

INTRODUCTION

Strikebreaking During Europe's Belle Époque*

Among the various strategies used by 'capital' to counter the unions, 'the scab is by far the most formidable weapon'. With these words, Jack London described the so-called *War of the Classes* that was taking place in the United States during the early 20th century. London also invited scholars to approach the class struggle not only from a merely theoretical perspective, but by focusing on violent practices, organisational strategies and furious confrontations.¹ The American case is certainly a clear archetype in terms of the violent counter positions between 'capital' and 'labour'. Images of heavily armed Pinkerton private detectives and gangs of scabs armed with sticks and brass knuckles immediately spring to mind, but so do images of brutal police forces employed in the service of private interests. Such perceptions were shared by contemporaries of London across the Atlantic. As a French journalist recalled in 1887, 'the police in the United States have become another of the armed bands of the Middle Ages which were found in the service of the barons'.² Some years later, in 1909, the economist Charles Gide stated that 'in the United States (but not yet in France) employers hired their own *briseurs de grève* (strikebreakers), that is to say *jaunes* (yellow unions), organised for the resistance and to strike back'.³ Gide's claim is important. Apparently without recognising the paradox in his statement, he was denying the existence of strikebreakers in France while using a French term to define them. Indeed, the term *jaunes* became synonymous with the independent (i.e. non-socialist) unions found throughout Europe and their role involved acting as *briseurs de grève*, often at the behest of employers and company management.⁴ This dystopic perception is indicative of an enduring twofold stereotype that emphasises American exceptionality in terms of violent social conflicts and armed strikebreaking in opposition to the supposed European moderateness. In a rather peremptory statement, historian Stephen Norwood alleged some years ago that 'the United States during the early twentieth century was the only advanced industrial country where corporations wielded coercive military power. In Europe, employers did not hire armed mercenaries'. On the contrary, according to Norwood, 'when force was applied in labour disputes, it was

* This project received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation programme (G.A. 677199 – ERC-StG2015 "The Dark Side of the Belle Époque. Political Violence and Armed Associations before the First World War").

¹ Jack London, *War of Classes* (New York: The Regent Press: 1905), 111

² Quoted in Gerald Friedman, 'Strike success and Union Ideology: The United States and France, 1880-1914', *The Journal of Economic History* 48 (1988): 14.

³ Charles Gide, 'Le Droit de Grève', in *Le Droit de Grève: Leçons Proférées à l'École Des Hautes Études Sociales*, ed. Charles Gide (Paris: F. Alcan, 1909), 18–19.

⁴ On the Jaunes, see George L. Mosse, 'The French Right and the Working Classes: Les Jaunes', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 3–4 (1972); Zeev Sternhell, *La droite révolutionnaire, 1885–1914: les origines françaises du fascisme* (Seuil: Paris 2000); Edward J. Arnold, 'Counter-Revolutionary Themes and the Working Class in France of the Belle Époque: the case of the Syndicats Jaunes, 1899–1912', *French History*, Vol. 2 (1999).

invariably by well-disciplined army troops or national police, neither of which was subject to private or local direction', with the result that 'spontaneous violence was far less common in European strikes'.⁵

It does appear that the United States and Europe are not directly comparable when it comes to the degree of violent strikebreaking and private policing they used, as evidenced by the bloodshed during the Homestead Steel Mill strike (1892) and the so-called Ludlow massacre (1914), as well as other less notorious cases. At the same time, however, this does not mean that strikebreaking was entirely non-existent in Europe. Yet, the issues of work replacement, private policing and violent labour confrontations have been largely under-researched in European historiography, due partly but not only to the bias that alleges American exceptionalism.

Many years ago, Charles Tilly invited historians to consider the plurality of actors involved in strikes: not only workers and employers, but also local and regional authorities, bystanders, and civil and military powers, including 'private police', since it is 'the *relationship* of workers to other groups [that] determines the frequency and character of collective conflict'.⁶ Tilly's invitation has not always been taken up in the field of labour history.⁷ Quantitative approaches have provided extensive data on the incidence and magnitude of strikes.⁸ However, the statistics can be misleading if they are not weighed against other considerations when investigating how 'various forms of conflict interlock' and how one struggle leads to another.⁹ Statistics will be used in these articles (and, indeed, in this introduction), but they will always be considered in relation to the social, political and even psychological impacts of the strikes, which 'cold' data can only hint at. The working-class and labour historiography of the 1970s and 1980s focused predominantly on the policies, organisational measures, political strategies and debates of unions, parties and movements linked in various ways to the Left. Official deliberations and political speeches made during general unions' congresses, and the organisational strategies and biographies of the key leaders have been widely scrutinised.¹⁰ In several cases, this approach reflects a keen interest in the development

⁵ Stephen H. Norwood, *Strikebreaking and Intimidation: Mercenaries and Masculinity in Twentieth-Century America* (Univ of North Carolina Press, 2003), 3). For the interwar period, see also the classical Maurice Dobb, *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1950), 353: 5.

⁶ Charles Tilly, 'Theories and Realities', in *Strikes, Wars and Revolutions in an International Perspective: Strike Waves in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries*, ed. Leopold H. Haimson and Charles Tilly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 11.

⁷ Kenneth D. Brown, *Essays in Anti-Labour History: Responses to the Rise of Labour in Britain* (London: Macmillan, 1974); Arthur McIvor, 'Employers' Organisation and Strikebreaking in Britain, 1880-1914', *International Review of Social History*, no. 29 (1984): 1-33; Arthur McIvor, *Organised Capital: Employers' Associations and Industrial Relations in Northern England, 1880-1939* (Cambridge University Press, 1996); Jean-Marie Moine, *Les Barons Du Fer. Les Maîtres de Forges En Lorraine* (Nancy: Serpenoise, 1989); Michael Rust, 'Business and Politics in the Third Republic : The Comité Des Forges and the French Steel Industry 1896-1914.' (Princeton, 1973); Sanford Elwitt, *The Third Republic Defended: Bourgeois Reform in France, 1880-1914* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986).

⁸ Gian Primo Cella and Guido Baglioni, *Il movimento degli scioperi nel 20. secolo* (Bologna: Il mulino, 1979).

⁹ Tilly, 'Theories and Realities', 5.

¹⁰ Of particular relevance here are edited books such as Elisabeth Domansky, 'The Rationalisation of Class Struggle: Strikes and Strike Strategy of the German Metalworkers' Union, 1891-1922', in *Strikes, Wars and Revolutions in an International Perspective: Strike Waves in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries*, ed. Leopold H. Haimson and Charles Tilly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 321-55; Asa Briggs and John Saville, *Essays in Labour History, 1886-1923* (London: Macmillan, 1971).

and history of the working classes, leaving other quite important actors in the background and frequently deprived of their own agency. In particular, little attention has generally been paid to those actors who, although members of the working classes, did not belong to left-wing unions and labour organisations and therefore belie the alleged significant identification between *the* working class and the Left. A further consequence was an underestimation of the role played by violence in labour conflicts, and specifically violence against blacklegs and scabs, which has often been considered a by-product of a lack of organisation and primitive behaviours or something inevitable and, after all, ‘relatively venial’.¹¹

In contrast, this special issue is an attempt to bring to the fore the hitherto rather neglected actors and practices by focussing on strikebreakers, private police and replacement workers, as well as on violence. Strikebreaking and violence are in many ways intrinsically linked. Indeed, the protection of replacement workers, whether by private or company police or simply by providing blacklegs with truncheons, knives and pistols, was inherent in their employment. The violent confrontations between unionised workers and blacklegs are, of course, only the tip of the iceberg of the general phenomenon of labour disputes, since the great majority of strikes were resolved peacefully and law enforcement agencies usually succeeded in defending law and order.¹² Nevertheless, the daily confrontations between unionised workers and blacklegs, as well as the major struggles, shed light on the reasons why violence was used and why it became a legitimate means of action. They also allow us to think afresh about the reconfiguration of labour disputes and the challenges that state authorities faced during the period between the 1890s and the outbreak of the First World War.

Through a symmetrical comparison of various strikebreaking-related practices and the political cultures in several European countries (the United Kingdom, Italy, the German *Kaiserreich* and the Austro-Hungarian Empire), we can use strikebreaking as an interpretative lens through which to investigate crucial phenomena in European history. We do this on several scales. Each article begins by offering a broad overview of the national situation, paying special attention to policing policies and labour conflicts, in order to outline the particular contexts in which the various forms of strikebreaking took place. This is followed by detailed, archive-based research on local and regional cases, which provide concrete examples of how strikebreaking was enacted, its impact and its causes. At the same time, each case study will be ‘connected with general processes and structures [...] since it cannot be assumed that everything that is local has exclusively local causes’.¹³ This dual approach helps to delineate the general and unique phenomenon of armed strikebreaking in Europe during the thirty years leading to the Great War.

¹¹ See, for example, E. J. Hobsbawm, *Worlds of Labour: Further Studies in the History of Labour* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1984), 11.

¹² McIvor, ‘Employers’ Association and Strikebreaking’; Friedman, ‘Strike Success and Union Ideology: The United States and France, 1880-1914’.

¹³ Jürgen Kocka and Heinz-Gerhard Haupt, eds., *Comparative and Transnational History: Central European Approaches and New Perspectives* (New York ; Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2009), 11–12.

The chronological framework of this research is the years between the ‘radical change’ of the 1880s and the eve of the First World War, a period of rapid and deep transformations that only retrospective nostalgic projections have defined as the Belle Époque.¹⁴ The articulated and complex transition from traditional conservatism and political elites to mass politics and greater participation characterised the political life of increasing numbers of European countries in what has been defined as a ‘wave of democratisation’.¹⁵ This period of transition between two ways of life transformed European social and political life, which had a significant impact in terms of expectations, fears and hopes.¹⁶

Armed strikebreakers, counter-unions and independent unions, and private and auxiliary police offer a perspective from which to investigate these tumultuous phenomena and shed light on how various European countries managed the common problem of violent shifts towards mass politics. The comparative perspective also allows us to avoid the trap of considering the model that directly links the development of liberal parliamentary democracy to the development of a civil society and advanced capitalism as being ‘normal’ and applicable to all situations.¹⁷ The case of strikebreaking reveals a less conventional image of the pre-war period, which is usually seen as an era characterised almost exclusively by the symbolic or verbal violence that was, at most, an anticipation of what was to come next. The very same stereotype of ‘the Belle Époque’ proved it.¹⁸ As this special issue aims to show, anti-socialist and anti-labour violence was perpetrated in pre-1914 Europe in the more industrialised countries of the continent. What is remarkable in terms of the analysis of this period, is the fact that, in certain circumstances, the level of conflict was so high that it fuelled and even legitimised the adoption of private or semi-public violent initiatives to oppose the unions and defend both loyal workers and industrial goods. Looking at the means of opposition to revolution (and democracy) may shed light on the long-term, deep-seated origins of the fears, expectations and hopes to which the 1917 Bolshevik revolution and the post-WWI crisis gave incredible and unprecedented substance without being, at least in Western Europe, the source.¹⁹

¹⁴ Jürgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton Oxford: Princeton university press, 2014), 63.

¹⁵ George Reid Andrews and Herrick Chapman, eds., *The Social Construction of Democracy, 1870–1990* (London, 1995), 1.

¹⁶ Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850–2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 76; Matteo Millan, ‘The Shadows of Social Fear: Emotions, Mentalities and Practices of the Propertied Classes in Italy, Spain and France (1900–1914)’, *Journal of Social History*, 50, no. 2 (2016): 1–26.

¹⁷ See Dennis Sweeney, *Work, Race, and the Emergence of Radical Right Corporatism in Imperial Germany* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010); Geoff Eley, ‘Capitalism and the Wilhelmine State: Industrial Growth and Political Backwardness, 1890–1918 in Recent German Historiography, 1890–1918’, *Historical Journal* 21, no. 3 (1986): 737–50; David Crew, *Town in the Ruhr: A Social History of Bochum, 1860–1914* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979).

¹⁸ Dominique Kalifa, *La véritable histoire de la Belle Époque*, 1 vols (Paris: Fayard, 2017); Dominique Kalifa, ‘«Belle Époque»: invention et usages d’un chrononyme’, *Revue d’histoire du XIXe siècle*, no. 52 (2016): 119–32.

¹⁹ For the «war in peace» see: Robert Gerwarth and John Horne, eds., *War in Peace: Paramilitary Violence in Europe after the Great War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Robert Gerwarth, *The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End, 1917–1923* (London: Allen Lane, 2016).

The British historian Arthur McIvor distinguishes between ‘coercive’ and ‘conciliatory’ strikebreaking tactics.²⁰ While conciliatory practices aimed to prevent and even break off strikes by brokering agreements between business and labour and granting limited concessions to unions, the coercive approach was based on confrontational tactics such as blacklists, strike insurances, lock-outs, work replacement and the armed protection of blacklegs. This special issue mainly focusses on coercive strikebreaking, which was quite frequent despite (or maybe because of) the development of trade unions and recognition of them as fully legitimate social actors in several European countries from the turn of the century onwards. Our use of the term ‘strikebreaker’ has two interconnected meanings: (1) non-unionised workers who agree to work during a strike and independently of union directives, and (2) the men who ensured their protection.

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Europe experienced labour unrest and multiple strike waves. What particularly disturbed contemporaries was the rapid growth of social conflicts, which were often characterised by sudden, unexpected changes. According to Brian Mitchell’s *European Historical Statistics*, there were fewer than 400 strikes in Italy in 1900, although this figure grew to an unprecedented peak of over 1,300 strikes in 1901. In France, the turning point was 1904, when the number of strikes was double that of the previous year which had seen 567 strikes. Strikes were much more numerous in Germany and steadily increased to peak of over 3,200 in 1910. Tumultuous economic and social transformations gave rise to conflicting fears and expectations, and also had a huge political impact. The European strike wave of 1904–1907 was without doubt linked to the 1905 Russian Revolution, but it resulted in a ‘radicalization’ that ‘destabilized the existing constitutional frameworks’.²¹ In all cases, the Great War was a period of frozen social conflicts, which then started growing again, and quickly, in 1919.²²

With strikes rocketing in frequency and magnitude, company and independent unions were thought to be the perfect antidote. A reservoir of loyal, obedient workers, they benefited employers and ‘free workers’ alike. The latter could take advantage of secure employment and often better wages, while proprietors and managers had at their disposal groups of loyal workers who were not subject to union discipline. Employers praised the bravery and loyalty of the workers who refused to join ‘red’ unions, while productivity, altruism and love of country were some of the most celebrated values that ‘free workers’ allegedly embodied. The leader of the Free Labour Association, William Collison, was proud of being ‘a strike breaker. I lived a strike breaker. I shall die a strike breaker’. He claimed to be always ‘in the first line’ against the ‘the tyranny of a self-appointed, privileged, aristocracy of labour’ and noted that

²⁰ McIvor, ‘Employers’ Association and Strikebreaking’.

²¹ Eley, *Forging Democracy*, 76, 116.

²² B.R. Mitchell, *European Historical Statistics, 1750-1970* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 1975), 173–83.

‘finding that tyranny intolerable, I fought it’.²³ Similarly, the French *jaunes* turned the pejorative label ‘yellow’ into a title of some pride. Their leader, Pierre Biétry, claimed that the *jaunes* should base their actions on the principles of ‘the individual, the family, the province and the fatherland’ for ‘the interest of the nation’ and ‘for the greatness and richness of France’.²⁴ One of the organisers of the Agrarian Association of Parma in Italy saw the ‘free workers’ as the quintessence of ‘faith in labour, embellished by the shining love for the nation’.²⁵ These representations were aimed at overcoming the fracturing of classes to achieve some sort of trans-class co-operation, in which workers’ interests would be subordinated to a general nationalist greater good. These discourses, in fact, conceal intrinsic contradictions, since workers’ and employers’ interests did not necessarily coincide, and it was often only possible to maintain internal discipline through coercion. Nevertheless, the success of the independent unions was quite significant, although this has not been widely studied. The Shipping Federation was able to mobilise significant numbers of workers and, according to some estimates, the Free Labour Association had approximately 60,000 members.²⁶ Independent and company unions flourished in the German heavy industries and collieries, where employers could more easily control the workforce, administer company social benefits, adopt moralising behaviour and undertake ‘direct surveillance’ . Geoff Eley estimates that ‘between 1909 and 1912 the number of company unions in the Ruhr rose from just one to 109, with a membership which rivalled’ that of the social-democratic unions (Free Trade Unions).²⁷

Despite legislation mandating peaceful picketing and equal recognition of the right to strike and the right to work, considerable efforts were needed to put these regulations into practice in the field of labour conflicts, and violence was often a predictable result of the employment of strikebreakers.²⁸ French strikers were driven by feelings of ‘frustration and revenge’ for the strikebreakers and *jaunes*, and attacks on blacklegs were therefore frequent and often ignited further conflicts.²⁹ According to the French economist, Charles Gide, this resulted in a ‘war of classes’ comprised of ‘assaults against the “jaunes”, bombs and dynamite against the houses of “fainéants” [the “lazy”] who keep working, the sabotages and sometimes the arsons of factories’.³⁰ If British politicians and social scientists agreed that after 1870 ‘average English workmen are not so political as continental’ workers and, therefore, that

23 Geoffrey Alderman, ‘The National Free Labour Association. A Case-Study of Organised Strikebreaking in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century’, *International Review of Social History*, no. 21 (1976): 335.

24 Pierre Biétry, *Les Jaunes de France et La Question Ouvrière* (Paris: Paul Placot, 1906), 35.

25 Giulio Talamazzi, *La funzione morale, civile e Politica del Libero lavoratore* (Parma: Tip. Operaia, Adorni, Ugolotti e C., 1909), 17–18, 11.

26 Alderman, ‘The National Free Labour Association’, 329.

27 Geoff Eley, *Reshaping the German Right: Radical Nationalism and Political Change after Bismarck* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 309. See also Eley, ‘Capitalism and the Wilhelmine State’.

28 Charles Tilly, Louise Tilly, and Richard H. Tilly, *The Rebellious Century, 1830-1930* (London: Dent, 1975), 262.

29 F. F. Ridley, ‘Syndicalism, Strikes and Revolutionary Action in France’, in *Social Protest, Violence, and Terror in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Europe*, ed. Wolfgang J. Mommsen and Gerhard Hirschfeld (London: MacMillan, 1982), 239–40.

30 Gide, «Le droit de grève», 18–19.

strikes had become more disciplined and peaceful, the ‘exception’ was found in the continuation of violent and chaotic riots against the use of police and troops to protect blacklegs, which resembled the food riots of old times.³¹ Strikebreaking from then on cemented intractable counter positions and fuelled deep hatred, making the situation hard to control. Jack London defined strikebreaking as a regression to the state of nature, in which egoism and inhumanity replaced the human solidarity proper to civilised societies.³² The figure of the strikebreaker had the power to arouse deep hatred and contempt because of the ignominious labels that socialists and unionised workers gave them. An 1893 report by the British Board of Labour stated that ‘the term blackleg is a terror to all working men’,³³ while Italian unionists called strikebreakers *crumiri* or *krumiri*, after a north African tribe of predators and brigands who could ‘set off fratricidal passions’.³⁴ In the *Kaiserreich* and in the Austrian half of the Habsburg Empire, the transliteration of the English word (*streikbrecher*) was both customary and insulting. Use of offensive epithets such as ‘pit rags’ was extremely frequent in Germany.³⁵ In Austria, blacklegs were berated with ‘sarcastic invocations of goulash, the metaphorical wages of their putative crimes’. Czech workers were ‘latecomers’ to industrial labour and so were frequently referred to as strikebreakers and ‘ignorant yokels’.³⁶ The French ‘blackleg [*non-gréviste*]’ was usually called a ‘traitor, betrayer, monster’.³⁷ Clearly, strikebreaking was never merely an economic issue, rather it involved capital values and opposing rights, which helps explain the excessive violence and hate that characterised many disputes in which blacklegs and protection corps were involved.³⁸

These potential inception situations were influenced by the fact that governments were at the same time increasingly reluctant to use bloody repression as the principal means of dealing with social unrest and unwilling to directly intervene to replace workers who were on strike.³⁹ As Anja Johansen has pointed out in reference to France and Germany, ‘the prospect of alienating important social groups, together with fears of swelling opposition and provoking popular revolt’ had pushed several European

³¹ James E. Cronin, ‘Strikes and Power in Britain, 1870-1920’, in *Strikes, Wars and Revolutions in an International Perspective: Strike Waves in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries*, ed. Leopold H. Haimson and Charles Tilly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 87–89.

³² London, *War of classes*, 112-113

³³ *Report on strikes and lock-outs in the United Kingdom...and on conciliation and arbitration boards; presented to both houses of Parliament by command* (London: H.M. Stationary Office, 1893), 284.

³⁴ Luciano Zuccoli, ‘Storia Dei Krumiri’, *La Lettura*, 6 June 1908, 455–59.

³⁵ Sweeney, *Work, Race*, 87.

³⁶ John Robertson, ‘Calamitous Methods of Compulsion: Labor War and Revolution in a Habsburg Industrial District 1906-1919’ (PhD, University of Northern Caroline Chapel Hill, 2014), 65; Jakub S. Beneš, *Workers and Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 205.

³⁷ Bureau, ‘Le Droit de Grève et La Liberté Du Travail’, 55.

³⁸ On this issue, but with a quite different chronology, see: Thomas Linehan, *Scabs and Traitors: Taboo, Violence and Punishment in Labour Disputes in Britain, 1760-1871* (Routledge, 2018).

³⁹ Jean-Marc Berlière, *Naissance de la police moderne*, Tempus (Paris, France) ; 407 (Paris: Perrin, 2011); Clive Emsley, *Gendarmes and the State in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Hsi-huey Liang, *The Rise of Modern Police and the European State System from Metternich to the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

governments to formulate less harsh and more conciliatory policing policies from the mid-19th century.⁴⁰ Between 1889 and 1914, 39 protesters were killed in France and 21 in Germany, and the figures were much higher in Austria and Italy. The bloodshed that left at least 80 people dead following artillery and infantry fire in Milan in 1898 represented a turning point in the policing policies of successive Italian governments: repression was certainly not abandoned (especially in the south), although the authorities were becoming increasingly aware of the potentially counterproductive political implications of it in an increasingly mass society. In contrast, episodes such as the Austrian troops' brutal repression of a mass demonstration of workers, women and children, and the replacement of striking workers by Imperial navy sailors during the 1902 strike in Trieste, remained fairly frequent in the Habsburg Empire. Military intervention certainly risked undermining the army's image, but was nevertheless considered to be an indispensable course of action.

Across Europe, state policing policies faced considerable challenges during labour conflicts. As alluded to above, repressive methods and the use of violence varied significantly from country to country. On the whole, states acted in general consideration of the political and social consequences of the excessive and brutal use of weapons against protesters and strikers. Over time, they adopted a more neutral stance with regards to social conflicts and gradually abandoned one-sided positions, thereby helping to defend both the right to strike and the use of blacklegs against violent pickets. The accountability of law enforcement agencies became an increasingly charged political issue, especially during periods when the franchise was being enlarged. However, the more impartial and more moderate tendencies were sometimes counterproductive. For example, in response to escalating social conflicts, insufficient police forces and more moderate attitudes, Italian (as well as French and British) industrialists and landowners started thinking that they should do something to protect themselves where state authorities were either unable or unwilling to intervene.

The deployment and the protection of strikebreakers often went hand in hand. Once police forces started to withdraw from protecting non-unionised workers or to only provide protection on a case by case basis, different forms of private security were organised to substitute or support the limited state protection, their primary *raison d'être* being the protection of private interests.⁴¹ A general definition of private policing includes three 'paradigmatically private functions', namely self-defence, private property and the logic of the free market that sees private guards as simply workers providing a service.⁴² This service could be provided either by recruiting private guards from external agencies, who would provide

40 Anja Johansen, *Soldiers as Police: The French and Prussian Armies and the Policing of Popular Protest, 1889-1914* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 2; Liang, *The Rise of Modern Police*.

41 Barry S. Godfrey and David J. Cox, *Policing the Factory: Theft, Private Policing and the Law in Modern England*, History of Crime, Deviance and Punishment Series (London ; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 105–6; Craig B. Little and Christopher P. Sheffield, 'Frontiers and Criminal Justice: English Private Prosecution Societies and American Vigilantism in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries', *American Sociological Review* 48, no. 6 (1983): 797.

42 David Alan Sklansky, 'The Private Police', *UCLA Law Review*, no. 49 (1999): 1188–89.

their services according to the 'logic of profit'⁴³, or by the company management empowering selected employees.

There was a clear and frequent overlap between the private and the public. Again, the American case stands as a model and offers examples of particular institutions, such as Pennsylvania's Coal and Iron Police and the numerous detective agencies, of which the Pinkerton National Detective Agency is just one but the best known.⁴⁴ One of the most significant examples in Europe was the institution of special constables in Britain, which allowed local judges to swear private citizens in as constables. In times of major unrest, it was not unusual for employers and company management to ask magistrates to swear their clerks and foremen in as special constables to oppose striking blue-collar workers.⁴⁵ We also see this public-private overlap in continental Europe in the other cases analysed here, such as the *Zechenwehren* in Germany and, to a certain degree, the rural guards in the Po Valley. Here, a corps of mounted rural guards was employed by the Society for the Reclamation of Ferrara Lands with the aim of keeping the workers in what has been described as a condition of semi-slavery. In the (apparently) progressive and reformist French Third Republic, companies might have public prerogatives and exercise full control over every aspect of public and private life within their premises. For instance, Eugène Schneider exercised constant control over his workers with a corps of private guards, while the town of Le Creusot, capital of his conglomerate, was kept in a state of almost isolation from its neighbours. The company ran the city council and spied on every aspect of its workers' most intimate activities. The 'mines d'Anzin' were notorious for employing a corps of private guards comprised of former soldiers and policemen.⁴⁶ These practices had the aim of preventing attempts by socialists to organise the workforce as well as state intervention, and contributed to the 'creation' of semi-autonomous zones where the bosses or anonymous companies enforced law and order, ran city councils and organised welfare initiatives. In this context, violence and anti-strike initiatives were considered necessary to enforce company order and keep workers subdued. At the same time, state authorities had no hesitation in intervening to support yellow unions, especially when it came to strategic interests, as in the case of unrest in the maritime and mining sectors.⁴⁷

Armed strikebreakers could also operate without explicit legal recognition and with the same goals as the more institutionalised private police corps, notably self-defence and opposition to union

43 Dominique Kalifa, *Histoire des détectives privés* (Nouveau Monde éditions, 2014), 10–11.

44 Sklansky, 'The Private Police', 1211–18.

45 Chris A. Williams, 'Constables for Hire: The History of Private "Public" Policing in the UK', *Policing and Society* 18, no. 2 (2008): 190–205.

46 Michelle Perrot, *Les ouvrières en grève*, vol. 2 (Paris La Haye: Mouton, 1974), 663–64; Roger Magraw, *France, 1800-1914: A Social History* (Harlow: Longman, 2002), 101.

47 Frank Broeze, 'Militancy and Pragmatism: An International Perspective on Maritime Labour, 1870–1914', *International Review of Social History* 36, no. 2 (1991): 187; Cooper-Richet, Diana, 'Le Plan général de Protection à l'épreuve de la grève des mineurs du Nord-Pas-de-Calais (sept.-nov. 1902)', in *Maintien de l'ordre et polices en France et en Europe au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Créaphis, 1987), 405.

workers on strike. The frequent violent confrontations between striking workers and armed strikebreakers in Austria are indicative of the progressive radicalisation of labour conflicts, even though there were no institutionalised private police in the country. In the Italian case, the shift from rural guards with legally-defined prerogatives to vigilante groups and protection squads of armed strikebreakers illustrates a change in the anti-labour techniques adopted by landowners in response to increasing militancy on the part of the socialist-led unions. Armed strikebreaking groups and private police typically operated on the borders between the legal and extra-legal, drawing their power from the language of the law, but often stepping outside it to perpetrate acts of violence, intimidation and subversion.

These anti-labour practices developed in the context of increasing participation in political and social life. The mushrooming of associations, clubs and organisations during the 'Vereinseuphorie' has been seen as one of the characteristic features of modern politics. A solid literature adopting the view expounded by Alexis de Tocqueville has framed the development of a civil society as a sign of a full and mature democracy.⁴⁸ In fact, the key image arising from the strikebreaking perspective has two aspects to it. The amalgamation of various social forces into organised, easily recognisable associations – from trade unions to employers' associations – helped regulate the confrontations, clarify opposing demands and legitimise social actors. At the same time, it helped radicalise the struggle, paving the way for new fighting strategies (ranging from massive strikes and boycotts to interrelated blacklists and promissory notes, and armed private police) and mitigating the costs of protracted conflicts.⁴⁹ The organisation of opposing interests and the mutual learning of strategies by adversaries elevated the conflict to unprecedented levels. As the Secretary of the Italian Minister of Agriculture, Industry and Trade wrote in 1912, 'the organisations of employers come from those of the workers [...]. These are two forces tied to a single life from two opposite poles, around a single fact: the class struggle'.⁵⁰ Charles Gide invited French employers to organise themselves into strong associations in order to establish an 'armed peace' in accordance with the slogan '*si vis pacem para bellum*'.⁵¹

In an increasingly democratised and mass society, the bitterness of labour conflicts and the high likelihood of violence testified to the interests and values at stake. Even in disputes over wages or working hours, the 'interplay between the actual character of labor conflicts and the representation of them by

48 Nancy Gina Bermeo and Philip G. Nord, eds., *Civil Society before Democracy: Lessons from Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Lanham, Md; Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000); Suzanne Berger and Joint Committee on Western Europe, *Organizing Interests in Western Europe: Pluralism, Corporatism, and the Transformation of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

49 See Alan Baker, *Fraternity among the French Peasantry: Sociability and Voluntary Associations in the Loire Valley, 1815-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Dylan J. Riley, *The Civic Foundations of Fascism in Europe: Italy, Spain, and Romania, 1870-1945* (Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

50 Ministero di agricoltura industria e commercio and Francesco Giannini, *Le Organizzazioni Padronali. Le Agrarie*, vol. 1 (Roma: Officina poligrafica italiana, 1912), 9.

51 Charles Gide, 'Le Droit de Grève', in *Le Droit de Grève: Leçons Professées a l'École Des Hautes Études Sociales*, ed. Charles Gide (Paris: F. Alcan, 1909), 20.

various actors involved' differed substantially.⁵² Principles such as private property, freedom of economic management and productiveness were perceived as being under threat from the spread of unions and working class associations. This perceived threat was intensified by the importance these values had not only for the individual but also for the entire social order. According to one correspondent, Britain's international competitiveness was threatened by the runaway development of unionism.⁵³ Italian landowners in the advanced, highly productive plains of the Po Valley feared that the unionisation of day labourers would bring with it a reduction in profitability as a result of increased wages and shorter working hours. Many saw these developments as nothing less than the quickest road to collectivisation. Such fears were, of course, born of economic systems largely based on exploitation and low wages. In this context, the availability of a reliable, loyal workforce was seen as the best antidote to the unions' seemingly ever-increasing demands. In France, during the period 1901–1909, company profits increase by 24% while wages increased by only 12%. In the mining and metal industries, dividends increased by 50–200% over the same period. Despite this huge growth in their earnings, French employers showed no hesitation in resorting to independent unions to weaken the workers' resistance and rebuff their demands. Many employers saw replacement workers as a means of blocking what they considered to be an illegitimate intrusion into their managerial prerogatives. 'I accept the intervention of *no one* outside the factory in contacts I have with my workers', the arms magnate Schneider was wont to say.⁵⁴ The principle of non-interference also concerned state authorities, even though they played an often crucial role in negotiating some sort of agreement. As a French prefect complained, employers expected the government 'to take measures necessary to assure the maintenance of order', although they did nothing 'to facilitate our task if it requires any financial sacrifice'.⁵⁵ Austrian employers – as Claire Morelon writes in her paper – emphasised their status as taxpayers to justify their moral superiority and to call for the army's intervention in repression. This did not prevent them from being opportunistic and they were unscrupulous in exploiting the workers, playing off the different nationalities against each other.⁵⁶ Alexander Tille, a spokesman for German heavy industry in the Saar, claimed that 'a "social aristocracy" of "productive employers" was called on to defend its prerogatives and the conditions of capitalist profitability against trade unions, irresponsible social reformers, meddle-some political parties, and an interventionist welfare state'.⁵⁷

⁵² Leopold H. Haimson and Eric Brian, 'Introduction', in *Strikes, Wars and Revolutions in an International Perspective: Strike Waves in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries*, ed. Leopold H. Haimson and Charles Tilly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 41.

⁵³ London, *War of classes*, 139.

⁵⁴ Quoted in Magraw, *France, 1800-1914*, 100.

⁵⁵ Gerald Friedman, 'Strike Success and Union Ideology: The United States and France, 1880-1914', *The Journal of Economic History* 48 (1988): 8.

⁵⁶ Jakub S. Beneš, *Workers and Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁵⁷ Sweeney, *Work, Race*, 3.

Against the background of democratic development and ‘progress’, it would be misleading to accuse the Po Valley landowners, the industrialists of eastern and northern France or the British shipping magnates of being premodern, feudal and old-fashioned reactionaries obsessed with the past. In their estates and factories, capitalist market rationality went hand in hand with authoritarian and disciplinarian forms of workforce exploitation, with actual or threatened violence playing a crucial role. Certainly, they saw in the imagined ordered society of the past a dream worthy of being pursued, but they were also well aware of the intrinsically modern features of the time in which they were living. The ‘productivist’ mania that informed their enterprises and the networks of trans-sectorial co-operation testified to this. Retrospectively, they cannot be deemed premodern simply because they despised democracy, quite the opposite in fact. The obsession with private property and employers’ prerogatives was not simply dictated by backwardness and greed, instead it had become a question of social defence.

The issue of strikebreaking, with its mixture of repression and social aspects, exemplifies the complexity and interconnectedness of social and political questions in a period of rapid and profound change and is a useful tool for examining the solidity of state legitimacy and the articulation of social cohesiveness.⁵⁸ During the Great Unrest of 1911–12, the British Liberal government’s efforts to mediate between employers and unionised workers did nothing but foster resentment on both sides. On the one hand, even forms of limited protection of blacklegs enraged the striking workers, while on the other hand, the attempts of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, David Lloyd George, to find some common ground between opposing demands infuriated the employers, although no clear anti-government initiatives resulted from this.⁵⁹ Despite the fact that German authorities ‘had certainly long equated protection of blacklegs with the protection of public order’, in 1891 Chancellor von Bülow refused to intervene in the disputes between Ruhr industrialists and the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD) ‘because it was not in the general interest’.⁶⁰ At the same time, private-public cooperation did not result in bloody conflicts. During the coal strike of 1905, Hamborn town council allowed August Thyssen to arm his ‘mine officials with revolvers and night sticks’. Company officials at other mines were also armed. With the *Zechenwehren*, which had been established through a solid alliance and cooperation between employers and state authorities, the show of force played a much greater role than in its actual use. There were no incidents or disorder, since state authorities and company management always stressed the importance of avoiding the use of guns ‘because of the public furore that would result’.⁶¹ In

⁵⁸ Eley, *Forging Democracy*, 76.

⁵⁹ James E. Cronin, ‘Strikes and Power in Britain, 1870-1920’, in *Strikes, Wars and Revolutions in an International Perspective: Strike Waves in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries*, ed. Leopold H. Haimson and Charles Tilly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 97. See also Geoffrey Alderman, ‘The National Free Labour Association. A Case-Study of Organised Strikebreaking in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century’, *International Review of Social History*, no. 21 (1976): 326.

⁶⁰ Bo Stråth, *The Organisation of Labour Markets: Modernity, Culture and Governance in Germany, Sweden, Britain and Japan* (London: Routledge, 1996), 35..

⁶¹ Elaine Glovka Spencer, *Management and Labor in Imperial Germany: Ruhr Industrialists as Employers, 1896-1914* (New Brunswick, NJ; London: Rutgers University Press, 1984), 126.

France, new protectionist tariffs and a sort of social imperialism co-opted new economic sectors and may have anaesthetised the social conflict, while rights to association and welfare policies were the counterpart that benefitted workers. Although these strategies probably did not achieve the desired results, they helped reinforce the republican myth among the working classes; nevertheless, the close connections between industrialists and state elites posed a constant challenge to the republican compromise.⁶² In other countries, relatively weak reforms were sufficient to fuel subversive anti-democratic aspirations. In Austria, the overlap between social and national questions risked challenging the effectiveness of policing during social conflicts, and there were frequent deadly confrontations between protesters and Austrian police and military forces. Although the rule of law and the ‘constitutional framework’ were generally accepted, social reality was much more ‘illiberal’ in reality and at the local level.⁶³ At the same time, there were intransigent and authoritarian circles in the general staff, the diplomatic corps and the aristocracy who perceived this weak liberalism and constitutionalism as a dangerous threat to the Empire’s cohesiveness and its status as a great power. This disdain was also shared, albeit for opposite reasons, by the most radical nationalist circles.⁶⁴ In Italy, despite the existence of quite brutal attitudes compared with other European countries, the perceived inability to provide effective protection contributed to delegitimising the ruling elites. Agreements between employers and unions became increasingly difficult to achieve and often resulted in deadlock, while state mediation was often seen as ineffective, illegitimate and even dangerous by both sides of the social spectrum. This contributed to unleashing bourgeois resistance, which took the form of armed strikebreaking.

Despite its retrospective positive image, the period between the 1880s and the outbreak of the First World War was characterised by intrinsic contradictions. The policing policies and strategies that were drawn up and implemented in order to manage increasingly complicated disputes were progressively characterised by only limited recourse to brutal repression due to the danger that this would pose to state legitimacy. This went hand in hand with the general passing of social legislation and granting of new social and political rights – from the right to strike and the right of association to the enlargement of the franchise. No matter how limited they appear in terms of their scope and effect, these transformations went beyond the purely formal and juridical and contributed to the growing conflicting expectations and

⁶² Sanford Elwitt, *The Third Republic Defended: Bourgeois Reform in France, 1880- 1914* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986); Friedman, ‘Strike Success and Union Ideology: The United States and France, 1880-1914’, 21; Magraw, *France, 1800-1914: A Social History*, 99–103.

⁶³ Laurence Cole, ‘Visions and Revisions of Empire: Reflections on a New History of the Habsburg Monarchy’, *Austrian History Yearbook* 49 (April 2018): 261–80.

⁶⁴ Pieter M. Judson, *The Habsburg Empire* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2016), 383–84. See also Solomon Wank, ‘Pessimism in the Austrian Establishment at the Turn of the Century’, in *The Mirror of History: Essays in Honor of Fritz Fellner*, ed. Solomon Wank et al. (Santa Barbara, 1988), 295–314.

fears, which had the potential to significantly challenge liberal democracies. The universal tendency of the state to guarantee the rights of all its citizens in order to gain the necessary legitimacy to rule clashed with the self-organised social corps, such as the unions and the employers' associations. Many among the propertied and even the working classes – for example, those in company unions or among the *juannes* – started to believe that the granting of universal social and political rights posed a potential threat to the entire social order. In this respect, the increase not only in political conflicts but also in labour and social struggles seen in Austria around the granting of universal suffrage (1907) is significant.

Far from creating a broader consensus and a pacified society, the combination of mass politics and more moderate policing policies actually contributed to the spread of insecurity and fear of revolution among significant sectors of the ruling classes. Some radical employers, die-hard industrialists and technocratic managers began to see a need to ensure absolute control over the workforce and to believe that the social order should be less passively defended. Guaranteeing both the right to strike and the right to work was a huge challenge for state law enforcement agencies, and their inability to fully achieve this ambitious goal opened the way to the creation of private police outfits and armed strikebreaking groups. This raises the issue of the reconfiguration of the private and public domains during an era of profound changes both in politics and in society. Radical and basically anti-government groups may form where there is a lack of state legitimacy, as demonstrated by the Volunteer Workers in Italy. At the same time, the case of the German *Zeichenwehren* analysed by Amerigo Caruso should make us wary of too hastily making correlations between private policing and a state that lacks legitimacy.⁶⁵ The regulated delegation of powers from the state to society and forms of 'taking justice in hand' are two opposing positions implicit in the difficult balance between the protection of rights and the need for security. As evidenced by the intervention of the army as a strikebreaker in public service strikes in France, Austria and Italy, governments were ready to directly intervene to sustain production in sectors considered vital for national interests. The need to avoid damaging the national economy and security was a duty that overrode individual rights and sectorial prerogatives. As Alessandro Saluppo's article shows, in an international context characterised by increasing tensions, the obsession with the precariousness of social foundations and with national security contributed to the establishment of international networks of employers' associations and strikebreaking agencies, to the point that the social enemy became a plausible common foe that could override conflicting national interests and foster different forms of capitalist solidarity and cooperation.

The development of private police corps, armed strikebreaking groups and counter-unions also challenges deterministic interpretations that directly connect the development of economic capitalism and mass society with progress, peace and democracy. Somewhat reminiscent of Karl Popper's paradox

⁶⁵ Wilbur R. Miller, 'A State within "The States": Private Policing and Delegation of Power in America', *Crime, History & Societies* 17, no. 2 (2013): 127.

of tolerance, Italian historian Raffaele Romanelli described liberal societies as being inherently threatened by the so-called paradox of the ‘impossible command’, according to which citizens cannot be ordered to be free. It follows that greater liberties and rights may undermine traditional state authorities and unleash authoritarian forces rather than establish more democratic standards.⁶⁶ In the face of ‘democratisation waves’ and societies becoming increasingly organised, it became more and more difficult to find a balance between ‘order’ and ‘freedom’. Where social and labour conflicts erupted, strikebreaking and private police intervention represented a first response. Here, the state played a multifaceted role: if, in Germany, the *Zechenwehren* were legitimised through the delegation of power from the authorities, Italian landowners and British shipping companies were ready to take up arms to defend their interests. These examples of armed strikebreaking and (semi-)private policing raise the question as to whether productivity and actual democratisation were possible within the legal and political boundaries of constitutional democracies. Whether armed strikebreaking represented a means of support or a threat to state authorities, many employers (and even workers) were ready to use weapons to defend their visions of an ordered society, work discipline, immutable social hierarchies and economic efficiency and productivity.

The question of whether or not they succeeded could only be answered after the turmoil of the Great War. The unparalleled levels of violence in post-1918 Europe led to the emergence of strikebreaking groups, civic guards and auxiliary police forces, which were established to counter the kind of social unrest to which the myth of the Soviet revolution gave new impetus. This was the case for the Supply and Transport Committee, the Industrial Unrest Committee and various strikebreaking organisations in the United Kingdom, the *Einwohnerwehren* and the Technical Emergency Corps in post-war Germany, the Unions Civiques in France and – to a certain extent – the fascist action squads in Italy, flanked by more extemporaneous strikebreaking groups. Taking into consideration the armed mobilisation of anti-labour groups in the pre-war period may help us to describe the extent to which civil, social and political rights and democratic political cultures were entrenched in European societies or instead made authoritarian dreams plausible.

Acknowledgments

This special issue came out of the PREWARAs research project, ‘The Dark Side of the Belle Époque. Political Violence and Armed Associations in Europe Before the First World War’, which is generously supported by the European Research Council (GA 677199) and is based at the Università degli Studi di Padova, Italy (2016–2021). From the very beginning, one of the driving principles behind the project has

⁶⁶ See Raffaele Romanelli, *Il comando impossibile: Stato e società nell’Italia liberale* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1988).

been to offer a broad comparative overview of the role, impact and consequences of armed associationism in Western Europe during the so-called Belle Époque, that is, to rethink the relationship between democracy and violence. The research team is made up of four postdoctoral researchers working on Germany (Amerigo Caruso), Austria-Hungary (Claire Morelon), France (Romain Bonnet) and the United Kingdom (Alessandro Saluppo), and one doctoral student (Assumpta Castillo Cañiz) working on the Iberian Peninsula. Special thanks are due to my colleague Giulia Albanese for the support, advice and help she has given from the outset. It has been a privilege for me to conduct research with all of these people. Although two of the researchers are now working elsewhere and it was not possible to include their work on France and the Iberian Peninsula, the articles in this special issue reflect our common efforts. Each author has sought to answer the same research questions and to relate the specificity of each case study to the broader European context. We are all, therefore, particularly grateful to the *European History Quarterly* for having agreed to host our common efforts in this special issue. We hope that the interplays, interconnections and comparisons arising from our ambitious task may satisfy readers and perhaps prompt them to think afresh about consolidated chronologies and topics.