

Michael Sonenscher — *Work & Wages. Natural law, politics, and the eighteenth-century French trades*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989. Pp. xi, 429.

Those not already familiar with the growing scholarly literature on trades, guilds, and skilled workers in eighteenth-century France would do well to start elsewhere than with Michael Sonenscher's *Work and Wages*. It is not for beginners, inasmuch as it presumes a great deal of knowledge, and it is not an easy book to read. With frequent quotations from the sources left untranslated, it requires facility with eighteenth-century French legalese and worker slang. The brief introduction does not sufficiently define a unifying theme or overarching argument for what is neither a narrative history nor conventional monograph but rather a collection of essays. By the same token, in some chapters, even the most careful reader will be hard-pressed to find and follow any argument at all amid the dense thickets of illustrative material — facts, figures, and anecdotes piled to overflowing. The book is repetitive and long-winded. The prose is convoluted, and the clarity of exposition is frequently marred by the presence of impenetrable statements such as “the substitution of labour-saving for labour-intensive materials, the transfer of work from one side of the division of labour to another to create greater horizontal integration ... played a significant part in changing the productivity of work of a number of trades” (199-200). In short, the book had this reader wondering more than once if Cambridge University Press has fallen on such hard times that it can no longer afford editors.

Yet, with all its organizational and stylistic shortcomings, this book is a valuable addition to the literature. Sonenscher is a diligent researcher who seems to have read all the relevant secondary works plus a good deal of social and economic theory. Moreover, he has combed archives throughout France to assemble an impressive array of documentation on labor disputes in France from the mid-seventeenth century to the Revolution (outlined in the Appendix), and he has also located registers of the corporate labor exchanges in Rouen, Nantes, and Tours that allow him “to envisage reconstructing something of the ordinary life of the eighteenth-century trades with some precision” (5). Drawing on this material, Sonenscher tells us some new and important things about the nature of artisanal work and the organization and functioning of trades in eighteenth-century France.

First of all, he challenges what he says is the conventional view of eighteenth-century trades as stable, orderly, and dominated by corporations (guilds) enforcing customary “pre-capitalist” practice. In truth, Sonenscher says, corporations had limited powers over their respective trades and those powers were being further eroded in the course of the century by disputes among masters with divergent interests and by challenges from journeymen who frequently went to court to defend and enhance their customary rights. Limits on corporate power in turn meant that trades were more open and labor was more mobile than once thought, and that market forces more than guild regulations determined what happened in the workshop.

Sonenscher is particularly good on the structures of artisanal production. He explores the complex division of labor between trades and within trades along with the extensive sub-contracting networks this entailed; he shows how some trades, such as printing and hat making, integrated different stages of production in what was essentially a factory setting while production in other trades was “disintegrated” in numerous independent shops; and he demonstrates the importance of core/periphery relations — that is, the relation between the few powerful masters who employed most of the journeymen in a given trade in each city and the host of one-man firms and the

floating population of workers that depended on those at the center. He also stresses the permeability of trades — how the similarity of skills needed in many trades allowed masters and journeymen to move across trade boundaries much more readily than corporate rules seemed to allow.

Sonenscher discusses at length the migration of journeymen, how journeymen rose to the status of master, and the cycles of employment and unemployment in various trades. In a chapter on wage determination, he argues, *contra* William Reddy, that efficient labor markets already existed in France in the eighteenth century and that wages were determined more by open market negotiation than by custom or law. In the book's longest chapter, on "Conflict and the Court", he attributes the legal disputes between journeymen and masters to "structural tensions between the endogenous supply of labor and the more substantial pool of peripatetic journeymen" (255) — meaning that established workers resisted the importation of lower-paid workers from outside. He then shows the French state "solved" the problem of labor litigation by abolishing the corporations and by privatising hiring and firing decisions, thereby distancing the world of trades from the court system.

In a chapter on *compagnonnages*, Sonenscher depicts the rise of these much-misunderstood secret societies as a product of high incidence of migration among journeyman craftsmen (*compagnonnages* provided "support groups" for provincial workers moving into towns and cities). He also attributes their popularity to the need for journeymen to maintain traditional hierarchies and distinctions to compensate for declining status in the workplace. Thus, he points out, *compagnonnages* were most prevalent in trades with the largest labor pools, the highest turnover, and the least defined occupational lines — namely, stone-, wood-, leather- and metal-working.

In the last chapter and in his conclusion, Sonenscher goes beyond the technicalities of the trades and their work force to address some of the "big questions" facing historians of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century France. One of these concerns the timing of the transition from a pre-industrial to an industrial economy and its relation to the rise of French socialism. Sonenscher joins Roger Price and David Pinkney in denying that the French Revolution represented an economic watershed and in arguing for continuity in French economic structures from the late eighteenth century to the 1840s. What changed between the 1780s and the early 1800s, says Sonenscher, was not the "rise of capitalism" or the transition from pre-industrial to industrial production — that had happened earlier — but rather the "institutional revolution" of 1789-91. In particular, the Chapelier Law of 1791, by stripping workers of the legal basis for their previous methods of self-defense, forced them to improvise new ones. This, he argues, eventually led to working-class socialism while also giving new life to the *compagnonnages* in the early nineteenth century. Sonenscher thus prefers to see the rise of socialism as the outgrowth of specific political events, not as the product of profound economic and social changes as Eric Hobsbawm and Marxist historians have long argued.

In discussing the Chapelier Law, Sonenscher, without quite acknowledging it, also intervenes on the revisionist side in the ongoing debate on the French Revolution. The outlawing of corporations and other forms of association and the enshrining of economic individualism in the Chapelier Law have long been cited as proof positive that the French Revolution was essentially capitalist and bourgeois. Sonenscher, however, attacks this interpretation by arguing that the Chapelier Law was a short-term political expedient to contain the growing pressure of Republican clubs on the

Constituent Assembly and unrest in the Paris trades, especially carpentry, in May-June 1791. He maintains that the law hurt employers and workers alike and that even subsequent labor legislation, notably the *livret* system, did not irretrievably tilt the legal system in favor of the capitalists. Thus, no “bourgeois revolution”.

Sonenscher addresses still other topics — notably the development of political theory and its impact on the trades — that cannot be dealt with adequately in a short review. Suffice it to say that the book gives historians plenty to think about. For specialists in labor history, it provides a feast of new information and intriguing theses on how the artisanal economy of the eighteenth century actually worked. For non-specialists, a patient reading will yield challenging ideas on the nature of the French Revolution, the origins of socialism, and the transition (or lack of transition) from the “pre-modern” world of workshops and guilds to the industrial economy of modern times.

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Janice E. Stockard — *Daughters of the Canton Delta: Marriage Patterns and Economic Strategies in South China, 1860-1930*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1989. Pp. ix, 221.

“Marriage resistance” in early twentieth-century China has fascinated feminist social scientists ever since Margorie Topley’s pioneering article of 1975 called attention to communities of spinsters living in certain areas of the Canton delta, or as migrants to Hong Kong and Singapore. These women had either refused to marry or had failed to take up residence with their husbands, sometimes purchasing concubines as substitutes. Topley noted the distinctive ecological and social features of the regions producing “marriage resisters”. In these sections of the delta fish farming combined with sericulture, adolescent girls’ and boys’ houses were an accepted part of the village culture, local Buddhist sects preached to a female audience, and there was little female infanticide and much male outmigration. Above all, silk filatures provided opportunities for women workers.

Topley’s model of “marriage resistance” assumed that these practices emerged in opposition to a dominant Confucian norm of early and universal patrilocal marriage for women. While not rejecting the notion of an anti-marriage bias in the thinking of “marriage resisters”, Janice Stockard’s pathbreaking book explores their way of life as developing out of variant *customary* forms of marriage in the Canton delta having deep historical roots. Where Topley related the possibility of resisting Confucian marriage to the emergence of modern forms of economic opportunity for women in mechanized silk filatures, Stockard deepens our understanding of the historically-complex ecological and cultural context surrounding what she has named “delayed transfer marriage”. This term is closer to the Chinese “pu lo chia” in Mandarin pronunciation, for “[women who] do not leave their natal home [on marriage]”. Normally, in these parts of the Canton delta, a bride did not take up residence in her husband’s household for around three years. This was supported socially by girls’ houses which served as gathering places or even residences for both unmarried