

Mutual Aid Societies in Eighteenth-Century Paris

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Mutual aid societies have been strangely neglected by historians. Although hundreds were formed in France in the first half of the nineteenth century, and in Britain their membership vastly exceeded that of trade unions, they have been little studied.¹ It is true that their archives are boring, mainly lists of payments and entitlements, their statutes full of procedural detail. They were rarely political and had none of the exotic ritual of the *compagnonnages*. In the 1980s William Sewell brought them into the mainstream as one of several types of artisan associations that, despite their unpromising exterior, were sometimes involved in industrial action and above all played a crucial role in shaping the language and thinking of labour.² Most specialists do not seem to have been persuaded of their links to militant labour, but mutual aid societies have nevertheless entered a wider narrative in labour history as precursors, along with *compagnonnages* and confraternities, to “true” labour organizations.³

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¹ Exceptions are Jean Bennet, *La Mutualité française des origines à la Révolution de 1789* ([Paris], 1981); George J. Sheridan Jr., “Internal Life and Tradition in the Mutual Aid Societies of Lyon, 1800-1870,” *Proceedings of the Western Society for French History* 9 (1981): 250-67; Allan Mitchell, “The Function and Malfunction of Mutual Aid Societies in Nineteenth-Century France,” in *Medicine and Charity before the Welfare State*, Jonathan Barry and Colin Jones, eds. (London, 1991); Michael David Sibal, “The Mutual Aid Societies of Paris, 1789-1848,” *French History* 3:1 (1989): 1-30. There is a larger literature on English mutual aid societies: see particularly Peter Clark, *British Clubs and Societies, 1580-1800* (Oxford, 2000), 350-87, and for the nineteenth century, Martin Gorsky, “The Growth and Distribution of Friendly Societies in the Early Nineteenth Century,” *Economic History Review* 51 (1998): 489-511; Martin Gorsky, “Mutual Aid and Civil Society: Friendly Societies in Nineteenth-Century Bristol,” *Urban History* 25 (1998): 302-22; Eric Hopkins, *Working-Class Self-Help in 19th-Century England* (London, 1995).

² William Sewell, *Work and Revolution in France: The Language of Labor from the Old Regime to 1848* (Cambridge, 1980), 163-66, 69-71, 84-87, 204-6.

³ Lynn Hunt and George Sheridan, “Corporatism, Association, and the Language of Labor in France, 1750-1850,” *Journal of Modern History* 58 (1986): 813-44 (816-8).

The key work on the Paris mutual aid societies is by Michael Sibalis, who demonstrated their numerical and financial importance in the early nineteenth-century. In 1805 the Société Philanthropique identified twenty-eight societies in the city, although there were certainly more. Their number continued to grow steadily, and by 1848 the government counted 280 societies with well over 20,000 members. By the 1840s they may have accumulated nearly two and a half million francs in savings. Sibalis argued that mutualism was indeed important in artisanal culture, but less in creating political awareness than in developing a sense of independence and new social values among workers.⁴ He also took issue with Sewell's characterization of mutual aid societies as "postrevolutionary versions of old-regime confraternities." They were in fact a different type of organization, though he concludes that "the transformation from confraternity, *compagnonnage* and custom to formal mutual aid society is impossible to trace, but in Paris at least it probably occurred in the early 1790s."⁵

This paper explores the development of mutual aid societies in prerevolutionary Paris. It looks first at the timing of their initial appearance, then examines the way their form and procedures changed across the eighteenth century and up to the early nineteenth. Finally, it considers why they appeared when they did. It suggests that whatever their later importance as a form of labour organization, in their origins they need to be seen in the context of eighteenth-century culture and experience, as E.P. Thompson showed for the English mutual aid societies that he described as growing out of the encounter between English working people's collective culture and the experience of industrialization.⁶ We also need to look beyond economic change and consider wider demographic trends, shifts in religious thinking, and new approaches to poverty and old age.

So what were mutual aid societies? Since they were a form of association that was evolving, as we shall see, any static definition will be unsatisfactory. However, their primary characteristic was that they involved a group of individuals who made regular payments into a common fund in order to provide for themselves in later, unforeseeable moments of financial hardship or of old age. A good example of an early nineteenth-century mutual aid society is the Société des Arts Graphiques, created in 1808. It admitted only men over twenty and under fifty, and it charged much higher admission and annual fees for those who joined at a more advanced age. In return, they received benefits if they were unable to work, reducing over a period of time, but in case of serious illness the Society would pay the admission fee for a hospice. Those too old to work received a pension of 200 francs a year, and the Society also paid for funerals. Widows of members could choose to continue the payments on their own behalf.⁷ This was a fairly typical arrangement, in which the financial stability of the society depended on sound evaluations of the likely longevity and incidence of illness and injury among the members.

Various suggestions have been made about the origins of mutual aid societies. As already noted, Sewell saw them as trade associations that continued in secular form the activities of religious confraternities, but that could also be a cover for

⁴ Sibalis, "Mutual Aid Societies."

⁵ Sewell, *Work and Revolution*, 164; Sibalis, "Mutual Aid Societies," 3.

⁶ E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth, 1968), 457-63 (esp. 462). See also Clark, *British Clubs*, 350-87.

⁷ Those between 20 and 40 were charged 30 francs admission and 1 franc 50 per month; those 40-45 paid 45 francs admission and 2 francs per month; men aged 45-50 paid 60 francs admission and 3 francs per month. *Règlement de la société des arts graphiques établie le 1er mai 1808* (Paris, 1817).

compagnonnages. Jean Bennet, an amateur historian of mutualism, likewise saw trade-based confraternities as precursors, but primarily as expressions of a wider sense of occupational community also evident in the guilds. Work on other places has also emphasized trade solidarity, since in England and the Netherlands many mutual aid societies seem to have emerged from the guilds in the late seventeenth century and in the course of the eighteenth.⁸

In Paris the mutual aid societies did not grow out of the guilds, which were mainly for employers, whereas as we shall see the mutual aid societies were for employees and many developed entirely outside the corporate trades. Nor did they emerge from the *compagnonnages*, the semi-secret associations of journeymen artisans that existed in many parts of France both before and after the French Revolution.⁹ As Michael Sonenscher and I showed some years ago, there is no evidence of the existence of *compagnonnages* in Paris between the mid-seventeenth century and the 1780s. This is not because they were secret, since in other parts of France they are well documented, and on the eve of the Revolution there are hints of their presence among Paris carpenters and perhaps hatters. It is likely, of course, that traditions outside Paris influenced men who came there from other parts of France. But as Sibalis points out, in the 1830s – the heyday of the *compagnonnages* – it was older men who established mutual aid societies. They catered to different clienteles. Nor is there is any hint in the mutual aid societies of the rituals associated with the *compagnonnages*.¹⁰

Direct connections between the Paris mutual aid societies and confraternities, on the other hand, are clear, even though the primary function of confraternities was the organization of religious services. There were around 500 in mid-eighteenth-century Paris, very diverse in character, but about half were connected with a particular occupational group, often a guild. Each one focussed on a particular cult, usually of a saint or of the Virgin. Most were purely religious, with no charitable or self-help role at all, although some assisted the poor and many did offer benefits to their own members, in particular arranging funerals and offering prayers after their death. A few offered charitable support to those who were sick or infirm, though rarely in a systematic way. Members paid regular fees, but these were for religious services and there was rarely any guarantee of assistance. The statutes usually, like those of the parchment-makers, urged that “the members will assist each other, will visit each other when sick, will pray for each other, and will help each other when in need.”¹¹ That was a far cry from the targeted subscriptions and the mathematically precise calculations of benefits guaranteed by the later mutual aid societies. Of course, confraternities were not static organizations either, but right up to the time of their abolition in 1792 religious services remained central to their existence.

Nevertheless, the first mutual aid societies in Paris did appear within religious confraternities run by journeymen in particular trades. Around 1720 the joiners’ confraternity in the church of Saint-Laurent levied five sous a month, which entitled a

⁸ Bennet, *La Mutualité française*; Clark, *British Clubs*, 353-54; Gorsky, “Mutual Aid,” 307; Sewell, *Work and Revolution*, 164-65.

⁹ Cynthia Maria Truant, *The Rites of Labor: Brotherhoods of Compagnonnage in Old and New Regime France* (Ithaca, 1994).

¹⁰ David Garrioch and Michael Sonenscher, “*Compagnonnages*, Confraternities and Associations of Journeymen in Eighteenth-Century Paris,” *European History Quarterly* 16 (1986): 25-45 (25-30); Sibalis, “Mutual Aid Societies,” 2-3; Truant, *Rites of Labor*, 110.

¹¹ Archives nationales (hereafter AN), K1032, no. 3. The best survey of eighteenth-century French confraternities, in English, is John McManners, *Church and Society in Eighteenth Century France*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1998), 1: 156-88.

member who fell sick to receive three livres per week. Anyone so seriously ill that he needed to go to the hospital was accorded half that sum.¹² The journeymen hatters' confraternity also had a very early mutual aid system. In 1725 the Paris police descended on a house in the suburbs where they found five hatters working on two registers used to record subscriptions and payments. One of the books contained the rules, which specified that new members had to be aged under forty. A man who was sick and unable to work received five livres a week for the first six months, after that six livres per month, and four livres per month if he was forced by old age or permanent incapacity to retire to the hospital. One of the members claimed that this system had been in place for over fifty years, although given the nature of collective memory such statements need to be treated with extreme caution. Yet it was certainly operating by 1721, when several hatters described it and claimed that it had been approved by the successive police chiefs La Reynie and d'Argenson: if so, it dated to at least the 1690s, but this may refer to the official approval received by the confraternity rather than to the practice of mutual aid.¹³

These are the earliest examples we know of, but a variety of similar organizations came into being in the following decades. The gravediggers formed a mutual aid association in 1725, probably linked to the confraternity they had created in 1663.¹⁴ By the 1750s the confraternity of Sainte-Anne at the Temple, primarily for journeymen joiners, was providing three livres a week to members who fell sick. According to a notice written in the mid-nineteenth century, but which plausibly claims to be based on original documents, only in 1758 did it begin offering payments to those who were permanently unable to work. Coinciding with these arrangements was a growth in membership from around forty-five members in 1745 to seventy-eight in the late 1770s. Given that over the same period its income doubled, the increased subscription rate is consistent with its transformation into a mutual aid society in the late 1740s or early 1750s.¹⁵

The exact starting point of other associations is even less certain. It was not until 1770 that the *garçons fripiers* – who worked for the sellers of second-hand clothes – sent the authorities the draft statutes of “a Confraternity whose object is to assist both those among them who are out of work and those who are sick.” Yet their association, they claimed, had existed for as long as any of them could remember. The confraternity itself was apparently founded in 1717.¹⁶ The printing workers also had a form of mutual aid. According to Nicolas Contat's *Anecdotes typographiques* of 1762, a number of individual print shops had their own tiny societies, the only examples we have from the prerevolutionary period of mutual aid unconnected with a confraternity. These bodies charged a small entry fee and a regular subscription, for which they received quite generous payments if they fell sick. However, Contat adds that some societies drew attention to themselves by printing their statutes and were

¹² Louis Brochard, *Histoire de la paroisse et de l'église Saint-Laurent à Paris* (Paris, 1923), 196-97; Jean Gaston, *Les Images des confréries parisiennes avant la Révolution* (Paris, 1910), 77.

¹³ AN Y14938, 17 March 1726 and Y14932, 13 November 1721. See also Michael Sonenscher, *The Hatters of Eighteenth-Century France* (Berkeley, 1987), 81-87. The confraternity was apparently created in 1673: José Lothe and Agnès Virole, *Images de confréries parisiennes. Exposition du 18 décembre 1991 au 7 mars 1992* (Paris, 1992), 116-17. An undated document, possibly from 1673, mentions the existence of a fund, but links it to strikes and to feasts: Bibliothèque nationale [hereafter BN] Ms fr 21793, fols 176-77.

¹⁴ Shelby T. McCloy, *Government Assistance in Eighteenth-Century France* (Philadelphia, 1946), 456. For the confraternity, L644, liasse 2.

¹⁵ AN F12 4820, Société de Sainte-Anne. Gaston, *Images des confréries*, xxxiv.

¹⁶ BN, Collection Joly de Fleury [JF], MS1590, fols 31, 94-95.

immediately suppressed by the police, who tolerated the confraternity but were resolutely hostile to any other form of worker organization. The printers' guild deliberately attempted to limit autonomous worker organization by organizing its own collections for sick workers.¹⁷

The examples of the *fripriers* and of the gravediggers show that mutual aid was not confined to manufacturing trades or even to those with a formal corporate structure, and there were others as well. The 1756 statutes of a confraternity of the Ange Gardien, an appropriate name for a mutual aid society, were identical to those of the *fripriers*, but it was for Savoyards, the term used to refer to shoe-shine and errand-boys, many of whom did indeed hail from Savoy. The following year the Archbishop of Paris authorized a confraternity for another non-corporate group, the *frotteurs* (polishers, probably of floors), its primary aim also being mutual assistance.¹⁸

These were all, it seems, trade-based associations, although the joiners admitted men of other occupations who lived in the parish. But other societies were explicitly open to a range of occupations. A particularly interesting one developed within the Confraternity of Saint-Prix, in the chapter church of Saint-Étienne-des-Grès. It was an ancient association, claiming to have been founded in 1414, and its 1674 statutes say nothing about assistance to members, who seem to have been quite affluent shopkeepers and merchants. The 1763 statutes, on the other hand, specifically mention assistance in case of illness and set an age limit for new members, a characteristic sign of a mutual aid society.¹⁹

Between the 1760s and the 1780s, further societies with no specific trade connection appeared in several different parishes: at Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet, on the Left Bank, as early as 1768; at Saint-Laurent in 1780, Saint-Eustache in 1782, and Saint-Médard in 1783. These were a different model again, because in each case the mutual aid society was a separate body within an existing confraternity. Only members of the confraternity were entitled to join, but they were not automatically members of the mutual aid society, which had its own rules and a separate financial and administrative structure. At Saint-Nicolas the mutual aid group was limited to 100 members, and both there and at Saint-Médard new entrants had to be under forty. In each of these cases the rules were as developed as for most of the nineteenth-century mutual aid societies, carefully regulated so as to guarantee financial stability.²⁰ Similar bodies were formed at Saint-Sulpice in 1772 and at Saint-Eustache in 1782.²¹

There were thus several different sorts of mutual aid societies in prerevolutionary Paris. Some grew out of existing confraternities; others were entirely original creations, either forming new confraternities or autonomous bodies

¹⁷ Philippe Minard, *Typographes des Lumières* (Paris, 1989), 156; Nicolas Contat, *Anecdotes typographiques* [1762], Giles Barber, ed. (Oxford, 1980), 78-79.

¹⁸ BN JF 1590, fols 102-12, 262-68.

¹⁹ AN F12 4820, Société Sainte-Anne. *Règlement et statuts pour la confrérie de S. Prix*, 1674. BN JF 1590, fols 119-26.

²⁰ *Statuts, réglemens et bulle de Notre S.P. le Pape Alexandre VII, concernant l'association d'assistance mutuelle des cent Associés de la Confrairie de Saint Jean-Baptiste et de Saint Jean l'Évangéliste, érigée en l'Église Paroissiale de Saint Nicolas du Chardonnet* (1769), Bibliothèque Mazarine, 42891, pièce 3; *Règlemens en forme de Statuts, pour la confrérie du Très-Saint-Sacrement, érigée en l'Église Paroissiale de S. Médard de Paris, pour la société des Boursiers-confrères de ladite confrérie, sous l'invocation de S. Pierre* (Paris, 1783); Bennet, *La Mutualité française*, 759-60.

²¹ Charles Hamel, *Histoire de l'église Saint-Sulpice* (Paris, 1900), 151; *Annuaire de la Société fraternelle de secours de Saint-Eustache, fondée en 1782 dans l'Église de Saint-Eustache par feu M. L'Abbé Viez* (Paris, 1844).

operating within existing confraternities. Only the printers had workshop-based societies without links to a confraternity. But not all these associations were for a single trade group: some were open to all male workers regardless of occupation. And only a minority seem to have existed in artisan trades, or to have been associated with confraternities of journeymen. To view them, as most authors have done, as essentially artisanal organizations is to read back from nineteenth-century forms of association and from the historiographical preoccupations of revolutionary and nineteenth-century historians. Rather, the mutual aid societies in prerevolutionary Paris need to be seen as an eighteenth-century development within the much longer history of religious confraternities.

It was not a simple matter of the secularization of an older institution and nor was there a particular transitional moment. Rather, we can see a long and fragmented development across the century. The earliest mutual aid societies were quite simple. That of the hatters, which may have begun at the very end of the seventeenth century, had four elected treasurers (two chosen by all the members every six months). They collected and recorded the regular payments from members and distributed a fixed weekly sum to those who were sick or unemployed. The calculations involved were very straightforward. The solvency of the association depended on reasonably full employment in the trade and given the high mobility of many journeymen may in practice also have relied on some leaving the city and their payments behind. The one actuarial precaution was the upper age limit of forty for new members, designed to reduce the likelihood of their needing assistance for some years. The society may also have depended on other sources of income, as the rules mention that journeymen were required to take up collections. It was a common practice for confraternities to solicit funds from worshippers during services and from the crowds at religious processions. The hatters may also have received subsidies from masters, as one of the treasurers mentioned that every two weeks he collected money from “some of the said master hatters and journeymen to help the sick journeymen.”²² The joiners too took up collections within the tiny parish where they were based, which may explain why they admitted locals belonging to other trades.²³ We can see here a creative combination of new elements and of fundraising methods common to all confraternities.

For the societies founded in the middle years of the century, however, age limits and other restrictions were standard features, perhaps as a result of experience: the joiners’ society at Saint-Laurent had become insolvent in 1756.²⁴ The later ones generally introduced a joining fee, adding to the financial stability of the association and guaranteeing the seriousness of new members: twelve livres twelve sous for Saint-Prix in 1763, twelve for the societies at Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet and Saint-Médard, six for the *garçons fripiers*. Some bodies added fines for late payments and for other infringements of the rules, which became increasingly detailed, particularly the checks required to prevent fraudulent claims and maladministration. The second-hand clothes sellers obliged all claimants to present a certificate from an employer or a medic, while other societies required the officials to make regular visits to those claiming to be sick. At Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet these were to be twice-weekly and might include a formal medical inspection. The Saint-Nicolas association also required new entrants to declare any existing infirmity. The later societies systematically limited the numbers admitted, presumably to allow for more accurate accounting. Administrative rules became increasingly detailed, again to prevent fraud

²² AN Y14938, 17 March 1726 and Y14932, 13 November 1721, witness 7.

²³ AN F12 4820, Société Sainte-Anne.

²⁴ Brochard, *Saint-Laurent*, 197.

and ensure financial stability.²⁵ Yet unlike the nineteenth-century mutual aid societies, the eighteenth-century associations invested none of their capital, accumulating only cash to serve as a buffer against claims. In about 1760 the floor-polishers' society apparently had as much as 2,400 livres in its cash box.²⁶

The early years of the Revolution brought a proliferation of new societies, largely thanks to newfound freedoms of association. The printing workers promptly organized an industry-wide Club Typographique, and a number of apparently new bodies were formed among the tanners, the journeymen goldsmiths, the workers on the docks, and the carpenters and the locksmiths. Some societies became entirely secular, if not immediately then after the National Assembly abolished religious confraternities in 1792. The joiners of the confraternity of Sainte-Anne reorganized themselves under the name of Société Fraternelle de Secours Mutuels, while that of the Nativité de la Sainte Vierge, at Saint-Laurent, mainly composed of unskilled workers, became the Société des Amis de l'Égalité.²⁷ It is clear that some associations listed by the Société Philanthropique in the early nineteenth century also had prerevolutionary antecedents. That of Saint-Hildevert was formerly a confraternity at Saint-Laurent, possibly associated with inlayers (since this was their patron saint). What seems to have been the first Paris mutual aid society exclusively for women, the Société de l'Union Secourable, "dite de Sainte-Catherine," probably had its origins in the confraternity of that name at Saint-Eustache. And it is likely that the Sociétés de Saint-Eustache, de la Fraternité Saint-Sulpice, and de l'Union Saint-Marcel were all former parish confraternities.²⁸ It appears that they too were transformed during the Revolution.

In the new political environment, some mutual aid societies seem to become revolutionary clubs, using their meetings for political discussion and education, although it is also clear that trade disputes occupied some of them. After the Le Chapelier law of June 1791, banning workers' organizations, some survived by opening their doors – at least in principle – to men from a range of trades. The Club Typographique became the Société Patriotique des Amis de l'Humanité, prudently adding to its rules a ban on any discussion of issues relating to a single trade.²⁹

A further innovation of the revolutionary years was the creation of enterprise-specific associations that were previously found only in some of the print shops. In November 1789 one was formed at the Réveillon wallpaper factory and another at the Richard-Lenoir cotton manufactory. In 1794 the workers at the Perrier pumping station at Chaillot formed their own society.³⁰ These were the first of many. In the early years of the nineteenth century a great many individual work-places had their own officially recognised mutual aid societies: the Post Office, the lumber-yards, certain ports along the river, the central market (for the porters), the tobacco manufactory owned by Le Sourd in the rue Montmartre, and a number of others. The

²⁵ BN JF 1590, fols 94-5, 119-26, 266. *Statuts . . . concernant l'association d'assistance mutuelle. . . en l'Église paroissiale de Saint Nicolas du Chardonnet* (1769) and *Règlements . . . pour la société des Boursiers-confrères de ladite confrérie, sous l'invocation de S. Pierre* (1783).

²⁶ BN JF 1590, fol. 154.

²⁷ Isabelle Bourdin, *Les sociétés populaires à Paris pendant la Révolution française jusqu'à la chute de la Royauté* (Paris, 1937), 117-21, 29-30; BN MS n.a.f. 2664, fol. 108; AN F12 4820, Société de Sainte-Anne. Bennet, *La Mutualité française*, 586, 759-60, 812; *Rapports et comptes rendus de la Société philanthropique de Paris, pendant l'an XIII* (Paris, 1806), 46.

²⁸ *Rapports et comptes rendus de la Société philanthropique . . . 1807*, 25; Bennet, *La Mutualité française*, 812.

²⁹ Bourdin, *Les sociétés populaires*, 117-30; Sibalis, "Mutual Aid Societies," 3-5.

³⁰ Bennet, *La Mutualité française*, 812; Sibalis, "Mutual Aid Societies," 3-5.

police and the employers preferred this model because it prevented industry-wide coalitions of workers, and the smaller numbers of members, together with workplace hierarchies, made them easier to control.³¹

The early nineteenth-century societies introduced further refinements. Some had a sliding scale of fees according to the age at which a new member was admitted. Some practised the systematic exclusion of men with health problems. A few employed their own doctor or distributed dispensary cards giving members access to cheap medicines.³² Like the earlier bodies, their precise form varied according to swings in government policy, so that from 1806-8 they were officially not allowed to restrict membership to a single trade, whereas later they were required to do so!³³ A few, during the Restoration, returned to religious practice, adopting a saint's name or paying for masses, and a handful of Protestant and Jewish associations appeared. But on balance the nineteenth-century societies were secular bodies. And while not all of them obeyed their own carefully constructed rules, and few were really run on sound financial principles, compared with the eighteenth-century ones their finances were far more carefully constructed. Many now invested their funds in government bonds, the Caisse d'Épargne, or in the city-run Mont-de-Piété.³⁴

The mutual aid societies of Paris thus continued to evolve, but their quantitative explosion in the first half of the nineteenth century built on models elaborated, piece by piece, across the preceding hundred years. They first evolved, in the vast majority of cases, within religious confraternities, initially in a very simple form, becoming more elaborate in the middle and later years of the eighteenth century. Where, then, did the inspiration come from, and why did they evolve at the time they did? We must also bear in mind that they were not confined to Paris, but that very similar associations appeared, at roughly the same time, in England, Germany, Scandinavia, and the Netherlands.³⁵

In a very general sense, the collective and corporate character of eighteenth-century urban life, expressed in but not confined to the guilds and the confraternities, was vital.³⁶ Many guilds assisted poor members who had fallen on hard times. But those helped in this way were masters, whereas the mutual aid societies involved journeymen and unskilled workers. Furthermore, as in the confraternities this was charity, not self-help, and nor was there any guarantee of assistance. Nevertheless, the communitarian culture was shared by most workers, and a direct inspiration for mutual aid is suggested by the language some of them used. The journeymen hatters, in the 1720s, talked about their "bourse," suggesting a close connection with the *bourses communes* run in many workplaces. A good example of a *bourse commune* is the system that operated among the porters in the Paris central market. At the end of each day they would deposit a fixed proportion of their earnings into a common fund, which at the end of the week was divided up between all the men working there. They took it in turns, two at a time, to serve as treasurer.³⁷ This system was designed

³¹ *Rapports et comptes rendus de la Société philanthropique*, an XIII, 1807, 1808; Sibalis, "Mutual Aid Societies," 7.

³² Sibalis, "Mutual Aid Societies," 11, 16; AN F15 1961, *Règlement de la Société officieuse* (1808).

³³ Sibalis, "Mutual Aid Societies," 11; Francine Soubiran-Paillet, "Comportements des autorités répressives à l'égard des corps professionnels de 1791 à 1830," *Déviance et société* 17 (1993): 1-17 (8).

³⁴ Sibalis, "Mutual Aid Societies," 18, 19, 21, 23-24.

³⁵ James C. Riley, *Population Thought in the Age of the Demographic Revolution* (Durham, N.C., 1985), 106.

³⁶ See E.P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (Harmondsworth, 1993); and for Paris, David Garrioch, *The Making of Revolutionary Paris* (Berkeley, 2002), part I and esp. 7-8, 40-44.

³⁷ AN Y11239, 28 October 1752.

to create solidarity and reduce competition, since vying for work led to conflict and produced undercutting that was suicidal in an occupation where wages were already very low. Similar practices existed among many occupational groupings, including labourers on the ports, the town criers, printing workers, even office-holders of various kinds.³⁸ Mutual aid contributions were only a modest step from the provisions of these *bourses communes*, building on the same principles of trust and mutual co-operation.

Another obvious precedent for mutual aid societies was the religious confraternities within which they developed. These offered a powerful organizational model, with their elected administrators and well developed accounting systems. Their members made regular payments, in return for which they were supplied with religious services and, in most cases, funerals. Historians of mutualism have also pointed to their traditions of charity, although here we need to be cautious: it was quite a jump from handouts, which could be humiliating for the recipient, to the self-help principles of the mutual aid societies. But there was a link: the ideology of spiritual co-operation. The confraternities existed because their members believed that their individual chances of salvation were significantly enhanced by collective worship and prayers. The crucial step from this “spiritual economy” to the cash economy of pensions and unemployment payments was taken in the eighteenth century, as part of the development of a more secular world view that placed greater emphasis on each person’s future in this world rather than in the next. This was in turn partly related to the increase in longevity which, even if eighteenth-century people were unaware of it, was nevertheless changing both realities and attitudes.³⁹

Changing thinking about old age was reflected in other ways, for example in forms of financial provision that certainly influenced the development of the mutual aid societies. The eighteenth-century interest in demography and statistics underpinned early forms of insurance and the sale of annuities, both of which in principle depended on calculations of probability, although the mathematics was rarely sound! A wide range of “income security associations” – pension funds, widows’ funds, life insurance, superannuation funds – sprang up across eighteenth-century Europe.⁴⁰ In France, both *rentes viagères* and *tontines*, forms of investment in which lenders received high interest but only for the lifetime of a designated person or persons, turned a profit for the lender if those named on the certificates lived longer than expected and led to a loss if they did not. Even some members of the working classes were purchasing these by the end of the eighteenth century.⁴¹ They focussed attention on life expectancy and risk, involving the same kinds of guesses that underpinned the finances of the mutual aid societies. Similar thinking formed the basis for proposals by Claude-Hubert Piarron de Chamousset and by Antoine Lavoisier, among others, for comprehensive insurance schemes. The mutual aid societies sprang up in a society in which ideas about making financial provision for illness and old age were becoming more widespread. The notion that people’s fate

³⁸ AN AD XI 17, dossier E (*emballeurs, chargeurs, déchargeurs*); BN F-24997, *Compromis de la Communauté des Commissaires, Contrôleurs, Jurez-Mouleurs, Comteurs, Cordeurs, Visiteurs et Mesureurs de toutes sortes de Bois de la Ville, Faux-bourgs et Banlieue de Paris* (1662); BN Ms fr. 21609, fols 109-14, statuts des jurés crieurs, 1741; Minard, *Typographes*, 150.

³⁹ John McManners, *Death and the Enlightenment: Changing Attitudes to Death among Christians and Unbelievers in Eighteenth-Century France* (Oxford, 1981), 84-86, 93-94, 111-19.

⁴⁰ Riley, *Population Thought*, 104-28; Lorraine Daston, *Classical Probability in the Enlightenment* (Princeton, 1988), 138-82.

⁴¹ Daniel Roche, *The People of Paris* (Leamington Spa, 1987. First published 1981), 83.

was entirely in the hands of God, and that individuals could do little about it, was being eroded, especially in the cities and nowhere more than in Paris.⁴²

The clergy themselves, for all that they might have wished the faithful to think more about the afterlife, were part of this process. It is clear that parish priests were instrumental in establishing or facilitating the creation of mutual aid societies. The very earliest one we know about, that of the journeymen hatters, drew up its rules in the priest's residence at Sainte-Geneviève-des-Ardents, presumably in his presence and with his assistance.⁴³ Much later, the deputy priest at Saint-Eustache was credited with founding the Société Fraternelle established in his church, and the parish priest of Saint-Médard was directly involved in drafting the rules for the society based there.⁴⁴ It is likely, too, that the almost simultaneous creation of parish-based societies at Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet, Saint-Eustache, Saint-Laurent and Saint-Médard reflects emulation and direct involvement by their respective parish priests.

But the clergy were not the only key individuals involved. Local notables also played a major role. A master *traiteur* named Porcabeuf, one of the administrators of the confraternity of the Blessed Sacrament at Saint-Médard, appears to have been a key figure inspiring the development of the mutual aid society there. Some employers helped to create societies, acting either out of concern for their workers or because they saw such associations as useful ways to maintain the fidelity of their work-force. Many of the enterprise-specific bodies that began to develop during the Revolution were undoubtedly promoted by employers, and it is probably no coincidence that the one in Réveillon's factory was established soon after the riot that destroyed his house, at the very moment he was trying to restore his reputation as a good citizen and model employer. Motives of personal benefit, humanitarianism, and philanthropic desire to promote principles of providence and thrift among the workers were not mutually exclusive.

The involvement of notables and employers does not necessarily mean that the ordinary members of confraternities were incapable of developing their own institutions. Rather, in a context where worker associations were viewed with suspicion and often suppressed, having clerical or bourgeois patrons could be very useful. It was also helpful in communicating financial principles with which such men were professionally well acquainted, and it almost certainly contributed to the introduction of the safeguards whose dissemination I have noted. Yet it was not indispensable, as the Société Philanthropique discovered, to its amazement, in the early 1800s when it first became aware of the number and variety of worker-run mutual aid societies.

But there were other factors more closely related to developments in the eighteenth-century economy, in the cities in particular, that are equally crucial in explaining the introduction and spread of mutual aid societies during this period. The most important is the changing nature of the labour market, which was in turn related to urban growth and to the expansion of consumption. As Michael Sonenscher has shown, in the French hatting trade and in similar sectors of luxury production there was a core of large producers and employers, surrounded by a periphery of smaller enterprises. Many of the smaller masters had to work, at least from time to time, for the larger businesses. This, together with the rules that favoured sons and daughters

⁴² Robert Favre, *La Mort dans la littérature et la pensée françaises au Siècle des lumières* (Lyon, 1978), 227-35; McManners, *Death and the Enlightenment*, 94-104.

⁴³ AN Y14938, 17 March 1726.

⁴⁴ *Annuaire de la Société fraternelle de secours de Saint-Eustache; Règlements . . . pour la société des Boursiers-confrères de ladite confrérie, sous l'invocation de S. Pierre.*

of existing masters, meant that most journeymen would never become masters themselves and those who did were likely to remain in a fragile position. At the same time, within most artisan trades the mobility of the workforce was very high, but once again there was a core of stable employees, mainly men who had married and who then remained in the same place for the rest of their working lives.⁴⁵ This was very much the case in the printing industry, where the number of masters was limited by the authorities and where the capital investment was enormous. A journeyman might conceivably become the foreman of a print shop, but even that was unlikely, and most employees would remain in the same kind of job until they were no longer able to work. Since Paris was the printing capital of the kingdom, the chances were that they would also stay in the city. With demand growing but fluctuating wildly, the numbers of printing workers tripled across the century and yet unemployment was an ever-present risk: at any one time, workers complained in 1730, a third of the men had no work. This was almost certainly an exaggeration, but it points to the fear of being laid off.⁴⁶

The furniture trades were far more diverse, with widespread subcontracting that enabled some journeymen to become masters, but it too was dominated by a small number of major employers who each had a large workforce. The widespread and often bitter industrial disputes in this industry point to both a wide gap between the workers and the guild leaders and to a corresponding solidarity among many of the journeymen. It is very likely that in this trade too the organizing was done by a core of settled men who knew that they had no chance of promotion and who were facing the prospect of declining incomes as they aged and their health failed.⁴⁷ It was precisely these conditions that encouraged the formation of mutual aid societies, premised as they were on the existence of a stable population. There is little hard evidence that this situation was new in the eighteenth century, since we lack comparable studies for the seventeenth, but what we know both about patterns of consumption and about the growth of manufacturing across the early modern period suggests that such conditions of employment were becoming more widespread and more entrenched.

The other key area in which trade-specific mutual aid societies flourished in Paris, the less skilled occupations of the ports and markets, is even less well known, but it too was characterised by a stable core and a highly mobile periphery. Although these groups did not have official corporate status, the core of permanent porters at the central market and on specific ports was very stable. In 1750, 81% of the labourers at the central market were born in Paris, and many of them were related to each other. Some of these groups, furthermore, had a well-established system of *bourses communes*.⁴⁸ Again, these were ideal conditions for the development of mutual aid. The unofficial corporate structures of the ports and markets probably went back a long way, so they are a necessary but not sufficient explanation for the appearance of the mutual aid societies.

⁴⁵ Sonenscher, *Hatters*, 44-57; Michael Sonenscher, *Work and Wages: Natural Law, Politics and the Eighteenth-Century French Trades* (Cambridge, 1989), 140-73. See also Steven L. Kaplan, "Idéologie, conflits et pratiques politiques dans les corporations parisiennes au XVIIIe siècle," *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 49 (2002): 5-55.

⁴⁶ Minard, *Typographes*, 25, 98-99, 105. See also Barber, introduction to Contat, *Anecdotes typographiques*, 10-11.

⁴⁷ Sonenscher, *Work and Wages*, 31-40, 90-92, 142-45; Garrioch and Sonenscher, "Compagnonnages, Confraternities and Associations of Journeymen," 37.

⁴⁸ Steven L. Kaplan, *Provisioning Paris* (Ithaca, 1984), 554; AN Y11239, 28 October 1752.

A further contributing factor was the threat of pauperization. The numbers of poor were growing, probably faster in Paris because that was where many dislocated and unemployed people from elsewhere in France ended up. The resources allocated to poor relief also increased, but probably not in proportion to the numbers of needy.⁴⁹ The fear of joining their ranks, combined with the changes in thinking about social provision and particularly old age mentioned above, encouraged those in a position to do so to turn to forms of self-help.

The early mutual aid societies, then, were not specifically a product of artisanal culture, since artisans were only one of the groups who participated. Certainly, mutual aid was intimately connected to the corporate, communitarian culture of the labouring and artisanal population and to the similarly collective religious ethos of the confraternities, and it was no coincidence that they appeared in sectors of society where these values were strong. Yet their appearance early in the 1700s and their gradual development across the century, well before the guilds and the confraternities disappeared, indicates that they were not in any immediate sense successors to either form of association. Neither guilds nor most confraternities offered the same benefits.

The early mutual aid societies, in Paris and probably elsewhere, were a response to very specific conditions in the eighteenth-century urban environment. The timing of their appearance was determined by a number of developments that appear to have been either new or more sharply accentuated in the period. The changing nature of the urban labour market was a major factor, probably already visible in the seventeenth century: the artisan dream of independence was becoming unrealizable in major sectors of production that were expanding but that experienced sharp fluctuations in demand. It would be an exaggeration to call this “proletarianization,” since the workers concerned were often a highly-skilled elite. But what was certainly new and important was the way the experience was interpreted: at least part of the workforce recognized the reality of their situation and thought about it in a new way. Whether or not people were aware of rising life expectancy, they were increasingly inclined – if they were able – to make provision for a future that they imagined in this world, rather than in the next. This was part of a wider secularization of social thought that was manifested in other parts of society – but increasingly among working people as well – in the growth of annuities and forms of insurance. These almost certainly influenced the way mutual aid societies developed, particularly through the new forms of actuarial thinking and practice they involved. Mutual aid societies also benefited from the assistance of priests, employers, and others, but they were built on existing organizational forms that were deeply entrenched in working people’s culture, the administrative and financial models of confraternities and of *bourses communes*. The proliferation of mutual aid societies, beginning on the eve of and during the Revolution and accelerating in the early nineteenth century, is above all testimony to the ardent desire of working people to take control of their own lives and futures in a world that was increasingly secular and in which institutional poor relief was inadequate and often demeaning.

⁴⁹ Olwen Hufton, *The Poor of Eighteenth-Century France, 1750-1789* (Oxford, 1974), 152-76; Daniel Roche, “A Pauper Capital: Some Reflections on the Parisian Poor in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” *French History* 1 (1987): 182-209.