
H-France Review Vol. 15 (October 2015), No. 138

Daniel Heimmermann, *Work, Regulation, and Identity in Provincial France: The Bordeaux Leather Trades, 1740-1815*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. 298 pp. Notes, tables, figures, bibliography, and index. \$95.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-137-43855-3.

Review by Daryl M. Hafter, Eastern Michigan University, Emerita.

We are indebted to Daniel Heimmermann for a vivid picture of preindustrial manufacture and its obstacles. Unlike most reports of eighteenth-century production, this book reveals an industry in decline, one that did not profit from a large workforce, a favorable location, or government interest. Despite the fact that demand for shoes, saddles, gloves, and other leather products increased during the period, actions by both the guilds and the royal government thwarted commercial success. The guilds hobbled entrance of workers unrelated to masters' families, demonstrating traits that were anathema to enlightened officials. The government's bumbling efforts to modernize the industry actually shrank the supply of leather and raised its price just when officials asserted the need for more leather products. In a somewhat confusing first chapter, Heimmermann sets out the disabilities of a hide-bound work association and a dysfunctional monarchy.

The author shows that Bordeaux's unusual city structure was part of the problem. Two privileged enclaves called *sauvetats* in which non-guild workers were legally permitted to manufacture and sell products flanked the urban center. These free-trade zones were a remnant of Bordeaux's early freedom for trades, and a signal that even within the urban center, thirty-six of its professions were not in guilds.

Unlike the privileged enclaves that Hiam Burstin found in Paris and Jeff Horn found in Normandy, however, the *sauvetats* were not centers of technical innovation.^[1] Instead, they housed poor shoemakers, cobblers, and makers of equine equipment who turned out cheaper goods of lesser quality. These products were legally sold only in the *sauvetats*, but inevitably filtered into the urban market, where they drew the hostility of the leather guilds. Apparently, the guilds here did not coopt the non-guild workers, unlike the actions that Steven L. Kaplan described in Paris, and Hafter found in Rouen.^[2]

Heimmermann also emphasizes the dysfunction between the royal administration and leather production. The king signaled the need for more leather goods, especially during wars, when shoes for the army and saddling equipment were scarce. But the government restricted the import and export of leather, curtailing supplies and raising prices. Again and again, ambiguous royal policy caused officials to make reforms only to overturn their own efforts under the pressure of financial need. In 1767, for instance, the king issued leather masterships that were supposed to expand guild membership and forbade the guilds from buying them up in order to suppress them. Yet, periodically thereafter, to raise money, the state issued a flood of *brevets de maîtrise*, and these were acquired by guilds solely to control and limit the entrance of new masters. This example pointed to the early insight of David Bien that reformers largely faulted the corporate structure as an inappropriate source of royal funds.

There were also political struggles between the Chamber of Commerce, filled with merchants, financiers, and lawyers, aiming to subordinate guild dominance, and the *Parlement* of Bordeaux and the

Jurade (town council) protecting guilds. In 1716 the Chamber of Commerce and the Intendant tried unsuccessfully to eliminate Bordeaux's guilds. When the king attempted to amalgamate the shoemakers and the cobblers into one guild in 1772 to do away with their incessant bickering, the *Parlement* took the shoemakers' side and obstructed the merger. Clearly, the retention of local privilege was at issue here, as it would be later when the kingdom-wide 1779 reform streamlined and standardized guilds.

Administrative contention was not the only source of trouble. Within the shoemakers' guild itself, there were serious struggles as younger masters tried to wrest exclusive privileges of receiving fines, honors, and other revenues from their older colleagues. In addition, more prosperous masters suborned journeymen of their own choosing by paying them above the guild's set rates. The wealthier masters were attempting to meet production schedules, or selecting more capable workers for elaborate products. The guild damned their efforts as "treasonous alliances" between masters and journeymen.

Journeymen did not always behave in concert with the masters. As a tramping trade, shoemaker journeymen constantly circulated through Bordeaux, expanding the labor supply. To preserve their own advantage, the city's own journeymen formed illegal confraternities, directing some wandering workers to particular masters and sending others away with a few coins in their pockets. The large increase of population after mid-century created new pressures. The flow of journeymen became so unmanageable that the city set up a bureau of employment to control workers. This occasioned a significant rebellion of journeymen, who refused to register, assisted by the few wealthy masters who wanted to maintain their own freedom.

Heimmermann recounts this story of guild contention by dividing the book into seven chapters, based on significant archival research. Chapter one lays out the general thesis, beginning with the issue that butchers were obligated to give the local tanners first right to buy hides, instead of making more lucrative contracts with outside buyers. Further problems with obtaining leather occurred when, in 1768, the king rescinded laws prohibiting hides from circulating between provinces, thus shrinking the local supply and requiring Bordeaux to import more hides from abroad.

The chapter lays out the technology of tanning, emphasizing the large capital investment required and the reluctance of tanners to adopt new British production methods. Hoping to overcome this obstacle, in 1759, the crown supplanted earlier taxes with a single tax on leather throughout France and appointed royal agents to supervise and raise standards. But too many separate regulations were imposed, and that mistake, along with the private tax collectors, who were notoriously corrupt, caused the industry to decline.

Chapter two details the inability of the guild to take advantage of the burgeoning market for shoes. Despite opening their ranks to over two hundred new workers, the shoemakers (who used only new leather) were continually preoccupied with fending off competition from the cobblers (who had to employ at least some used leather). Thus, most of the increase in shoe stock came from maverick shoemaker masters with clandestine shops and workers in the unincorporated *sauvetats*.

The third chapter treats the structure, finances, internal dissension and rivalry between older and younger masters in guild communities. We also read about conflicts between masters with larger, better-established enterprises, and small, two-person *ateliers* in the competition for raw materials and labor. One surprising fact was that in the rush of immigration into the city, a number of Protestant workers were inducted into the guilds, despite their legal prohibition.

Chapter four emphasizes how popular Bordeaux was with journeymen, attracting some 15,000 in a city with a total population of 110,000. Most leather journey workers came from outside the city and had few resources and no local ties. It was to manage this aggressive group of men that the shoemakers—and later the saddlers—established the work placement bureaus in 1772. The guilds' attempt to

dominate the labor force largely failed, as journeymen confederations exerted real control over the industry with strikes, labor boycotts, mass meetings, and riots. Heimmermann's description of the journeymen's rebellion against registering at the employment bureau brings this dynamic into vivid relief. We are drawn into a scene of tumult, with men massing in the city squares and menacing civic and royal officials.

Chapter five explores the ways in which the large-scale, wealthy leather masters dominated, still without modernizing the industry, and this despite a high 82 percent in general of masters and 53 percent of their wives who signed marriage contracts. One would have thought this the very cohort to adopt the new scientific methods to process leather. That it did not may indicate that literacy did not necessarily advance industrial science or foster technical progress.

The last two chapters attempt to show how the current of guild conflict, crown mismanagement, and the obstreperous behavior of journeymen led to the revolutionary establishment of free enterprise, but Bordeaux already had a long medieval tradition of free production without guilds, as the author states. Pressure to suppress the existing guilds came early in the eighteenth century from businessmen and the Intendant, but it was not sustained. The individuality of tramping leatherworkers and their demands for better wages was part of the *compagnonnage* system, not a novelty of modern industry.

Most puzzling, however, is the author's sparse mention of women in the leather industry. Their high rate of signing marriage records (89 percent of glove-makers' wives, 85 percent of saddlers' wives, 77 percent of tanners' wives) did qualify them to participate in sales and book keeping, as Heimmermann states. Their important function in linking trade families is also signaled, as is their crucial work of cleaning, managing workers, and "interacting with customers, guild inspectors and tax collectors" (p. 157), but we do not know about their function in the production process. Did these wives work alongside the journeymen? Did guild statutes forbid day-laboring females from using leatherworkers' tools (thus revealing that they did participate in such work)? We know from Michael Sonenscher's book on hatmakers in Lyon, that masters' wives took an active role in preparing hides and even in coopting sales to their own benefit.^[3] Considering how many poor shoemakers there were in Bordeaux with only one assistant, it would seem logical that unlicensed female labor would be pressed into service in many *ateliers*. It is possible that police archives might help to fill out the record of the activities of Bordeaux's women.

Heimmermann's study of leather making is sure to stimulate new interest in the history of laboring people as they negotiated for control over their working lives. Reconsidering the existence of industries that failed and the actions of guilds and government in that dynamic should lead us to review of the role of the eighteenth century as precursor of the modern industrial revolution.

NOTES

[1] Haim Burstein, *Une Révolution à l'oeuvre: Le faubourg Saint-Marcel (1789-1794)* (Paris: Champ Vallon, 2005), Jeff Horn, *Economic Development in Early Modern France: The Privilege of Liberty, 1650-1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

[2] Steven L. Kaplan, "Les Corporations, les faux-ouvriers et le faubourg Saint-Antoine," *Annales: E.S.C.*, mars-avril, 1988: 253-88, and *La fin des corporations* (Paris: Fayard, 2001). See also Daryl M. Hafter, *Women at Work in Preindustrial France* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007).

[3] Michael Sonenscher, *The Hatters of Eighteenth-Century France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

Daryl M. Hafter
Eastern Michigan University, Emerita
dhafter@emich.edu

Copyright © 2015 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172