

REPLY TO PROFESSOR LBOVICS

In his lengthy commentary on my article, Herman Lebovics assembles an impressive array of “countercriticisms” that go far beyond our differing views on the Méline tariff. To respond to each and every one of these would be tedious and pedantic and ultimately of little interest to anyone but the two principals. Even the most illuminating scholarly disputations sooner or later reach the point of diminishing returns; in this instance I think we are at or beyond that point already. So I shall limit my reply to a few of Professor Lebovics’s most sweeping assertions.

First, there is the suggestion that I am making a career of criticizing Professor Lebovics’s work and that anti-Marxism – a desire to “re-enact old ideological combats” – lies behind my criticism. In point of fact, besides the present article (a revised version of the paper presented at Santa Barbara to which Professor Lebovics alludes), my only discussion of his work appears in the 800-word review of *The Alliance of Iron and Wheat* in the October 1989 issue of *The American Historical Review* which he also mentions (indeed, Professor Lebovics’s remarks seem to be aimed as much at that review as at the present article). The review did criticize his treatment of the tariff in ways that foreshadowed the present article. But it also praised the soundness of Professor Lebovics’s overall argument, which I said “unquestionably enhances our understanding of the convoluted political history of the Third Republic”. I recommended the book to scholars then, and I continue to do so. Thus it should surprise no one when I say that, in principle, I have no objection to Marxian class analysis or the notion of class conflict. Was class conflict between industrialists and workers an important factor in the politics of the early Third Republic? Of course it was. Did industrialists seek to control and pacify militant workers in the 1880s and 1890s? Undoubtedly. But that does not mean that the “Labor Question” dominated the making of *all* economic policy in France, no matter how tangential to employer–worker conflict. My view is that the range of government policies that were determined by the warfare between the industrial bourgeoisie and the industrial proletariat in the early Third Republic was limited and that tariff policy was not among them. Class analysis is not the only way, nor always the best way, to illuminate what was happening in late nineteenth-century France. If it is anti-Marxist to say that, so be it.

The issue of the relative importance of class conflict in French politics – and in the minds of French industrialists – is of course closely tied to the question of motivation. Professor Lebovics emphasizes how difficult, even

impossible, it is to fathom the motivations and intentions of historical figures. Now if he is referring to the deep, subconscious motivations that Freudians search for, I quite agree. But if he means that it is impossible to discern conscious but unspoken motives behind the public statements of politicians (thus making it necessary always to take them at their word), I surely must disagree. Who could ever do political history – or even make sense of the evening news – operating in such a methodological straitjacket? Certainly not I nor, I suspect, as good a political historian as Herman Lebovics. In any case, I do not consider it very daring to assert, after years of studying the tariff politics of the early Third Republic, that Jules Méline had something other than the “welfare of the workers” uppermost in his mind when he presented his tariff bill to the Chamber of Deputies in May 1891.

While questioning my treatment of the protectionists’ intentions, Professor Lebovics takes time (in note 5) to pronounce my grasp of tariff theory “soft” because, according to him, I assume that domestic producers can choose either to raise prices or to increase their share of the domestic market once higher duties have raised import prices. In truth, I assume nothing of the sort. It goes without saying that the intended effects of any increase in tariff protection may never be realized by individual domestic producers for a host of reasons, including internal competition from other domestic producers or from foreign producers who have jumped the tariff wall. Indeed, I cite such a case in the woolens industry where strong competition from Roubaix kept other French producers from deriving much financial gain from the greater protection of the domestic market after 1892. My purpose in reminding readers of conventional theory on the effects of a tariff was simply to point out that, *if* a monetary benefit accrues to domestic industry from an increase in import duties, that benefit goes to the industrialists themselves, who then determine if anything is passed on to their workers. There is no necessary or direct connection between increased tariff protection and the material welfare of domestic laborers.

Finally and most importantly, Professor Lebovics expounds at some length on historical methods and the canons of evidence. In particular, he upbraids me for “arbitrarily chos[ing] a narrowly positivistic terrain” when looking for evidence that tariff legislation “*qua* labor-pacifying policy worked or failed”. But it is hardly arbitrary to suggest, as I do, that we test the Méline-tariff-as-social-protection argument by looking at conditions in those industries (e.g., textiles) that actually received increased protection in 1892. Nor is it unreasonable or unfair to suggest that historians should go beyond the most obvious and readily available sources in seeking to understand what has happened in the past. I would not wish “archival silicosis” on anyone, but if Professor Lebovics is defending the sufficiency of “discourse elaboration” – if he really believes that all we must do to get at the truth is to

lightly gloss the public utterances of the most prominent historical actors – then we certainly disagree.

One thing we do agree on is that I have taken what I perceive to be the implicit argument in Professor Lebovics's work and have presented it as an explicit hypothesis to be proved or disproved. He calls this a "reductionist reading" of his text, but I say that, without specifying the questions, the advancement of knowledge in history or any other field becomes highly problematical. The method of my article, far from being novel, is in fact squarely in the tradition of *histoire-problème*, a form of inquiry pioneered by Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch, further developed by the "Annales school", and now widely practiced in the "historical sciences" on both sides of the Atlantic. And in this case I believe it has produced useful results. Indeed, by posing "my" questions and looking for answers in sources that neither I nor Professor Lebovics had previously consulted, I have tried to go beyond simply criticizing his work to add something new to what we know about the politico-economic history of modern France. Surely our collective effort to understand the past has room in it for such "positivist" endeavors – however "narrow" or inadequate they may be – as an accompaniment and counterweight to the imaginative reconstructions of the past of Dickens, Zola, and E.P. Thompson that Professor Lebovics rightly admires.