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Sydney Watts, *Meat Matters: Butchers, Politics, and Market Culture in Eighteenth-Century Paris*. Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2006. Illustrations, appendix, notes, bibliography, and index. x +232 pp. \$75.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 1-58046-211-1.

Review by Julie Hardwick, University of Texas at Austin.

Arthur Young's *Travels in France* on the eve of the Revolution famously commented on lack of meat in diets of French population, but he did not look at what people were eating in Paris where, apparently, as Sydney Watts demonstrates, the role of meat as an item in diets and signifier of a rich set of cultural, political, and economic meanings had already been revolutionized over the course of the eighteenth century. The role of bread as a dietary staple and political semiotic has long been evident to contemporaries and historians, right from summer of 1789 when the market women of Paris who marched to Versailles to seize the Louis XVI and his family asked for the baker and the baker's wife and bread prices peaked on July 14, 1789 as the Bastille was stormed. Here, however, we see that meat, too, was of profound consequence as all contemporaries realized even if its role was subsequently elided when historians highlighted bread as the key signifier. As Watts notes, in fact the king provided the market women who went to Versailles with "all the bread *and* meat that could be had" (p.7). [emphasis mine]

Meat Matters focuses on the transformation of meat from subsistence to consumable. Parisians, like their counterparts outside the capital, ate little meat in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but Watt demonstrates that during the eighteenth century meat consumption grew dramatically in Paris--although apparently not elsewhere in the country. The book provides an often fascinating and very suggestive addition to the literature on the "consumer revolution" that has rarely yet treated the literally consumable. As a student of Steven Kaplan, Watts brings a many-sided exploration to meat similar to that Kaplan has developed magisterially for bread, albeit it far more briefly in a book that includes eight short chapters.[1]

Watts looks at how and why meat mattered in social, economic and cultural as well as political terms. The first chapter, "The Political Economy of Meat," carefully sets up government regulation of meat in the eighteenth century as a framework for the book as a whole. Meat became a new consumer staple, freighted with meanings about status and the public good. Parisian authorities were very sensitive to the need to provide a stable supply of meat at relatively stable prices, a concern that attracted high levels of regulation and supervision to the trade.

"Meat and the Social Hierarchy," the second chapter, lays out the patterns and contests over who ate what kind of meat as elements in the social topography of France's capital. Not surprisingly, the wealthy ate more choice cuts, like roasts, while the poor ate offal and other bits, and predictably these patterns of consumption were integral to social status. However, here Watts thoughtfully shows how in each exchange both butcher and customer were able to angle for advantage, and how--as with soul food in the United States--not all food associated with workers was inevitably poor either in terms of nutrition or taste.

A chapter on “Liberty and Regulation in the Cattle Markets” explores conflicts between merchants and guild masters, on one side, and the Parisian authorities, on the other, over the regulation of meat production and marketing from the provisioning markets outside of Paris to the butchering of cows and selling of meat in the city. As in the case of London, and no doubt other major cities, elaborate networks of credit, communication, and cattle moving were required to deliver fresh meat to urban residents.

Chapters four and five offer contrasting perspectives on butchers from without and within the guild system. First, Watts shows why butchers were associated with disorder: their occupation was devoted to killing; foul smells and smoke arose from the butchers’ premises; and the numbers of often rowdy journeymen necessary to feed the rapidly increasing Parisian population kept growing. Watt argues that Parisian authorities sought to control the threat of disorder by careful regulation of the locations of meat stalls, but largely ignored the many unlicensed, extra guild meat sellers, male and female, who were also attracted into the trade by the growing market.

The following chapter examines the internal workings to demonstrate how highly-variegated the butchers’ guild was. Watts observes that the guild’s membership stayed stable—(less than 240 master butchers) despite the growth of the city and meat consumption—but encompassed a wide range of influence, prosperity and power between members. Her account of the butchers’ guild in action here—the elections, the competition, the adaptation to a changing environment (including the efforts of the Turgot and the physiocrats to abolish its monopoly in 1776) as well as the vast differences in the circumstances of men who were nominally all “guild masters”—offers a nuanced picture of guild practice rather than mere prescription.

The careers of butchers as apprentices, journeymen, and masters are traced in two subsequent chapters. Of particular interest are the fortunes of the rapidly expanding category of “career journeymen” who either could not, or preferred not, to meet the high bars of entry into mastership, whether measured by monetary connections or reputation. Like other recent scholarship, Watt argues that their varied circumstances—some stable and quite prosperous and others engaging in a kind of extended adolescence—did not translate into an automatic master-journeyman antagonism. Virtually no butchers married until after they became masters (a striking pattern since the rising number of journeymen in other trades did often marry), and marriage patterns were highly endogamous in professional and geographical terms, as in many guilds. Butchers’ marriages, like those of their corporate peers, offered opportunities to accumulate property and status, or set the stage for intense conflict and multi-faceted difficulties.

A final chapter explores the critical role of credit in butchers’ operations. Like other early modern peoples, butchers relied on loans as borrowers and lenders, extending credit to customers and taking on debts from their suppliers. As in all credit relations, butchers had to maintain a perilous balance: they used multiple forms of debt (not only primarily notarially documented loans), and needed to guard their own reputations to procure credit and build prosperity from their ability to utilize credit.

Perhaps because I have been much preoccupied with related questions in recent years, albeit for cities outside of Paris and for the preceding century, *Meat Matters* raised many questions for me. There is a vagueness about the characteristics, chronology, and evolution of “the market economy” as a particular form of economic organization. Phrases like “the market economy, akin to modernization, altered how individuals determined their material needs ...” leave the reader wanting more specific clarification (p. 5). Even leaving aside the issue of individual roles versus structures in shaping the market economy, this easy equation between a market economy and modernization seems unhelpful, and almost accidentally contentious. The same paragraph wraps up with a reference to “the triumph of the market economy,” but surely a market economy had not yet triumphed by the end of the eighteenth century (if it ever has). Many economic historians and economists have artfully demonstrated the persistence of moral or cultural aspects embedded in economic practices and discourses, even in the most market

oriented of economies.[2] The kinds of economic uncertainties discussed here were already in play in the seventeenth century, and probably earlier. What was different about the eighteenth century? My own proclivity may be to dwell too much on the incremental and uneven nature of what some of us might call the intensification of market practices and others the transition to capitalism, both before and after the eighteenth century, but it would be illuminating if Watts unpacked more specifically how the processes surrounding meat in Paris during the eighteenth century speak to the rich historiographies to which her subjects point.

I missed a comparative discussion here that would embed this project explicitly in the broader geographical and historiographical topographies. Watts knows the comparative literatures and contexts well (see her wonderful joint authored article in the *American Historical Review*); more of that kind of contextualization would have been helpful here.[3] Such discussion is absent even on very specific topics. Peter Linebaugh, for instance, has made provocative arguments, from a particular political (Marxist) stance, about the process and consequences of the transformation of the London meat markets at Smithfield in the eighteenth century as a window into the transition to capitalism.[4] Comparing, even briefly, Parisian and London dynamics would be instructive. At the same time, within France Paris seems to have been genuinely exceptional with regard to meat consumption and all its associated meanings. In this regard, meat seems to have had a quite different role in France as a whole than bread, whose importance was clear nationwide. Why was this the case? Similarly, the rich historiography on French guilds in the eighteenth century, especially in Paris (Crowston, and Sonenscher among others as well as Kaplan) is largely relegated to the sidelines, leaving the reader to draw his or her own connections.[5] (I wondered, in fact, if a desire by the press for a shorter book, an all too common imperative these days, led Watts to eliminate discussion of a broader geographical and analytical context of the Parisian experience, given her own expertise and engagement with it elsewhere.)

Perhaps answering all of these questions in fact requires a Kaplan-esque career-long devotion to exploring all the possibilities, too high a bar for any first book. *Meat Matters* explores a little known but central slice of eighteenth-century Parisian life, provides a cut across political, economic, and cultural issues that were inevitably intertwined but which are too often separated analytically, and offers a morsel of a pre-revolutionary political economy that was central to Parisian subjects/citizens. Isn't leaving you wanting more the sign of the best kind of meal?

NOTES

[1] Among the large body of Kaplan's work on bread, see for example, Stephen Lawrence Kaplan, *The Bakers of Paris and the Bread Question, 1700-1770* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).

[2] See, for example, the discussion of the false dichotomy between moral versus market economies in Mark Metzler, "Woman's Place in Japan's Great Depression: Reflections on the Moral Economy of Deflation," *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 30: 2 (Summer 2004): 315-352.

[3] Roger Horowitz, Jeffrey M. Pilcher, and Sydney Watts, "Meat for the Multitudes: Market Culture in Paris, New York City, and Mexico City over the "Long" Nineteenth Century," *American Historical Review*, 109:4 (October 2004): 1055-1083.

[4] Peter Linebaugh, *London Hanged: Crime and Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[5] Clare Haru Crowston, *Fabricating Women: the Seamstresses of Old Regime France, 1675-1791* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001); Michael Sonencher, *The Hatters of Eighteenth Century France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

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