

No Interests in Common: Sabotage as Structural Analysis

Author(s): R. H. Lossin

Source: *Journal for the Study of Radicalism*, 2021, Vol. 15, No. 1 (2021), pp. 75-108

Published by: Michigan State University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.14321/jstudradi.15.1.0075>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Michigan State University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Journal for the Study of Radicalism*

JSTOR

No Interests in Common

Sabotage as Structural Analysis

*Sabotage is a little word,
Easily said and easily heard,
Expresses much and means disaster
When properly used against the master.*

*Sabotage is a thing that's banned,
By labor fakirs throughout the land,
By rebel workers used for ages
To make the bosses increase wages*

*Sabotage can always be used
To gain justice when workers are abused:
Bad bosses, too, are tamed in a day
When a little sab kitten strays their way.*

*If the strength of sabotage you should doubt,
There are many ways of finding out,
And if you think that is a lie,
Ask pickhandle Johnson or Governor Spry.¹*

“Sabotage” by Herbert Mahler,
Industrial Worker, 16 April 1916

Very few workers went to jail for committing acts of sabotage but thousands were arrested for talking about it. The practice of sabotage was not new, but the word was, and there was something distinctly threatening about naming the disparate, rebellious practices of disgruntled workers. Sabotage gave an intellectual coherence and revolutionary meaning

to activity that could easily be interpreted as irrational, impulsive, and apolitical. Much like the Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.), it organized the disorganized and legitimated what appeared illegitimate. It also became a lightning rod for legal repression. Following the 1913 silk workers' strike in Patterson, New Jersey, Frederick Sumner Boyd was tried for sedition, in part because he urged workers to incapacitate looms with vinegar. Boyd's trial inspired a heated defense of sabotage as "the guerilla warfare of the working class."² Elizabeth Gurley Flynn's pamphlet, "Sabotage," a direct response to the charges against Boyd, was one of many writings by I.W.W. organizers and worker intellectuals advocating sabotage as a nonviolent form of worker control and a legitimate means of coercion.³ Property destruction had long been a regular occurrence during labor conflicts in the United States, but its open defense was a disturbing novelty.

Sabotage literature consisted of songs, poems, allusions to "sab kittens," and endless images of black cats and wooden shoes. Its traces were everywhere. A handful of pamphlets functioned as the intellectual core of this discourse. They were not numerous, but they were among the I.W.W.'s most widely distributed literature.⁴ Sabotage was a sophisticated analysis of class conflict, presented in simple terms that was sung, recited, printed, stickered, and drawn across the complex landscape of American syndicalist thought. And it did not go unnoticed by the public at large. First mentioned in 1907, worker sabotage continued to generate headlines in major newspapers well into the 1920s.⁵

Sabotage, as both a theory and a practice, encompassed a critique of property, industrial progress, efficiency, and centralized bureaucratic control that enriched understandings of class conflict in the industrialized United States of the early twentieth century. It destabilized the well-established association between industrial efficiency and social progress by negatively reimagining that progress as something external to technological development and productive capacity. Indeed, it suggested that social progress would be achieved by the *interruption* of industrial progress, the disruption of production and the violation of property rights. Sabotage inverted one of modernity's foundational myths: "the story of the industrial revolution . . . as the triumph of new techniques, and the inevitable march of progress."⁶ According to Walker Smith, editor of *The Industrial Worker*, the word "sabotage" was so terrifying that the employer class did not even want to utter it for fear that the working

class would learn what it was.⁷ This would appear to be true. Legal efforts to literally take the word out of circulation through the passage of state-level laws that made speaking or writing about “sabotage” a felony, began in earnest with the U.S. entrance into World War I.

Workers in the United States clearly knew what sabotage was before it was named and they continued to employ it after the term fell out of fashion. They had flooded mines, set fire to rail yards, disabled engines, and variously rebelled against attempts by owners to increase and deskill production. Sabotage had been, and would continue to be, a relatively common occurrence during labor disputes. It was normal practice for journeymen to avoid exceeding stints by removing parts of the machine that they were using. The International Association of Bridge and Structural Ironworkers (I.A.B.S.I.W.) carried out a prolonged dynamiting campaign that resulted in the destruction of at least 80 worksites and culminated in the bombing of the *Los Angeles Times* in 1910. Workers smashed looms during the Lawrence Textile strike in 1912. During the trial of William Haywood and nearly 100 other I.W.W. members in 1917 dissatisfied, itinerant farm laborers testified to the destruction of farm equipment and loggers and mill hands recounted the many ways to ruin lumber. In 1937 workers turned off refrigeration at Newton Meat Packing Co. destroying \$170,000.00 worth of meat. Explosions were more or less the central negotiating strategy in the unionization of irregular, overland trucking by Detroit teamsters. The Teamsters unions maintained this tradition of property destruction, setting up roving pickets and disabling nonunion trucks attempting to enter Detroit in 1970. Greg Shotwell’s account of union organizing in southwestern Michigan opens with following anecdote: “A foreman who was new told us to get up and get to work. ‘Right now,’ he said ‘I’m the boss.’ We said ‘Yes, sir boss.’ We went right to work. Thirty minutes later, every machine in the department was down. Then skilled trades came out, tore the machines apart, left parts all over the floor, and went off to look for the missing parts. They didn’t come back.”⁸

Although organized labor does not—and indeed its more “legitimate” organs never did—officially endorse sabotage as a negotiating tactic or a form of worker control at the point of production, sabotage has always been an important weapon in the workers’ arsenal.⁹ In light of this, the absence of a literature on sabotage is intriguing.¹⁰ Smith’s formulation of sabotage as too dangerous to mention was clearly intended to lend the word a certain

cachet, but the observation also has enduring analytical value and seems to be born out in the tortured efforts of historians to excise the word from the I.W.W.'s history.

Writings on sabotage may have fallen victim to what E. P. Thompson called the "extreme condescension of posterity." Laura Weinrib, for example, has remarked that "theory of any type was never a Wobbly strong suit."¹¹ Indeed, writings on sabotage were playful and flamboyant and remain difficult to square with academic sensibilities, but they were also serious works of political economy. The effort to distance the organization from a word that became the focus of federal prosecutors and widespread public hysteria is another explanation for minimizing the word's importance. This legitimating move resulted in an overcorrection by careful and sympathetic chroniclers of the I.W.W. that has produced its own significant and lasting blind spots.

Recent literature on the I.W.W. has greatly expanded our understanding of the organization through the careful study of local organizing drives as well as the organization's international composition and influence.¹² But the New Left framing of sabotage has remained intact. Melvyn Dubofsky argued that sabotage was *only* an attention-grabbing tactic and that its use has caused lasting confusion in studies of the I.W.W.. The idea that bloodshed and destruction followed the dangerous hobo Wobbly, he argues, "died hard because I.W.W. rhetoric and songs fed the myth of the Wobbly as a wild and wooly warrior."¹³ The reality, he writes, is that "Wobblies did not carry bombs, nor burn harvest fields, nor destroy timber, nor depend upon the machine that works with a trigger."¹⁴ But in 1914 the ninth annual convention of the I.W.W. passed a unanimous resolution instructing all speakers to recommend both slowdowns and sabotage.¹⁵

Philip Foner likewise suggested that the promotion of sabotage coincided with the organizations' focus on the free speech fights waged between 1907 and 1916 in the western portion of the United States. The word, he notes, stopped appearing in official publications in 1917 at the same time that the I.W.W. decided to devote its resources to widespread strikes in war industries, in particular lumber. The implication here is that sabotage was, as Dubofsky claimed, a popular topic for soapbox speakers rather than a useful tactic and that it became unimportant, or even disappeared, after 1917 when the I.W.W. matured into a more effective organization. The consensus that sabotage was a passing rhetorical fad ignores what is difficult to prove but

easy to infer. Sabotage was popular and Walker Smith's pamphlet "Sabotage" was being advertised in the *Industrial Worker* as late as December of 1916. Joseph Murphey, who didn't join the organization until 1919, recalled that "although organizing and teaching was a very good way of persuading people, you could not get along without the good old wooden shoe." He and his fellow Wobblies would recite a poem reminding them "how to resist John Farmer":

If freedom's road seems rough and hard
and strewn with rocks and thorns
Just put your wooden shoes on pard,
and you won't hurt your corns.¹⁶

In addition to demonstrating the continued importance of sabotage, Murphey's anecdote suggests that the I.W.W.'s well-established oral tradition makes it unlikely that the removal of a word from a newspaper had much of an impact on that word's use by its membership.

The argument that Foner puts forth for minimizing the role of sabotage in the activities of the I.W.W. is similar to Dubofsky's: "it is easy to be carried away by slogans, songs and stories of sabotage, and it is extremely difficult to separate rhetoric from practice."¹⁷ But it should be noted that this is only a problem if "separating rhetoric from practice" is the operational framework for analysis. Even if instances of sabotage by I.W.W. members are difficult to locate and impossible to positively quantify, it is in no way misleading to give pride of place to an idea that was, if briefly, central to the writings, speeches and overall project of the I.W.W. itself.¹⁸ Although positive proof of its occurrence might demonstrate its tactical importance in a particular dispute, the announcement of its mere, incalculable existence arguably had a political effect far greater than any single strike and its use—even if it was "just talk"—was significant.¹⁹ It can be argued that the word "sabotage" was the only difference between machine wrecking in 1910 and machine wrecking in 1890. Most important, it was a difference introduced to the United States by members of the I.W.W.. To diminish its significance in the service of evidentiary "truth" requires ignoring what these historical subjects were actually saying—repeatedly and with force.

The particular formulation of sabotage by French syndicalists that was taken up and modified by I.W.W. leaders was distinguished by several ideas, one of which was an insistence on its theoretical importance. The historian's impulse to separate rhetoric from practice therefore contradicts one of the central arguments

put forth in the theory of sabotage itself. This idea is clearly articulated by Arturo Giovannitti, the Italian-born I.W.W. organizer who translated Emile Pouget's 1896 pamphlet "Sabotage" from the French. In the introduction to the English version published by the I.W.W., Giovannitti notes that "sabotage is a certain simple thing which is more or less generally practiced. . . . [It only] becomes a monstrous thing, a crime and a blasphemy when it is openly advocated and advised."²⁰ Rather than insisting that sabotage needs to be proven in order to have significance, we should take sabotage seriously as an idea that retrospectively organized a range of rebellious worker activity. Not because ideas necessarily have a material and historical force of their own but because they are—and this applies in particular to sabotage—both generated by practice and real in their effects. Revolutionary slogans are "a kind of lifeline between writing and politics" that have the ability to move mere language into the realm of the real.²¹ Given the revolutionary intentions of the I.W.W., sabotage—even if it was just a theory—was not ancillary to their project but absolutely central to their efforts to mobilize workers towards the horizon of the general strike. Reflecting on the organization's influence, Foner notes that "although the I.W.W.'s membership was small, 'as a spirit and vocabulary [it] permeates to a large extent enormous masses of workers,'" and the same logic might be applied to this word.²² If we think of the I.W.W.'s history as a "telling and making at once," we can see that it was using sabotage to rewrite the moral, political, and economic history of the United States and that this revision was central to its revolutionary project.²³

Sabotage was compelling to marginalized, precarious workers for a number of reasons. Its etymology suggests that Pouget's choice to use the word sabotage, rather than its Scottish equivalent *Ca'Canny* (an older term of which he was aware), was a conscious act of reappropriation.²⁴ The popular, but false, etymology of sabotage is evocative. Workers, the story goes, would throw their "sabots" or wooden shoes into a machine causing it to come to a halt. The word "sabotage" is indeed derived from wooden shoes, but the relationship between *sabots* and rebellion is not nearly so theatrical. Prior to its use by syndicalists, the word simply referred to the fabrication of wooden shoes. In the late nineteenth century "sabots" was turned into an epithet for the unskilled workers who wore them and took on the connotation of poorly executed work.²⁵ The precise way that it tied revolutionary theory to everyday practices and linked these practices to a population ignored by established craft unions, would have made it appealing to an organization that saw the intellectual development and

political education of its marginalized membership as crucial to its on-the-ground organizing efforts. And, unlike other theories aimed at nurturing the class-consciousness of workers, sabotage was also simply a practice that was already in effect. It offered the I.W.W. a way of teaching political economy and revolutionary theory that didn't violate the intellectual autonomy of its workers because it described, rather than prescribed, their actions. Sabotage depended on this very autonomy—on the workers' ability to discern the proper forms of interference in their particular work environment. It assumed the expertise of a class that was generally described as “unskilled.” It legitimated the tactics as well as the knowledge of *les sabots*. It also provided a way for a worker's daily resistance to rise to the level of theory—for individual actions to become, through their very enactment, part of a revolutionary program—without any program of action being imposed from above. The “particulars” of sabotage, Pouget wrote, “must issue from the temperament and initiative of each one of you and are subordinate to the various industries.”²⁶

The Critique of Property

Of the many things that sabotage could mean in practice, costly property damage and machine wrecking was certainly among them. Mike Davis argued that the reason for “continued agitation around the idea of the workers' right to employ retaliatory property destruction as a tactic, whether actually used or not, was to demystify the sanctity of property and teach workers the methods of protracted struggle.”²⁷ Sabotage, even when only threatened “taught an invaluable lesson in political economy.”²⁸ What I.W.W. pamphleteers and orators did by advocating sabotage was to translate the socialist claim that workers *should* own the means of production into the simple claim that they *did* own them and could therefore act on this presumption with justification. Property destruction was more than justifiable retaliation—in this scheme it was the assertion of preexisting, if not legally recognized, property rights. It might have been “legal for the bourgeoisie to keep [the instruments of production] in accordance to its own laws” but they had in fact been pilfered from the working class: “If it is just and right to force the capitalist to grant us certain concessions by withdrawing our labor and remaining inactive, why is it not equally just to render equally inactive our own machines, made by our own selves?”²⁹

Sabotage was, as Davis points out, a critique of property relations, but it was also a set of recommendations. It was a form of strong-arming that could be implemented when strikes failed and workers returned to work. It offered a type of rebellion that was sometimes more desirable than a walkout if replacement workers were readily available and could be implemented by individuals and small groups in the absence of widespread organization. Its most visible iterations are not, therefore, an accurate means of assessing its occurrence. Sabotage was certainly not *the* way to win the class war, but it was more than a pedagogical tool. The *Industrial Worker* repeatedly encouraged it and occasionally gave specific instructions. One small item suggests that emery or any other gritty substance such as sand or glass will cause bearings to heat, and soap or washing powder will disable a boiler. It warns that putting lye in a boiler will only “benefit the boss by removing the scale.”³⁰ Presumably this is meant to correct a piece of circulating misinformation and it does not seem unreasonable to infer that disabling boilers was a common enough practice that at least one worker had screwed it up. The *Industrial Worker* also gleefully reported that the Socialist Party’s recent membership clause banning sabotage was violated when arc light wires of the Pacific Gas and Electric Company were cut during an electrical workers strike in San Francisco.³¹ The paper reported incidents of stalled trains with boilers full of oil, encouraged lumber workers to spike timber, and insisted that the threat spiking posed to the sawyers was invented by someone who had never seen a sawmill.

Sabotage was, in the final analysis, justified as a legitimate response to an inherently illegitimate system of property claims. “Imagine,” wrote Louis Moreau in 1911, “the accidental breaking of machinery or costly tools. Bum work. . . . Deliberate blunders, delays, blockading of the means of transportation: in fact thousands of devices can be used to create havoc. . . . If we cannot get all we produce, why let others have it?”³²

Defining Sabotage and Using Sabotage

Sabotage made its way into the American vocabulary by 1907 at the latest—two years after the founding convention of the I.W.W. was held in Chicago.³³ It appeared in both *Solidarity* and the *Industrial Worker* for the first time in 1910. In 1913 it was the subject of a 13-part article. A whole set of direct

action tactics were brought together under the rubric “sabotage” and given an intellectual coherence and revolutionary meaning they had heretofore lacked. It also transformed the lack of a union contract into an asset. Unlike trade-unionists, I.W.W. members were not hamstrung by agreements that obligated workers to, in effect, protect employer property.

At the level of individual actions, sabotage was an impossibly capacious category. Quoting a pamphlet on its English predecessor, the “Go Canny,” Pouget wrote that it consisted in “systematically applying the formula: ‘Bad wages, bad labour.’” The following example from an 1889 railwaymen’s strike—which Pouget claimed was the first manifestation of sabotage *as* sabotage in France—was an open threat by the union to “put the locomotives in such a condition as to make it impossible to run them.”³⁴ Sabotage was, in one example, precisely what it is typically understood to be: “a little sand or emery in the gear of those machines which like fabulous monsters mark the exploitation of the workers,” to render them “palsied and useless.”³⁵ In another example, sabotage was merely pickets to prevent the circulation of trains. Or the changing of patterns before a strike in a fur factory. Printers could send uncorrected proofs to print and mix up cases of type. Wasting materials was another means of sabotage, reportedly practiced by Parisian bill posters who added tallow candles to their paste and used twice as much as was necessary. Painters could dilute and condense colors and anyone in a service industry or professional position could practice open mouth sabotage by announcing to consumers the “frauds and trickeries” of their employers.

Smith referred to what amounted to a slowdown pegged to wages. Because of a widespread practice of sabotage in England, “the brick masons there,” he recounted, “lay, as a day’s work, less than one third the number of brick required from their brother craftsmen in America. Any reduction in pay is met with a counter reduction in the work.”³⁶ Workers could clock in and out for fellow workers; or the time clock itself might “have the unaccountable habit of getting out of order.”³⁷ Sabotage could thus be a secret show of solidarity amongst workers. It could also be symbolic and even whimsical. Smith gives us an account of a farmer who, having replaced a striking crew, visits his farm to find that the union men he had unknowingly hired had planted “1000 young trees . . . upside down, their roots waving to the breeze as mute evidence of solidarity and sabotage.” Or, a “gang of section men working on a railroad” might respond to a cut in their wages by having “two inches cut

from the scoops” of their shovels and return to work with the proclamation “short pay, short shovels.”³⁸ It was reported that during a strike in California’s Imperial Valley, “every car on the local sidetrack Tuesday night, had its air hose cut. I.W.W. labels were also pasted on every glass of the many paned windows of the passenger depot.”³⁹

Apocryphal or not, the examples were both vindicating and plausible. Whether carried out by a group or an individual “by reason of his strong class desires,” sabotage was an expression of working class solidarity and “working class solidarity is simply the result of a consciousness of power.”⁴⁰ In self-reinforcing fashion, practicing sabotage allowed workers to experience this power. So although “sabotage may mean the direct destruction of property” or “indirect destruction through organized inefficiency” or, conversely “may proceed from a greater degree of efficiency than is desired by the employing class” the thing that made it sabotage and not vandalism was its “power to solidify labor.” The practice itself gave way to “a consciousness of economic might [that] springs from the knowledge . . . that employers have no force save that given by the labor of the slave class.”⁴¹

Jack Miller, an itinerant agricultural laborer, explained how sabotage could be used by workers to control the length of their workday. For Miller, the distinction between the “conscious withdrawal of efficiency” and the destruction of property was immaterial. Interrupting the rhythm of machinery by disabling it *was* the withdrawal of efficiency: “Sabotage meant the conscious withdrawal of worker efficiency. You might be working on a threshing machine. If you threw the bundles fast and in a certain way, there would be a lot of waste. Teeth in the machine might get broken off and the stacker could get clogged. The farmer saw that he would get less wheat in twelve hours than he could get in eight if we were working with more efficiency.”⁴²

Flynn likewise argued that sabotage was “the withdrawal of worker efficiency” in any form: “Sabotage means either to slacken up and interfere with the quantity, or to botch in your skill and interfere with the quality . . . or to give poor service.”⁴³ But in the end, sabotage could not be precisely delineated. There could be no program of sabotage properly speaking because it was always contingent. “I have not given you a rigidly defined thesis on sabotage,” Flynn wrote, “. . . because sabotage is in the process of making. Sabotage itself is not clearly defined. Sabotage is as broad and changing as industry, as flexible as the imagination and passions of humanity. Every day

workingmen and women are discovering new forms of sabotage, and the stronger their rebellious imagination is the more sabotage they are going to develop.”⁴⁴ To lay out a program of sabotage would be as pointless as laying out a program for production in all industries or defining invention once and for all.

What differentiated these activities from commonplace mischief and vandalism was their class feeling. Although from the perspective of legal authority, this sensibility did not need to be particularly evolved. Long before Pouget “baptized” sabotage, the French penal code recognized the threat and distinguished between vandalism generally and the destruction of an employer’s property by an employee, assigning to the latter a much more severe sentence.⁴⁵ But according to Pouget, sabotage was something of a different order entirely. It is slightly, but crucially different from intentional destruction and inefficiency for the sake of leverage in a localized dispute. In 1881, telegraph operators in France had cut off all telegraphic connections, but this was the result of a “sullen anger” that had begun to “circulate among them” and caused them to resort to a “trick.” Only after the CGT’s “theoretical consecration” in 1895, did sabotage “take its place amongst the other means of social warfare.” Only when it was conceptually shifted into the register of a class conscious action did it become, in the words of Giovannitti, “a monstrous thing.” Or as Flynn put it, “Everything is ‘against the law’ once it becomes large enough for the law to take cognizance that it is in the best interests of the working class.”⁴⁶

Worker Sabotage and Capitalist Sabotage: A Critique of Violence

What distinguished sabotage from vandalism and even instrumentalized destruction and interference in general, was its announcement or “baptism” as a source of working-class power. Sabotage, in its various practical forms, was elaborated into a theory through one central and predictable distinction—the working class and the capitalist class. Because of its precise location in workers’ interactions with the instruments of production, sabotage distilled these otherwise abstract categories into material terms. Articles, pamphlets, songs, and poems about sabotage not only threatened mischief, they effectively reduced class difference, class interest, and class conflict to an

easily imaginable set of activities: “worker sabotage” and “capitalist sabotage.” This binary conceptualization allowed for the succinct elaboration of the central tenets of a Marxist theory of class while simultaneously identifying concrete examples of employer exploitation and suggesting immediate ways to assert working-class power.

The categories of worker and capitalist sabotage also offered a sophisticated analysis of how violence was defined and deployed under capitalism. Worker sabotage was a particular form of violence that restricted itself to “inert” property and defined itself against—indeed offered itself as an antidote to—the often unacknowledged, inherent violence of capitalism. In suggesting these terms, Pouget outlined what we would now refer to as “structural violence”: “The detractors and slanderers of the working class were never scandalised and never show any anger against another sort of sabotage truly criminal, monstrous and abominable, which is the very life essence of modern society: the sabotage of the capitalists which reaps human victims and deprives men of their health by sticking like a leech at the very sources of life.”⁴⁷

Worker sabotage only appeared violent against the backdrop of an economic system dependent on wars, cheap goods, and disposable labor. By opposing the categories of worker and capitalist sabotage, the I.W.W. offered an analysis of objective violence and in the same breath—the same word—a strategy for interrupting the smooth functioning of this catastrophic apparatus. It also applied the logic offered by this schema repeatedly in articles with headlines such as “Violence is Legal for Bosses; Illegal for Workers” and articles justifying theft through similar inversions of common sense understandings of ownership.⁴⁸ The category of capitalist sabotage showed how intentional, specific and “subjective” the systemic violence of capitalism actually was.⁴⁹ And it did this by enumerating the bodily injuries and deaths of workers and showing that it was, in fact, performed by a clearly identifiable agent. It named systemic or objective violence and in so doing assigned to it a subjective character—that of the “the boss.” Individual acts of violence are appealing in their way because their causes are identifiable, finite, and therefore subject to correction. By defining capitalist sabotage, the I.W.W. not only made the tacit, “everyday resistance” of workers visible, it made the tacit, “everyday” forms of capitalist control visible as well. This went beyond the symbolic challenge that James C. Scott ascribes to visible political resistance. In offering a framework for such a reversal, sabotage presented something

that was indeed “monstrous” to its targets: a clear announcement of the violence that inhered in the smooth functioning of capitalist production and a declaration of workers’ ability to disrupt it without detection. Sabotage was thus a symbolic threat of continued tacit rebellion.⁵⁰

Worker sabotage, as one anonymous pamphlet defined it, was “anything that the worker, acting for his class interests, can do at the point of production or distribution to hamper the processes by which profit is made and capital perpetuated and increased.”⁵¹ These actions, however, were not without limits. Worker sabotage was emphatically nonviolent if, that is, violence could be limited to harming persons; “It never results in the loss of life or limb.”⁵² The nonviolent character of worker sabotage was constantly reiterated.⁵³ “The workers strongly insist,” wrote Pouget, “on the specific character of sabotage which consists in hurting the boss not the consumer.” In many cases sabotage was arguably in the service of the consumer, who was not so much exploited as extorted by the capitalist class. “Open mouth” sabotage was particularly effective in this regard; druggists and workers in the food industry should be sabotaging their bosses by announcing the myriad ways that food and pharmaceuticals are adulterated. Indeed, Pouget suggests that *not* engaging in this form of sabotage is a sort of criminal negligence: “It is indeed deplorable to notice how often the workers lend themselves to the most abominable tricks against their brothers and to the detriment of public health in general, without their realizing the great responsibility that befalls them for actions which, though not within the criminal law, nevertheless do not cease to be crimes.”⁵⁴

That which does not fall “within the criminal law” yet does not cease to be a crime is an apt description of what French and American syndicalists dubbed “capitalist sabotage.” Like its working-class counterpart, it encompassed a broad range of activities as well as failures or refusals to act at all. The term “capitalist sabotage” was assigned to a range of common practices by business owners so widespread and unexceptional that they collectively appeared normal, even natural.

The phrase “capitalist sabotage” was, in these formulations, almost redundant. Capitalists, so the arguments went, can’t actually run businesses without sabotage.⁵⁵ The crucial difference between the two forms of sabotage was not tactical or formal. Capitalist sabotage was, like its workerist variant, dependent on restriction, reduction, and interference. Nor was the difference

strictly economic, even though capitalists were in a position to capture surplus value whereas workers could only reduce it. The primary distinction between the two was that of violence: capitalist sabotage caused harm to people—both workers and consumers—rather than property. Thus renaming industrial accidents as “capitalist sabotage” pointed to and subjectivized the systemic violence of capitalism—violence that was ignored in part through an obsessive attention to the apparently subjective violence of the workers. The repeated condemnation of the workers’ sabotage “against inert, painless and lifeless things” functioned as a means of maintaining a definition of violence that was not only class-based, but solidly in the register of the “subjective.” That is, identifiable instances of violence that, because of the agents’ relative social position as workers, ruptured the social fabric and threatened the integrity of the legal foundation upon which this other structural violence was constructed—structural violence, in the face of which “the detractors and slanderers of the working class were never scandalized.”⁵⁶ Renaming the systemic violence of capitalism as “capitalist sabotage” allowed for an enumeration of activities that shifted the normal function of business from the objective, background conditions of social organization—that which “constitutes the element in which this society breathes”—into a subjective register.⁵⁷

Capitalist sabotage included much more than the aforementioned adulteration of pharmaceuticals. Pouget provided a long list of the “saboteurs” toward which the bourgeoisie remained largely “impassive” and “indifferent.” It included bakers who adulterate flour, iron and steel barons who built faulty and weak boilers for warships, building and railway contractors, furniture and chemical fertilizer makers. All captains of industry were saboteurs “because all trick, fake, adulterate, defraud, and swindle.”⁵⁸ From the injuries “inflicted by capitalist sabotage,” he dramatically concluded “it is human blood which gushes out in streams.”⁵⁹

Smith provided a litany of capitalist sabotage as well and even extended his analysis into the realm of speech.⁶⁰ Emphasizing the importance of propagandizing to both camps he wrote that “several of the so-called ‘muck-raking’ magazines have been forced to suspend through use of sabotage.”⁶¹ Sabotage became a political activity but the loosening of its definition did not lessen its potency. The categorical linking of censorship to shirking and state power to misplaced or misused tools, legitimated and magnified the power of workers to disrupt an amorphous system with individual and concrete

actions. An open and political program of sabotage thus had the power to legitimate the activities of the economically disenfranchised—to validate and thus encourage both their resentment and whatever actions were taken in relation to it—and to potentially multiply the acts of tacit everyday resistance that were both costly and difficult to detect. It not only raised practice to the level of theory, it anchored revolutionary theory in actually existing practices, amplifying an ideological disruption at the point of production. This was a terrifying proposition indeed, and one that was encouraged with endless references to the human cost of capitalist sabotage.

William “Big Bill” Haywood provided one of the most notorious examples during a 1911 speech given at New York City’s Cooper Union during which he unequivocally declared his solidarity with John J. and James B. McNamara, who had recently confessed to dynamiting the *Los Angeles Times* building leading to the accidental deaths of 21 employees: “The McNamara boys who went to San Quentin out of Los Angeles know what the class struggle means. They knew and for that reason my heart is with them. Let the Capitalists count their own dead. There are 21 dead in Los Angeles and we have 207 dead in Briceville, Tenn. The deaths in Briceville were just as much murder as any premeditated crime could have been. The mine owners knew an unventilated mine meant a mine ready to explode.”⁶² Haywood made further remarks concerning class war and the general strike and repeatedly announced that there was no reason for workers to be “law-abiding.”

Haywood’s militaristic framing of the conflict through the comparison of casualties on both sides, reflected the fatal reality of many industries, but sabotage was often far more mundane. Worker sabotage and capitalist sabotage often intersected, as in cases of open mouth sabotage where the worker’s interference was composed of announcing employer sabotage. The sabotage encouraged by Boyd during the Paterson silk strike—to adulterate the silk dyes using certain chemicals—provided a remarkable example of such a confluence. While discussing Boyd’s advice with the strikers, the I.W.W. discovered that this was, in many cases, precisely what the company was doing. Flynn recounts that an investigation by the I.W.W. into employer practices in the silk mills, revealed that “the sabotage of silk fabrics was being done as a usual practice by the employers.”⁶³

It would be a mistake to reduce sabotage to its most extreme expressions. It was not synonymous with the anarchist notion of “propaganda of

the deed.” It did not always seek to call attention to itself. Likewise, gruesome industrial accidents, although tragically common, were hardly the sum total of exploitation and poverty. The literal explosions of violence on both sides of the class war were continuous with more subtle variations of conflict, control, and disruption, but the extremity of something like the *LA Times* bombing can be misleading. When Giovannitti wrote that sabotage becomes a monstrous thing when it is named, he was not thinking of something so apparently monstrous as the death of twenty-one persons by dynamite, but of something like Boyd’s advocacy of adulterated dyes.

Certain forms of sabotage were less offensive than others. Giovannitti argued that slowdowns needed little justification whereas sabotage that would destroy a piece of machinery or make a product unsalable was “a real and deliberate trespassing into the bourgeois sanctum—a direct interference with the bosses own property.” This form of sabotage “must create its own ethics.”⁶⁴

The working out of a new ethics, or the elaboration of a working class “morality” was a crucial aspect of the shift from mere vandalism to conscious sabotage. Violence is defined within constantly shifting frameworks. In general, it is within a legal framework that we distinguish between violence and nonviolence and that legal framework does not permit inquiry into its own justification. A legal regime that seeks to monopolize violence must call every threat or challenge to that regime a violent one.⁶⁵ The constant reiteration of the nonviolence of sabotage, the distinction between harm to people and harm to property reflected an understanding of the ability of sanctioned violence to appear as civil order or to disappear into “accidents.” Insisting that property destruction by workers was morally justified was not a tidy, contained, and finite proposition. It challenged the basis of the morality on which acceptable forms of violence rested in the simple act of identifying this morality as a collateral product of property relations. The bedrock of bourgeois morality, it turned out, was nothing more than private property and by attacking property—literally and figuratively—sabotage threatened more than the profits tied to that particular piece of property. It threatened the very concept of property and thus the entire moral framework upon which the designations “violent” and “non-violent” rested. Sabotage was an expansive moral argument against the sanctity of property. “Even so-called sexual immorality,” wrote Smith, “is condemned while universally practiced, because it violates the principle of inheritance in property.”⁶⁶

It was not by any means unknown that capital was organized in its own interests. Walter Lippmann, a journalist, author, and ambivalent socialist, recognized that employers were “organized for obstruction” against unions and that labor was fighting a legitimate battle that required a certain amount of illegality and violence. “Perhaps it is true,” he wrote, “that there is no such thing as peaceful picketing. There is no such thing as a peaceful coast defense or a gentlemanly border patrol.”⁶⁷ But the I.W.W. was not content with merely asserting that a certain type of violence was justified in a certain situation. They insisted that property destruction was of an entirely different order—that violence should be strictly defined as bodily harm. The oft-repeated call to “hit the boss where it really hurts . . . in his pocket book,” conveyed a meaningful displacement of workers’ anger from the body of their employer to his wealth. “Sabotage” wrote Giovannitti, “has nothing to do with violence.” It is a way of “chloroforming . . . the ogres of steel and fire that watch and multiply the treasures of king capital.”⁶⁸ In other words, sabotage wouldn’t “hurt” at all. It couldn’t. It was hoped that great structural disruptions would follow these attacks on inanimate objects, but it was not a call to revolutionary violence as such. Like the general strike in which it would play a central role, it was supposed to bring about a sort of bloodless coup.

The emphasis on this distinction between property and people was not incidental or insignificant. Consider some of the other strains of revolutionary thought that would have been circulating at the time. Johann Most’s “propaganda of the deed” was a close anarchist cousin. In Italy, Marinetti had issued the Futurist Manifesto—a romantic celebration of violence, war, and the destructive potential of technology. Alexander Berkman’s attempt to assassinate Henry Clay Frick was not so far in the past as to be forgotten. The successful 1901 assassination of William McKinley by the self-declared follower of Emma Goldman, Leon Czolgosz also colored the moment of the I.W.W.’s founding. But the distinction between people and property was more than a cynical attempt to avoid public approbation or distance the organization from anarchism.

That one could wage a class war without harming anyone was idealistic to say the least.⁶⁹ But the justification of sabotage compelled I.W.W. worker-intellectuals to elaborate an alternative moral system anchored in this basic division between human beings and inanimate property that had yet to be clearly articulated by even the most humanist iterations of socialism.

The revolutionary proletariat had a “special mentality and hence a special morality of its own” one that is principally organized around the benefit of the working class and into which sabotage could be seamlessly integrated. Sabotage was a moral affront, not because it was violent, but simply because it announced itself. It claimed that every bit of theft and destruction by workers that interrupted, slowed down, or prevented the accumulation of wealth by their employers, was a moral good. Not tactically expedient in certain situations—just *good*. As Giovannitti put it in appropriately religious terms, “A sin is absolvable only when it is confessed as such, but becomes a damnable one when an explanation is found for it.”⁷⁰

As a general practice that remained hidden and thus compliant with reigning definitions of legality and morality, sabotage was just such an absolvable transgression. It fit neatly into a legal framework of crime and punishment. Once it had been announced, justified, and “advocated as a *good* thing,” it exited the realm of confession and absolution. It was, to extend the metaphor, transubstantiated, emerging as a “dynamic and disintegrating force,” because it “[wrested] from the political state one of its cardinal faculties.” Workers, in other words had claimed for themselves what Max Weber identified as the constitutive function of the state—the legitimate use of force. The rejection of the state’s legitimacy implicit in the appropriation of the use of force made the existence of the I.W.W. incompatible with government. But its insistence on direct action and sabotage in the economic field as the primary mode of social transformation also placed it in direct conflict with other opponents of capitalist state power. In 1912, the Socialist Party effectively excommunicated the I.W.W. As an organization that both saw the state apparatus as the means of restoring power to the working class and had a considerable ideological and practical investment in demonstrating its own legitimacy as a political party, it could not tolerate the I.W.W.’s advocacy of sabotage.

Socialism versus Syndicalism

Sabotage was officially banned by the Socialist Party in 1912 by way of a simple but profound linguistic substitution. The denunciation of sabotage took the form of an amendment to the membership clause in the party’s constitution. Up to that point any advocacy of violence “against the person”

resulted in automatic expulsion. The revised version replaced this injunction against harm to persons with “sabotage.”

From a purely instrumental perspective, sabotage threatened the Socialist Party’s electoral legitimacy. The desire to expand socialism’s reach by appealing to middle-class progressives made disassociating with the I.W.W. and their advocacy of a practice that attacked the principle of private property seem particularly urgent. During the election years of 1910 and 1911, Socialist Party candidates had done surprisingly well. The party had elected “56 mayors, 305 aldermen and councilmen, 22 police officials, 155 members of school boards, and 4 pound keepers.” And they were gaining ground at the national level as well. Socialist Victor Berger had already taken his seat in U.S. House of Representatives.⁷¹ By the end of 1911, 1,141 socialists held public offices in 36 states across 324 municipalities. Party membership had doubled between 1909 and 1911 and by 1912 it had reached a record 118,000 members. Eugene Debs was running for president for the fourth time and would poll over 900,000 votes—a striking 6 percent of the votes cast nationally.⁷² Given these electoral and membership gains, the party was understandably anxious not to alienate the voting public. This aggravated old antipathies between the party’s far left, syndicalist members, epitomized by Haywood (who held a seat on the Executive Council), and its more conservative, reformist wing, most visibly represented by Victor Berger and Morris Hillquit of New York as well as Job Harriman, whose promising mayoral campaign in Los Angeles had been recently derailed by the McNamara confession. In its broadest definition—encompassing slowdowns as well as property destruction—sabotage occupied ambiguous legal territory. As a philosophy it suggested that a certain amount of disorder was a necessary component of change. More important, though, it’s “advocacy and use [helped to] destroy the ‘property illusion.’”⁷³ Thus, it was fundamentally incompatible with the ethos of a sympathetic, but comfortable and property owning middle class whose experience of legal order was largely positive.

Sabotage was, among other things, a repository for more general class anxieties. Debates over sabotage within the party expressed what were essentially class positions as tactical positions. Hillquit’s evaluation of the membership base of the I.W.W., made clear in *Socialism Summed Up* (published one year later) is telling. “The Socialist Party,” he wrote, “recruits its adherents mostly from among the better situated, better trained and more intelligent workers.

The unfortunate 'slum proletarians,' whose energies, hopes and ambitions have been crushed out by misery and destitution, can only rarely be relied on to rally to the virile battle cry of Socialism."⁷⁴ This then was not simply an argument about effective tactics, but a conflict between a better type of socialist and "slum proletarians." On the one side, elections and political power, on the other direct action and union power, each corresponding to a distinct class composition. Haywood, despite his membership and position on the executive council, believed in the priority of union organization over political activity. The official organs of the I.W.W. regularly derided political participation and had little interest in encouraging workers to vote, viewing all state functions as a mere extension of capitalist interests and the law as a means of enforcing class divisions.

Haywood was in the habit of making provocative speeches declaring workers exempt from laws designed to exploit them. Even though his work with the Socialist Party indicated an implicit belief in the possibility of a state and legal system that would benefit workers, Haywood's faith in industrial unionism remained thoroughly bound up in a principled disregard for the law and its enforcement. Working in the political field did not detract from his conviction that direct action by workers was the most effective means of obtaining widespread social transformation. The potential political fallout from these actions, including sabotage, remained, in his view, irrelevant. In 1911 these beliefs were made abundantly clear: "I am not law abiding citizen," he announced to the crowd gathered at New York's Cooper Union. "More than that," he went on, "I do not think that you here ought to be law abiding citizens."⁷⁵ Such a position was obviously untenable for a party invested in winning elections, but this announcement indicated a more fundamental disjuncture. Although socialist and syndicalist beliefs concerning rightful ownership and the social organization of production were in concert, they operated in entirely different temporal registers generated by divergent strategies.

The I.W.W. was operating with what might be called a vulgar labor theory of value—insisting that the workers already had a right to the value that they produced. Socialists may have shared this belief, but their claim on this property was politely deferred. Direct action, sabotage and strikes did not occur in the future. These actions—the very locus and content of workers' power according to the tenets of industrial unionism—did not slowly arise through small changes. They were not enacted within the terms—contractual,

moral, legal—set by their antagonists. Sabotage was, in this sense, a sort of prefigurative expropriation. It anticipated the moment in the future when property would be returned to its rightful owner and acted as if this moment had already arrived.

Socialism, by contrast, existed in the future and was, by its very nature as a political party. It was constituted by the procedures, institutions, and laws that Haywood deemed illegitimate. It can be presumed that Haywood would have urged workers to obey just, socialist laws but these conditions were yet mere abstractions. The logic of union power was intractably presentist. Asking workers to express themselves through political participation was, in some sense, demanding that they indefinitely defer control over their working and living conditions. “No Socialist,” Haywood asserted “can be a law abiding citizen.” Coercion was the only way to bring about socialism and acting within extant laws was not only ineffective, it was counterrevolutionary: “the trade unionist who becomes party to a contract takes his organization out of the columns of fighting organizations . . . he removes it from the class struggle.”⁷⁶ The relationship between industrial unionism and political participation was not simply fraught, brought to its logical conclusion it was structurally unsustainable.

Debs’s aversion to property destruction developed directly out of his experience as president of the American Railway Union (A.R.U.). Bound up as it was with his time organizing an industrial union, his views on the role of violence in labor agitation were more ambivalent than those held by party members with primarily political careers. Called to testify to the U.S. Strike Commission in 1894 following the A.R.U.’s strike against Pullman, Debs was charged with the difficult task of denying accusations that the union encouraged property destruction, while simultaneously defending the workers who had engaged in it. When asked to relate his “own observations as to riot, acts of violence, destruction of property, or anything of that kind” Debs was evasive at first. In response, he reiterated the conditions that led to the strike, delicately explaining that concessions could only be won by organized coercion without referencing any property destruction: “The railroad companies have never increased wages of their own accord. I would like to have that put upon record as one of the reasons for any unrest and lack of confidence in the ranks of railway employees, for every concession the railway companies have ever made has been wrung from them by the power

of organized effort.”⁷⁷ After elaborating some of the specific conditions that led to the strike—the Santa Fe line, for example, had been in arrears to its employees for two to four months—he concluded, “any class of employees, working under such conditions, are almost right to enter a protest on behalf of labor against the injustice of the corporations.”⁷⁸ Debs was adamant, however, that by protest he meant a peaceful withdrawal of labor power and nothing more: “We want to win as becomes law-abiding citizens; we have got a right to quit in a body, and our right ends there.” To this end, Debs and the union leadership responded to intimations of “trouble,” with a series of statements and documents that “appealed to our members throughout the country under no circumstances to countenance violence, but to keep away from the company’s property altogether.”⁷⁹ His position on sabotage, “that there is nothing to be gained by violence” remained consistent, and in 1912, in response to Haywood’s outrages, Debs reiterated his dedication to lawful tactics in the face of laws that were, as he stated to the strike commission, “enforced without merit against the employees and are ignored with reference to their application to the companies.”⁸⁰ Writing about the Socialist Party’s constitutional revision, he characterized sabotage as a “reactionary” tactic while defending industrial unionism in principle and reiterating his own disdain for capitalist property laws: “As a revolutionist I can have no respect for capitalist property laws, nor the least scruple about violating them. I hold all such laws to have been enacted through chicanery, fraud, and corruption, with the sole end in view of dispossessing, robbing, and enslaving the working class.”⁸¹ But Debs did have respect for these laws in practice. He had made this abundantly clear during his congressional testimony two decades earlier and held fast to his view that property destruction was never tactically desirable. This abstract understanding of injustice did not mean, he wrote, “that I propose making an individual lawbreaker of myself and butting my head against the stone wall of existing property laws.”⁸²

Given his early alliance with the I.W.W. and his dedication to industrial unionism in general, Debs must have found the prospect of a break between union and party distressing. Furthermore, Debs was far from being on good terms with Berger and his allies. But in 1894, when asked by the strike commission if there was “any specific rule in [the ARU’s] constitution or in the constitution of the different unions providing that a man shall be expelled who participates in any violence,” Debs found that he could only answer

that the regulation of member behavior was left to the locals. When asked whether he thought that such a provision should exist, he answered “yes.”⁸³

Though their attitude toward the form and application of current laws was similar, Haywood and Debs couldn't have been further apart on the practical question of legality in the labor movement. “[The worker] knows,” wrote Haywood and fellow I.W.W. Frank Bohn, “that the present laws of property are made by and for the capitalists. Therefore, he does not hesitate to break them.”⁸⁴ This inducement to action was not simply tactical. Haywood and many members of the I.W.W. saw sabotage as empowering: “a consciousness of economic might springs from the knowledge thus gained.” It was a way for individual workers to put theory into practice and thus experience power, however fleeting. Debs, by contrast, thought that tactics such as sabotage “do violence to the class psychology of the workers and cannot be successfully inculcated as mass doctrine.”⁸⁵ This reflects a persistent misreading of I.W.W. endorsements of sabotage as individual rather than class activity. Furthermore, it may be noted that the anxiety fueling the sabotage debate resulted precisely from the possibility that such tactics *could* be successfully inculcated as mass doctrine. And the issue of industrial unionism's relationship to the Socialist Party—as a parallel but autonomous actor in the economic field—was given urgency by the fear that such tactics would be adopted. Or fear that they already had.

Just days before the decision to add language about sabotage to the constitution's membership clause the left wing and supporters of Haywood had won a major victory with the adoption of a resolution put forth by the Committee on Labor Organizations and Their Relation to the Party. The resolution “reaffirmed the Socialist Party's neutrality on ‘questions of form of organization or technical methods of action in the industrial struggle’ . . . [and] called on unions to undertake the ‘task of organizing the unorganized, especially the immigrants who stand in greatest need of organized protection.’”⁸⁶ It was all but an endorsement of the I.W.W. and an apparent setback in ongoing reformist efforts to unseat Haywood from the Executive Council. An attempt to repudiate Haywood had been made in March, 1912 “on the grounds that he had made certain statements deprecating political action,” which was certainly true, but the recent success of the I.W.W.-led strike against textile manufacturers in Lawrence, Massachusetts, made the resolution unpopular.⁸⁷

The singular goal of ridding the party of Haywood's noisome presence gave the amendment added momentum but banning sabotage also reflected

the conservative members' broader ideological commitments. Among these was a preference for the A.F.L. over the I.W.W. in spite of Gompers's venomous opposition to socialism.⁸⁸ Rather than supporting alternatives to the A.F.L., such as the I.W.W., many party members encouraged a program of spreading socialist doctrines among members of A.F.L. unions referred to as "boring from within." This preference for the A.F.L. not only reflected the reformist conviction that extant institutions could be politically altered without disrupting their essential forms, it demonstrated an affinity with the U.S. government's burgeoning policy of conciliation towards "legitimate" and allegedly law-abiding unions.⁸⁹

The amendment that concerned the language of Article II, Section 6 of the party constitution and changed "against the person" to "sabotage" was a clear statement of a deep aversion to the destruction of property regardless of the conditions under which that property was acquired and maintained. The Socialist Party position on sabotage was thus constructed in a manner identical to its articulation in anti-criminal syndicalism laws.⁹⁰ William Preston goes so far as to refer to it as the "ideological forerunner" of these laws.⁹¹ The difference between sabotage according to I.W.W. and the state or the Socialist Party did not lie in their definition of sabotage as such, but in the moral distinction to be drawn between people and things. The Socialist Party, along with the state, assumed a sort of moral equivalence between the destruction of property and bodily harm. The revised version thus read: "Any member of the party who opposes political action or advocates crime, sabotage or other methods of violence as a weapon of the working class to aid in its emancipation shall be expelled from membership in the party. Political action shall be construed to mean participation in elections for public office and practical legislative and administrative work along the lines of the Socialist Party platform."⁹² W.L. Garver, a delegate from Missouri, who introduced the motion to "amend by striking out the word, 'against the person' in the second line and inserting the word 'sabotage'" expressed his concerns as follows:

The qualifying words "against the person" imply that if the crime is against property it might be permitted. Under such a construction we might be considered as advocates of dynamite. Under that construction we might be considered advocates of railroad wrecking. I contend that it is high time for this convention to take a distinct stand and declare that it is opposed to every form of crime and violence

(great cheering). Why this committee composed as it is of representative men of the convention should put in a qualifying clause implying that crime must be against the person to be denounced I cannot understand. You all know that Jim McNamara said that he didn't intend to kill anyone in Los Angeles; that he simply intended to injure the building that was blown up.⁹³

The debates that follow the motion are largely semantic—many delegates suggested that section two be stricken altogether for the sheer confusion regarding the meaning of the word. Others contended that it was perfectly clear what sabotage meant. Only one delegate spoke against the constitutional amendment in terms that addressed the use of so-called legal force by organized capital and indicated the danger of formally disavowing a tactic that was being used to imprison and prosecute workers and organizers. An attempt to amend the amendment by striking the whole paragraph was then introduced. Max Hayes of Cleveland, echoing the resolution on trade unions, argued that the Socialist Party should not be telling labor organizers what to do and should “leave the industrial field to the unions.”⁹⁴

The argument failed. An open discussion of sabotage had made certain realities of labor power and class conflict unavoidable. The industrial field was murky legally speaking. If only because workers were operating in a landscape that was not of their own making, much of their activity was not “law abiding.” The distinction between violence against people and violence against property was central to a morality born of the realities of on the ground conflict. Its rejection for a simpler injunction to accept and obey “the current definition of crime,” revealed an insurmountable difference between those operating in a political register and the workers negotiating conditions at the point of production.⁹⁵ In the words of one Wisconsin delegate, “the crime against property is a thing that this party cannot stand for.”⁹⁶

Conclusion

The avoidance of sabotage as a subject and the near disappearance of the word from labor history (replaced by “direct action”) seem to bear out Walker Smith's pronouncement that it is so dangerous that it can't be mentioned. Sympathetic historians have unconsciously repeated and reinforced the

systematic state repression of the philosophy of sabotage by attempting to distance the organization from its advocacy. Various proclaiming that it played a minor role, entirely ignoring it, attributing its advocacy to a handful of violent anarchists at the fringes of the organization and, most insidiously, declaring that it was “merely” speech rather than a practical tool for economic organization and resistance. In a sense this could be seen as an internalization of the logic of the prosecution and thus maintained what Kristin Ross has dubbed a “police conception of history,” the repetition of the injunction to move along because there is “nothing to see here.”

But there is something to see. By avoiding sabotage we not only willfully ignore large amounts of writing, we also suppress an argument about the relationship between violence and property that remains useful, and reinforce the liberal consensus that protest must be nonviolent—that property destruction is always illegitimate. Sabotage was not simply another word for direct action but a carefully articulated, radical critique of capitalist social relations that was inseparable from its existence as a tactic. Among other things, sabotage provided, and more important, enacted, a critique of private property. As a consequence, the circulation of the word “sabotage” orally and in print was an unacceptable challenge to the status quo. A serious look at sabotage, and the vicious legal and extralegal reactions that it elicited, exposes the relationship between politics, morality, and an economic order founded on private property. It suggests that property destruction constitutes a sort of limit to our collective political imagination—an unspeakable act haunting the margins of political power.

Notes

1. William Spry was the governor of Utah from 1909–1917.
2. Mike Davis, “The Stopwatch and the Wooden Shoe: Scientific Management and the Industrial Workers of the World,” *Radical America* 9 (1975): 84. Popular pamphlets on sabotage include William Trautmann, *Direct Action and Sabotage* (Chicago: I.W.W. Publishing Bureau, 1912); Walker Smith, *Sabotage* (Chicago: I.W.W. Publishing Bureau, 1913); Walker Smith, *Jersey Justice at Work: First Decision on the Advocacy of Sabotage in the United States Courts* (New York: I.W.W. Publishing Bureau, 1913); Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, *Sabotage* (Chicago: I.W.W. Publishing Bureau, 1917).

3. Flynn ultimately regretted her advocacy of sabotage because of the dangers presented by legibility. Although not going so far as to disavow sabotage, she explains in her memoir that her defense of sabotage was not a belief that it was effective, necessary, or even desirable. It was simply a defense—one inspired by a general obligation to defend I.W.W. members in general and Boyd in particular—of those who were being persecuted and prosecuted for advocating the tactic. Her pamphlet, published in 1915 and discontinued at her own request in 1917, resurfaced continually as proof of illegal intentions in her own political trials as late as the 1950s. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, *The Rebel Girl: An Autobiography*, (New York: International Publishers, 2016), 163–64; On the disappearance of sabotage from the pages of *Solidarity* see Philip S. Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States, Vol. 4: The Industrial Workers of the World, 1905–1917* (New York: International Publishers, 1997).
4. Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States, Vol. 4*, 159–60.
5. Newspapers began reporting on sabotage as early as 1907 and continued to run stories decrying the odious tactic well into the 1920s. Most early articles reported on its use by French railway unions, but by 1912 major newspapers such as the *New York Times* and the *Chicago Tribune* had begun to report on its possibility and employment in the United States. After the U.S. entrance into World War I articles about sabotage in general linked the act to undermining patriotism and the war effort; “sabotage” regularly featured in headlines that described the 1919 prosecution of Haywood and other I.W.W. members under the Espionage Act. Some characteristic prewar headlines include: “Meaning of Sabotage: The Acts of Workmen who deliberately Spoil their Product,” *New York Times*, 17 May 1909; “Ettor Harangues Meeting: Tells Strikers That They Must Fight and if They Lose, Then Sabotage,” *Boston Daily Globe*, 29 January 1912; “I.W.W. Will Advocate Sabotage in New York Strikes,” *Los Angeles Times*, 19 January 1913; “Plan Sabotage in Soup: Striking Waiters Threaten ‘Disgusting Time’ for Public,” *New York Tribune*, 22 January 1913; “Driven Out by Sabotage: Manufacturers’ Exodus to South Explained by Coler,” *New York Tribune*, 8 February 1913; “Sabotage Cooks Scheme to Make Mistress Kind,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 14 July 1916.
6. Maxine Berg, *The Machinery Question and the Making of Political Economy, 1815–1848* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 9.
7. Walker Smith, *Sabotage: Its History Philosophy and Function* (Chicago: I.W.W. Publishing Bureau, 1913), Section VII. Retrieved from <https://archive.iww.org/history/library/WCSmith/sabotage/>, 1 October 2015.
8. Greg Shotwell, *Autoworkers under the Gun: A Shopfloor View of the End of the American Dream* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2011), 1.

9. David Montgomery, *Workers' Control in America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 13; Louis Adamic, *Dynamite: The Story of Class Violence in America* (New York: Viking Press, 1931); Meredith Tax, *The Rising of the Women: Feminist Solidarity and Class Conflict 1880–1917* (New York: Monthly Review Press 1980), 246; *United States v. Haywood et al.* Industrial Workers of the World Papers, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University; Jeremy Brecher, *Strike!* (Boston: South End Press, 1997), 200, 233; Thaddeus Russell, *Out of the Jungle: Jimmy Hoffa and the Remaking of the American Working Class* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001), 20.
10. That labor conflict in the United States was exceptionally violent is widely acknowledged. I am making the narrower claim that “sabotage” the word, the writing about it, and its significance has not been written about since the early twentieth century. Beverly Gage’s suggestion that American historians have taken as axiomatic Philip Taft’s claim that there was a lack of “ideological violence” in the United States applies to the marginalization of sabotage by postwar historians. For example, the word “sabotage” does not appear in Jeremy Brecher’s *Strike!* despite it being a veritable catalog of property destruction.
11. Laura Weinrib, *The Taming of Free Speech: America’s Civil Liberties Compromise* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 84.
12. Salvatore Salerno’s book, *Red November, Black November: Culture and Community in the Industrial Workers of the World*, was a major turning point in the study of the I.W.W. (Salvatore Salerno, *Red November, Black November: Culture and Community in the Industrial Workers of the World* [New York: State University of New York Press, 1989]). Countering the attempt by Melvyn Dubofsky to situate the I.W.W. as a particularly American phenomenon that emerged from the coal wars of the Mountain West, Salerno emphasizes the international composition of the I.W.W. and links its rich culture to a variety of anarchist and syndicalist movements that its members brought from their countries of origin. Recent works on the I.W.W. that destabilize Dubofsky’s American thesis and expand Philip Foner’s analysis in large part through an emphasis on the international dimension of the I.W.W. and its close ties to anarchism include: David R. Berman, *Radicalism in the Mountain West, 1890–1920: Socialists, Populists, Miners, and Wobblies* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2013); Christopher J. Casteneda and Monse Feu, eds., *Writing Revolution: Hispanic Anarchism in the United States* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019); Peter Cole, *Wobblies on the Waterfront: Interracial Unionism in Progressive-Era Philadelphia* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007); Peter Cole, David M. Struthers, and Kenyon Zimmer, eds., *Wobblies of the World: A Global History of the I.W.W.* (London: Pluto Press, 2017); Linda J. Lumsden, *Black, White, and Red All Over: A Cultural History of the Radical Press in its Heyday, 1900–1917* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2014);

- Matthew S. May, *Soapbox Rebellion: The Hobo Orator Union and the Free Speech Fights of the Industrial Workers of the World, 1909–1916: Rhetoric Culture and Social Critique* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2013).
13. Melvyn Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1969), 146.
 14. *Ibid.*, 147.
 15. Eldridge Foster Dowell, *History of Criminal Syndicalism Legislation in the United States* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1939), 33.
 16. Stewart Bird, Dan Georgakas, and Deborah Shaffer, eds., *Solidarity Forever: An Oral History of the I.W.W.* (Chicago: Lakeview Press, 1985), 43.
 17. Foner, *History of the Labor*, Vol. 4, 162.
 18. As a continuous and secret form of shop-floor rebellion and control sabotage was difficult to locate and prove. In a rare book-length study of industrial sabotage in France, sociologist Pierre Dubois settled for indirect evidence, writing that the first sign of sabotage may be a “proliferation of controllers and repair workers” and the second “large-scale wastage of raw materials.” Even blatantly destructive sabotage such as machine wrecking is hard to trace as the culprits may remain unknown and companies may decline to prosecute. Again, Dubois suggests that sabotage might be inferred from “the amount of time machinery is in use, records of quality, [and] reprimands for defective work.” Sabotage is a form of worker resistance that evades managerial control at a practical and a discursive level. Pierre Dubois, *Sabotage in Industry*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York: Penguin, 1979), 13–14.
 19. It should be noted that the division between speech and organizing proper is another labor historical axiom that unintentionally dismisses years of Wobbly organizing as ineffective. As Matthew S. May pointed out, “the most common interpretation among sympathetic labor historians and postwar Wobblies is that fighting for free speech distracted workers from their proper task of organizing workers at the point of production. May, *Soapbox Rebellion*, 4.
 20. Emile Pouget, *Sabotage*, trans. Arturo Giovannitti (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1913), 6.
 21. Alice Yaeger Kaplan, *Reproductions of Banality: Fascism, Literature and French Intellectual Life* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 68.
 22. Foner, *History of the Labor*, Vol. 4, 147.
 23. Kaplan, *Reproductions of Banality*, 68.
 24. Although posterity would preserve the French word for the practice of revolutionary direct action, the Scottish, “Ca Canny” or “Go Canny” predated the anarcho-syndicalist use of sabotage and was familiar to French workers. In addition to its importation by

- the repatriated Pouget, at least one pamphlet celebrating the “Go Canny” was translated into French. In 1896, a long article on sabotage appeared in Pouget’s journal *La Voix du Peuple* and in 1897 the CGT voted on whether to officially sanction sabotage along with the boycott as a means of advancing their cause. Sebastian Albertelli, *Histoire du Sabotage: De la CGT a la Resistance* (Paris: Perrin, 2016), 18–19.
25. In France, as in the United States, the left was divided between the political action of traditional socialism and the economic, or direct action, of the anarchist tradition. Although they shared the goal of a socialist future, the Section Francais de L’international Ouvriere (SFIO) sought to achieve that goal through political action within established political channels, by running candidates, recruiting voting party members, and changing laws. The CGT was a syndicalist organization that had absorbed many anarchists as well as their beliefs and this included a general distrust of the state as a viable means for achieving socialist goals. They were, therefore, uninterested in activities such as voting and were dedicated to traditions of self-organization and direct action. Albertelli, *Histoire du Sabotage*, 14.
 26. Pouget, *Sabotage*, 26.
 27. Davis, “The Stopwatch and the Wooden Shoe,” 83.
 28. *Ibid.*, 84.
 29. Pouget, *Sabotage*, 13.
 30. *Industrial Worker*, 3 July 1913.
 31. *Industrial Worker*, 12 June 1913.
 32. “The Weapon Which Wins,” *Industrial Worker*, 23 February 1911.
 33. “Urge Workmen to Sabotage,” *Detroit Free Press*, 28 April 1907.
 34. Pouget, *Sabotage*, 20.
 35. *Ibid.*, 44.
 36. Smith, *Sabotage*, 6.
 37. *Ibid.*, 10.
 38. *Ibid.*, 11.
 39. Thom M. Dodson, “Sabotage is Working,” *Industrial Worker*, 16 November 1911.
 40. Smith, *Sabotage*, 13.
 41. *Ibid.*, 14.
 42. Stewart Bird, Dan Georgakas, and Deborah Shaffer, *Solidarity Forever: An Oral History of the I.W.W.* (Chicago: Lake View Press, 1985), 39.
 43. Flynn, *Sabotage*, 5.
 44. *Ibid.*, 29.
 45. The French Penal Code of 1863 clearly distinguishes between vandalism and vandalism

by employees against employer property: “Whoever by means of corrosive liquid, or by any other means, shall willfully deteriorate merchandise, materials or instruments used in making goods, shall be punished by imprisonment from one month to two years and a fine not exceeding a quarter of the damage done nor less than sixteen francs. *If the offense had been committed by a workman of the shop or a clerk of a business house, the imprisonment shall be five years in addition to the fine.*” [emphasis added] “Urge Workmen to Sabotage,” *Detroit Free Press*, 28 April 1907.

46. Flynn, *Sabotage*, 28.

47. Pouget, *Sabotage*, 49.

48. *Industrial Worker*, 28 October 1916.

49. Slavoj Žižek argues that “at the forefront of our minds, the obvious signals of violence are acts of crime and terror, civil unrest, international conflict . . . violence performed by a clearly identifiable agent [but] subjective violence is just the most visible portion of a triumvirate that also includes two objective kinds of violence.” The first form of “objective violence” Žižek identifies as symbolic and linguistic: “our ‘house of being.’” The second is the far less esoteric category of systemic violence: “the often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems.” Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008), 1–2.

50. This lack of visibility is characteristic of the “everyday forms of resistance” that, according to James C. Scott, constituted a vast portion of the political activity of subordinated groups. Scott argues that it is precisely the illegibility of these practices that allow them to thrive. Everyday forms of resistance are intended not to be noticed. Those who employ them “avoid calling attention to themselves” and although they often have the same goals as open, political confrontation, “the former aims at tacit, *de facto* gains while the latter aims at formal, *de jure* recognition of those gains.” Often, Scott suggests, the choice of tacit rather than public, formal resistance is tactical. Tacit resistance is often beneficial to participants and problematic for authorities: “There is no organization to be banned, no conspiratorial leaders to round up or buy off, no rioters to haul before the courts—only generalized non-compliance.” Everyday resistance, in Scott’s account, can have significant material and economic effects that usually go unrecorded if not unnoticed. Furthermore, even if it is enacted by individuals it usually involves a significant level of coordination and cannot be dismissed as anti-collective in nature. What it does *not* do is threaten political authority: “everyday resistance leaves dominant symbolic structures intact.” A tacit agreement among workers to complete tasks more slowly would threaten their bosses’ profits, but “by not openly contesting the dominant norms of law, custom, politeness, deference, loyalty and so on leaves the dominant in command of the public

- stage.” James C. Scott, “Everyday Forms of Resistance,” *Copenhagen Papers in East and Southeast Asian Studies* 4 (1989), 34–35; 57.
51. Smith, *Jersey Justice at Work*, 3.
 52. *Ibid.*
 53. Dominique Pinsolle has suggested that what differentiates American uses of the theory of “sabotage” from its French counterpart, is the emphasis placed by Bill Haywood in particular on the nonviolent nature of sabotage. Part of the reason for this, he argues, is that “Haywood retained only the strictly labor aspect of sabotage at the same time that the French increasingly integrated this tactic into large-scale anti-militarist projects.” The other reason was that the recent *Los Angeles Times* bombing and the confession of the union members John J. and James B. McNamara made Haywood and other American radicals anxious to distance themselves and labor from violent activity. This is misleading for several reasons. First, Haywood openly supported the McNamaras—not by claiming that they were innocent—but by announcing in a speech given at New York City’s Cooper Union in 1911 that the 21 people they killed by the McNamaras were nothing in comparison to the hundreds of workers murdered by capital. Second, it ignores the fact that American sabotage literature imported the philosophy of violence and nonviolence laid out by Pouget along the lines of worker and capitalist sabotage. Pouget also claimed that worker sabotage was “nonviolent” in the strictest sense. Third, the United States entered World War I much later than France and when it did, sabotage and other forms of direct action were explicitly framed as ways to disrupt military action. Dominique Pinsolle, “Sabotage, the I.W.W., and Repression: How the American Reinterpretation of a French Concept Gave Rise to a New International Conception of Sabotage,” in Peter Cole, *Wobblies on the Waterfront: Interracial Unionism in Progressive-Era Philadelphia. Working Class in American History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 44–58.
 54. Pouget, *Sabotage*, 38.
 55. Thorstein Veblen borrowed the I.W.W. framework of capitalist and worker sabotage for his 1921 work *Engineers and the Price System*, where he elaborated on the necessity of sabotage to normal economic activity under financialized capitalism.
 56. Pouget, *Sabotage*, 49.
 57. *Ibid.*, 50.
 58. *Ibid.*
 59. *Ibid.*
 60. “Competitors of the Standard Oil Company often found that legal documents had been improperly executed for them. Rivals of the Sugar Trust had foreign materials introduced into their shipments, and in the fight of Havemeyer against Spreckels the latter’s machinery

had an unaccountable habit of getting out of order. A Denver brewing company almost ruined a competitor by hiring men to spread the story that a decomposed body had been found at the bottom of its rival's brew-vat." Smith, *Sabotage*, 13.

61. Ibid.
62. "Haywood Declares an Industrial War," *The New York Times*, 22 December 1911.
63. Flynn, *Sabotage*, 163.
64. Arturo Giovannitti, introduction to *Sabotage*, by Emile Pouget (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1913), 12.
65. Judith Butler, "Critique, Coercion, and Sacred Life in Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence,'" in *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*, ed. Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 52.
66. Smith, Section V.
67. Walter Lippmann, *Drift and Mastery: An Attempt to Diagnose the Current Unrest* (New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1914), 84. Lippmann was one of several prominent socialists who protested the removal of William D. Haywood from the Executive Council of the Socialist Party in early 1913.
68. Giovannitti, introduction, 6.
69. Foner, *History of Labor*, vol. 4, 354. There is a reasonable amount of evidence that the presence of I.W.W. leadership during strikes did minimize violence. A clergyman present during the Patterson strike, for example, claimed that not a single scab was attacked by striking workers.
70. Giovannitti, 8.
71. Joseph R. Conlin, "The I.W.W. and the Socialist Party," *Science & Society* 31, no. 1 (1967): 22.
72. Sari Bennett, "The Geography of American Socialism: Continuity and Change, 1900–1912," *Social Science History* 7, no. 3 (1983): 268.
73. Smith, *Sabotage*, Conclusion.
74. Morris Hillquit, *Socialism Summed Up* (New York: H. K. Fly Company, 1913), 53.
75. "Haywood Declares an Industrial War," *The New York Times*, December 22, 1911.
76. William D. Haywood, quoted in Nick Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 253.
77. U.S. Strike Commission, ed. Tim Davenport, "Testimony to the United States Strike Commission of Eugene Debs, Chicago August 20 & 25, 1894," *Report on the Chicago Strike of June–July 1894* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1895), 16.
78. Ibid., 19.
79. Ibid., 21.
80. Ibid., 64.

81. Eugene Debs, "Sound Socialist Tactics," *International Socialist Review* 13, no. 8 (1913): 1.
82. *Ibid.*, 1.
83. Strike Commission, 34.
84. William D. Haywood and Frank Bohn, *Industrial Socialism*, quoted in Debs, "Sound Socialist Tactics," 1.
85. Debs, "Sound Socialist Tactics," 2.
86. Foner, *History of Labor*, Vol. 4, 404.
87. Conlin, "The I.W.W. and the Socialist Party," 28.
88. In 1903 Gompers directly addressed socialists at the A.F.L.'s convention in Boston. "Economically," he declared, "you are unsound; socially, you are wrong; industrially, you are an impossibility." Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs*, 201.
89. There is ample evidence that craft unions engaged in a range of illegal activity. As noted above, the most dramatic example of this, the bombing of the *Los Angeles Times* building in 1910 by the International Brotherhood of Bridge and Structural Iron Workers, was defended by Haywood on the grounds that all workers were justified in their sabotage of capitalist property. But the IABSIW was not a revolutionary union or in any affiliated with the I.W.W. Thus, it can be argued that the public support of sabotage more than its use that Berger, Hilquit, and colleagues found to be unfavorable to the socialist cause. Sidney Fine, *Without Blare of Trumpets: Walter Drew, The National Erectors' Association, and the Open Shop Movement, 1903-1957* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995).
90. Following World War I, 23 states passed criminal syndicalism laws. The broadest and most severe of these statutes was passed by the state of Montana in 1918. The language of the Montana act is typical, but is significant in particular because it served as a model for the 1918 Sedition Act. A set of amendments to the 1917 espionage act under which hundreds of Wobblies, including labor leader William "Big Bill" Haywood were charged, convicted, and either jailed or deported. See Robert C. Sims, "Idaho's Criminal Syndicalism Act: One State's Response to Radical Labor" *Labor History* 15, no. 4 (1974); F. G. Franklin, "Anti-Syndicalist Legislation," *American Political Science Review* 14, no. 2 (1920).
91. William Preston, *Aliens and Dissenters: Federal Suppression of Radicals, 1903-1933* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), 50.
92. John Spargo, ed., *Stenographic Report of the National Convention of the Socialist Party* (Indianapolis, IN: M.A. Donohue & Co., printers, 1912), 208.
93. *Ibid.*, 130.
94. *Ibid.*, 133.
95. *Ibid.*, 132.
96. *Ibid.*, 131.