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Steven L. Kaplan, *La fin des corporations*, traduit de l'américain par Béatrice Vierne. Paris: Fayard, 2001. ix + 740 pp. Notes and index of names. 220 FF. ISBN 2-213-60829-6.

Review by Christopher H. Johnson, Wayne State University.

The Master of Series Y strikes again. Demonstrating, once more, that if historical truth is at least to be approximated, it will come from the barrel of the archives, Steve Kaplan has in this book transformed our understanding of the last phase in the history of the French guild system and in so doing of the meaning of the sans-culottes movement and, in general, the politics of work and its discontents well into the nineteenth century. Perhaps most importantly, it now becomes possible to view the August 1776 restoration/reform of the guilds, orchestrated principally by Jacques Necker, as the foundation stone of the dirigiste market system that characterizes the modern French economy.

Kaplan has long labored at the heart of the controversies over the transition from “corporative” to “modern” conditions and relations in the world of work and, therefore, of the problem of working-class formation in France. *Work in France* (1986), a volume that he and Cynthia Koepp edited drew together most of the (then) principal historians of this problematic and crystallized what emerged as the central issue: what was the relationship between the corporative “tradition” and new modes of thought and practice that could be variously labeled “capitalist,” “liberal,” and/or based in “natural law” in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Further, what was the on-going strength of each in the making of modern working-class politics at the point of production and in the public sphere? William Sewell’s *Work and Revolution in France* (1980) stressed the powerful survival of the “corporate idiom” in the “language of labor” and thus could see the working-class struggle down to 1848 (some would take it at least to 1871) as a kind of “artisan defense” rooted in a discourse of skilled labor under challenge. Proletarianization and the beginnings of labor-capital conflict occurred in this context and began to reach significant proportions only in the nineteenth century. My own research and that of Bernard Moss already had argued the same, though giving greater emphasis to what we perceived as the “material realities” of a newly emerging economy (such as *confection* and its impact on small “masters” and workers alike) than to visions of an idyllic past. Nevertheless, the stress on “de-skilling” as a source of the worker movements of the 1840s was clear enough.

The challenge to this position came into focus in the early 1980s from two directions. Jacques Rancière posed a startling challenge in *La nuit des prolétaires* (1981) and “The Myth of the Artisan” in the Kaplan/Koepp collection, arguing that “craft identity” in the first half of the nineteenth century was much weaker and marked far fewer workers than the de-skilling school thought, with most workers leading “aleatory” worklives; if anything, workers with the highest levels of craft identity tended to be the most conservative. Moreover, the principal goal of members of the working class was to get out of

it--by night work, study, and writing for the reading class, particularly about their (idealized) work-values and the traumas of working-class existence. Though he might be accused of overkill, his point was well taken; and his work was based exclusively on primary sources, if somewhat selectively used in the "genealogical" fashion of Foucault.

More important, perhaps, was research done at the other end of the transition--the world of work in the eighteenth century. Stimulated undoubtedly by the huge interest in rural "protoindustrialization" and the incursions of capitalism into ostensibly state-regulated outworking industries, the study of urban (especially Parisian) crafts and trades under the corporative umbrella began to reveal an eighteenth-century trend toward capitalist practices and myriad labor disputes both within and beyond the corporate boundaries. Studies of expanding consumerism (such as Daniel Roche's *Le peuple de Paris* [1981]) also stressed the impact of market-responsive production. No book captured our imagination more than the *Journal de ma vie* by Jacques Ménétra, which Roche got into print in 1982. Among other things, the inventive glazier made us realize how fragile the corporative system had become under the impact of market forces. Entrepreneurs like himself within and hordes of "illicit" and "false" workers as well as entire districts of legal "free" production without threatened its hold over productive processes. Michael Sonenscher's *Work and Wages* (1989) revealed in copious detail the breadth and depth of master-journeyman conflict in the daily arena of workshop relations, in the courts, and in collective action. In many respects, Kaplan himself provided the most penetrating view of the tensions and battles arising in the three-cornered ring of corporative control, market response, and state "policing" in his magisterial *Bakers of Paris* (1996) as well as the specific contexts of master-worker conflict in several articles. These studies and much more laid to rest any notion that we must await the nineteenth century before thinking about capitalist practices in urban industry, conflict and the point of production, and indeed "working-class formation" in France.

The problem was, of course, that the corporative system in the world of production and exchange, beset as it might have been, was one of the pillars of a society founded on privileged bodies, itself the basis for the political authority of absolute monarchy, France's (and most of Europe's) form of the sovereign state. To recognize the guilds' sclerotic condition and to act on behalf of liberty by abolishing the system, while undoubtedly opening France to greater prosperity and therefore increased tax revenues, would also run the risk of breaching the dike of privilege and drown royal authority in a flood of its own making. This is where Kaplan begins his study. During the quarter-century before 1776, liberals outside and inside the administration bombarded it with attacks on the guild system. Although general works by authors such as Charles Loyseau stressed corporatism's primordial role as a "*structure structurante*," the government mounted no official defense, apparently because the system simply was taken for granted by its supporters, inscribed in the nature of things. Thus the great inversion, Turgot's "carnival," arrived as an "apocalypse." Readers familiar with Kaplan's long contribution to *Work in France* will see a section of it here: masters almost unanimously condemned the *bouleversement* with a furious campaign of petitions and brochures, and workers (sometimes riotously) supported it, seeing an opportunity to extract improved wages and conditions of employment or advance themselves to "master" status. Above all, "disorder" reigned in the trades. Turgot was disgraced and chased from the government. But don't count on 1986 Kaplan for the rest of the story. With regard to the aftermath, he seriously revises himself and in the process advances a new paradigm for understanding not only the "end of the guilds" but also the way reform of the monarchy from within created both a new discourse and new structural realities that became part of the "revolutionary" process. He thus makes an enormous

contribution to our appreciation of the integral links between "ancien régime" reform efforts and the revolutionary changes emerging in 1789 and after.

The heart of the book is the analysis of the restored system promulgated by the August 1776 decree and its later addenda (pp. 128-362). This is the first detailed study of the last fifteen years of the guilds' existence and the only one to take this period seriously. Overall, I am struck by its resonance with P.M. Jones's *Reform and Revolution*, which posed a fundamental alternative to the then-popular Habermasian paradigm of the growing public sphere of private groupings of individuals outside and against the official "public" of the state as the context where transformative politics was situated. Instead (or actually, in addition), Jones emphasized the multiple efforts *within* the government for reform, carried out by leaders who themselves were part of the "public sphere" as opponents of many past practices but were actually in a position to effectuate change through policy. Under this optic, the "inside-outside" dichotomy that runs through the Habermasian model loses its explanatory power.

What Kaplan sees (in greater depth than any of Jones's examples) is that the 1776 reform effectively eased the guild system away from its traditional foundations as a cornerstone of corporative society. Privilege, place, honor, hierarchy, those markers of that society, were eroded by the monarchy itself, which, after rejecting the radicalism of Turgot and the ultra-liberals, created a hybrid framework accommodating greater liberty in the trades while retaining what officials thought to be a more rational structure. But was it any longer *structurante* in the sense of Loyseau that its strength came from within, from the beliefs and values of the members of the body? No, indeed. The grand change after August was that the autonomy of the old system was seriously undermined as regulatory authority transferred to the government. Lenoir, the Lieutenant-General of Police, became more than just the enforcer of the guilds' self-policing, but emerged, as he so lucidly understood, as the man who oversaw what amounted to a government licensing system, granting and protecting masterships, old and new, full or partial (the *agrégés*).

That it was also a new *fiscal* regime goes without saying, and the few historians who have dealt with the problem at all give this most of the emphasis. The architect of the new system was none other than Jacques Necker, whom Kaplan likens, perfectly, to an up-dated Colbert. The hope was to create a reordered and rationalized system of production and exchange that would be flexible enough to promote occupational mobility and greater competition, but simultaneously retain assurance of quality, consumer satisfaction, and an economy that made orderly progress. "Necker," writes Kaplan, "envisaged the creation of a climate of fruitful tension between liberty and a notion--supple, deliberately vague--of responsibility as defined by the state, a kind of *laisser-faire dirigé*" (p. 163). For those of us who have spent a great deal of time thinking about the history of the modern French economy, this summary of an era usually maligned as a "spineless restoration" catches our attention. Could it be that this reform was in fact the taproot of France's economic future? The new guild system disappeared with the D'Allarde Law of 1791, but the thinking that it represented certainly did not. Kaplan's discussion, especially in his Conclusion, of the fascinating idea of a Neckerian tradition of "bureaucratic corporatism" informing the master narrative of the modern economy in France is eye-opening.

The long chapters supporting the double-edged analysis of the reformed system (how did the new system pave the way to abolition? what was its long-run significance?) cannot be discussed in detail here. Many trends predated and were only accentuated by the reform: the overlapping business of many

guilds thrown together in August 1776; the independence of Brittany, Languedoc, and Bordeaux in matters corporative; the decline of apprenticeship as a ticket of admission and the sinking prestige of the *chef d'oeuvre* (no longer required at all under the new system); the relative openness of the guilds to new blood (the myth of the master's son [in-law]); the weight of capital as opposed to skill in becoming a master (the reform made mastership purely a monetary/fiscal arrangement). Others continued pretty much as before, especially the already high level journeymen's daily insubordination (though Kaplan argues that "insurrections" of the 1780s have been overdrawn by previous historians). There were, of course, major changes. Since Turgot had abolished the guilds outright, theoretically 1776 August meant starting from scratch. The most important change was the creation of a two-tiered structure of who could do business as guildsmen and women: masters and *agrégés*. The latter paid a good deal less and thus had fewer rights and privileges within their guilds (such as the right to train apprentices), but they were legal members and could be quite prosperous. Many came from the world of journeymen and illegal bosses. But many former masters decided to pay less, be *agrégés*, and continue their businesses as before. So what if they couldn't train "apprentices"? Apprenticeship no longer figured as a qualification for mastership anyway. Many more people became legal shop owners. Some "new masters" decided the higher fee was worth the added prestige to be sure, but the big surge came at the *agrégé* level. "False workers" still abounded, and the problem of the Faubourg Saint-Antoine free zone remained. The main responsibility for regulation and punishment of contraventions now shifted, as noted, to the state.

Perhaps the most significant change brought about by the August decree related to the status of women. No guild could any longer be restricted to a single sex. Widows had long had the right to continue their husbands' businesses (and received special protections, a benefit lost by the widows of *agrégés*), but now many women (daughters, wives, widows, singles in or out of their male-connections' trades) entered formerly male guilds if they had the wherewithal for "establishment." It wasn't Niagara, but the flow was significant, even into unexpected trades, like construction. (This was also a measure, perhaps, of the expanding "office" character of bosses' duties as many businesses grew in scope.) Most of the prior women's trades continued to be dominated by women, who too had the same options and opportunities after August. Kaplan does not speculate on the significance of this empowerment for both the upsurge and the reaction against women's activism after 1789, but surely it had some. Such benefits were not extended to another excluded group, the Jews, whose efforts to become guildsmen under the loosened regulations were repulsed by Lenoir and then by royal decree. Finally, there was the Jews' traditional nemesis, the Six Corps de Paris, the elite body dominated by the great merchants of the city that historically negotiated with king and parlement. Their fulminations against the "pollution" of the corporative order revealed the new world. As the moral dominance of the system's values was eclipsed by the economic logic of bureaucrats, their complaints lost their power. In this sense, this restoration was "mollassonne."

Kaplan devotes the last section of the book to the impact of the Revolution, analyzing in loving detail a chronicle that is generally familiar to us, but now deeply conditioned by the addition of the missing piece in the history of French political economy, the guilds and the world of work from 1776 to 1789. First, if the guilds were simply "moribund," "destined for death," or whatever clichés we use in our lectures, why were they not abolished on the night of August 4-5 with all the other privileges? How could they survive the Declaration? Clearly they were perceived as something different and perhaps even useful. What occurs quickly, however, is that the "Revolution infiltrates the guilds," both in terms of the ideology of those glorious moments and of the practical inequalities maintaining their hierarchies.

They imploded under the weight of journeymen and women's demands, the desires of "false" workers to be true, and the inequalities built into the codes of distinction among masters and *agrégés*, merchants and producers, guild and guild in the same line. Most importantly, worker collective action, associations of all sorts, were making the power of the guilds less and less meaningful. Repression of necessity would come from the state, and masters themselves had to justify it by using the very language of the revolution: "the public interest" must be served. So came first the Loi D'Allarde in March, the Loi Le Chapelier in June. Their rationales, argues Kaplan, were identical: citizens are such, and all relations in society are undertaken "*a titre individuel*." If masters are not to have associations, then neither are workers. (This same logic undergirded labor law in France for the next seven decades—however the various regimes violated other individual rights.)

The rapid implementation of the law prohibiting worker association arose—Kaplan proves definitively through archival research—from the explosion of worker militance following the abolition of the guilds. It arrived just in time, as Kaplan asserts: "There is no doubt that the social movement of 1791, and perhaps also the efforts made to politicize it [by certain clubs and associations] accelerated the promulgation of the Le Chapelier Law, which, in a fundamental way, prevented the passage from one to the other." Thus a class-based movement came to be overtaken by the sans-culotte movement. Although Kaplan hardly would deny the significance of the outpouring of patriotism that surged forward from the flight to Varennes onwards or the shared anxieties over subsistence and all the other psychological factors pushing the self-described "*menu peuple*" toward a self-described harmony from later 1791 to 1794, he argues that one must also recognize that this destructive prohibition of worker association (and their prosecution for doing so) left them nowhere to go, if they were to maintain their activism, but the *sections*.

The apparent contradiction between the social diversity and the language of harmony that characterized the sans-culottes has long been at the core of debates about the nature of the French Revolution. Not satisfied with simplistic explanations based on patriotic fervor or hunger, historians grasped on to the fact that the political grouping that proudly turned the pejorative assignation on its head mostly came from the Parisian world of production and exchange organized until February 1791 around the guild system. (Virtually no one—until Kaplan—seemed concerned about *what* guild system.) The first great book was Albert Soboul's, which argued that workshop "intimacy" between master and man created an unequal harmony allowing for small and medium (ex)master leadership in propounding the amorphous petty-bourgeois ideology. Richard Andrews scathingly revised Soboul's assessment of sans-culotte leadership by proving the central role of well-off merchants and manufacturers, a "revolutionary bourgeoisie" that dominated both lesser masters and journeymen (still undifferentiated) in the movement. William Sewell's stress on a "corporate idiom" bonding all together largely echoed Soboul if eschewing his Marxist construction of ideology. Finally, Michael Sonenscher, who had done so much to destroy the Soboul/Sewell picture of old-regime good feelings, came along with his own linguistic answer, saying yes indeed conflict was there, but if there was to be any production at all (and therefore wages and profits), agreed-upon mechanisms of harmonization were worked out, a "code of honor" that nevertheless contributed to the sans-culotte mentality.

Kaplan's critiques of all these arguments are thorough and convincing, drawing upon the wealth of evidence regarding the complex, conflictual character of life in the trades, heightened by their reform, and capped off by revolutionary struggles for liberty and equality within them. His own argument (with

the help of Haïm Burstin) is straightforward. The language of the sans-culottes is a set of myths based in a vision of the corporative past that had not existed for at least a half-century and was dealt a mortal blow by the reforming monarchy in August 1776. Workers did not gullibly buy into it, but in effect traded, under the compulsion of the Le Chapelier Law, their enhanced, then destroyed, collective identity as “worker” for that of cooperative and responsible and vigilant “citizen.” If their consciousness as worker should reappear (for instance in demanding higher wages in an era of national defense), they would be quickly reminded, under pain of becoming a “suspect,” that these times (as a later generation would put it) required “equality of sacrifice.” Thus was the issue of class identity versus the hegemonic power of civic identity also broached at the very dawn of the revolutionary age.

Overall, this book makes major contributions on three levels, all revealed by plumbing the depths of archival sources. First, it demonstrates the integral connection between late old-regime reform and revolutionary initiatives as well as the role of government officials themselves as key players in the “oppositional public sphere” and in the making of “public opinion.” Second, it elevates the Neckerian reform of August 1776 and its creation of a “bureaucratic corporatism” to a prototype of the state-regulated *laissez-faire* that characterizes the French economy to this day. Third, it definitively ratchets backward our understanding of the timing of working-class formation and chronicles the initial phase of the confrontation between labor and capital as tilted (as always) to the latter by the power of the state, which compensated stymied workers with citizenship, or, more accurately, with what Benedict Anderson calls the “poisoned gift” of nationalism.

Although one might wonder about the length of this book, it’s worth every word. We should remember that when, in *Amadeus*, Emperor Joseph criticized the composer for writing “too many notes,” he was talking about Mozart, not Salieri.

Christopher H. Johnson
Wayne State University
aa4307@wayne.edu

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