Regeneration through Labor: Vocational Training and the Reintegration of Deportees and Refugees, 1945-1950

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The image of the "mutilated body" used in 1945 by General de Gaulle to describe the devastation of France vividly illustrates the material reality of the post-war years: destroyed cities and roads, acute food and housing shortages, wrecked industrial infrastructure, depopulation, loss of manpower, and renewed rural exodus. That productivism was an immediate legacy of the Second World War was evident in the vocabulary of reconstruction, in which reference to "production battles," "campaigns," "shock-troops," and "heroism" stoked the drive to national recovery.¹ Besides its combative overtones, the daunting task of reconstruction emphasized France's dire need for workers, both native and foreign. Official slogans of the time urged French workers "to roll up their sleeves," while labor experts called for the massive import of manual workers for industries deemed essential for French recovery, mining in particular.² Consequently,

historians have been tempted to describe the laborist rhetoric of the time as a mere reflection of the material constraints of the post-war era. For instance, Jean-Pierre Rioux's standard history of the Fourth Republic presents the post-1945 ideology of production as a temporary economic tool allowing "the supply problems to be surmounted, the bottlenecks eased, the destruction repaired."³

In this essay, I would like to add a cultural dimension to this overall economic interpretation. If urged by modernizers and economic planners as a vital necessity, the state-organized effort to redirect individuals to unskilled and skilled productive occupations also aimed at healing, reintegrating, and emancipating various segments of the French working population after the war. Beyond the material demands of the reconstruction, the advocacy of production was prompted by several other factors. First, manual work was praised for its therapeutic and healing virtues, both physical and moral, as reflected in the agenda of vocational retraining (reclassement professionnel). Second, productive activities were framed as a necessary step towards the reintegration of a large number of returning refugees and deportees into French society. Third, the political Left and its strong Communist component viewed vocationalism as the path to working-class emancipation and French modernization.

Vocational retraining at the Liberation:
The case of returning deportees

Theorized in a vast professional literature in the pre-war period, vocational retraining was a subdivision of the broader field of "professional orientation." Since 1919,


work scientists and state-trained vocational counselors (orienteurs professionnels) assisted French youths in identifying a trade suitable to their personality and skills. Inspired by Taylorism, professional orientation was part of the interwar improvement of employee work performance. Although aimed at helping French citizens in their quest for happiness through a life of labor, the assignment of individuals to specific occupations was not without gender and racial bias. As Laura Frader has shown, interwar professional orientation heavily relied on scientific reports of the alleged strengths and weaknesses of women and racial groups such as blacks and North Africans. Moreover, vocational guidance counselors encouraged young girls to have careers but also stressed the importance of a maternal and domestic role, without which France risked undermining its entire social and moral order. To such categorizations, Vichy labor scientists added a causal link between "character" and types of occupation. The redirection policies of the post-war years were concerned with a more pragmatic goal: the assignment of the maximum number of workers to manual and productive

occupations. The underlying rationale of this redirection program was to shape the work force to the needs of economic and material reconstruction. "If in the past," argued the influential economist Alfred Sauvy in 1946, "changes in the professional structure were the result of a free mechanism of supply and demand, today such an automatism is inconceivable." The vocational retraining of workers and their reassignment to production can therefore be seen as driven by French reconstruction imperatives. The First Monnet Plan (1946-1953), for instance, explicitly called for the transfer of unproductive workers to vital sectors of the French economy and bemoaned "the high number of half-idle workers, black market speculators and useless forms of employment."^10

Yet the semantic evolution of the concept of "vocational retraining" points to a deeper cultural trend. Informed by occupational therapy, its original meaning was vocational rehabilitation, a type of professional guidance aimed at reintegrating wounded or physically handicapped workers into more suitable forms of work. In 1945, "vocational retraining" maintained its focus on impaired individuals, such as returning deportees unable to fit into the productivist context of the reconstruction. Yet beyond the retraining of diminished bodies, vocational redirection became at the Liberation a general practice of reconversion of individuals to manual work. In May 1945, the Provisional Government issued a decree enabling war

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veterans, repatriated prisoners, and deportees to enroll in retraining programs in industrial professions.  

One of the main agencies in charge of retraining workers was the Centre de Reclassement Professionnel (CRP) created in 1936 by the Radical Party senator and mayor of Lyon, Justin Godart. The CRP initially aimed at redirecting French youth toward agricultural and especially artisan professions. Imbued with strong anti-urban sentiment, the CRP viewed craftsmanship as a way to reinvigorate rural France—le désert français—by redirecting workers to depopulated areas. It also advocated artisanal work as an alternative to the "plethora" in the intellectual professions, an issue that mobilized various corporatist forces throughout the 1930s. An illustration of the Radical, lower middle-class, interwar philosophy of work ethics and moderate traditionalism, the CRP was mostly aimed at French nationals prior to the war.  

Yet between 1936 and 1939, it also arranged for the vocational schooling of Jewish German refugees in French agricultural and technical institutions. 

During the Occupation, the CRP transferred its operations from Paris to the southern zone and engaged in the retraining of French nationals displaced by the hostilities. The CRP later emerged from the war with an acute sense of national mission, since the reconstruction of France required the training of many skilled manual workers. Its 1936 motto—Reclassons!—remained particularly

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12 Archives Nationales [hereafter AN], Série 43AJ (International Refugee Organization), 43AJ-1253, Historique du CRP.
13 Vicki Caron, Uneasy Asylum. France and the Jewish Refugee Crisis, 1933-1942 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 133.
14 Ibid.
relevant in 1945. At the Liberation, the CRP was officially appointed by the Ministry of Education to supervise the vocational retraining of Frenchmen repatriated from Germany. Moreover, the CRP set itself the task of retraining the *jeunesse des maquis*, the thousands of youngsters emerging from the Resistance and in need of employment. The CRP anticipated a large number of retrainable workers. "Returning prisoners, political and racial deportees will need to be retrained . . . and vocational schooling will be organized for the youth whose education has been postponed by clandestine activities," Louis Chantal, the head and cofounder of the organization, announced in early 1945. In order to put into practice its retraining agenda, the CRP reached out to all potential trainees, both French and foreign: "Prisoners, stateless, refugees, widows of resisters and deportees, unskilled workers, young men and women: become free again by learning how to make wise and efficient use of your hands!"¹⁵

One of the guiding principles of Louis Chantal's advocacy of manual work was its therapeutic virtue. The waves of returnees from Germany required "the application of new methods" elaborated in 1945: "We noticed that the acquisition of a manual trade, when rationally conducted, allows the most impaired (deportees, internees) to escape their moral suffering and restores the psychological balance taken from them by adversity." In particular, the therapeutic bend of CRP's retraining reflected the acknowledgment of "psychological alteration" among the deportee candidates for vocational training. At a time when traumatic psychiatry as well as social psychology were virtually non-existent disciplines in France—at least as

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applied to pathologies spawned by internment in concentration camps—manual work was believed to facilitate the social reintegration of deportees into post-war society. As it appears from the records, wartime and deportation trauma were treated by a rudimentary methodology vaguely based on shock therapy. For instance, the case of a librarian retrained by the CRP emphasized the supposed healing virtues ascribed to noisy industrial work conditions, thought to promote "forgetting."

The CRP often extolled the achievements of its retrained deportees healed through manual work. Here the language of retraining overlapped with a rhetoric of physical and moral redemption. A returning deportee and former lawyer became an excellent fitter (ajusteur) at the end of a long training "during which he needed strong moral support." The case of a former professor of Roman law illustrates a deeper process of personal transformation. By becoming a brilliant apprentice in the iron industry, this interwar refugee was now "fully committed to the heroic struggle against the resistance of matter." To achieve these results, the CRP sought to instill in workers the inner will to undertake vocational training. Gradually, a CRP report concluded, "the whole mass of victims of Nazism turned to vocational retraining as the only way to secure their existence."

Within the broad category of deportees, Jewish refugees resettling in or merely transiting through France were particularly exposed to vocational redirection. One

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17 AN, 43AJ-1253, Réunion sur le reclassement professionnel des réfugiés.
influential Jewish retraining organization was the Organisation-Reconstruction-Travail (ORT) which put into practice the philosophy of "productivization" of Jews set forth by Zionist Russian thinkers at the end of the nineteenth century. Their aim was the reversal of traditional Jewish occupational patterns, the regeneration of Jews through manual labor, their de-ghettoization through integration in the working-class, which was believed to put an end to anti-Semitism, and for some, a preparatory step toward the "Building of the Land." At the Liberation, the ORT vocational school network in France pursued a double goal: the reintegration of young Jewish deportees into French society and the vocational training of Holocaust survivors en route to Palestine. To this end, ORT set out to educate in manual fields "young adults who survived death camps, fought in the maquis or as partisans in Eastern Europe."

Whether foreign or French, ORT students were molded into producers ready to enter the "battle of production," although this re-educational process was not coercive. Rather, as ORT's president Léon Meiss argued, vocationalism met the specific demands of Jewish youths in post-war France: "Our young people have the legitimate desire to expunge themselves from the circuit of commercial and professional occupations; they are attracted by the increasing importance of technical skills in modern

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18 The acronym ORT initially stood for Obshchestvo Rasprostraneniya Truda sredi Yevreyev ("Society for Spreading Work [artisan and agricultural] among Jews").
19 On Jewish productivization, see Israel Oppenheim, The Struggle of Jewish Youth for Productivization: The Zionist Youth Movement in Poland (Boulder: East European Monographs, 1989).
life and by the strong influence of the laborious masses on social organization." In the context of increasing demand for manual labor, ORT saw itself as a significant contributor to French and European reconstruction: "Most European countries suffer from a lack of productive elements, and ORT can make up for manpower shortages." Praised at numerous occasions by the French government for its dedication to vocational education, which also included non-Jewish vocational students, ORT could boast impressive achievements in 1948: "Thousands of youths and adults would never have engaged in manual occupations had they not been swayed by ORT's ideas on the virtues of manual labor." This agenda also involved the redirection of Jewish refugee intellectuals to production: "Men who were yesterday destined to a predominantly intellectual life, turn today to manual professions in order to assimilate in their hosting country." The "productivization" of refugees with intellectual backgrounds was advocated as an economic necessity as well as a crucial step towards their integration into French society.

Refugee assimilation through manual labor

In the aftermath of World War II, French vocational policies targeted another category of foreigners: the so-called "refugee intellectuals," a group of migrants formed by pre-war German and Austrian exiles and "displaced persons" resettled in France in the late 1940s. Broadly

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21 Ibid.
defined as individuals with academic, professional, or managerial background, refugee intellectuals were transplanted members of Eastern and Central Europe's educated middle class. The productivist climate of the French reconstruction, the scarcity of job opportunities and the large number of intellectual professions closed to foreigners in France made their social integration particularly arduous. As the delegate of the Intergovernmental Committee for Refugees in France observed in 1945, refugees with intellectual or professional backgrounds "are today completely estranged in France."24

Ideology also motivated the redirection of refugee intellectuals to production. For Vichy nostalgics, such as the labor expert Georges Mauco, known since the 1930s for his racialist views on immigration, the outpouring of intellectual refugees threatened the cultural and occupational equilibrium of the French nation. "Let's face reality," warned Mauco in 1945, "if we fail to retrain them, they will flock to cities and crowded professions."25 For refugee advocates and proponents of French republican ideals, joining the "battle of production" was a tribute to be paid to reconstruction as well as an entrance ticket to French society. The symbolic association of production with French patriotism, a theme especially propagated by the Communist party, further reinforced the link between labor and French identity. As the Communist leader Maurice

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Thorez proclaimed in 1945, "production is today the highest duty of Frenchmen."  

Another factor accounts for the intensification of professional redirection beginning in 1948. The creation by the French state of a specific body in charge of transferring intellectual immigrants to productive occupations coincided with the arrival in France of the so-called "neo-refugees." This category contained the waves of political dissidents produced by the communist takeover in East-Central Europe. The main sociological feature of these newcomers was the high rate of intellectuals among them. Their non-manual background was immediately perceived as a serious obstacle to their integration in France. The Ministry of Labor complained about the "delicate problems" caused by the "discrepancy between their qualifications and the needs of our country."  

Consequently, the Ministry created in September 1948 its own agency to resolve this urgent problem. Labor officials were confident: with three hours daily of vocational courses, "we can put them in a position to become skilled workers or craftsmen within a fairly short time." They also prided themselves on turning "intellectuals into skilled workers in six months." Here too, grandiloquent praise for refugee intellectuals successfully converted into productive workers was a common occurrence. A former artist retrained as a mechanic was commended as a model of self-abnegation: "His only regret is to not have had the courage to change his life earlier." Father Roger Braun, the head of Secours Catholique and a prominent refugee advocate,

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26 Cited in Rioux, 63.
27 Centre des Archives Contemporaines, CAC 770623, article 171, Note relative à la situation des personnes déplacées.
28 Ibid.
29 AN, 43AJ- 640.
acknowledged that professional reconversion was primarily a constraint imposed by the post-war context: "Many hopes are unfulfilled: students who aspired to become doctors, journalists, university professors or lawyers, find themselves from one day to the other condemned to factory or agricultural work." Yet he also viewed vocational transformation as an act of renouncement and abnegation. The case of "a former well-known journalist in Warsaw, who despite frail health did not hesitate to retrain himself as a blacksmith" was branded as exemplary: "His case is not unique. The courage of many fills our heart with admiration." 30

The extent of this redirection policy should not be overstated. Overall, France received only about 40,000 refugees and dissidents in the 1940s, and many remained unaffected by the drive to productivization. Those who started and then abandoned manual occupations were not affected by any disciplinary measures except for the severance of welfare allocations. Despite attempts by the Ministry of Labor to lure intellectual refugees away from Paris and other urban centers, freedom of movement was essentially unhampered, as evident in the recollections of a Czech exile: "I first worked in agriculture in Normandy and in the Vosges. Conditions were precarious and difficult. I felt isolated, and decided to make my way back to the Paris area." 31 Others challenged the utopianism of reconversion policies. As a refugee publication remarked, "the fact that an engineer or a bachelor of philosophy is compelled to grab a pickaxe and to go dig in the depths of a mine . . . is

30 Father Roger Braun (Secours Catholique) in Pages Documentaires, 1948. (AN, 43-AJ1268).
undoubtedly an enriching life experience, provided that it is a temporary one," and the same refugees found "the metamorphosis of an intellectual into a man of manual skills (un homme de métier)" a highly unrealistic prospect.\footnote{Marc Ibère, "Le problème des intellectuels exilés," Pro Europa (1949): 13, in AN, 43AJ- 640.} Despite its limited extent, the experience of professional redirection indicates that the "reconciliation of the hand and the mind" was a theme inherently linked to the culture of reconstruction. "An intellectual," argued a labor official, must be persuaded that there is nothing demeaning in "thinking with his hands."\footnote{Pierre Louis Mallen, "The Refugees Who Learned to Think With Their Hands," UNESCO Courier (March 1951), in AN, 43AJ- 640.} This idea featured prominently in the Left's advocacy of vocationalism as working-class empowerment, as well as in post-war plans to reform the French educational system.

"Towards a new humanism":
\textbf{The advocacy of vocationalism}

I have so far focused on "outsiders" (returning deportees, refugees) in order to emphasize the widespread advocacy of production after 1945. Indeed, my contention is that the experience of outsiders can reveal and magnify mainstream trends, often invisible from an insider perspective. Yet it is important to ask how the redirection and retraining policies affected French society at large. One possible avenue of inquiry is to go back to the "Liberation spirit," which demanded a new start for the French nation through modernization and industrialization. With the political mood distinctly bending toward the Left and its Communist brand of workerism (ouvriérisme), broad access to vocational education appeared to be the only way to alleviate working-class pauperization while engaging in
national reconstruction. Vocationalism was presented at the Liberation as the path toward a better future. As the Communist-oriented Union de la Jeunesse Républicaine de France (UJRF) argued in 1945, "It is evident that extending the qualifications of workers will strengthen production and foster the march of progress."34

To this end, this youth organization demanded broad measures in order to "re-educate the millions of unskilled French youths and adults reduced today to unemployment." It also emphasized France's need for modern and accessible manual vocational programs, purged of the ideological legacy of the Vichy era and its corporatist and anti-modern cultural rhetoric. Despite this apparent ideological divide, Leftist vocationalist demands and Vichy's record in the field of manual education overlapped significantly. From 1942 to 1944, the Vichy regime had established the foundations of modern French vocational education by creating a network of 900 specialized schools attended by 56,000 students.35 In 1945, the French educational system absorbed Vichy's vocational schools and training centers. Even the Communists went so far as to recognize that some of these schools "had achieved impressive results and benefited French youth and industry."36 This institutional continuity can therefore be framed in terms of unexpected ideological kinship: the heroization of industrial hardship and a backbone of post-war laborist Communist culture


36 Union de la Jeunesse Républicaine de France, *Pour donner à chaque français un métier*. 

perpetuated on other grounds the National Revolution's idealization of manual labor.

In many respects, however, the post-1945 advocacy of vocationalism drastically departed from Vichy's reactionary utopia. Modernist and democratic ideals prompted the desire to rehabilitate manual education; vocationalism was to provide the French drive to industrialization with a new generation of skilled workers and technicians. Vocationalism was also perceived as a tool to enhance the status of the working class in French society. The Langevin-Wallon Commission (1944-1947), the first of an endless series of post-war attempts to reform French education, set out to put into practice this modernist-democratic agenda.37 Mostly composed of scholars (such as the Annales historian Lucien Febvre) and progressive education experts sympathetic to the Left, the Commission urged the democratization of the "elitist" French education system by championing the virtues of vocationalism: "Justice commands the recognition of the dignity of all social tasks, the high material and moral value of manual activities, practical intelligence and technical talent."38 For Leftist proponents of vocationalism, educational democratization through the rehabilitation of manual skills was a fulfillment of the promise of justice and social reform that blossomed at the Liberation. The acquisition of manual skills was therefore tantamount to emancipation, a philosophical proposition put into practice through the introduction in 1945 of manual activities (travail manuel éducatif) in secondary schools, an unprecedented challenge

37 Paul Langevin was a renowned physicist and fellow-traveler active in the interwar antifascist movement. A communist intellectual, Henri Wallon was a philologist and child psychologist.
to the classical and intellectual orientation of the republican curriculum. Post-1945 vocationalism idealistically called for the recognition of the value of all work, of "manual" concrete intelligence as well as theoretical learning.39

Ultimately, the democratic potentialities embedded in post-war vocationalism brought back to the surface an old Marxist query: how to transcend the division between manual and intellectual labor, a structural feature of bourgeois society since the Industrial Revolution? Marxist doctrine located the answer in the rise of a classless society and the "polytechnism" of all workers, which would eliminate the distinction between manual and intellectual activities, an ideal already dear to French Utopian socialists more than a century before its reappearance at the Liberation.40 Yet post-war French vocationalists addressed this question differently, advocating the complementarities of manual and intellectual work as part of a new humanism. In particular, the harmonious relationship between manual and intellectual labor was a strong component of French-Jewish vocational philosophy. For Louis Kahn, ORT's vice-president, the necessary productivization of Jews did not constitute a break with the Jewish intellectual tradition: "Judaism should neither shun its thinkers nor apologize for Bergson and Einstein, Maimonides or Spinoza." Against a pre-war "elitist conception of society," whereby masses of manual workers were isolated from "thinking elites," Louis Kahn viewed the Liberation as a unique opportunity to harmonize manual and intellectual occupations: "Today,  

material work is only the necessary basis of the intellectual life now opened to all." The sociologist Georges Friedmann made a more general plea in favor of vocational humanism in 1951. His views epitomized the Left's desire to rehabilitate manual skills through democratization. In *Humanisme du travail et humanités*, Friedmann argued that the gap between the manual and intellectual world was not inevitable; rather, harmony was reachable through the recognition of the "profound unity of education" in which manual and intellectual skills were to merge in a single humanistic curriculum. Echoing a broad post-war concern with social justice and democratization, Friedmann's vocational idealism challenged the narrow content of manual education restricted to the mere acquisition of a trade as well as the traditional primacy of classical humanities.

Often ignored in standard narratives of the post-war period, in which 1945 is the "zero hour" of French economic modernization, the discourse of professional redirection, production, and vocationalism was a strong cultural marker of the reconstruction years. It sustained a project of social reintegration of various categories of outsiders and provided the basis for idealistic projects of educational reform. The analysis of the rich iconography of production further unveils the cultural—and not purely economic—aspect of post-war reconstruction; it also reveals how anxieties over production were tied to the reformulation of French identity and even masculinity following the Liberation. Such an inquiry provides a visual

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41 Kahn.
illustration of the many virtues–regeneration, morality, patriotism, humanism–ascribed in liberated France to productive and manual work.