The destruction and disruption of the First World War naturally impeded the development of cycling overall – in terms of competition, industry, media and everyday use – in France, although the links between light arms manufacture and the cycle industry that were discussed in the previous chapter meant that newly expanded factories, for example, were in a position to produce more bicycles than before, if the demand was there. In fact, in 1920 there were 4.3 million bicycles in France recorded by the authorities. By 1923 this figure had risen to 5.8 million, and by 1926 there were 7.1 million bicycles declared. But between 1926 and 1936 (when 7.5 million bicycles were recorded), this growth in ownership slowed and stagnated under the triple influence of a saturation of the market, public interest in watching rather than doing sport for leisure, and economic recession (Gerbod, 1986: 69–79). The cultural, social and philosophical reaction to the horrors of the war that gave the name les années folles to the 1920s, in recognition of a general interest in finding distraction rather than serious activities, evidenced itself in a popular enthusiasm for professional sports, fed and encouraged by the sporting media and late professionalizing sporting disciplines such as football. During the 1930s, a period in France as elsewhere in Europe marked by economic depression, social hardship and the rise of political extremism, although household incomes suffered, affecting the purchase of cycles, the impetus given by the Popular Front to sport and leisure in 1936 – as France began to recover from slump – encouraged bicycle ownership, which reached 8.8 million in 1939, despite the more than doubling of the bicycle tax in 1938 from 12 francs to 25 francs (Gerbod, 1986: 69–79).

During the 1920s and 1930s French society and politics became progressively polarized between the traditional visions for France proposed by Left and Right that had marked the French polity since the Revolution: Agulhon (1993: 178–213), for example, describes the period as one of ‘disillusion and dissent’. After the apparent ‘victory’ of the Republic in the 1890s and early 1900s, when republicanism and the
prevailing economic liberalism of the late nineteenth century had seemed to have imposed themselves over other projects (monarchy, imperialism, socialism), the Union sacrée uniting Left and Right in defence of France that obtained during most of the First World War had also encouraged the idea that la guerre franco-française was a thing of the past. In the inter-war period, however, with the continuing industrialization and urbanization of France and the concomitant rise in support for left-wing politics, and an international context in which communism was looming large as a project for society, economic and social hardship fostered the rise of both French socialism and communism and of disruptive right-wing protest movements against the Republic. Sport in general, and cycling in particular – because of its early professionalization in France – became a field in which the ideological oppositions of Left and Right were worked out, as well as representing the social and cultural aspirations of a population keen to amuse itself.

In this chapter, we consider firstly how leisure and sporting activities in general, and cycling especially, were influenced by the consequences of the war on thinking about sport and leisure, including a necessarily brief discussion of the impact made by the Popular Front government in the mid-1930s on public policies in favour of sport and leisure. Secondly, we look at the ways in which (professional) cycle racing, and particularly the Tour de France, was subject to the ideologies of class and social relations, economics and business, and human effort that were current during this period of political extremisms. Thirdly, developing the theme of professional sporting activity and the desire of the population to seek distraction in popular culture, we examine the prime example of sport-spectacle in the 1920s and 1930s that was provided by the six-day track racing at the famous Vélodrome d’hiver in central Paris. And finally, in a study of a phenomenon that is often neglected in studies of sport in France, we consider the short but instructive history of the ‘alternative’ Paris–Roubaix cycle race, run by left-wing sports federations in the mid- and late 1930s as a counter-example to the commercialized, professionalized and sport-spectacle Paris–Roubaix of Desgrange and his L’Auto newspaper.

**Cycling and leisure: années folles to congés payés**

The First World War had a number of effects on sport and on government thinking on the role of sport in society, which have usefully been recently summarized by Paul Dietschy (2007a; 2007b). Grassroots
participation in sport was arguably encouraged in the post-war years, and official policies on sport evolved a more sophisticated understanding of its usefulness. Although the rise of commercial sport during the 1920s and 1930 – with new sports stars and new role models in the form of géants de la route, or heroes of six-day racing, or footballers, boxers, or rugby players – demonstrated the need during les années folles for sporting entertainment, the practice of sport was also encouraged by changing mindsets and changes in society. Just as conscription had forced Frenchmen of all classes and all regions to serve together in the trenches and – literally – learn a common language, the mixing of different populations had facilitated an exchange of ideas and passions, including interests in sport. Moreover, the physicality of life in the army, including in many cases organized or ad hoc sporting events, had helped to spread awareness of sport as a personal pleasure and discipline, and when soldiers returned home in 1918 they often brought with them a new interest in sport. Team sports, perhaps encouraged by the camaraderie of life in uniform, flourished, and were stimulated further by the development of professional leagues and their highly mediatised competitions. The extent to which cycling as a professional sport was already highly developed by this period is perhaps indicated by the fact that the French professional football league was only formed in 1932. Individual sports such as cycling were perhaps less directly influenced by the war, but the increasing prosperity of the working classes during the 1920s and the falling price of bicycles paved the way for the explosion of recreational cycling that occurred in the mid- and late 1930s.

With regard to official thinking on sport, the population losses in terms both of men and lowered birth rates during and after the conflict massively disrupted French society for years to come by weakening an already fragile demographic structure, and focused the attention of government even more closely on the quality and quantity of France’s human capital. If before the war much of official and other discourses on sport had centred on the need for sport as direct préparation militaire – the sociétés de gymnastique set up after the defeat of 1870 were a prime example – during the 1920s and the 1930s there arose a new tension in government thinking between this traditional conception and a belief that sport had a wider role and importance in society. In the 1920s it was Henry Paté, who ended up as Under-secretary of State at the Ministry of Education and Arts in 1928–32, who defended the value of éducation physique in general as more than a simple adjunct of national defence, as part of the French state’s as yet inchoate thinking on ‘sports policy’, whose overall historical development has been chronicled by, among
others, Jean-Paul Callède (2000). In anticipation of the work of the left-wing politicians Jean Zay and Léo Lagrange during the Popular Front, sport could now be thought of as contributing to the general well-being of individuals and society as well as, naturally, helping the health of France’s citoyens-soldats.

**Cycle touring in the 1920s and 1930s**

According to one historian of cycling in this period, Paul Gerbod, cycle touring in the 1920s suffered in popularity, losing out to the more spectacular distractions – suited to the années folles – of six-day racing in velodromes and the Tour de France (Gerbod, 1986). As a spectator sport rather than an active leisure practice, cycling was also rivalled by the development of professional team sports such as rugby and football, in such a way that the géants de la route had to compete with a new category of sports stars: the dieux du stade.²

The French tradition of audax rides was first properly institutionalized by Desgrange and L’Auto in 1903 and 1904, when in order to match the exploits of a group of Italian riders who planned to ride from Italy to Paris, the newspaper lobbied for and created a monitored 200 km ride, successful finishers of which were awarded certificates and medals. The new enthusiasm for audax rides was carried forward by L’Audax club parisien (ACP) (launched in 1904 by Desgrange and other founder members such as Gaston Clément), but the concept remained the property of L’Auto. After the war the ACP expanded its range of audax distances, creating in 1921 free-paced events at the distances of 200, 300, 400, 600 and 1,000 km, and by the end of 1921 audax certificates – Brevets de randonneurs français – had been awarded to 4,500 cyclists. The success of the idea, which combined healthy exercise in the open air with a collaborative and essentially non-competitive ideology of sport, was such that, in 1921, L’Auto’s competitor newspaper L’Echo des Sports (under its editor Victor Breyer) approached the ACP for help in staging another long-distance cycle touring event, the Polymultipliée, which had previously been run in 1913 and 1914 (Poyer, 2003a: 294–96). Desgrange naturally reacted badly, and withdrew his permission for the ACP to certify audax Brevets, causing a split in the club between those faithful to Desgrange and L’Auto, who seceded to create the Union des Audax Cyclistes Parisiens (UACP), and the ACP itself.³

The ACP responded by inventing its own Brevets de randonneurs français over distances between 200 and 600 km, which were ridden at paces chosen by each ride participant rather than at the strictly fixed speeds of the original audaxes. The first 300 km event was held on 11 June 1922;
the first 400 km ride on 22 July 1923; and the first 600 km ride on 30 June and 1 July 1928. By 1930 these hard-riding touring clubs were realizing that longer and longer distances were of increasing interest to French cyclists, and although the introduction of a 1,000 km audax event organized by the ACP had to wait until August 1934, the anniversary of Paris–Brest–Paris in 1931 provided an opportunity for the two clubs to produce their competing versions of the famous audax Paris–Brest–Paris that still runs today. From 1930 Henri Griffe of the UACP, which was loyal to Desgrange, had been floating the idea of audax Brevets along the course, an innovation approved by L’Auto as it allowed the abolition of the less prestigious touristes-routiers category in the race itself. The president of the ACP, Camille Durand, understandably then proposed its own 1,200 km audax – a Paris–Brest–Paris Randonneur at free speed – to be run along the N12, passing 17 checkpoints and to be completed in under 96 hours. As shall be discussed in a later chapter, in the 2000s organized rides along stage-routes of the Tour de France became a significant dimension of leisure/sports cycling, and in these early Paris–Brest–Paris rides we can perhaps see a precursor of this link between professional sport and individual practice.

Institutionally, the 1920s and 1930s saw developments in cyclo-tourisme. The Touring Club de France founded in 1890 was increasingly focusing on tourism and general, and particularly automobile, touring, and as cycling clubs were set up after the war with an interest in touring the need began to be felt for a coordinating body that could provide the liaison and unity not afforded by the TCF. It was thus that, in December 1923, Gaston Clément, who had been a founding member of the ACP, launched the Fédération française des sociétés de cyclotourisme (FFSC), which until 1945 was to be the sport’s managing institution. In an effort to maintain at least a façade of unity in cycling, the long-standing Union Vélocipédique de France attempted unsuccessfully in 1926 to take control of cycle touring away from the clubs and the newly formed FFSC. Despite the support of the TCF for the UVF, interest in cycle touring as an activity distinct from the professional racing with which the UVF was associated allowed the FFSC to survive the take-over, and by 1939 the new federation could boast over 9,000 members.

The Popular Front: sports policies and structures
Such was the fervour and hope during the Popular Front that sport could become more fraternal and egalitarian that the Fédération sportive et gymnique du travail (FSGT) even suggested that the Tour de France should be taken into common ownership, and as a nationalized sporting
event should henceforward be organized by the Sports Ministry. In this view, articulated also in an article in *Sport* in midsummer 1936 (Ory, 1994: 730), the commercialism and competition of the event would be moderated and attenuated by the creation of two categories of riders (100 internationals and 100 youth and veteran participants), by a route that would give a more balanced coverage of France overall, and by a festive and educational dimension (bicycle rallies, processions, parties and cinema ‘explanations’ of each day’s racing).

A succinct (and moving) definition of the philosophy behind the Left’s leisure and sports policies was given later by the former Popular Front prime minister, Léon Blum, when he was put on trial in March 1942 by the collaborationist Vichy government: ‘On s’est rendu compte que le loisir n’était pas la paresse, que le loisir et le repos après le travail sont aussi comme un réconciliation avec la vie naturelle dont le travailleur est trop souvent séparé et frustré’ (quoted by Cacérès, 1981: 34). A comment by Blum’s minister Léo Lagrange adds to our understanding of the political and ideological underpinnings of their policies: Lagrange refused what he described as a ‘caporalisation’ of leisure in which sport and relaxation would somehow be ‘imposed’ on people; his ambition was to offer the masses the possibility of ‘loisirs sportifs’, ‘loisirs touristiques’ and ‘loisirs culturels’ (discussed by Ory, 1994: 713–88).

Lagrange’s thinking on sport and leisure was informed by a number of factors. Firstly, he was influenced by the European context, in which the Olympic Games of 1936 in Berlin demonstrated the fascist Italian and Nazi German approaches to sport. Secondly, he was aware of the apparent deficiencies in health of the French population, undermined, it was claimed, by vicious alcoholism and tuberculosis. Thirdly, he was unhappy with the excesses of *sport-spectacle* in the 1920s and 1930s, which seemed to have encouraged the watching of sports often conducted in ethically dubious circumstances (cheating, match-fixing, doping) rather than the practice of healthy exercise. One of his calls to action encapsulated the ‘political’ and ‘practical’ aspects of his endeavours: ‘J’ai trop souvent entendu dire qu’un pays démocratique était par essence incapable de créer une organisation des sports et loisirs. Notre ambition est de démontrer l’erreur fondamentale de cette conception. Son principe d’action est simple. Là où il y a une école doit exister un terrain de jeux’ (radio broadcast 10 June 1936, quoted by Cacérès, 1981: 34). As well as working to break old mindsets (leisure equating to laziness, for example) and to transform the legal entitlements of workers to free time, the Popular Front concentrated on developing infrastructures, often in sports from which the working classes had been excluded because of lack
of means. Canoeing, climbing, rowing and skiing were examples of these, but flying – *l’aviation populaire* – was perhaps the most surprising addition to the list of activities encouraged by the government.

Les années folles and the early 1930s had witnessed a growth in sport-spectacle and sport-commerce, as society had sought distraction and enjoyment, and as the sports media and sports industries had developed more sophisticated ways of catering for and stimulating public demand. For some, scandals in professional football and dubious practices in other sports smacked of an inherent ethical deficit in the sport-spectacle of sports governed by the national sports federations. The Popular Front’s policies in favour of a sport d’assainissement (‘purifying sports’) – activities that would contribute to France’s redressement moral et physique (‘ethical and physical renewal’) – aimed to encourage people to ‘do’ rather than simply watch sport, and, in parallel, requests were made to the federations to restrict the frequency of their competitions. Left-wing sport had also moved to counter the drift towards exploitation and unethical behaviour that it identified in sport-spectacle. Since les forçats de la route (see below) the Tour had been a prime example of the excesses of commercial sport, and its proposed nationalization in 1936 would only have taken a step further the tradition of compétitions autonomes organized by the Left in parallel to existing events. The ‘Cross de *L’Humanité*’ (1933) was a copy of the cross-country running race of *L’Auto*, and the ‘Grand prix cycliste de *L’Humanité*’ (1937) was presented as an alternative to the *Grand Prix de Paris*. Most notably however, the Paris–Roubaix travailliste of 1935, sponsored mainly by the newspaper *Le Populaire*, was a successful reaction against what was seen as the excessive commercialism of Desgrange’s Paris–Roubaix, whose finish was then taking place in a closed stadium requiring payment for entry from spectators.

*Cycling and the congés payés*

Writing about the troubled Tour de France of 1937, which was won against expectations by the French rider Roger Lapébie against a background of national rivalries reflecting the tensions of the European context, historian Pierre Miquel evokes the constant presence of the bicycle among the Tour’s working-class followers: the factory hands of France’s growing industrialization were all ‘des cyclistes permanents, qui constituent, dès l’aube, le long cortège serré, aux sonnettes cristallines, des travailleurs pédalant vers l’usine ou l’atelier, qui réveillent aux carrefours le bourgeois moins matinal’ (Miquel, 1997: 20–21). The bicycle as a symbol of working-class freedom – even if it was often only the freedom
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to commute more comfortably or more cheaply to and from work – was frequently to be found in the films and other iconography of the 1920s and 1930s. Cacérès, in his analysis of the ‘invention’ of leisure by the Popular Front, discusses Renoir’s film *Le Jour se lève* (1939), in which Jean Gabin’s elegant and charismatic but troubled proletarian hero is inseparable from a lightweight racing bike, symbol of his freedom; in the tragic finale of the film, a crowd of his workmates, who plead with him to surrender to the police, all hold their own bikes in their hands (Cacérès, 1981: 31). After 1936 and the introduction of *congés payés*, the bicycle and especially the tandem became even more the iconic objects of working-class leisure. As Cacérès suggests: ‘le tandem est resté l’image de 1936. Il a valeur de symbole. Il incarne le passage à la civilisation de loisirs’ (1981: 33). Ever since the bicycle had become affordable to workers it had been a means of transport for work and pleasure, but the restricted possibilities for times of pleasure afforded by long working hours and low pay had limited the use of the bike for escape and relaxation. By limiting working hours and by creating real holidays, the Popular Front produced the time to allow workers to go further afield on two wheels: occasional short excursions to the suburbs by Parisian workers could now be extended to longer trips into the countryside, and the combination of *congés payés* and higher wages made tandems and vacations on them properly affordable. Even now, the mental picture of young couples on tandems, either picnicking, returning home from a day out with bunches of flowers picked from the fields, or heavily laden with camping gear, endures as a powerful evocation of happiness and freedom.

**Racing and the Tour de France: les forçats de la route**

By 1930 *L’Auto’s* Tour de France could describe itself as a ‘Fête Nationale de la bicyclette [...]’, grande compétition internationale et pacifique où les nations cyclistes viendront chaque année prendre la mesure de la valeur de leurs champions’ (*L’Auto*, July 1930). This year marked the change of rulings that created national teams rather than teams of riders in the pay of cycle manufacturers and a swarm of independent competitors, and it was arguably the high point of Henri Desgrange’s stewardship of the race. The years from 1903 to 1939, when the race’s founder finally abandoned it, have come to be known as ‘les années Desgrange’, as his influence was ever-present in modifying the rules of racing to ensure the maximum control of *L’Auto* over its own race and maximum returns from his concept (Poyer, 2003b: 191). Desgrange as
'patron' of *L’Auto* and the Tour had essentially two opponents in the struggle to impose mastery on the lucrative spectacle of cycle racing that the Tour had rapidly become: the riders themselves and the manufacturers. The growing commercial significance of the Tour in the 1920s and 1930s had increased the responsibilities of riders and race managers alike, and while Desgrange attempted to impose his own ideology of sporting effort on the professional riders, some competitors began to react against the excessive demands forced on them. The purity of competition was spoiled by the interference of manufacturers in the unfolding of the race, as not only were dirty tricks frequently employed – such as the classic scattering of nails in front of rival riders – but team orders favouring some star performers could ruin the Tour as a spectacle by deciding the final result far in advance of Paris. ‘Les années Desgrange’ were also those of the first full internationalization of the race, and the hopes of France for a renewal and rebirth of society and sport marked by French victories in its national race were first dashed, then played out in the troubled context of growing European crisis.

**Business and manufacturers**

From 1903 to 1929 the Tour as a business was based on its initial founding commercial premise: the race was a means of selling newspapers (*L’Auto*) to the public and advertising space to the cycle industry, both in the pages of *L’Auto* and on the backs and bikes of riders. Such an ecosystem of interactions between the sports media and the cycle industry dated to the early days of cycle sport in France in the 1880s and even before, but Desgrange’s invention of the Tour ‘caravan’ in 1930 caused, as Eric Reed has discussed in a thorough and accessible treatment (2001; 2003), a fundamental evolution of the Tour’s nature as an advertising vehicle.

The manufacturers’ teams exploited the paradox fundamental to cycle racing, namely that it is an individual sport in which riders depend on the support of others to have a chance of overall victory. Desgrange’s view was always that the race was a competition between individuals, and the domination of the Tour by the Alcyon (Faber, Lapize, Garrigou, Defraye) and Peugeot (Thys) teams before the First World War had frustrated his desire for racing to be as exciting and unpredictable as possible. The participation of the major manufacturers also, of course, helped raise the profile of the race, so *L’Auto* did derive some benefit, but during the period 1919–29, the racing and winners reflected as much the fluctuating fortunes of French industry and cycle sales as they did the inherent strength of individual riders. By 1929 the stranglehold of Alcyon was
such that the severely suffering Maurice Dewaele – a ‘cadaver’ in the typically unsympathetic view of Desgrange – was guaranteed victory by his team, even against strong riders such as Antonin Magne.

From 1919 to 1921 sluggish demand for bicycles made manufacturers combine in the La Sportive consortium, with a (well-disciplined) team managed by Alphonse Baugé, which propelled its star members to victory. When the consortium dissolved in 1922, as trade picked up, Baugé continued to dictate the result of the Tour with his Peugeot team; then it was Automoto that dominated events, before Alcyon returned to winning ways in 1927. Not only were the major teams strong enough to dictate events, but other teams engaged in the race were unlikely to make difficulties, as they were often subsidiaries of the likes of Alcyon (Armor, Labor, Thomann) and Peugeot. Not only was racing stilted by team orders, but the commercial stakes involved in highly visible success in the Tour led to all kinds of gamesmanship, contrary to sportsmanlike behaviour.

The close symbiosis between industry and L’Auto in the Tour during the years 1903–14 and 1919–29, although irritating to Desgrange in the way it took some control over the race and racing from his hands, also facilitated some aspects of organizing an increasingly onerous event. The ‘interference’ of cycle manufacturers and other sponsors of the race was allowed at the price of material help in the form of machines for the riders and cars for L’Auto’s following journalists and organizers. Moreover, Desgrange also had the power, as owner of the race, to modify the rules as and when he liked in order to optimize both his own control over the event and competitiveness, spectator satisfaction, sponsor exposure and media coverage. It was thus that the famous yellow jersey was introduced in 1919, time-trial racing (in teams) against the clock in 1922, points bonuses for stage-winners in 1924, and radio reporting in 1929.

Sporting ideology: les forçats de la route
The famous reporter Albert Londres launched the scandal of les forçats (forced labourers) de la route in Le Petit Parisien on 27 June 1924. The popular rider Henri Pélissier, who had won the event in 1923, explained to the press why he, his brother and their protégé Vrille had abandoned the race: ‘Vous n’avez pas idée de ce qu’est le Tour de France […] c’est un calvaire. Et encore, le chemin de Croix n’avait que quatorze stations, tandis que le nôtre en compte quinze. Nous souffrons du départ à l’arrivée. Voulez-vous voir comment nous marchons? Tenez...’ (Londres, 1996b: 22). What the riders revealed to Londres and other journalists was the chemist’s shop of drugs they took on a daily basis to help them
through stages, and the publicity that this gave to the more negative aspects of how Desgrange treated riders in the Tour created for the first time a questioning of the giant scale and inhuman demands of the race.

As Christopher Thompson has pointed out, there was a strong strand of thinking on cycling (often to be found in the columns of L’Auto) that presented the human body – that of Tour racers – as a machine whose performance could be described in terms of output and input, stress, power, productivity and effort (Thompson, 2001; 2003). This philosophy of man as machine in sporting competitions reflected deeper-rooted theories of man as motor in the context of work and industrial production and the ways in which the productivity of French workers could be maximized. Desgrange’s own ideology of sport, which informed his organization of the Tour, combined a Taylorist concern to obtain maximum effort from the competitors and an apparent desire to instill bourgeois values in the racers. The ever-increasing feats of physical endurance demanded of the riders as L’Auto added successive difficulties to the race (more mountain stages, time trials, greater distances) served both to test the performance of machines (human and metal) and to create the drama necessary to sell papers and advertising. The glory of success was also proof of the developing limits of man/machine and bicycle technology, and what – post-Pélissier particularly – came to be seen as the ‘mistreatment’ of riders was the quasi-scientific testing of human productivity.

Before the Pélissier affair, left-wing politics and newspapers had generally been relatively indulgent towards the Tour, perhaps choosing to celebrate the glory and bravery of working-class riders rather than to investigate the conditions of their employment. But even in the 1920s the concerns about the commercialized excesses of le sport-spectacle that were to burgeon later in the inter-war period focused attention on some of Desgrange’s more unpleasant practices, such as his ruling in 1903 (rapidly abandoned, but still revealing) that riders failing to maintain an average of 20 kph on any stage would forfeit the day’s payment from L’Auto. Prizes and bonus payments were occasionally withdrawn when the Tour managers felt that riders had not tried hard enough. Both riders and Desgrange agreed that riding the Tour was ‘work’ – after all, the racers were professionals – but from 1924 the revolt of the Pélissier brothers showed that ideas diverged on how the work was managed, and on the symbolic value of riders’ suffering. Londres’ depiction of the Tour as a ‘tour de souffrance’ in which racers were brutalized by pain and effort, and badly treated by a draconian management that prevented them from wearing multiple jerseys to keep warm because discarding
them during the stage represented an abuse of team property, went against the image of heroic warriors stoically completing a job of work well done.

**National teams, caravane, slump, radio**

In 1930 and 1931 Desgrange introduced two major innovations in the organization of the Tour that, although shifting the balance of power from manufacturers back to *L’Auto*, nevertheless accentuated the rampant commercialism of the competition. In addition to (or because of) the problems with the manufacturers’ teams, sales of *L’Auto* were stagnating, and the peak circulation of 500,000 during the Tour of 1924 needed to be regained. Another, more implicit, objective of the modifications was to facilitate the success of French riders, as the French public had been unable to celebrate a Gallic victory in what had become the ‘Fête nationale de la bicyclette’ since Henri Pélissier in 1923. The first change was the introduction of national teams in 1930, and the second, a year later, the invention of ‘la caravane publicitaire’ (Reed, 2003: 104–07). The new ecosystem of relations between the Tour, press and industry was evolved from the version that had governed the race in the 1920s, redistributing the financial burden of organizing the event, relocating the contractual loyalties of riders, redefining the rules of competitiveness, renewing the visibility of existing sponsors and creating new kinds of sponsors.

The change to national teams was intended to increase the competitiveness of the racing, as manufacturers and their subsidiaries could no longer ‘fix’ the results, and, if each national team had strong riders, then patriotic pride should give true racing all the way to Paris. Another accessory benefit would be that the star French riders such as Magne and Leducq, who usually rode for opposing commercial teams (and thus tended to nullify each other’s chances) could both be supported by a single squad. The countries taking part in 1930 were Belgium, France, Germany, Italy and Spain, and it was André Leducq (a French Alcyon rider, outside the Tour) who was first back to Paris. This result was highly satisfactory to Desgrange, who had summarized the rationale of the new rules by claiming that nothing henceforward prevented the best rider from winning. Leducq was to win again in 1932, and France celebrated home victories during the rest of the 1930s with Magne (1931, 1934), Speicher (1933) and Lapébie (1937), with the Belgian Romain Maes winning in 1935 and 1936. Riders were no longer controlled by the manufacturers, but they were now contracted to *L’Auto* for the duration of the race, and thus under the management of Desgrange (*L’Auto*, 20
May 1930). Jean Durry discusses the contracts between riders and Desgrange and comments on how this changed the dynamics of the race (1981: 85–87). Because the Tour was now paying the wages of riders and other organizational costs previously the responsibility of the commercial teams, greater independence in running the Tour came at a price for Desgrange. Outside of the Tour, riders were still attached to manufacturers, and thus much advertising could be made from success in the Tour, although the bikes actually ridden during July were provided by L’Auto (painted yellow, they were the same for all professional riders in the national teams).

The advertising caravan was one of the solutions to the increased costs of running the race. By opening the Tour to general corporate sponsorship whose cars and vans would follow the route of the race, dispensing free gifts and jollity along the roadside and in the stage-towns, Desgrange allowed businesses outside cycling to profit from the fame of the Tour. A place in the caravan of publicity floats was obviously given in exchange for a fee, and although only ten companies participated in 1930, by 1935 there were 46. Sometimes companies sponsored individual stages, and the prizes were also linked to businesses, so the finances of the Tour were revolutionized. The greater affluence of the Tour made Desgrange more independent, and he was able to increase the sums demanded of the stage-towns for the privilege of hosting the race. The caravan commercialized and spectacularized the race in new ways by attracting extra-sporting sponsors, adding a dimension of entertainment and festivity that was non-sporting in nature. This trend reflected both the development of French business in the 1930s and the French population’s desire for distraction.

**Le Sport-spectacle: the Six Jours du Vél’ d’hiv’**

During the 1880s and especially the 1890s, velodrome cycle racing had been a popular spectator sport. Track racing dominated cycle sport, and the heroes and champions of track competition were media stars, lauded by the specialist press, which followed their every race and every move. Media coverage fed the appetite for news of both those who were able to spectate in person at the numerous velodromes and those who followed their heroes’ exploits only in the newspapers, but actual attendance was strong during the hey-day of velodrome racing. Track racing was one of the first sports to create such a popular following that it could be properly termed *sport-spectacle*, and it was the Vélodrome d’hiver in
Paris in the 1920s, 1930s, 1940s and 1950s that confirmed cycle racing in France as a mass spectator sport. The Vélodrome d’hiver was built in 1903, when Henri Desgrange caused a cycle track to be installed in the Galerie des Machines, a huge building near the Eiffel Tower left behind by the 1889 Exposition Universelle. Between 20 December 1903 and 1909, this initial velodrome in the Galerie des Machines rapidly became one of the foremost sites of mass sports spectatorship, as the Parisian urban working classes (and other less proletarian groups) flocked to attend races. In 1909 the Galerie des Machines was demolished, and Desgrange commissioned a new 17,000 capacity cycling stadium (with standing room for the lower classes and seats for their social betters) close to the original site, on the corner of the boulevard de Grenelle and the rue Nélaton. In the half-century before its demolition in 1959, the new Vél d’hiv’ hosted an incalculable number of sporting (and non-sporting) events, becoming a near mythical space of popular sports spectatorship. Today, the Vélodrome d’hiver is principally known, outside sporting circles, for the role it played in 1942 in the shameful internment and deportation of French Jews (Rasjhus, 2002; Lévy and Tillard, 1967; Marrus and Paxton, 1981). But in the 1920s and 1930s it was a site of festivity, sociability, competition and sporting achievement.

As well as staging major boxing matches, horse riding, fashion shows and other important sporting competitions, the celebrity of the Vélodrome d’hiver was built principally upon the Six Jours non-stop cycle races, which had originated in the US but which Desgrange introduced to the Vél d’hiv’ in 1913. The First World War interrupted the full development of the six-day races, with the event only being resurrected in 1921, and it was during the 1920s and 1930s that cycle racing at the Vél d’hiv’ helped develop sport in France as mass culture. The inter-war period was one in which sport in France underwent significant changes, pushed to evolve by the interacting forces of democratization, politicization, commodification and mediatization, and the Six Jours de Paris from 1921 to 1939 mirrored and helped shape these changes. From 1946 to 1958, the year before the Vél d’hiv’ was knocked down, racing continued, but track cycling was less the passion that it had been when it became, in the US at least, ‘the Jazz-age sport’, and when, in France, the Vél d’hiv’ and the excitement of its Six Jours exemplified the sport and popular culture of the inter-war years (Nye, Groman and Tyson, 2005).

Commodification and mediatization of cycling
The spectating that went on at the Vélodrome d’hiver was a prime
example of the commodification and mediatization of cycling in the late Third Republic. These processes continued the trends initiated in sport in general by cycling in the 1880s and 1890s, when the emergence of highly popular professional racing on roads and on the track had provided a model for other sports. The Tour de France had also demonstrated the ways in which sport could be packaged as a product to be consumed directly and indirectly through spectating at the roadside or through the pages of newspapers. But Desgrange’s Vél d’Hiv’ could take commodification even further than the Tour, as the classical three unities of place, time and action could combine to provide a spectacle over which almost total control could be exercised, and whose representations could be carefully shaped by L’Auto newspaper. The disadvantage of road racing compared with track racing was that the spectating public was essentially elusive and transient, since the crowds who watched the Tour pass by were local, consuming the race itself directly only for a few minutes. The invention of the advertising caravan in the 1930s was one way in which the Tour worked to extend the time spectators were exposed to the product, but in essence, the Tour was always a race in search of its own fans. In track racing, on the contrary, as the velodrome craze of the 1880s and 1890s had demonstrated, crowds flocked to the stadiums to see races and record attempts that could last up to 24 hours or longer. The faithful fans who patronized the Vél’ d’hiv’ constituted a captive public for commodified and mediatized sport and for all the ancillary phenomena of popular culture that developed around the racing.

The Vél’ d’hiv’ was part of Desgrange’s sporting and media empire, and the Six Jours de Paris held during the off-season for road racing was an important event in the professional calendar, as riders needed to ride to maintain income and L’Auto needed competition to report and discuss in order to fill its columns. Desgrange also owned the Parc des Princes track and so had a stranglehold on track racing as commercial spectacle in Paris. The financial importance of an off-season contract to ride at the Vél’ d’hiv’ was such that Desgrange could use the threat of exclusion from the Six Jours to influence riders in the Tour de France. In 1938 the promising young French rider Victor Cosson finished third in the Tour, but was accused by Desgrange of not having tried hard enough to attack the winner Gino Bartali. Desgrange famously threatened Cosson: ‘Méfiez-vous jeune homme, je vous briserai, rappelez-vous que je peux faire d’un toquard un champion mais aussi d’un champion un toquard!’ and he excluded him from the Vél’ d’hiv’ (quoted in Serres, 2003). This influence exercised over sportsmen by the sports media and by the sporting industry was precisely what worried those who were more
attached to the amateur, Corinthian, Olympic ideals of sport in which competition was intended to be pure, noble, honest and transparent. Much of the Popular Front’s later concern with ‘sport for all’ and sport as a healthy leisure practice was a reaction against the ‘passive consumption’ of spectacularized sport exemplified by track racing.

The public that attended the Vél’ d’hiv’ was essentially of two kinds: the Parisian working classes who often came with their families, bringing food and drink to consume during the long hours of racing; and the bourgeois sporting enthusiasts and high-livers of various social origins who patronized the expensive restaurants and bars that welcomed customers in the centre of the track. As Brasseur describes the scene: ‘Des ouvrières encore en bleu de travail, des familles entières avec des paniers pour le pique-nique dans les gradins et des élégantes en robe du soir au bras des messieurs en smoking. Bref, le tout Grenelle et le tout Paris réunis dans une même passion frénétique du Vélodrome d’hiver’ (1997: 39). In some ways, these two groups were segregated by the spatial arrangements of the velodrome: the restaurants were situated on the central lawn area whereas the cheaper locations for watching the racing were in the banked rows of seats around the track. However, in between the working classes and the bourgeoisie – in social if not strictly physical terms – was another group of patrons of the Vél’ d’hiv’. In common with much competitive spectacular sport, professional cycling attracted the attention of criminal groups who attended track events in the same way they followed boxing and other high-profile sports that were the subject of betting: underworld bosses, hangers-on and prostitutes were often to be found at important races and other events.

The Vél’ d’hiv’ in the 1920s mirrored the social and cultural development of France after the First World War. It is too simplistic to believe that the whole of France was overtaken by the desire to celebrate life and living that gave rise to the term années folles, but as Becker and Berstein point out in their history of France (2005), subtitled ‘victory and frustrations’, this idea is at least partially true, in the sense that some groups of people and some locations did indeed participate in a cathartic self-indulgence of pleasure and entertainment.

The Vélodrome d’hiver as ‘stadium space’

A strong recent trend in the study of sport has been the analysis of stadiums, exemplified by the work of sports historians, geographers, urban planners, economists and public policy experts such as John Bale (Bale, 1993; Bale and Moen, 1995; Vertinsky and Bale, 2004). For obvious cultural reasons, the main focus of attention has been football
and baseball stadiums in North America (for example, Ford, 2009; Abrams, 2009) and soccer grounds in the UK and Europe. Velodromes in general, and the Vél’ d’hiv’ in particular, can be examined fruitfully using some of the concepts developed to explain what is at work in sports stadiums; as Maguire (1995: 45) concisely asserts in a formulation that can help guide our ‘reading’ of the Vél’ d’hiv’: ‘Sports stadiums are sociological entities which are formed spatially.’ One building-block in the analysis of stadiums is simply their location and the ways in which they are perceived as and represent space and place. Definitions of space and place are multiple and varied, but following the dictum that ‘spaces where life occurs are places’ helps us to understand that ‘place’ is linked to community, identity, emotion and ultimately the idea of topophilia. Space, on the contrary – though inextricably tied to place in a dialogue of meaning – is concerned with capital, the distribution and ‘disciplining’ of bodies, the design of stadiums as retail/leisure complexes and, finally, a sense of ‘placeless-ness’.

Looking at the Vél’ d’hiv’ as space located within the urban environment of central Paris reveals that the velodrome possessed, from the outset, a geographical and thus cultural and social identity that set it apart from other sports venues. A tendency in the location of postmodern stadiums is to site them in the faceless suburbs or on the peripheries of cities (see Dauncey, 1997, for a study of the French national stadium), but the Vél’ d’hiv’ occupied a prime piece of real estate right from 1903. Although the move from the site of the Exposition Universelle in 1909 reflected the fact that the business of sport had to give way to urban heritage aesthetics – the original building was spoiling the view of the Champ de Mars – the new location below the Eiffel Tower still occupied a place of significance. Compared with the Stade de France built for the 1998 World Cup in the poor northern suburbs of Saint-Denis, the Palais Omnisports de Paris at Bercy built in the 1980s in a run-down area in the east of the city, or even the Parc des Princes at the old city boundary of the Porte Maillot, the Vél’ d’hiv’ was central to Paris and to Parisians’ self-representations of their city and its life. Over a period of fifty years, Desgrange’s covered velodrome formed part of the historic memory landscape of Parisian popular culture. Juxtaposed with the monuments and buildings of greater official status as lieux de mémoire (or ‘places of commemoration’) such as the Eiffel Tower or Les Invalides, the Vél’ d’hiv’ became an object of topophilia for the hundreds of thousands of Parisians who flocked to its cycling competitions and many other varied events.

Considering the Vél’ d’hiv’ as a stadium in abstraction from its privileged location within the heart of Paris also reveals interesting
considerations of its singularity. In essence, stadiums exist for the playing and watching of sport: they are, in their simplest expression, and to adapt Le Corbusier’s term, ‘machines for watching sport’. The traditional approach to the modernist design of stadiums was to define a ‘landscape of spectacle’ that rationally optimized both the game and spectatorship by providing the best-possible normalized playing surface and clear lines of sight for all watchers of the competition. This trend in design created the anonymous concrete behemoths of stadiums that have spurred analysts, following John Bale (1993) and his interpretation of Foucauldian perspectives on panopticism, to liken them to prisons for the disciplining of spectating and sporting bodies, sanitized soulless spaces for the rationalized and commercialized production and viewing of performance. More recently, stadium design has attempted to inject a wider range of functions, making sports grounds more flexible (multi-use) and better placed to integrate into their locality. Although the Vél’ d’hiv’ could not avoid its use by the authorities as a holding camp for Jewish detainees in 1942, it was not actually designed along lines that anticipated the stadium as machine. The 1909 design of the Vél’ d’hiv’ looked backwards to the velodromes of the 1880s and 1890s and the hippodromes upon which the latter were modelled as much as it looked forward in some ways to the later stadiums of the 1920s and 1930s such as those of Colombes (1907, enlarged in 1924 for the Olympic Games) and Charléty (1939).

Partly because of its location, partly because of its nature as a covered space and partly because of the simple duration of the sporting events – the six-day races – that it hosted, the Vél’ d’hui’ was never simply a ‘non-place’ of sport and spectating, but through the provision of food, music, light and entertainment was always something more social, cultural and emotional. The notion of a ‘non-place’ has been considered particularly by the anthropologist Marc Augé (1992), in reference to places of transit and travel, using the term to describe places that are only remembered in generic terms rather than as individual sites with specific identities. To the extent that many sports stadiums and football grounds are nowadays generic in design and location, it seems possible to extend the use of the term to them. But the Vél’ d’hui’, as we argue here, retains an individual meaning in memory. The velodromes of the track-racing craze of the late nineteenth century had evolved in response to the need for normalized distances and conditions for competition, organized in private space rather than the public sphere of parks and city streets and had attracted aficionados and casual spectators with military bands, food, drink, electric light and other distractions. The ‘total’ experience offered by the Vél’
d’hiv’ prefigured postmodern stadiums that, by integrating shopping malls, restaurants and cinema complexes, offer much more than mere sanitized concrete space for competition and spectatorship. Chris Gaffney and John Bale (2004: 25) have suggested that modern (stadium) sport is threatened with becoming a ‘landscape of anaesthesia’, but the Vél’ d’hiv’ – despite the totally normalized space of competition provided by the minutely measured and carefully prepared track – was, in the dazzle, colour, noise, stink and taste of its total experience, very far from the antiseptic panopticons of sporting non-space of modernist stadium design. The interesting analysis by Gaffney and Bale of the experiential dimensions of stadiums stresses how ‘the feeling of place’ associated with stadiums by those who frequent them derives from sensory perceptions of sight, gaze, sound, touch, smell, taste and ‘sixth-sense’ ideas of togetherness that make ‘the stadium experience […] a vital element of both constructions of reality and constructions of identity’ (Gaffney and Bale, 2004: 25–38).

The Vélodrome d’hiver and spectacle

Another strand in recent academic analysis of sporting activities has been that of investigating sport as spectacle. The French sociologist Philippe Gaboriau has recently summarized a number of ‘readings’ of sporting spectacles, some of which can help unpack the cultural significance of the Vél’ d’hiv’ in the inter-war years. Gaboriau suggests that the sporting spectacles of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries are peculiar to their time:

En ce début de XXIe siècle, le sport est devenu une sorte de morale emblématique, la morale du capitalisme. “Le culte de la performance” et le besoin d’affirmation de soi par voie compétitive sont perçus comme des valeurs positives et dominantes. Le plus fort gagne, les autres perdent. (2003b: 113)

Gaboriau’s readings are that sporting spectacles can be understood as ‘carnival’, as ‘heroic epics’, as total institutions à la Erving Goffmann, as entertaining conflict, as contemporary art, as the ‘opium of the people’ and as religious ritual. Arguably, an understanding of the Vél’ d’hiv’ can benefit from all of these perspectives. To take just one example of how the Vél’ d’hiv’ was carnival as well as competition, one can consider the tradition of annually electing the Reine des Six Jours, whose responsibility it was to officially start the race, which was considered the high point of the track season. Sport as spectacle and the popular cultural spectacle of the music hall and of popular music met in the figure of artistes such as Edith Piaf, Annie Cordy and Yvette Horner, all of whom at one stage were the Reine des Six Jours.
The Paris–Roubaix travailliste

In 1935 there were two versions of the famous race from Paris to Roubaix. One was run by the traditional organizer of this classic of the professional cycling season, L’Auto, and the other, an amateur race, was sponsored by the socialist daily newspaper, Le Populaire. The 36th Paris–Roubaix organized by L’Auto was won by Rebry of Belgium at an average speed of just over 39 kph, riding an Alcyon bike with Dunlop tyres and taking home a first prize of 3,000 francs; the Paris–Roubaix travailliste was won by Decru from Lens at an average speed of 30 kph, on an unrecorded bicycle and tyres, the winner being awarded 700 francs. Through its Paris–Roubaix travailliste, in which only members of the left-wing amateur sports organization the Fédération sportive et gymnique du travail were allowed to compete, Le Populaire was making a stand against what it saw as the rampant commercial exploitation both of a race that was part of cycling history in France and of proletarian muscles.

Founded in 1896, the professional Paris–Roubaix, alongside the Tour de France and the Six Jours de Paris, had become one of the key events in L’Auto’s domination of cycling competition. The autocratic and domineering approach of Desgrange towards ‘his’ races and the riders who took part in them had always brought him into conflict with those who felt that sport (even races such as Paris–Roubaix that had always been commercial operations) somehow also had a public significance to the national or local community, and that professional racers should be treated with the respect that was due to their status as true ouvriers de la pédale. Paris–Roubaix travailliste and other cycling competitions organized by left-wing sports movements and newspapers were an attempt to propose an alternative model of sport, diametrically opposed to le sport-spectacle of the press–industry–federation complex.

Commercial and socialist sport

Ever since the precocious professionalization of French cycling in the 1880s and 1890s there had arisen critiques of the way in which the commercial imperatives of sport-spectacle both denatured athletic contests themselves and could potentially lead to the exploitation of competitors. This strand of thinking reached its clearest expression in the furore that erupted in the mid-1920s over the Tour de France and Desgrange’s alleged inhumanity to the riders, who were described as
forçats de la route. This scandal continued to taint the image of the Tour throughout the remaining years of the inter-war period, and it was against this background in particular that the 1935 Paris–Roubaix travailliste was organized. As we have discussed above, the term forçat was first coined by the journalist Albert Londres, in a celebrated series of reports on the 1923 and 1924 Tours that he wrote for the newspaper Le Petit Parisien.12 Londres’ view of the 1924 race as a kind of cycling Calvary was informed by interviews with the Pélissier brothers, famous and popular riders who were vociferous in their complaints against the draconian and often petty rules imposed on competitors in the Tour by Desgrange.

These rules were intended, in Desgrange’s ideology of sport, to help make the Tour a civilizing process in which proletarian racers could be moulded into properly trained and respectable ouvriers de la pédale, as Thompson (2001) has masterfully described. Successful and independently minded racers such as Henri Pélissier were prepared to accept that road racing was work that was exhausting and excruciatingly painful, but rejected the need for trivial rules; implicitly, for them, the labour of cycle racing was honest and honourable enough. Unfortunately for Desgrange, the communist daily L’Humanité took up the Pélissier affair and used it to transform its hitherto relatively neutral coverage of the race – emphasizing the strength and skill of the riders rather than criticizing their exploitation – into a systematic critique of the Tour as the epitome of capitalist, bourgeois, profit-driven, commercial sport-spectacle, itself emblematic of contemporary French industrial capitalism. The communist view of professional cycling was thus simple and clear, but the socialist newspaper Le Populaire was less forthright, preferring to continue celebrating the riders’ skill and courage and denouncing the extremism of L’Humanité’s approach.

As Ory (1994) has summarized and as Fontaine (2004) also touches on, for a decade after 1924 it suited the two strands of the Left to display differing attitudes towards the Tour and professional sport, as the two parties vied for electoral support and leadership of progressive France, but in the run-up to the election of the Popular Front in 1936, a consensus view was developed. In the fraught political and social context of the mid-1930s, debates over the commercial exploitation of athletes for the benefit of sport-spectacle became more heated, as French society increasingly polarized between Left and Right. Moreover, as the splintered Left moved towards greater cooperation in the hope of presenting a united front to the forces of reaction in France and fascism in Europe, the left-wing critique of sport-spectacle found new consistency and strength. The
socialists adopted the more radical approach of the communists, choosing now to emphasize the suffering of riders caught in capitalist exploitation and being more ready to accept the image of forçats de la route.

In the increasing union of the Left that would deliver the electoral success of the Popular Front in 1936, communist and socialist sports movements began to work together, pooling their strengths in organization and membership. It was this collaboration that created the Fédération sportive et gymnique du travail (FSGT), born on 24 December 1934 of the merger between the communist Fédération sportive du travail and the socialist Union des sociétés sportives et gymniques du travail. These two sports movements had been set up in the early 1920s, as French socialism and communism developed on separate paths after their split at the Tours Congress in 1921, and were themselves based on various organizations of le sport travailliste that had arisen during the early decades of the century.

The FSGT and ‘participation for all’ in sport
The historian of French culture and society in the inter-war period Pascal Ory has described Paris–Roubaix travailliste – even though it preceded the election of the coalition government of socialists and communists by over a year – as an event typical of the Popular Front’s ambitions in cultural policy:


In a simple physical sense, Paris–Roubaix travailliste knocked down the barriers for those who wished to watch their sport of cycling without having to pay. The trigger for creating Paris–Roubaix travailliste was L’Auto’s decision to conclude its race in the hippodrome Croisé-Laroche at Marcq-en-Baroeul in Roubaix, where spectators could more easily be made to pay for entry than on the Avenue Gustave-Delory, where the finishing line had previously been located. The left-wing council of Roubaix saw this as an insult to the working people of Roubaix, who would thus be deprived of ‘their’ race by Desgrange’s appetite for financial gain.

However, the objectives of the newly unified left-wing sports movement were obviously wider reaching. The principles of the FSGT were
expounded in the sports columns of Le Populaire during January 1935 by the journalist Pierre Marie. More than just creating a unified sports movement, the ambition was to: ‘grouper des centaines de milliers de jeunes prolétaires, à qui l’exercice physique sagement dispensé apportera le complément de santé indispensable à une époque où tout concourt – rationalisation, civilisation mal-dirigée, chômage, sous-alimentation etc – à entamer la valeur et la résistance physiques des travailleurs’. The founding of the FSGT ‘a sonné le glas du sport frelaté, des marchands du temple sportif, des mercantils des muscles des autres. Plus d’un parmi ces mauvais bergers peut s’apprêter à faire ses paquets, à disparaître de la scène de l’exercice physique. La vérité sportive est en marche, rien ne l’arrêtera’ (Marie, 1935a).

Writing on the day of the race itself, Marie explained the links between socialism and sport and how Paris–Roubaix travailliste was different to Desgrange’s sport-spectacle:

la course Paris–Roubaix sera bien autre chose qu’une manifestation publicitaire au profit d’une société, d’un journal ou d’un homme. Elle prendra vraiment le caractère d’une vaste manifestation socialiste tout le long de la route, du départ à l’arrivée […] J’ai bien souvent soutenu que le sport s’inspirait, à bien des égards, des mêmes principes que le socialisme, que la pratique sportive contenait, pour une part, comme une anticipation du régime socialiste. Le sport se fonde sur l’égalité, au sens véritable du terme. Le sport implique la recherche, la culture, et l’emploi exact des tempéraments individuels. Le sport comporte l’émulation désintéressée. Le sport tend à créer du bien-être, de la santé, l’usage heureux de la force et du loisir. (Marie, 1935b)

This approach was even symbolized by the day chosen by Le Populaire and the FSGT for the race: Sunday 14 April 1935. This was also the date of the Journée nationale de la bicyclette organized by the (bosses’) cycle trade confederation, Desgrange’s L’Auto and the Union Vélocipédique de France, and so the Left were aiming neatly to hijack an event symbolic of the more purely commercial interpretations of cycling. For many on the Left, it seemed that sport itself had been hijacked by business, in the form of L’Auto and its backers in the cycle industry, and that the UVF, instead of protecting the interests of sport against capitalist exploitation, was in fact conniving with the press and business by delegating to them the responsibility for organizing major races and championships.

Preparation and the race itself
Following Desgrange’s decision to conclude his Paris–Roubaix in a private velodrome, Jean Lebas, mayor of Roubaix, and Raymond Boucherie, who was in charge of the cycling branch of the FSGT, decided
to run their own race, announcing the date and the prizes in *Le Populaire* of 2 January 1935 in order to steal Easter Sunday from *L’Auto*. Desgrange’s race would henceforth use the racecourse of Croisé-Laroche or the Stade Amédée-Prouvost, though he was eventually reconciled with the council of Roubaix and used the velodrome of the *Parc municipal des sports* built by Lebas’s administration as part of the Popular Front’s encouragement of sports infrastructure. No opportunity was missed by *Le Populaire* in the run-up to the race to poke fun at Desgrange for having lost the moral copyright to ‘his’ race, and *L’Auto* responded with a peevish but dignified silence, while awaiting the running of its own Paris–Roubaix the following Sunday. *L’Auto* of Monday 15 April reported on the running of the 21st Paris–Caen (organized by *L’Auto* and *Le Journal de Caen*), the festivities of the *Journée nationale de la bicyclette* and track racing at the Buffalo velodrome, but gave only the briefest of passing mentions to Paris–Roubaix travailliste.

The race was planned to coincide also with the 50th anniversary of the Roubaix workers’ cooperative *La Paix*, in a neat reversal of *L’Auto’s* plan to use the competition as publicity for the *Journée nationale de la bicyclette*. As well as support from *Le Populaire*, the finances and prize lists were swollen by contributions from favourably inclined newspapers in the north of France such as *La Croix du Nord* (and even *Le Peuple de Bruxelles*), and the left-wing *Le Sport*. Commemorative cups were donated by *Le Populaire*, *Le Peuple de Bruxelles* and *Le Sport*, and a total of 5,100 francs of prize money was offered, comparing not unfavourably with the rewards of the professional Paris–Roubaix of *L’Auto*. However, the prizes for Paris–Roubaix travailliste were arguably more equitably distributed than those of its capitalist model (*Le Populaire*, 1935), as some 60 competitors would be recompensed in one way or another, either as top finishers in the general classification (40 prizes with a gentle taper) or in the 3rd category classification (20 prizes in all). The principles of *sport travailliste* were further evident in the organizers’ concern that competitors should not be prevented from taking part because of expenses, and there was some correspondence in *Le Populaire* over what costs should necessarily be borne by riders and what subsidies could be made to allow as many as possible to participate. Although personal insurance was compulsory, helmets were deemed to be a necessary private accessory and accommodation at Saint-Denis before the start was at the expense of individuals, it was decided that riders who won no prizes would be given a travel subsidy and that everyone would benefit from a food allowance (*Le Populaire*, 1935).

The race itself was conducted as a kind of festivity, despite atrocious
weather. On the Saturday evening before the start in Saint-Denis, the council held a gala reception for the French, Belgian and Polish competitors, and the race itself was watched by tens of thousands of spectators, who were encouraged to shout ‘Vive le Socialisme, vive le journal du Parti, vive le Sport ouvrier’ as the riders and caravane rouge of some fifty cars passed by. Given the bad conditions, quite a few of the 185 riders who had originally signed up decided not to start, including the 63-year-old veteran Bouhours, who had won L’Auto’s Paris–Roubaix in 1905. Decru was the winner of the final sprint in Roubaix, narrowly beating the local rider Wybon to take the 700-franc first prize as well as the special prize – a racing bike – donated by L’Humanité. It was the communist daily that summarized most neatly the impact of this course rouge and of these sportifs rouges: it was through competitions like Paris–Roubaix travailliste and the Grand Prix cycliste de l’Humanité that ‘les sportifs prolétaires arracheront à l’influence néfaste du sport bourgeois, à son chauvinisme détestable, les nombreux travailleurs qu’il inféode encore’ (L’Humanité, 1935a; 1935b).

The second Paris–Roubaix travailliste was run on 4 April 1936, in the full swing of campaigning for the general election that would produce the government of the Popular Front. The race was run again in 1937 and 1938, but as France prepared for war interest declined and the race was forgotten.  

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Sport and leisure in France during the 1920s and 1930s were highly charged as vehicles for ideological competition, and cycling, in the form of the Tour de France and its ongoing negotiation of its own ideology of sporting endeavour and physical work, was at the forefront of this process. Sport and leisure during the inter-war period were also, increasingly, the object of growing mediatization as the written press and, from the mid-1920s onwards, new media such as the wireless began to contribute not only their coverage of events to the avid sporting public, but also to create innovations in the form of contests themselves. The growing media interest in sport facilitated the development of le sport-spectacle, exemplified by the races staged by the velodromes, most extravagantly by the Vélodrome d’hiver in its popular-cultural mixing of showbiz, social classes, sports competition and amusement. More soberly, and more seriously, left-wing ideology was reacting against the exploitation of workers and the duping of the viewing public represented by sport-spectacle organized by the bosses in the form of media entre-
preneurs such as Desgrange and L’Auto, and, when in government, the Left was instrumental in laying the bases of what would become – during the 1940s and the Fourth Republic (1946–58) but also most significantly under the Fifth Republic (1958–) – public policies in favour of sport and healthy lifestyles. Here the iconic image of the Popular Front’s innovations is the tandem, emblematic of the working classes’ newfound right to paid holidays and of the Left’s belief in a better and healthier life for all. Alongside the Tour de France (the icon of free-market sporting spectacle reliant on the labour of ouvriers de la pédale), an image of equal strength of the exploitative demands of professional cycling had always been the Paris–Roubaix race (known as ‘the Hell of the North’ for the suffering it demanded of riders), but in the 1930s the compétition alternative offered by the FSGT and Le Populaire gave another interpretation of how sport could be organized.

Notes

1 ‘Standard’ French had only been relatively slowly adopted in the provinces, even since the implementation in the 1880s of a nationalized, standardized primary education system using French as the language of instruction. In the First World War, soldiers whose mother tongues were Breton, Flemish, Basque, Catalan, Provençal, Alsacian and other regional languages were forced to communicate in French, thus favouring the post-war improvements in French’s position as the national language and the common language of a national press.

2 Les Dieux du stade was the French title of Leni Riefenstahl’s film Olympia about the 1936 Berlin Olympics, but the term was used already during the 1930s in France for the new stars of ‘spectacularized’ sport created by the rise of professional competition and stadium sports.

3 The UACP was later to become L’Union des Audax Francaises, which nowadays certifies Brevets ridden at a constant speed of 22.5 kph under the direction of ride captains, whom riders may not overtake. These rides are known as Brevets audax.

4 The professional race Paris–Brest–Paris had been run in 1891, 1901, 1911 and 1921, with an amateur category of touristes-routiers from 1901.

5 The start of the first Paris–Brest–Paris Randonneur was given on 2 September 1931. A peloton of 45 men, two women, five tandems (four of which were mixed teams) and one triplette set off at 10 p.m. from ‘la Porte Maillot’ in front of the Le Mauco café. The entire ride was made in rain and strong westerly winds, making progress rather demanding, but despite the conditions, 34 single bicycles and all five tandems finished within the time limit.

6 The rides along Tour stages in the 2000s, of which the best-known is called the Etape du Tour, attract riders in tens of thousands.

7 The FFSC was transformed into the Fédération française de cyclotourisme on 7 May 1945.

8 Dine (2001), for example, comments on the ‘illicit’ professionalization of French rugby in the 1930s.

9 Desgrange was happy that riders were ‘in the hands of the organizers’.
The architect was Gaston Lambert.

The race had been invented by two Roubaix industrialists, Théodore Vienne and Mauric Perez, who had wanted to find a way of publicizing the vélocipède du Nord built in 1895 and who had hit on the idea of a cycle race for Easter Sunday that would interest both Paris and the north and Belgium. Their idea was soon taken over by *L’Auto*.

See *Le Petit Parisien*, 23, 27, 29 June 1924, 2, 3, 5, 7, 9, 13, 19, 20 July 1924, later reproduced in two slim volumes (Londres, 1996a; 1996b).

Rather surprisingly, the caravan of cars from the newspapers (three cars for *L’Humanité*; eight cars for *Le Populaire*) also included a representative of the well-known aperitif ‘Midy’, a *vin tonique*, samples of which were distributed free-of-charge to the waiting crowds.