio-economic organization of the American society, not as a person.

The worker may, for example illustrate the cruelty of free competition let loose: free competition in its two aspects - that of the industrialist, (unscrupulous in competition, greedy, heedless of common rights) and that which is imposed on the worker. For unemployment besets him more often than not, and the very economic organization of society makes him helpless in his struggle for life:

He is dependent on manual labor for a living, he is unemployed and unknown and his pocket is empty. He has a wife and children. With that sole equipment, 'a pair of stout hands' which so many well-fed and well-clad students of the social problem consider an abundant outfit for happiness, he seeks employment. The first effect of the competitive system is that he finds about him men eager and anxious in the same pursuit...¹¹

And because he must provide for his family, the worker was silenced even though his employer kept back his wages, made him work on Sundays or forced him to vote for the party that served his own interests. "In every particular of demand he must yield silently". As a consequence, the worker's life was "in every way narrowed, depressed and cramped"... "the destruction of the poor is poverty". Such pictures as this would therefore stress that the worker was dwarfed, cramped, broken, and that he was exposed to the destructive dangers of alcohol, prostitution and loss of self-respect because

¹⁰ Bishop Huntington, *op.cit.*, p 126.

¹¹ Bishop Huntington, "Social Problems and the Church", Sept. 1890. Vol X, p. 139.

he was in a "straitened lot...where every taste for the beautiful is denied, thirst for knowledge is despised..."

While Lester Ward depicted the worker's lot to demonstrate that better equality would be achieved if everyone agreed to enhance the action of the state, Bishop J.L.Spalding saw the workers' condition as the expression of the evil that corrugated the industrial society abandoned to the spirit of profit. Capitalism, like "germs of malaria", was eating out the vital forces and the dignity of the workers.

The modern industrial system...is a sacrifice of human beings to capital, a consumption of men, which, by the wasting of human forces of individuals, by the weakening of whole generations, (...) and the destruction of the joyousness of work (...) has brought civilized society into imminent peril.

...a "low and lowest class" without land of their own, without homes, tools or property beyond the strength of their hands....

...the enforced starvation, the horrible slow death of every divine impulse within us (...) They will be demanding the abolition of that great and scandalous paradox whereby, though production has increased 3 or 4 times as much as the mouths it should fill, those mouths are empty.¹²

Voracious Capitalism then, was the Minotaur of modern times, to whom the workers were being fed. A similar metaphor is to be found in William Barry's warning that a revolution was imminent :

The worship of the almighty dollar (...) And like all other idolatries it is man-devouring (...) It creates the proletariat that it may eat up the lives and souls of men and women by the hundred thousand, by the million, by the generation (...) Mammon has the gaping mouth and the fiery hands of Moloch

¹² Bishop J.L.Spalding, "Is Our Social Life Threatened?", March 1888. Vol V, pp.168-169, 174.

(...).into that portentous maw the young, the innocent, the broken-hearted with fruitless toil, the lonely and helpless, all those who have only their labor to sell, are flung from year to year; and it is not nor can be filled.

Most appeals for more justice for the worker seem to have been obsessed by the problem of hunger and starvation, thereby giving way to repeated use of the images of the gaping or the empty mouth. This is best illustrated in William Barry's attempt to challenge the idea that labor was a commodity:

He [the Employer] has no right to wax fat by consuming their strength and their life (...) I am loath to argue that a man ought not to be a cannibal; I will venture to regard it as a moral axiom (...) if the wage that he pays is so small that they are starving, he must not heap up profits coined from their life-blood, no matter what the market rate of wages may be.¹³

The unequal distribution of wealth also contributed to shape the group-portrait of the worker:

We have before us an amazing spectacle. We see a great multitude plowing the fields, raising the harvests, digging mines,...and fashioning all manner of beautiful and useful things by means of the machinery they have made (...) and then, note the magic transformation! The banquet of civilization is spread and the company sit down. Are they the toilers of sea and land we beheld so busy? Do these eat the fruit of their hands? By no manners! They have withdrawn out of sight to their dog-kennels (...) and to their festering scraps.¹⁴

¹³ Washington Gladden in "Is Labor a Commodity", Aug. 1886. Vol I, pp. 474-475.

¹⁴ Bishop J.L. Spalding, "The Moloch of Monopoly", June 1889. Vol.VII, pp. 436-445

Another major controversy of the late 19th century present in *The Forum* revolved around the idea that labor was a commodity to be bought only when needed. This theme was best summed up by W.A. Croffutt, a Methodist preacher, in a debate with Louis. F. Post, entitled "What Rights Have Laborers?" (June 1886).

It may very much simplify the discussion here opened if at the outset we state two or three pretty well established conclusions of economic science, viz. 1/.Labor, like flour or cotton cloth, should always be bought in the cheapest market and sold in the dearest. 2/ The sole legitimate condition that regulates wages is the demand for service and the supply of workers (....) An employer is under no more financial obligation to his workmen after he has paid them current wages, than they are to him or to a passer-by on the street whom they never saw.¹⁵

Essays debating this concept are numerous in *The Forum*. In the purely economic relationship stated, the seller and the buyer of labor are shown as free and wise contractors; in so far as labor could be called a commodity, the laborer followed the same status as the labor he could sell, that is to say that *he too*, was made to appear as a commodity. All discussion as to whether the price of labor should be influenced by considerations of fairness or justice to the laborer was therefore irrelevant, incongruous as an animist practice in the eyes of a civilized man. The workman in such a perspective was therefore reduced to a pair of hands - a thing that was endowed with enough brains to sell its productive power, and which would see the price of its labor pocketed by its double, the man who went home to a wife and children.

It is no surprise to find that most opponents of such a de-humanization of the worker were preachers whose major preoccupation was to restore a soul to the merchandise-man. Washington Gladden denounced that

¹⁵ William A. Croffutt, "What Rights Have Laborers?", June 1886. Vol. I, p. 297.

[there is a] ..strong tendency in the purchasers of labor to regard labor simply as a commodity, [an attitude by which the employer alone would stand as] the actual man. That labor may be considered and treated as a commodity is beyond question (...) Should the economist and the employer put it into the same category with corn, and coal, and pig-iron, or does it belong to a different category?

Gladden then quotes John Ruskin's comments on the validity of the economic theory that labor is only a commodity:

It would be so if the servant were an engine (...) But he being, on the contrary, an engine whose motive power is a Soul, the force of this very peculiar agent, as an unknown quantity, enters into all the political economist's equations¹⁶

Francis A. Walker, then a famous economist and President of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology concurred with Gladden in underlining the danger of a de-humanized perception of the worker by an employer "who looked upon the mass of workmen who flocked to his gates much as he did upon the materials and supplies brought into his mill.". Such was the revolution which had affected "the relations which had existed between master and man" and had opened the industrial chapter of "the long, long history of 'man's inhumanity to man.'"¹⁷

Those who contended that labor was nothing but a commodity were not very far from those who had a generation earlier subscribed to the idea that slaves were chattel. Nevertheless, the slaveholder as well as the industrial employer expected their servants to show a number of qualities which could only pertain to human beings. This was the contradiction with which all lived easily, but which the reformists underlined heavily in terms of an economic nonsense. How could the employer appeal to the worker's sense of duty and workmanship if the worker was but a commodity? So long as "the human hopes and needs which agitate the employee" are coldly

¹⁶ Washington Gladden, "Is Labor a Commodity", Aug. 1886. Vol. I, p. 473.

¹⁷ Francis A. Walker, "The Socialists", May 1887. Vol. III, pp. 234 -235.

studied from the point of view of "the credits and debits of the balance sheet [and that the worker].is simply a tool worth so many dollars a week so long as he is needed (....) How can any feeling of loyalty develop under such condition", Louis F. Elrich observed.¹⁸

Washington Gladden presented the issue still more forcefully by expatiating on the employer's expectations:

Does he desire to employ the muscular power of these persons for a certain number of hours a day, as if they were beasts of burden? Probably they expect a great deal more than this. He wants intelligence, skill, and honesty; he wants their good-will toward himself and toward the enterprise; he wants them to be cheerful and hopeful in their work, since work that is not done in this temper is not apt to be well done.¹⁹

Economic rationality was therefore found to be at odds with its own finality, the profit motive. To take labor and the laborer as a mere commodity would ultimately destroy the productive impulse, since the quality of production depended on the quality of the work performed. This was the demonstration which the preachers wanted to prevail, with the implicit idea that the employers would listen better if they were shown where their moneyed interest lay.

Prompted by their religious concerns, the preachers were worried that the hardships of the workers' lot would lead them down the slippery road to Hell. There were those who chose to raise a pathetic appeal in favour of the workers; and those who thought that the best way to avert the danger was to address the employers themselves and to use the only language they could understand - that is the language of the balance sheet. To try and restore a soul to the working-class was a direct justification for their political involvement and constituted one step toward the goal which the Social Gospellers often set themselves - to bring the Kingdom of God into the world, then and there. But this may have also influenced their vision of the worker as a Christ-like martyr.

¹⁸ Louis R. Elrich, "Stock-Sharing as a Preventive of Labor Troubles", Dec. 1894. Vol. XVIII, p. 436.

¹⁹ Washington Gladden, *op.cit.*, p 472.

Some ten years after the first group of articles pleading in favour of the workers, labor leader Frank K. Foster contributed an article entitled "The Condition of the American Working-Class: How Can It Be Benefited?" (Feb. 1898). Foster's opening remarks express a slight irritation²⁰ at the maudlin interest poured on the workers, hinting that a great part of such emotion must be of the same kind as the fascination experienced by those who listen to the sad tales of drowning sailors, or of miners being buried alive in a mine. Yet, for all this suspicion of voyeurism, Foster does underline the same features: the inherited sickness in the child, the 'factory mark' that shortens the workers' life expectation, the fundamental injustice.

Where War slays its thousands, the industrial battle-fields count their victims by the tens of thousands. The pallid children of the factory leave there a mighty host, perishing from malnutrition and lack of vital power (...) The law of heredity perpetuates the frail physique from generation to generation; and the 'factory mark' (...) is in evidence for all who choose to look.²¹

1. With Bread Enough and not Without Enjoyment.

That workers were no more than flour or cotton to some employers is not to be doubted. That the supporters of the free enterprise ideology felt that way is perfectly illustrated in *The Forum* in the fact that the somber and pathetic pictures drawn by Huntington, Ward or Spalding were answered with statistics or through ample lectures in economics stressing that reality, however unpleasant, could not be evaded.

²⁰ "The dilettante, speculative spirit, which approaches the study of the Labor problem with somewhat the same manner as an entomologist regards the antennae of a rare bug under the microscope, fails utterly to grasp the pith of the question at issue. Almost as much at fault is the average kindly philanthropist who slums, and sentimentalises over the abject wretchedness of the very poor." Frank K. Foster, *op.cit.*, Vol. XXIV, p. 712

²¹ Frank K. Foster, *op.cit.*, p 712.

Furthermore, *Social Darwinism* taught a philosophy of natural selection, progress and economic prosperity attainable through strict observance of Laissez-faire. The late 19th Century was a period of great American optimism and trust in the virtues of the Anglo-Saxon race. To believe that the American society was one of the best societies, and that it would go on progressing toward a more gratifying order because it was already shaped by the American virtues of order and rationality naturally produced a more euphoric vision of the worker's lot.

Professor Goldwin Smith for instance, considered that the American society was losing ground because "the governing classes, unnerved by scepticism, have lost faith in the order they represent.." and because philanthropy, vanity or fear, fostered a demagogic and dangerous propensity to dally with revolution. Goldwin Smith therefore proceeded to hammer out to those he calls Prophets of Unrest, a number of "fundamental truths" - that all laborers were not "..leaping and plunging under the pitiless lash of hunger, fainting at the rope and trampled in the mire"- or, in other terms, that the American worker was neither starving nor unhappy:

Are they not with their families living in tolerable comfort, with bread enough, and not without enjoyment? Has it not been proved beyond doubt that their wages have risen greatly and are still rising?²²

The workingman, Henry Holt said, was clinging desperately to a number of misconceptions which the philanthropists and the demagogues had put into his head : that the world was his, and that he had been robbed of its fruit by the employers; that the rich were becoming richer, and the poor poorer. As consequence, Holt battled against these ideas which, he said, undermined the workingman's determination to face the only valid challenge in life, and to which they should be dedicating all their energy - that is, 'take care of themselves' in William Graham Sumner's terms.

Goldwin Smith contended that the social problems were due to the demise of the ruling classes under the influence of the so-called "friends of the working-man". Henry Holt considered that it was the real American worker who was endangered by the "Fallacies Underlying the Social

²² Goldwin Smith, "Prophets of Unrest", Aug. 1890. Vol. IX, p. 603.

Discontent". Goldwin Smith insisted that the American workingman was no longer a "leading characteristic [of the economic scene]. When he was, he did his work, saved his money, enjoyed and advanced his life, and spent no thought upon any agency for doing so but his own energy and frugality". The true born American workingman was much too sensible to have ever been a Socialist. Such fallacies could seduce only the lowest kinds of immigrants, not he who had too much of the Yankee sense. "But he has generally been law-abiding, good-natured, and in intention at least, constructive."²³

Though swiftly drafted, the portrait of the American worker proposed by Henry Holt and Goldwin Smith opened favourable vistas on the social scene : progress had allowed the gradual and unceasing improvement of the worker's condition. There was no hardship besetting a whole class of men, but only the unequal capacity to struggle for life.

2. Behind the portrait, ideology

Despite their distortions, the reformists did attempt at least to depict the workingman, whereas the conservatives were too little interested in him to try and represent him otherwise than in short sketches. Nonetheless there is a strange paradox in the fact that those who stood on the side of the worker saw him as a stunted man, sub-human and helpless, whereas those who had little sympathy for the cause of the worker would see him as active, self-reliant and dynamic.

Both sides, however, employed an impressionistic brush to portray the worker: realism was almost entirely excluded and the worker is never known through a trade, a place of work or a feature, the shape of his body or of his face. He is almost entirely assimilated to a pair of hands and an empty mouth or a silent mouth. The worker is essentially defined by his condition, a condition that speaks for his entire class. Each portrait therefore functions like an outcry appealing to the rest of society, but each carrying one specific indictment, one special message.

The worker in these texts constituted a key element in the ideological constructions of the authors, functioning in the manner of a synecdoche - a detail intended to represent the whole - the figure by which the failures or the merits of the whole social and political system could be blamed or praised.

²³ Henry Holt, "The Social Discontent -I- Its Causes".

Was it because the ideological purpose was too overpowering that there was no room for a real perception of who the workingman was? It is clear that the symbolic representation of the American workingman was instrumental to the defence of what each author conceived as the survival of the American Civilisation and of its ethics.

We may also observe that behind the oratorical precautions and the Christian sermon speech, the reformists employed socialist concepts hardly concealed by the pathos of the descriptive approach: they spoke in terms of the ruling classes and the dominated classes; the exploitation and pauperisation of the working classes; the private appropriation of the means of production and the spoliation of the masses. The portrait of the workingman was also to provide a battling ground for the confrontation of the two major American moral systems of the time, the *Social Gospel*, which implicitly stressed that America was to be Christian or to break up into chaos; and the lessons of *Social Darwinism* that taught that progress alone would ensure the survival of the true American virtues.

3. But did they Starve?

The debate on whether the American worker had good cause for being angry could take on realistic tones. A few authors did contend that the average wages allowed the workers to provide for their basic needs and even a little more. This was the case for Simon Newcomb who blamed the social discontent on Mischievous Philanthropy which encouraged the workingman's useless wailings:

A critical comparison of the starvation wages with the prices of necessaries of life will show that with one week's such wages he can buy all the bread he can eat, a few pounds of beef, a pair of second-hand pantaloons, a pair of stockings and seven nights' lodging.²⁴

²⁴ Simon Newcomb, "Mischievous Philanthropy", June 1886. Vol. I, p. 354.

Howard Crosby in turn, proved that a careful management of the worker's earnings would allow him to provide for his family decently and still save \$50 per year. But in fact the "Forgotten Cause of Poverty" was to be found in the reckless behaviour of "the man who will frequent the saloon and lavishly spend his wages for the whisky that ruins his body and soul"²⁵

A very interesting case is provided by Edward Atkinson, an industrialist who had won for himself the reputation of being a wise man and a friend of the worker. Through a series of articles he attempted to suggest "Remedies for the Social Ills". Considering that the wage fund would not permit any substantial redistribution of income, he then suggests that waste is the fundamental cause of poverty:

So far as any computation is possible, in my judgment, the annual product, i.e. the wage and profit fund, is impaired more seriously by the waste of the poor and ignorant, not only in drink, but in the purchase of bad food worse cooked, than by all the luxurious expenditure of the rich.²⁶

One year later, Atkinson further elaborated his point, affirming that the first and the best action in favour of the worker would be to teach him - or rather teach his wife - to cook the family's food correctly:

If little can be saved on the proportionate expenditure either for clothing, for fuel, for light or for sundries (...) does it not follow that the only method for improving their condition is by economy in the purchase and right use of food and drink? Is it not true that better results can be obtained - a more appetizing quality imparted to the food, and more adequate nutrition derived - from 25 cents' worth of food well-cooked than from 25 cents' worth of the same food cooked and served as it commonly is? Five cents a day saved on the food of each member would amount to

²⁵ Howard Crosby, "The Forgotten Cause of Poverty", Aug. 1887. Vol. III, p. 573.

²⁶ Edward Atkinson, "How Can Wages Be Increased", June 1888. Vol.V, p. 488.

\$109.50 a year, which might be converted into rent or rental value.²⁷

Another voice rings a similar bell: Doctor Dwight Henry Chapin in an article entitled "Preventable Causes of Poverty".

Much disability comes to many of the very poor from their utter ignorance of the simplest hygienic laws. (...) This unfortunate condition is brought about not so much by unavoidable overcrowding and hardships, as by ignorance of the simplest elements of dietetics (...) The mother must be taught the necessity of cleanliness (...) She needs to learn about ... proper selection of food that will yield the most nutrition with the least expense. The frying-pan is the only utensil of cooking with which many a poor woman is familiar²⁸

As far as food was concerned, it appears that, once more, the contributors to *The Forum* failed to provide precise data as to the real diet of the workers. Bad food, dyspepsia and alcohol could serve to account for all the labor problems. Apparently, these authors did not seem to have really attempted to share the meals of a workingman. And this is one more feature of the reports on the American worker in *The Forum* - that the description was effected from a distance; and that facts concerning the worker's life were of little interest to those authors.

On the other hand, workers' weeklies and journals also contained scanty information and sometimes surprising opinions on the worker's food. For example, let us take the *National Labor Tribune* over a period of three years (1884/1885/1886) we find mention of food only now and then, perhaps, once in every two or three months. The main topics are 1/ how businessmen and trust management "gamble on the price of food"²⁹; 2/ that whisky and food are critical problems - as heavy drinking habits and bad

²⁷ Edward Atkinson, "Remedies for Social Ills", July 1889. Vol.VII, p. 161.

²⁸ Dr Dwight Henry Chapin, "Preventable Causes of Poverty", June 1889. Vol.VII, pp. 417-418, 420.

²⁹ "A Corner in Food", in *The National Labor Tribune*, Sept. 6, 1884; "Gambling and Food", Oct. 25, 1884.

cooking too often destroy the workers' life and activities. The articles appeals to the workers to improve their way of feeding themselves³⁰; 3/ advertisements for groceries, listing a remarkable variety of articles e.g. "The best of hams, flour, coffees and teas constantly"³¹; 4/ articles reporting on the life in Paris, and describing for example the budget of a student, "not without enjoyment"³²; and last but not least, an article on "How the Italian Workmen Live, Eating Toads, Turtles and Chickens...Dying from Cholera".³³

This very brief exploration of a working-class journal will serve our demonstration under two rubrics: first, they seem to confirm some of the facts stressed by *The Forum* - the bad eating habits and the problem of alcohol.; second, the *NLT* gives indications that workers had a diversified diet, eating a variety of foods with their bread; and third, that the description of eating habits could occasionally serve to express ethnic prejudice, as in the case of the "lowly" Italians.

French visitors

In the late 19th Century, distinguished Frenchmen visited the United States, pursuing various goals, surely following the steps of Tocqueville, but with an obvious desire to point to the American model to prove something about French politics. That was the case with Emile Levasseur, who published in 1898 an enormous report, 1200 pages long, entitled "*L'Ouvrier Américain*". It constitutes an impressive collection of data on wages, working hours and housing facilities, but Levasseur also described the American workers' ways and manners in the style and fashion of an anthropologist.

Paul de Rouziers visited America a few years before Levasseur, and though he brought home fewer statistics and data, his perception and descriptions of American life are more pungent and savoury - perhaps because his political intentions were a little less pervasive. These two French professors had come with a purpose. Paul de Rouziers studied labor issues in Great Britain and Socialism in Germany. Both he and Levasseur belonged to

³⁰ "Our Country's Curse" in *The National Labor Tribune*, Jan. 19, 1884. p. 3; "Whisky and Food", June 28, 1884. p. 3; "The Drinking Habit", Aug. 9, 1884. p. 3; "How Liquor Has Defeated Labor in the Contest with Capital", April 24, 1886. p. 7.

³¹ *The National Labor Tribune*, April 11, 1885. p. 8.

³² "Letter from Paris", in *The National Labor Tribune*, Nov. 14, 1885. p. 3.

³³ *The National Labor Tribune*, Aug. 9, 1884. p. 3.

the reformist branch of the French School of Sociology, the Le Play group. These sociologists shared the belief that Social Reform could be achieved through sociology and they were both attracted to the American model, though in a very different way.

Paul de Rouziers's attention is, not surprisingly, caught by four sets of factors : 1/ that the American people had no sense of what a pleasurable meal meant; they mostly swallowed food . 2/ they wasted a lot of food. 3/ they consumed a lot of preserves; 4/ they often suffered from dyspepsia.

De Rouziers quotes one episode of a pantomime he attended as symbolic of all that concerns the way the Americans ate: a man is seen standing by a wash-stand, still in his pyjamas, and with his hair tousled from the night sleep; he calls out to his wife "Breakfast's ready?". The audience, he said, vigorously applauded at this convincing sketch of morning life that showed the kind of hurry everyone lived in. He then goes on explaining that, because people won't have another real meal during the day, they usually have a big breakfast:

A beefsteak, a mutton chop, bacon or salt pork, with eggs and oatmeal porridge. They will swallow all of that, because time is short and, to save time, they'll break the most elementary rules of gastronomy, in the most scandalous fashion. When you eat out in a restaurant, the waiter will give you your dessert as soon as you are seated, and you'll eat it while he cooks the meat you've ordered. You then eat your side-dish - the porridge; and because it takes only a few minutes to cook it, you'll have your beefsteak as a last course.

Though more terse in style, Levasseur is struck by the same kind of facts: the heavy breakfast, the light lunch.

Lunch is of course still more precipitated, and the author was struck by an advertisement that reads : "Try our quick lunch". He describes one of those lunch counters in the business area:

Gentlemen, with their hats on their heads stand in a row along the counter on which there are cold meat cuts, piles of sandwiches, cakes, beer, ice water,

ready at hand. In less than five minutes, they swallow an amount of food, pay and go.³⁴

Of course this is a picture of a middle-class meal. But de Rouziers' critical report contains about the same kind of disapproval and commiseration as was found in Atkinson's or Chapin's comment on the ignorance of dietetics among workers. In the early 19th Century, La Reynière described the evolution in French eating habits and observed that at breakfast, the good society ate a little less but gave more space to conversation and social life

Breakfast since the beginning of the century has gained a remarkable importance: it is, I dare say, one of the conquests of our civilization that it has been raised to the dignity of a full meal...³⁵

And, because of his bad eating habits, the American is troubled by dyspepsia:

This is why his stomach vigorously protests. Dyspepsia, which is just beginning to be naturalized in France reigns supreme here, witness the numerous remedies advertised to the dyspeptics.³⁶

Another cause of dyspepsia seems to have been the extensive recourse to tinned and preserved food:

I have read somewhere that on some American cow-raising farms surrounded by beautiful fields, people will use concentrated milk imported from Switzerland (...) The Yankee, sparing of his time,

³⁴ Paul de Rouziers, *La Vie Américaine*, Paris, 1892. p. 99.

³⁵ La Reynière, *L'Almanach des Gourmands*, 1808. p. 79.

³⁶ Paul de Rouziers, *op.cit.*, p. 100. See also *The National Labor Tribune*, June 21, 1884. p. 3.

is reluctant to milk a cow, just to have the pleasure of drinking fresh milk. But, should he sell his milk to a store, then, he'll be ready to milk as many cows as necessary, since it would no longer be a bother, but a business.³⁷

French bourgeois visitors were of course more likely to observe the lack of decorum and the fact that for the Americans, meals were only expected to nourish the person, or as Molière's Miser, Harpagon put it, "one must eat to stay in life, not live to eat". Such a philosophy always sounds somewhat ridiculous to the French for whom meals must include an amount of ceremony, half way between the art of gastronomy and the rites of a civilized life.

Watching American habits, there must have been contradictory feelings arising in the minds of those distinguished visitors', who had come with the hope of demonstrating that the American model, like the Statue of Liberty, was leading the way which Europe should follow. What they witnessed seemed to imply that the model was not polished enough to be quite admirable. American efficiency was deficient at two levels: it precluded the higher forms of refinement in the way of living; it encouraged waste, to no avail.

American people waste a lot of food, de Rouziers writes. But what struck him most was how American patrons would order five or six courses, have them all served at the same time, pick at the dishes, and leave most of the food untouched. Bad manners again were what shocked him. Levasseur dedicates even more space to this point.

Above all, the American woman has no sense of thrift. You only have to walk along the back alleys to understand this; every day, considerable amounts of bread and meat are thrown away. If the housewife knew how to cook she could feed the whole family for very little money. If beef to roast is as expensive as in France, pork is very cheap and vegetables (...) have become very cheap.³⁸

³⁷ Paul de Rouziers, *op.cit.*, p. 101.

³⁸ Emile Levasseur, *L'Ouvrier Américain*, Paris, 1898, (Deuxième Partie). p 9.

Yet if American housewives wasted the money and the food left to their care, it was due to the system of co-education which " never gave her the opportunity to be trained in the activities that belong to her sex". Like her husband, she wanted things to be quickly done, and would not spend much time in cooking. She would for example resort more often than not to canned meat ("which costs 3 cents a pound!"). She hardly ever served a soup, and when she did, she'd use Liebig. (Almost a crime for a Frenchman of the time):

The workingman's wife does not seem to know the more sophisticated art of cooking the pot-au-feu [a soup with beef and lots of vegetables], or the stews which French farmers' wives cook much better; Like her husband (...) she likes to do what is quickly done : fried eggs, grilled ham, sausages in the frying pan, boiled potatoes, a slice of roastbeef, cut very thin, overdone and dry. I have seen some of them cut a chicken into 4 shares, as if it were a pigeon; she usually serves helpings that are too big, and she'll throw away what is left in the plates.³⁹

Because Emile Levasseur is absolutely convinced that the American workingman is much better off than his French counterpart, he therefore goes into many details to illustrate the American worker's standard of living : how many times per week he eats meat, how much he spends on sugar, cakes, and the like; and he thoroughly describes the different diets of the native American, the German and the Russian workers. Of course the Russian is found to eat only rye bread and kacha.

Levasseur's opinion on alcoholism in America is mixed: on the one hand, he stresses that drunkenness is not that widespread. Everybody seems to be drinking ice-cold water during meals and heavy drinking takes place at another hour, at home or in the saloons. Levasseur takes up most of the arguments about the waste of money in drinking which we encountered in *the Forum*. But on the other hand, he quotes several bosses who contend that they have seldom been obliged to discharge workers for drunkenness.

³⁹ Emile Levasseur, *op.cit*, p. 9.

Levasseur offers an example of an interesting mixture of objective observation and concealed bias: he really wants to find the American worker much better off than the French one. Being a Professor of Economics at the Collège de France, he had access to a plethora of statistics which he exploited thoroughly and, in the end, he manages to give a very positive picture of labor conditions in America. But, when it came to food the French man in him spoke louder than the professor and the politician.

A third source of information on how American workers fared is provided by the *Report of the Free Delegation of Workingmen to the Universal Exhibition of Philadelphia of 1876*. In fact, on the occasion of the Exhibition, several delegations visited American workplaces, and reported their visit afterward. Their candid surprise may serve as a counterpart for whatever superiority Levasseur believed there was in the condition of the American Worker.

Visiting the Singer factory in Elizabethport, New Jersey, one group noted:

The workers have only half an hour for lunch. That's a strange practice; it's obvious that such a short pause is absolutely insufficient. We have attended one of those meals, and we declare that the most frugal of our party would not have been contented (...) a sandwich and a glass of beer for some; others ate a soup with pieces of lard in it, and many of them drank only ice water - which greatly surprised us. But it is true that we were in the German section of the town.

The French doubtlessly put a great store with the food they ate. Even workers, then, were shocked that the Americans would eat so badly, so quickly, and so little. Not concerned with bourgeois moralism, they tended to think that to drink wine at meal time was most natural. And behind their surprise that such a short time should be allowed for lunch, there was a sort of silent comment on how American workers were "driven" - an echo to Huntington's portrait of the workingman.

Workers, like any other class in the society, have their ethnic prejudices. Strangely enough, the visitors at Elizabethport put forth about the same observation as Levasseur did, concerning the Germans whose standard

of living was surely inferior to that of the natives Americans. In the same vein, there was the article in *The National Labor Tribune*, about the Italians who "ate toads, turtles and chickens dying from cholera."

What is interesting in this cross-observation of reports and descriptions is that those who intended to speak of the American worker brought forth a mixture of true facts and of "clichés" easily traceable on both sides - clichés about workers' wastefulness, drinking propensity, hurried eating manners and bad cooking habits. But it is the difference between the American picture and the French one that delivers a specific meaning. Of course French visitors to America did see more facts and features than how or what American workers ate; but it is clear that French habits and patterns of mind seem to have predisposed them to perceive what American reformists had decidedly left out. You are what you eat, they all seemed to think. Disparaging remarks about other people's food is perhaps one way to feel superior to the people from whom one senses a menace or a challenge. But our study could also afford a modest contribution to a reflection on what "standards of living" really mean: wages, however high do not ensure good living, a notion which economists can hardly reckon with.

On the other hand, that workers' portraits by reformist authors were so deprived of flesh and body is a clear expression of the "invisibility" of the real worker to the middle-class readers of quality magazines like *The Forum*⁴⁰.

⁴⁰ See Sylvia Ullmo, "La Question Ouvrière dans la Revue FORUM: Reflets de la Conscience Sociale de l'Elite Américaine à la Fin du XIXème Siècle", Doctorate Thesis, Paris VIII, Oct. 1989. p.1100