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Notes on Guilds on the Eve of the French Revolution

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NOTES ON GUILDS ON THE EVE OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION¹

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ABSTRACT:

This short paper reviews the economic-historical literature on *ancien régime* French guilds and suggests some paths for future research.

Keywords: guilds, apprenticeship, economic history, France

JEL codes: N33

¹ These notes were drafted during the summer of 2015 as a tentative research agenda. The current interest in the economic history of apprenticeship and of guild regimes in England and France prompts their circulation in this form. My thanks to Morgan Kelly, Joel Mokyr, and to Natacha Postel-Vinay for comments. The usual disclaimers apply.

Introduction

The traditional historiography of the guilds echoed the Enlightenment critique of their monopoly status and associated inefficiencies and injustices. Robert Darnton's famous characterisation of eighteenth-century Montpellier—that it relied on the same methods to produce the same goods on the same scale as in the Middle Ages (1984: 114; cited in Fitzsimmons 2010: 10)—is a striking example of this supposedly *histoire immobile* quality of guild-based regimes. But were the guilds as powerful in the 1780s as they were in the 1680s? Did the practices that de Gournay *et al.* accused them of in the 1750s²—inhibiting trade, keeping prices high, and discouraging risk-taking—still matter to the same extent in the 1780s? Again, how closely linked was the abolition of the guilds in 1791 to the decline of apprenticeship in the nineteenth century? Did that decline entail economic costs—as sometimes claimed—or was it simply a case of *post hoc ergo propter hoc*, the healthy product of industrialization and the spread of the factory system?

Enlightenment rhetoric excoriated the guilds, much as the likes of Arthur Young did the open fields in England. In recent years, the Enlightenment's rabid anti-guild stance account has prompted a revisionist reaction from some historians, who hold that there was a gap between the rhetoric in print and the reality on the ground (e.g. Minard 2006). Fauché's review of the situation in *ancien régime* Bordeaux led him to muse that '*après*

² In his celebrated *Mémoire adressé à la Chambre de commerce de Lyon* in 1753 (Tsuda 1993: 21; Théré *et al.* 2011) de Gournay had famously accused the guilds of '*de renchérir considérablement nos étoffes, de leur donner une valeur fictive qu'elles n'auraient pas eu si on avait laissé à chacun la liberté d'avoir autant d'apprentis qu'il eût voulu, de fabriquer et de vendre*'.

l'étude des règlements corporatifs, on pouvait s'attendre a un résultat différent (1913: 36).³ Scholars such as Burstin (1985) and Fitzsimmons (2010) highlight the increasing pressures on guilds during the eighteenth century, and not least the tendency for rogue masters to violate guild regulations; Fauché (1913: 36) describes the situation in many of the trades of mid-eighteenth century Bordeaux as 'lamentable', with very little formal regulation: no limits on the number of apprentices per master, and no significant differences in the time served between fully qualified craftsmen and others. Tables A1 and A2, derived from Fauché, describe the situation in Bordeaux in 1762, distinguishing controlled from non-controlled occupations. To be sure, Fauché also emphasized a century ago that conditions varied considerably by location. But all this was a far cry from what a study of guild regulations would have led one to expect.

Was the Enlightenment critique banging on an open door? According to Burstin (1985: 101), the increasingly meddlesome actions of the Parisian guilds on the eve of their abolition reflected their desperation rather than their power. For some time, he claims, the guilds had been fighting a losing battle against 'free' workers who were much better placed to cope with changes and challenges. On the eve of the revolution 'the mesh of corporate tissue proved increasingly loose and free labour which focused initially on quietly evading regulations, spread out and began to dominate in several sectors'. So much so

³ For a sample of economic historians' contrasting perspectives on the contribution of guilds in France and further afield see Lequin 1986; Epstein 1998; Kaplan 2001, 2002; Kaplan and Minard 2004; Minard 2006, 2007a-2007d; Crowston 2008; Epstein and Prak 2008; Minns and Wallis 2013; Ogilvie 2011, 2014; Ben Zeev, Mokyr, and van der Beek 2015; de la Croix, Doepke, and Mokyr 2018.

that on the eve of the guilds' demise, what might be seen as increasingly vexatious interference was in reality a sign of weakness; far from gaining ground, the guilds' clumsy efforts at holding on to their privileges were their response to increasing pressure from free labour and from the state. Adam Smith (1977: 177) claimed that the guilds had 'banished arts and manufactures from the greater part of towns-corporate', but Coffin (1996: 31) describes a thriving informal sector of drapers and tailors in the eighteenth-century French capital which grew as fast as, or faster than, the formal guild sector; indeed, the clandestine workers were often employed by guild members. However, Coffin (1996: 32fn47) also mentions in a footnote that none of those scholars who highlight the importance of the informal sector ventures a guess at its relative size.

Contracts

A key element in the power of guild masters was their bargaining power vis-à-vis potential apprentices. Critics like Vincent de Gournay and Adam Smith argued that the former over-trained the latter by insisting on onerous, over-long contracts. The relative bargaining power of both sides determined the terms of the contract, as reflected—one presumes—in the length of the contract, the fee paid by the apprentice's guardians, his age, whether he was literate, inclusion of bed and board, and other aspects. If the guilds were under pressure, this should be reflected in the terms they managed to negotiate with apprentices. It would be of great interest therefore to find out how

apprenticeship contracts in France varied in practice over time and across space, and indeed how they varied across guilds (compare Genard 1994; Crowston 2005).

In theory, the length of apprenticeships varied according by *métier* (trade). Thus in Bordeaux it was supposed to be two years for roofers, plumbers, weavers; three years for stevedores, gunsmiths, buttoners, coppersmiths, hat makers, glove makers, wig makers, saddlers, tailors, turners, basket weavers; four years for wheelwrights, blacksmiths, printers, locksmiths, dyers; five years for pewterers; six years for upholsterers; eight years for goldsmiths. Some guilds seem to have been more flexible about the length of time served than others, however. Martin Saint-Léon (1922: 597) noted that after 1776 *'L'apprentissage avait été maintenu en principe; mais on accordait facilement des dispenses, pourvu que le candidat parût avoir la capacité requise.'* In Bordeaux, the tailors accepted two years on the payment of a fee of one hundred *livres*, while the coopers reduced the term from four to two and a half years for apprentices who paid thirty *livres* up front (Fauché 1913; compare Thillay 2002: 218). But it would seem that—in the mid-eighteenth century at least—most of Bordeaux's artisans acquired their skills outside the city's guild system (see below).

A preliminary canvas suggests that notarial apprenticeship contracts are plentiful. They are discussed quite extensively in the literature (e.g. Pelligrin-Postel 1987; Gallinato 1992; Kaplan and Postel-Vinay 2000; Kaplan 2002; Ricalens 2007). Fauché (1913: 31-33) presented some data based on a sample of

forty-six contracts in Bordeaux, Kaplan assembled a database of 316 Parisian contracts, Belmont's study of rural apprenticeship in the Bas-Dauphiné is based on a sample of 510 contracts, while Gallinato's study of Bordeaux is based on 2,538 contracts (Kaplan 1993; Belmont 1998; Gallinato 1992). However, apprenticeship contracts in France have hitherto not been submitted to systematic econometric analysis. One suspects that an analysis based on a large sample of contracts, in which the variations over time and between different locations in the terms set out in contracts are controlled for variables such as the skill in question, the age of the apprentice, the fee paid, parental background, and so on, might be an improvement on the weak correlations which 'prohibit all generalisations' in Kaplan's sample (1993: 449). If so, it could tell us much about the evolving economics of the guild system. Kaplan (2002: 450fn37) elsewhere reports that the average amount of time served in 107 *métiers* in *Tableau universel et raisonné* (1760) was 4 years, 7 months and 3 weeks, while in *Dictionnaire raisonné universel des arts et des métiers* (1793) the average for 67 trades was 4 years and 11 months.⁴

The situation in Paris is clearly fundamental, but considerable variation in the power of the guilds across the hexagon is likely. A foretaste of what is available in the provincial archives is provided by Ricalens (2007), who describes trades in two towns in an area not far from Toulouse, Castelnaudary and Revel. Castelnaudary had a population of 7,871 in 1793, Revel 3,743. Ricalens' analysis of what is set out in the contracts implies quite a range in

⁴ Martin Saint-Léon (1922 552-556) provides data on the terms for apprenticeship and *compagnonnage* in 113 *métiers* in 1766.

both fees paid and duration, both within and across occupations, and also over time. However, his number of observations is always very small. Ricalens suggests that the fees were mainly compensation for the apprentice's food (rather than a payment for instruction). He does not focus on how common it was for apprentices to escape, a central theme in Minns and Wallis (2013) for England, but clearly the fear that apprentices might leave was implicit in French contracts (Kaplan 1993: 443-45).

The 'Faux ouvriers'

The industry of manufacturing villages has remedied in part the inconveniences of the monopolies established by towns-corporate had occasioned.

Adam Smith, *Correspondence*, p. 177.

'All of Paris will become one Faubourg St. Antoine: no talent, no strength, plenty of intrigue, fortunes based on nothing, none of the trust that is associated with a solid institution.'

Paris master buttonmakers, 1776 (Thillay)

The guilds were monopolies. The presence next to many of the bigger cities of enclaves beyond their control constrained their market power. The most famous of these enclaves was the *faubourg* St. Antoine, a major suburb immediately to the east of eighteenth-century Paris. It was granted freedom to

produce and trade without regulation in most sectors⁵ by Colbert in 1657 and maintained that privilege, though not uncontested, until the abolition of the guilds in 1791. For a century or so this vibrant and occasionally violent area of 30,000-45,000 inhabitants, most of them immigrants from the north and the east, and most of them dependent on employment in small workshops, coexisted and competed with the guild economy of the city.

From the early eighteenth century the *faubourg* St Antoine became synonymous with cabinetmaking, an industry that revolved around dozens of small, specialized workshops. Carriage-makers were numerous too, as were metalworkers such as locksmiths, nail-makers, toolmakers, founders, and tin- and coppersmiths (Thillay 2009: 130-155; Weisbach 1982; Leonard 2009). The *faubourg* also became noted for its venetian-style windows, mirrors, hosiery, porcelain, and ceramics. All these products were produced in workshops by a combination of artisans and unskilled workers. Producers in the *faubourg* were barred from selling their wares in the city, but there was nothing to prevent Parisians from coming to buy from them. Perhaps the most famous employer in the *faubourg* was Jean-Baptiste Revellion who in 1759 began producing painted wallpaper, with shops on the rue de Charonne and later near the Tuileries, and a factory with a labour force of 350 at Titonville (Rosenband 1997; Velut 2002).

To the southwest of the city, the *faubourg* Saint Marcel enjoyed similar privileges. Daniel Roche has described its world as fundamentally one of small-time artisans and free workers. Burstin's analysis of notarial contracts and

⁵ The concession did not extend to drapers, dry goods merchants, goldsmiths and jewellers, silk merchants and spice merchants (Leonard 2009: 57).

identity cards reveals Saint Marcel's heavily proletarian character, with 6,500 salaried workers and 12,700 wage earners in 1791 (Roche 1986). There were other small 'free trade' enclaves too: the precincts of the Temple, of the priory of Saint-Denis-de-la-Chartre, of the abbey of St-Germain-des-Prés, and of the rue de l'Oursine (Tarbé 1841: 215-16).

These two suburbs and their unregulated labour must have impacted on the power of the city guilds, though how much is impossible to say (or remains to be seen?). Their presence increased the employment options available to potential apprentices; it undermined the monopoly of Parisian producers through supplying goods more cheaply to city consumers; it encouraged entrepreneurs to set up there; it attracted migrants barred from the city guilds (Protestants, foreigners); and it prompted guild masters to connive with clandestine workers in the city and 'false' workers in the *faubourg* (Thillay 2009). The economic importance of the *faubourgs* is thus fundamental: '*Tout Paris n'est peut-être pas le faubourg Saint-Antoine, mais le faubourg Saint-Antoine et ses 'faux ouvriers' reflètent une grande partie du monde artisanal parisien*' (Thillay 2002). And again: '*Quelques sondages opérés dans d'autres quartiers de la capital, sur le territoire contrôlé par les jurandes, montrent également que la diversité l'emporte. La durée réglementaire des contrats n'est guère plus respectée et les apprentissages ne sont pas toujours approuvés par les jurés. Le Faubourg Saint-Antoine et la ville partagent en la matière les mêmes défauts et répondent, a fortiori, aux mêmes réalités*' (Thillay 2002: 218). Seizures by merchandise by the guilds were rare (Thillay 2002: 220). The guilds repeatedly protested against and contested the *faubourg's* privileges, but to

little effect. Their reaction to Turgot's proposals in 1776 was that they would reduce the whole city to one big *faubourg* St. Antoine.

Outside of Paris, the role of guilds in eighteenth-century Bordeaux has been the focus of considerable research (Fauché 1913: 20-21; Gallinato 1992, 1992b; Heimermann 1998, 2014; Horn n.d.). In mid-century guild regulation reached only a small part of the city's economy (Gallinato 1992: 245). Important occupations free of guild restrictions included coopers, butchers, cutlers, card makers, shipbuilders, bell-founders, watchmakers, and carpenters (Fauché 1913: 21). And when the carpenters of Bordeaux sought the privileges of incorporation in 1768 the president of the local *parlement* rebuffed them, being 'utterly convinced that all exclusive privileges and the creation of communities of craftsmen was very prejudicial to competition and to the public' (Fauché 1913: 37). The city guilds had no jurisdiction over workers in the busy manufacturing *sauvetats* (i.e. districts) of St Seurin (with a population of 18,500 c. 1790, compared to Bordeaux's 110,000) and St André. An inquiry into the city's trades in 1762 revealed that most craftsmen were either masters or *compagnons*, with very few apprentices. It seems that most new workers arrived already fully trained from the countryside, the noteworthy exceptions being in shipbuilding and sailmaking (Fauché 1913: 37; see also Appendix below).

Johnson has highlighted the weakness of guild regulation in Toulouse and Grenoble. In the former, guild representatives complained in the *cahier des doléances* that 'the estates of Languedoc... composed mostly of citizens

foreign to all kinds of arts and métiers have ignored our most legitimate reclamations’ and complained that the city authorities were ignoring ‘these sage and old regulations, on which depend the perfection of the arts and métiers and the public interest.’ In the former, the guilds were also in decline, as reflected in the fall in their number from 62 in 1750 to 48 in 1767. The local intendant was no friend of the clothiers’ guild (Johnson2014: 63).

It was likewise in Rouen (St. Sever) and Troyes (Croncels), and even in Lyon (Vaise), but in Marseille and Aix the guilds were seemingly much more powerful (Johnson 2014: 63) (see Table 1). According to Sonenscher (1989: 64): ‘In addition to the scores of tiny localities in which corporations had not been established (and there were some 800 towns with populations of 2,000 or more inhabitants in late eighteenth-century France) almost every major city contained a suburb or liberty which had its own privileges and rights..’

Table 1. Some Cities and their ‘Free’ Faubourgs				
<i>City</i>	<i>Population c. 1790</i>	<i>Faubourg</i>	<i>Population c. 1790</i>	<i>Sources</i>
Paris	630,000	St. Antoine	40,000	Monnier 1979
		St. Marcel	60-65,000	Roche, review of Burstin
Rouen	29,000	St. Sever		Perrenoud 1990: 243
Bordeaux	110,000	St. Seurin	18,500	Gallinato 1992b: 244
		St. André		Horn, 32
Troyes	28,000	Croncels		Horn, 32
Lyon	150,000	Vaise	1,800	Wiki

After the Revolution

Il y a une tendance marquée dans l'industrie... à ne plus faire d'apprentis... le travail devient automatique: on place la l'enfant et on lui donne une petite remuneration. Il apprend de qu'il a à faire en deux jours, en deux heures peut-être...

Anthime Corbon [1878; cited in Perrard 1987: 71]

The Allarde and Le Chapelier laws of May 1791 put an end to the guilds (for context see Fournier and Boutillier 2012; Beauvisage 2011). But did they also put an end to formal on-the-job training? The survival of some master-apprentice notarial contracts suggests 'not entirely'. But McPhee (456-57), citing Subreville (1982) notes that there were 123 contracts recorded in Bourgen-Bresse, capital of the Ain *département*, in 1789-99, but that the annual average fell 16 in 1789-93 to only 6 in 1794-99, and a dominant theme in the literature on skill formation in the nineteenth century is the decadence of the French apprenticeship system (Lequin 1989). If apprenticeship endured, to what extent and under what conditions did it do so? One might have thought that the number of such contracts and the conditions laid out in them after 1791 would offer one way of measuring the rents earned by the guilds before their demise. If the legislation increased competition, then one would predict shorter contracts. According to Levasseur (cited in Fauché 1913: 43) the term served by a goldsmith's apprentice in Paris, for example, was five to eight years before 1791; this was cut to five years in cases where the master fed the apprentice, to

four years without food, and to three when the apprentice agreed to pay for his board.

Lequin (1986, 1989) implies that the eradication of the guilds left a gap in the transmission of knowledge. He cites a chamber of commerce study in 1848 which found only one apprentice per seventeen qualified workers in the capital. A short time later, at the beginning of the Second Empire they were reckoned to number only 20,000 out of 420,000 industrial workers, of whom 120,000 might be reckoned adolescents. In 1865 yet another, more general, inquiry found that apprenticeship, defined as learning on the job, hardly featured at all in professional training. Nor was it just quantity: the quality of apprenticeships had also declined, and the practice of written notarial contracts had all but disappeared. So that of 19,000 apprentices identified by the chamber of commerce in 1848, nearly 14,000 had only verbal agreements; by 1903 written contracts constituted only 3 per cent of the total.

Did this transformation result in an under-trained labour force (compare Minard 2007a)? The impact of industrialization and the growth of the factory system on the demand for the kind of skills associated with the workshop and on-the-job training would complicate any such a before-and-after experiment. One might argue that the apprenticeship system run its course—as it virtually had in England (see e.g. Lane 1996: 210-17). However, a tight focus on apprenticeship contracts in the immediate pre- and post-1791 periods—say the 1780s and 1790s—might be interesting in this regard. Changes both in the number and content of contracts would be worth examining.

Finally:

[1] The trends discussed above suggest collecting and analyzing contracts around three or four dates in the century before the Revolution might pay dividends: one or two before 1776 (e.g. 1720 and 1750); one about 1780; and the 1790s (post Le Chapelier).

[2] Given its size, Paris is paramount, but getting a sense of guild power outside Paris and the role of the *faubourgs* as a check on monopoly power elsewhere would also be clearly important.

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[<https://books.google.ie/books?id=FjwFJ541g4MC&pg=PA214&lpg=PA214&dq=apprentissage+ancien+regime&source=bl&ots=22VzUfb936&sig=HMw6n65IKUFulwESozRwtDB4goY&hl=ga&sa=X&ei=Fo5oVdyqMuHe7Aaa8oDICQ&ved=oCCgQ6AEwBDgU#v=onepage&q=apprentissage%20ancien%20regime&f=false>]. Genard implies that contract terms were pretty flexible in the eighteenth century.

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TABLE A1. Status by Trade, Bordeaux in 1762: controlled occupations			
<i>Trade</i>	<i>Masters</i>	<i>Apprentices</i>	<i>'Compagnons'</i>
Apothecaries	17	1	16
Stevedores	10	0	10
Gunsmiths	8	0	54
Bakers of holy bread	17	5	22
Buttoners	28	1	20
Milliners	9	0	3
Wheelwrights	15	3	5
Coppersmiths	12	2	7
Roofers and <i>plombeurs</i>	35	6	46
Scriveners	17	0	0
Pinmakers	8	0	10
Stocking makers	5	0	4
Blacksmiths	20	3	36
Polishers (<i>fourbisseurs</i>)	3	0	2
Glovers	17	0	7
Goldsmiths	20	3	3
Tinsmiths	20	5	7
Wigmakers	86	9	160 to 170
Potters (tin)	7	0	1
Pulley-ers and marine turners	13	6	21
<i>Sacquiers</i> [dockers?]	66	0	0
Saddlers	10	3	10
Locksmiths	50	11	.
<i>Symphonistes</i> [musicians?]	20	0	0
Measurers	200	4	130
Upholsterers	18	5	4
Dyers	12	1	4
Weavers	11	0	0
Turners	32	4	8

TABLE A2. Status by Trade, Bordeaux in 1762: non-controlled occupations			
<i>Trade</i>	<i>Masters</i>	<i>Apprentices</i>	<i>'Compagnons'</i>
Butchers	50	0	valets only
Carters	9	3	10
Shipbuilders	38	46	10
Cutlers	10	0	3
Bellfounders	7	0	2
Clockmakers	19	1	2
Carpenters	80	3	20
Farriers	7	0	12
Confectioners and hoteliers	15	0	0
Furriers	12	0	0
Dressers	26	0	0
Cobblers of Saint-Seurin	62	4	9 to 10
Tailors of Saint-André	109	0	0
Tailors of Saint-Seurin	39	0	4
Coopers of Bordeaux	317	0	0
Coopers of Les Chartrons	438	.	.
Coopers of Saint-Seurin	102	6	30
Sailmakers	12	14	18
Source: Fauché 1913: 34-35			

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