

The Representation of Working People in Britain and France

The Representation of Working People
in Britain and France:
New Perspectives

By

Antoine Capet

**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

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FOREWORD

It is a pleasure and a privilege to contribute an introductory note to this collection of wide-ranging and insightful essays. They were first presented at a conference in Rouen, in which Britain's Society for the Study of Labour History was pleased to be a partner. As the Society's chairman during the organising period, I know how much all of us who were involved in the conference owe to Antoine Capet. This debt to him is now redoubled with the present volume.

The Society's thanks are also due to the President of the University of Rouen, Professor Cafer Özkul, for his generous hospitality towards all who attended the conference; to the Conseil Scientifique de l'Université de Rouen, the École Doctorale Rouennaise (Savoirs, Critique & Expertises) and to CORPUS (Conflits, Représentations et Dialogues dans l'Univers Anglo-Saxon, Universités d'Amiens et de Rouen).

In 2010 the Society for the Study of Labour History celebrates the 50th anniversary of its formation. In 1960 labour history was a marginal activity in British universities, but the energy of the small group of historians who founded the Society profoundly changed this. They included Asa Briggs, J.F.C. Harrison, Royden Harrison, Eric Hobsbawm, John Saville and E.P. Thompson, all of whom went on to make lasting contributions to the study of the history of working people, their lives and cultures. The Society is, inevitably and quite properly, mainly concerned with British labour history. However, this has never been its exclusive preoccupation. As early as 1966, the Society's first major venture beyond British labour history was an Anglo-French colloquium, 'Trade Unions and Labour Movements, 1890–1914'. Chaired by Asa Briggs and Jacques Droz from the Sorbonne, the colloquium heard papers from, among others, Eric Hobsbawm, François Bédarida, Jacques Juillard, Annie Kriegel, Henry Pelling, Michelle Perrot, Madeleine Robrieux and Rolande Trompé.

This new collection of essays provides a timely insight into how much this field of academic endeavour has changed since 1966. Simply to glance at the contents page is to realise how far its chronological reach has spread from the heartland signalled by the title of the 1966 Anglo-French colloquium. A particular strength of this collection is the various authors' sophisticated and nuanced insight into the cultural dimensions of labouring lives, and into the ways in which they were represented (and misrepresented)

by contemporary commentators. By titling the conference on 'The Representation of Working People', it was the organisers' hope to bridge the best of labour history and the new cultural history. This volume shows how well this objective was met.

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

CLOTH CAPS AND ALL THAT

When Professor Malcolm Chase, then Chairman of the Society for the Study of Labour History, asked me two years ago if our research group CORPUS was interested in co-organising an International Conference on "The Representation of Working People in Britain and France" at the University of Rouen, there could be no hesitation on my part. The cross-fertilisation which results from such undertakings is evidently well worth the efforts involved in organising them. With speakers—of all generations—coming from Britain, France, Germany and the United States, the friendly confrontation of points of view, reflected in the lively debates which followed the papers, could only add to our perception of the diversity of that elusive notion in History, "Representation".

It is a truism that History is about "Representation": but then opinions will diverge—as it should be—between what is meant by "Representation". Thomas De Quincey's distinction springs to mind, when in 1848 he divided human writings into "the literature of knowledge" (which we would now call "non-fiction"—"the function of the first is—to *teach*", he wrote) and "the literature of power" (which we would now call "fiction"—"the function of the second is—to *move*"). Interestingly, the chapters in the present collection allude to both. The historians of labour are often wrongly perceived as people who are primarily interested in Trade Union membership statistics or unemployment figures—but even though they obviously would not like their publications to be seen as "fiction", they often use different forms of "fictitious" representation, works of the imagination whose "function is—to *move*", as their sources.

When for instance Suzanne Beal discusses Patrick Allan-Fraser's 1871 painting, *Idleness* (formerly titled *An Idle Housemaid*), she founds her reasoning on a "fictitious" representation—yet the conclusions which she draws obviously belong with "the literature of knowledge". Likewise, even if "fables" are "fiction" by definition, Alexandra Sippel convincingly shows that John Minter Morgan's *Revolt of the Bees* (1826), which has so far benefited from much less attention than the famous *Fable of the Bees* of 1714 by Bernard Mandeville, reflects contemporary "imaginary

representations" of the world of labour—but also burning contemporary preoccupations about the organisation of human activity, which are naturally of the highest interest for the labour historian. Somewhat paradoxically, then, a "fable"—theoretically a "literary" form of "representation"—becomes a primary historical source. The "social problem novels" studied by Victoria Mears have long received the attention of "social historians", as they of course reflect one aspect of the evolution of the various forms of "representation" of the labouring classes. But she goes one stage further when she argues that, contrary to what commentators have generally tended to claim, the authors' solutions were perhaps after all "realistic"—in which case these "works of fiction" would acquire an additional "historical" dimension.

For the general public, there are borderline cases: photography, for instance, especially "documentary photography" is perceived as reflecting "historical truth". An analysis of the photographs of the unemployed published in 1930s Britain easily shows that such is not the case: a clever caption can in fact reverse the initial conclusions which the viewers were likely to draw for themselves. The searching question put by *Creative Camera* in 1986, "What is the future of documentary photography in Great Britain in the 1980s?" might have equally as well been posed by the "social photographers" of the 1930s. Similarly, the very seductive thesis propounded by Sophie Orlando when she writes "Photography as an instrument of social change and representing the class of workers gave way to the photography of the emergence of a new social class and new social questions focused less on the membership of a class than on the definition of the individual in an embryonic consumer society" could also apply to, say, Bill Brandt representing "A Night in London", to take up the title of his well known collection of 1938. *Plus ça change...*

The famous plates in the *Encyclopédie* would also be regarded as "objective" sources by most commentators—after all the team of draughtsmen took great pains, they repeatedly claimed, to provide the highest accuracy in their descriptions—but, Douglas Page asks, "are the illustrations merely informational, and therefore relatively value-neutral, or are there aspects to them that can be read as skewed toward a particular perspective, a perspective intended by Diderot and the Encyclopedists?" This of course does not make the plates less valuable, but to take up Douglas Page's words, this skewed perspective changes our own perspective on the true informative content of these celebrated sources on the working practices in the "mechanical arts" of 18th-century France. In his study of one of these "arts", goldsmithing, David Humphrey shows that it benefited or suffered—depending on one's point of view—from yet

another form of “representation”, this time in the form of an a priori conception of how the trade should be (re)organised, in Boileau’s *Livre des Métiers* of c.1268 and in King Philippe le Hardi’s royal ordinance of December 1275.

It is fascinating to follow the continuity/discontinuity strand first introduced in this collection by David Humphrey’s discussion of the restrictions in freedom of trade—or at least in freedom of trade management in the form of the limitations on the master’s freedom of hiring whom he liked. This entrepreneurial freedom (or the restrictions put on it “in restraint of trade”) was the object of the constant attention of the workforce, this attention being most often the butt of extremely negative “representations” in both Britain and France. The principle first seen at work here among the goldsmiths was clearly reaffirmed, as Patrice Bouche appropriately reminds us, both by the French Revolutionary Assembly’s *Loi Le Chapelier* of 1791 and the British Combination Laws of 1799–1800, which reasserted the right of “employing whomsoever [one] shall think proper to employ”. Concurrently, as was only to be expected from legislation intended to remove anything “in restraint of trade”, the right to “combine... for obtaining an advance of wages” was of course totally denied.

Only a few months after this concession of defeat—since the British Parliament would not have seen it imperative to put an end to the incipient confrontation between employers and workmen if things had been as harmonious as Jean-Baptiste Say suggested—the latter unabashedly proposed to the French an extremely idealised picture of what we now call “industrial relations” in Britain, “the English worker assists the entrepreneur”, as most usefully recalled by François Jarrige. Some sixty years later, the same ploy was reiterated in the *Enquête, traité de commerce avec l’Angleterre* of 1860–1862, in which it was reported that “in England, spinners take pride in their work” the better to berate their French counterparts. That this was in fact only meant to show the French worker in a negative light vis-à-vis his “positive” English opposite number introduces a new element in the general discussion found in this collection: the positive representation of a workman as a weapon against another, seen or shown as suffering from a negative image.

One obstacle to the success of this transparent device was of course working-class solidarity, which in a way has also often been the subject of idealised representations. None was more obvious than that of the CPGB in its “Popular Front” heyday when, as Jeremy Tranmer reminds us, it staked everything on an alliance between the blue-collar and the white-collar working classes against “the great capitalist employers and

financiers", who supposedly saw them as "superfluous scrap", in its first long-term programme, *For Soviet Britain* (1935). No doubt the leaders of the CPGB had perceived the difficulty of breaking the "self-representation" of the white-collar working class as different (in fact, superior), a "desire on the part of the white-collar workers to set themselves apart from the blue-collar workers". This, Yannick Marec tells us apropos the efforts at unity of organisation in 1880s Rouen, came from the fact that "they sought to establish an understanding between themselves and the employers in view of a social reconciliation which was deemed to be favourable to a progressive improvement in their conditions".

The "villains" who are the object of Marc Lenormand's chapter precisely received this image because they refused this conception of "a social reconciliation which was deemed to be favourable to a progressive improvement in their conditions". "Class collaboration" is presented as incompatible with working-class solidarity by the Marxists in the widest sense (let us remember that even William Morris relentlessly attacked it)—and conversely the British press, including the *Guardian*, pleads (or pleaded in the 1980s) in favour of a vague form of national solidarity which strongly reminds us of the illusions of the white-collar workers of Rouen in the 1880s. By a curious reversal of values, it is the press which uses the language of the "class war", with a repeated use of military metaphors.

As for the most potent of the mass media, television, it was used with very good effect by the Conservatives during more or less the same period to increase and perpetuate another form of division based on "self-representation" among the wage-earning classes—this time not between the white-collar workers and the blue-collar workers, but among the industrial workers themselves. David Haigron's findings aptly remind us of the impact of Conservative election broadcasts among the crucial skilled workers, the celebrated "C2s", and perhaps even more important, their "C2 wives". During the 1979 General Election campaign, Keith Joseph probably went too far, because few viewers would have been sophisticated enough to recognise the original allusion, in his negative association of the Labour Party with Stanley Baldwin's famous phrase in 1918, "A lot of hard-faced men who look as if they had done very well out of the war", loosely taken up in the 1945 Labour Manifesto, which Keith Joseph twisted a little further: "You are accustomed to thinking of us as a hard Party as against a compassionate Party. By now, some of you will have been horrified at some hard-faced men from the Labour Party and the Trade Unions who are doing well out of class-war". Margaret Thatcher

was far more direct during the 1983 campaign when she said “In Britain today, there’s no room for out of date distinction of class or creed”. In the same year, by denying the value of the perpetuation of “the traditional bowler hat vs. cloth cap model of British politics”, Richard Rose in fact confirmed the continued importance of “representations”. It may be that the evolution of the economy and society had made the “model” irrelevant—this is not the point here, the important point being that British scholars continued to use this long-established figurative vocabulary to make themselves understood by the general public.

By a curious—and fascinating—historical twist, Richard Rose’s assertion comes very close to what François Jarrige argues in a different context: “In mid-19th century France, the way English workers were represented was the subject of ardent sociopolitical dispute since the figure of the worker actually stood for the choice of industrial development model”. There’s evidently more to it than meets the eye in the British worker’s representation with a cloth cap—and in the conclusions which the French have drawn from it at different stages in their history—leaving plenty of work for another conference and collection on cross-Channel visions of the “signifier” and “signified” in the long history of the working-class.

In the meantime, it must be said that it is always a pleasure to see that one’s labours have come to fruition—and the Editor can only hope that the reader will find the same pleasure in perusing all these percipient chapters, with all the “bridges” between them that constantly spring to mind.

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CHAPTER ONE

INFORMAL LABOUR STRUCTURES IN THE LATE MEDIEVAL PARISIAN GOLDSMITHING TRADE

DAVID HUMPHREY¹

In the period between the Sack of Constantinople in 1204 and the departure of the French monarchy to the Loire in the early 1420s, Paris was the centre of medieval Northern Europe's goldsmithing trade. Despite the best efforts of sumptuary laws and associated legislation to limit those deemed to be of sufficient social rank to wear items of precious jewellery, demand from the courts of France, Valois Burgundy, England and the increasingly affluent, Northern Europe-wide, merchant classes saw levels of production increase dramatically. An indication of the number of items that were required may be gleaned from an examination of those inventories that have survived and been published in works by, amongst others, the nineteenth-century French antiquary Léon de Laborde.

At regal and ducal level the goldsmiths of Paris were called upon not only to produce jewels and plate in ever increasing quantities, but also to manufacture such works to innovative designs capable of assuring that purchasers would occupy positions as leaders in fashion. To satisfy the demands made of them, goldsmiths had to engage a wide range of skills, techniques and materials: many of these had to be sourced, through necessity, in a way that cut across legalisation that controlled their trade.

Development and regulation of the Parisian trade

A large section of the Parisian trade was clustered into small workshops along the Grand-Pont: the bridge connecting the Île de la Cité

¹ Acknowledgements: I wish to express my gratitude to the following people for the intellectual stimulus that has played a key part in the development of this work: Beatriz Chadour-Sampson, Carol Chattaway, John Cherry and Michael Rowe.

to the Right Bank. The Grand-Pont provided a key portal for those wishing to enter the north of Paris from a southerly direction and acted as a major conduit through which potential customers for luxury items were required to pass through. Guillebert de Metz, writing in 1407, noted there were either 68 or 72 goldsmiths' workshops on the bridge.

Further groups of workshops, many more extensive in their manufacturing resources than those on the Grand-Pont, occupied considerable space in the Les Halles area north of Châtelet, and on the Left Bank around the site occupied today by La Sorbonne. The Rue de la Barillerie, which ran along the east side of the royal palace, also supported a colony of precious metal workers in the thirteenth century. Although corroborating evidence is lacking, these workshops may have been of a larger physical size than those on the Grand-Pont and thus would have undertaken larger scale work than could have been accomplished in the small workshops located on the Grand-Pont.

Over the course of the late medieval period the Parisian trade became evermore moderated through items of legislation imposed on it from one external source or another and through regulations developed out of its own guild structures. A similar process characterised the evolution of the goldsmithing trade in England during the corresponding period. The process was an evolutionary one making the identification of what may be considered as a defining set of regulations or statutes an impractical task. However, two events and their consequences may be seen as key to the organisation and subsequent development of goldsmithing in Paris, in particular, and within the greater regions of Valois Burgundy and France.

The first event, the drawing up c.1268 of the *Livre des Métiers* by Étienne Boileau, Prévost of Paris, put into law many existing regulations and responsibilities and also included a collection of new ones. The major implication of Boileau's legislation for both formal and informal labour structures in the trade was the limitation of only one apprentice per goldsmith who was not a relation of the goldsmith, whilst allowing any number of apprentices who were members of the goldsmith's family, or his wife's family.

Although at first appearing to structure support for hereditary continuity into the trade, such a restriction effectively prevented goldsmiths the freedom to choose those individuals they thought had most potential as would-be apprentices. Furthermore it hindered, or potentially hindered, the acquisition and integration of new or innovative skills and techniques into the trade as it created a training loop that sought to act as a baulk to the new and innovative.

Despite such an apparent problem innovation did take place in many areas of practice—particularly in enamelling: much of it led by craftsmen from other parts of Europe, and beyond, who became absorbed into the Parisian trade structure despite regulations which sought to prevent such informal, or unregulated, arrangements.

The second event that impacted on the Parisian trade was the ordinance issued in December 1275 by King Philippe le Hardi stating that town marks were to appear on silver items denoting they were made from the required quality of refined silver. Failure to comply would result in the loss of the silver by the maker. Marks were to be unique to towns and work made in one town could not be marked with the mark of another town.

Many towns in France already had such marks: the ordinance was intended to make the practice official legislation and to universalise it throughout the country. For those working in the goldsmithing trade it served to tighten up their manufacturing standards and to make them more rigorously inspect work contracted out to other, specialised, workshops on an informal basis.

Taken together, Boileau's *Livre des Métiers* of c.1268 and the royal ordinance of 1275 imposed new demands on how the goldsmithing trade was structured in terms of its engagement and management of labour. Who could work within the trade, and who could not, and how they worked was defined, or so it was intended, by these items of legislation. Such a definition, in theory, impacted on the finer grain of the technical stages of production in restricting goldsmiths' abilities to harness specialised skills often through informal arrangements. The reality of day-to-day operation and the realities of business meant that many goldsmiths simply ignored legislation they viewed as restricting or worked around it by stretching it to its legal limits or engaging tacitly in dishonest or illegal practices.

Organisation of the trade

From its earliest history the practice of goldsmithing has been a devolved one in both the processes of production and in the use of specialised skills within its labour structures. The manufacture of individual items of work positioned a master goldsmith at the top of a pyramid of human resources and practical labour. He acted as both the conduit through which the processes of manufacture were routed and, in modern terms, acted as the project manager. He was responsible for assessing what he himself would contribute to the fabrication of an item

and for the identification and engagement of craftsmen with other skills necessary for its completion. The master was, in theory, in the thrall of guild regulations and other instruments of legislation designed to maintain levels of honesty and good practice within the trade. Many master goldsmiths were totally honest: many were not. Similarly many of those in the devolved processes of manufacture were totally honest: many were not. It is important to realise that for many working in the medieval goldsmithing trade, as in other trades, the desire to gain personal wealth and kudos overrode issues of honest trade practices and obligations to clients.

As already noted the Parisian trade operated from a number of locations within the city. Many goldsmiths operated out of a simple shop with public access. The workshop was often attached to the shop with living accommodation for the goldsmith, his family and in some cases apprentices. Customers would either buy from stock on display in the shop or commission the goldsmith to manufacture a piece of work to an agreed specification. The commissioning-to-completion manufacturing cycle required input from a range of specialised processes and associated technical skills including design, the acquisition of precious metals and gemstones, basic forming and soldering of precious metal, input from enamellers, engravers, stone cutters, stone setters and polishers to name but some. The range of additional skills and associated labour the master goldsmith needed to harness was often extensive even for a single item. Through the apprenticeship system many of the necessary skills were immediately to hand through those employed in a workshop. Once qualified as a journeyman (a position roughly between an apprentice and a master) many once-apprenticed goldsmiths specialised in particular aspects of the manufacturing process: enamelling and engraving serve as examples. This system was eventually relaxed to allow greater inclusion of “outsiders”, but it maintained a labour pool that was bound by the formal connections of family relationships as well as the more informal, and fluid, use of skills within a business. Crucially it supported the end-on nature of the involvement of many specialist craftsmen: they inherited a job from one person, carried out the work demanded of them, the work was then sent on to the next stage of the production process. That production process was, in modern terms, a pipeline, that depended on every stage being completed on time and in budget.

The precise point at which a goldsmith had to employ specialised skills accessed through informal links beyond the immediate vicinity of his own workshop is difficult to assess at a generic level as extant records are few and more often such outwork went unrecorded. Research suggests that

external, specialised, labour was engaged when the technical requirements of a particular piece were beyond the capabilities of a goldsmith's own workshop. Quite early in the period what amounted to a modern concept of "freelance" working existed in the Parisian trade: in 1292 an enamelling specialist known as Richard, "esmailleur de Londres", is recorded as working in Paris. Allied to the need for super technical competence was the necessity of harnessing new and in-demand decorative techniques that may not have been practiced at all within a goldsmith's own workshop. The relationship between goldsmiths and technical specialists in manufacture was organised on an *ad hoc* basis but with the goldsmith tending to use, where possible, those they considered "tried and trusted". The specialists themselves, by virtue of working in fairly close geographical proximity, became what might be considered a professional community but one without formal organisation.

The involvement of informal labour arrangements outside of a goldsmith's own workshop often started at a very early stage of the manufacture of an object. "Designers" as we know them today did not exist. In many circumstances the master goldsmith produced a design in consultation with the client. To a great extent the complexity of design that could be developed depended on the drawing skill of the goldsmith. This process worked in the case of a simple motif, but more complex configurations demanded the skills of an engraver. In cases of more technically demanding design work than an engraver might be able to accomplish the work would often be sub-contracted to a painter or sculptor, again on an *ad hoc* basis. This often brought painters into potential conflict with the guild regulations that controlled their own trade. Painters in this context were working, in modern terms, as 'freelancers' that cut across the organised labour structures of their own trade. Their skills were frequently used to present the master goldsmith with a design that could be directly transferred by tracing or pricking-through onto metal. How such artistic input was remunerated in financial terms is difficult to assess, but may have been in relation to the assumed affluence of the client or the overall pricing or budget for an individual job.

In-line with practices in the production of tapestry, design advice was often sought from the Church to gain assurances that biblical or general symbolic references encapsulated in the design of an object adhered to accepted standards of religious compliance. This relationship was also an informal one, brought into focus as, and when, it was needed. In terms of labour usage in the process of manufacture it acted as a consultancy service providing a degree of informal, but necessary, authorisation at the formative stage of the development of a precious object. The master

goldsmith would either visit the location of the expertise or the expertise would come to the master goldsmith—the process was a flexible one. No common mode of payment or remuneration existed for this consultancy process—or even if payment, in some form, was a regularly expected part of it.

The sourcing and supply of materials

The ever increasing demand for new jewels placed on the workshops of late medieval Paris generated a parallel demand for precious metals, precious stones and other materials to manufacture them. The demand was met, in large part, by the established process of recycling existing jewels. A goldsmith's client would present the goldsmith with those objects they wished him to use for the new object or objects. He would then break up the old objects removing the gemstones and melt down and recast or work the precious metal into the new forms required.

This relationship between the client and goldsmith effectively positioned the client as unpaid, informal, labour for the goldsmith working in the capacity of a supplier of core material resources. The client's role in this respect must be considered as of considerable significance in terms of both its presence as a specific group in a devolved labour structure within the trade and within the context of the disparate structures of precious materials acquisition.

Beyond the supply of precious materials from clients the acquisition of raw materials to construct jewels and other goldsmiths' work involved an extended network of individuals and services based in Paris itself, in other parts of France, wider Europe and beyond into those areas on and off of the so-called "Silk Road". Despite the apparent decline of the importance of the "Silk Road" in the fourteenth century in the face of military action and an increase in the traffic of goods by sea, enormous quantities of precious materials were imported into Europe through a network of so-called "middlemen" who, through their trading operations—often pan-continental in nature—could provide almost any luxury item from any location known to the late medieval world: men like Dino Rapondi.

Rapondi was head of a vast trading empire that serviced the needs of the affluent classes of Northern Europe in the latter part of the fourteenth and early part of the fifteenth centuries. The necessity of acquiring precious materials required for new jewels above and beyond those sourced directly from the client, saw goldsmiths turn to men like Rapondi to seek out new materials from their stock or use their business links to source them from locations across the world. Most such middlemen

employed their own staff at least as far as their bases of import on the Italian or North African coasts, beyond that they usually operated through freelance agents in the countries from which they obtained the required materials. Those remote agents would often be charged with very specific requirements requiring, for example, local craftsmen to fashion gemstones in ways not technically possible in Europe during the period. Such an informal engagement of labour, working completely outside of the formal structures imposed by legislation in Paris and often thousands of miles from the city, serviced the needs of the trade in an indispensable way.

Those delivering specialist skills and services to the goldsmithing trade in Paris of the period may be thought of today as an informal association held together by a common position in the luxury goods trade. That informality gave them more cohesion than legal regulations or guild pressure could achieve: they became increasingly mutually interdependent through the increasingly detailed demands of the trade's customers.

Moreover it gave them a presence, unexploited in the main, to influence the sumptuous world of the royal and ducal courts of the time as they effectively enabled that sumptuousness to thrive. Equally the technical innovations that they exploited in areas such as enamelling made sure that the works worn by those at the courts of Northern Europe were at the forefront of fashion and those who wore them were therefore seen as leaders of fashion in an increasingly vanity-driven environment.

The informally structured aspects of the trade and the ingrained informal labour engagements that supported the master goldsmith at its core created what might be considered as a "black economy": a business world operating outside of financial regulation. Worse still it saw acts of illegal business practices and outright theft. The nineteenth-century French historian Louis Douët-d'Arcq noted the case of a Parisian goldsmith who, in 1417, convinced two men who worked for him supplying gold and silver to augment that supply by robbing churches in Paris of their holy vessels.

It was not an isolated incident and points to the systematic use of illegally obtained precious materials—unsurprising perhaps given that such a method of acquiring precious materials could significantly increase the profit to be made by an unscrupulous goldsmith.

Changing horizons

With the ravages of the Black Death in 1348 the number of goldsmiths in Northern Europe declined. Numbers gradually increased again over the course of the fifteenth century. The newly invigorated trade had by that

point re-established itself away from Paris, particularly in the cities and towns further to the east in Europe. Technologies employed in various aspects of production were developing rapidly—particularly so in relation to the cutting and polishing of precious stones.

What had once been a trade largely carried on outside of Europe became absorbed more centrally into the core skills supported in the master goldsmith's workshop and represented structural changes in trade practices that are still in flux today. The model of the trade practised in late medieval Paris began to be replaced by one with far more in-workshop integration, although the new model retained much of its devolved nature in terms of processes.

Conclusion

Despite legislation that sought to organise and control the working environments within which late medieval Parisian goldsmiths operated, and the associated pressures to formalise their businesses as formal labour, family enterprises, informal labour arrangements, particularly in relation to specialised skills, helped to drive artistic and technical innovation. The absorption, generally on an informal basis, of such skills in pursuit of ever more opulent objects underpinned the rise of Paris to its position of the leading centre of the Northern European goldsmithing trade in the late medieval period.

To goldsmiths, if not to legislators, it was apparent that to support the ideas that clients were expressing to potential makers required the annexation of the best skills available—which often meant using craftsmen from beyond the confines of their own workshops. Client desire and increasing technical innovation within the processes of the trade fortuitously found the raw materials they needed through the developing trading networks with their roots in Paris and Bruges and their reach across the known world.

The relationships that developed between clients, goldsmiths and the operators of such trading networks were largely informal and operated on an “as-and-when-required” basis. Informal labour arrangements themselves ranged from agreements between individual goldsmiths and specialised workers in particular aspects of technique or technical processes, to the employment of less than honest members of the lower levels of Parisian society who were prepared to undertake activities including theft and robbery on behalf of a dishonest goldsmith.

In an essentially generically devolved trade such as goldsmithing, formal labour practices defined by legislation were, more often than not,

inhibiting to the efficient operation of business and suffocating to the development of improved working practices and technical innovation. Through necessity formal labour structures were often worked around when the situation required it. What resulted for the trade: a mixture of formal and informal or *ad hoc* arrangements survives in many respects down to today.

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CHAPTER TWO

DIDEROT'S ENCYCLOPEDIA: A QUESTION OF INTERNAL SYMMETRY

DOUGLAS PAGE

From its inception, Diderot's *Encyclopedia*, published during the third quarter of the 18th century, has been recognised as more than a mere reference work. As a publishing venture, it was more expansive than any yet created, presenting its survey of knowledge in seventeen volumes of text and eleven volumes of plates. It was also quite unusual for an encyclopedia in that the mechanical arts were prominently featured, including both extensive text and illustrations. The rationale behind this focus was made clear in an article entitled *ART* that Diderot wrote to help create interest in the *Encyclopedia*. In his article on Art, Diderot points out that there are differences between works of the mind and works of the hand. These are the liberal arts and the mechanical arts. And although he finds the primacy of the liberal arts "well-grounded," he also laments the resulting prejudice towards the mechanical arts, a prejudice that tends to degrade people whom he sees as "very estimable and very useful." Diderot finds these attitudes "bizarre" and refers to two men of the previous century, the Englishman Francis Bacon and the French minister Jean-Baptiste Colbert, as examples of great men who did not hold such ideas. Diderot biographer Arthur Wilson points out that it is just this "attitude, faithfully reflected in a thousand places in the *Encyclopédie*, that made the work so revolutionary. New *values* were here being set forth and admired, the dignity of just plain work was being extolled."¹ Implicit in this sentiment is that Diderot was attempting to shape the opinion of the *Encyclopedia's* readers, to get them to take a fresh look at the familiar and to turn a critical eye toward what was commonly accepted. But in order to steer clear of trouble, especially in matters of religion or politics, Diderot

¹ Arthur M. Wilson. *Diderot*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1972 : 131.

and all of the other contributors to the *Encyclopedia* had to exercise great caution. As Wilson puts it, “the sophisticated soon realised that it was necessary not only to read the lines of the *Encyclopédie* but also between them.”²

When I first conceived of this project, I intended to explore the relationship between selected occupational descriptions that are found in the text and their corresponding images. This would raise the question whether the illustrations reflect the craft as it was practised, a symmetrical relationship, or were they also subject to the editorialising that was a hallmark of the encyclopedic enterprise, a potentially asymmetrical relationship? In short, are the illustrations merely informational, and therefore relatively value-neutral, or are there aspects to them that can be read as skewed toward a particular perspective, a perspective intended by Diderot and the Encyclopedists? In the intervening period I have come to broaden this approach to include potential asymmetries, dissonances, or tensions, be they textual or illustrative.

Diderot and the Encyclopedists went to great lengths to gather information for the *Encyclopedia's* articles on the mechanical arts. This was not an easy task as Diderot would explain in his *Prospectus*. He recounted that in order for he and others to obtain accurate and up-to-date information on the mechanical arts they spoke to the most skilful by going directly to the workshops. There they would question the workmen, and through a rather arduous process of information gathering, they could reconstruct a relatively accurate description of what it was that these artisans actually did.³

Diderot and his companions were persistent, going from one workman to another in order to obtain the most accurate information, asking questions, listening and writing as the craftsmen explained what it was they did. This job was undeniably hampered by the language used, language most likely unfamiliar to the information gatherers but essential to conversing with precision within the atmosphere of a trade. Then, of course, there were also those who had to fall back on their memory, a prospect that Diderot and his companions found somewhat unreliable, so they developed the precaution of correcting errors by questioning other individuals, thus allowing a comparison of information. Diderot came to discover that there were only a few who could step up to the task at hand and provide the requested information. Indeed, Diderot noted that

² Wilson : 137 (his emphasis).

³ *Prospectus*.

One hardly finds a dozen among a thousand in the position to express himself with some clarity about the instruments they use and on the products that they manufacture. We saw workmen who had worked for forty years without knowing anything about their machines. It was necessary for us to practice with them the role Socrates extolled, the painful and delicate function of helping give birth to minds: *a midwife of the mind*.⁴

An example of the practices that could be gleaned from the practitioners of a trade is found in the article FRAMING OR CARPENTRY. Here the author provides a brief history of the development of carpentry and building framing, and gives an upbeat observation that “the art of carpentry has made very great progress in France, since most of the contractors and the workmen had instructed themselves in the necessary mathematics.”⁵ This positive note suggests that carpentry is becoming, in the Encyclopedists' time, a more artful practice, combining practical and speculative principles to advance it. But, according to the author, beyond the hazard of fire, especially within a city, there are other concerns with wood framing that mathematics alone cannot address:

there remains much to desire about the economy in this art or for the method of avoiding the enormous complication of parts in the load-bearing assemblies; on the manner of assembling, of cutting wood, of placing it; on the knowledge of the nature of woods, their durability, their other physical qualities, etc. It would be desirable that experience, mechanics and physics meet together to deal with this significant matter.⁶

The hope here is that more will be learned about the properties of wood itself, in addition to the mathematical and physical principles that might advance construction techniques. The author is effectively calling for the combination of principles learned through experience and those derived from mathematics and physics. There is also a more pointed note regarding carpentry, a potential problem that deals with the practices of carpenters themselves. The author explicitly advises readers to be aware that workmen might mix old lumber with new and misuse measurements to their own benefit. A practice that can mean the difference between the efficient and safe use of wood and the incurring of additional expenses for the employer. We can see in these statements potential asymmetries between extolling work and the practices found within it. While the

⁴ *Prospectus*.

⁵ *CHARPENTE ou CHARPENTERIE*, 3: 214.

⁶ *CHARPENTE ou CHARPENTERIE*, 3: 214.

Encyclopedists are attempting to create a positive attitude towards the mechanical arts, this section suggests that some workmen, in this instance carpenters, might be untrustworthy by attempting to inflate profits through faulty measurements and the use of old materials. In addition to this factor, we can also see that there are suggestions for improving the practice of carpentry. These suggestions, like others found in the *Encyclopédie*, also signal some of the tensions inherent in this enterprise which help to make it more than a mere reference work, based upon the static realm of memory, and move it into the active realm of reason, a substantial shift in the categories of knowledge for Diderot and the Encyclopedists.

This example helps to point out that the *Encyclopédie* was not merely a propaganda piece for manual labourers, but a work that sought changes in the attitudes of and toward workers. The article *BUTCHER* captures this notion immediately by pointing out that “The butcher’s meat is the most ordinary food after bread, and consequently one of those things which more and more often concerns health. The police force cannot thus watch over this object too attentively.”⁷

Diderot does not describe the butcher’s skills, but rather presents to the reader a long-established, and necessary institution that should be carefully regulated for the sake of the public’s welfare. He provides a history of the butchering trade as it developed out of Rome, and describes the growth of the butcheries in Paris, along with the difficulties butchers experienced gaining and regaining privileges throughout the last few centuries. Diderot dwells on the fact that butchers, as a group, have in their control the second most important food product in French society and thus potentially wield a tremendous amount of power, especially in cities such as Paris. His remedy is twofold: to weaken their monopolistic power by creating a more competitive marketplace, thus allowing other vendors to sell meat along with other goods in their stalls, and also to disperse butchers throughout the city. Diderot argues for the public good, on grounds of economy and safety. He writes that:

One can provide an infinite [number] of reasons for it: but that which strikes [him] the most, is drawn from the public peace. Each Butcher has four boys; several have six of them: they all are violent people, unmanageable, and whose hands and eyes are accustomed to blood.⁸

In short, he feels that beyond the economic power they wield, butchers, if left undispersed and unregulated, are a potential threat to the public

⁷ *BOUCHER*, 2: 350.

⁸ *BOUCHER*, 2: 351.

peace. Not a very positive view from one who hopes to raise the esteem of those who work with their hands. Yet, it becomes understandable if we recognise the difficulties the Encyclopedists went through in collecting pertinent information. Diderot recounts in the article *ENCYCLOPEDIA* that after one has spent a great deal of time travelling to the workshops, and paying for bad information, then one can recognise that craftsmen, especially those in Paris, are perpetually suspicious out of fear of the taxman. And they regard anyone who is curious about their craft either as an agent of the tax farmer, or as potential competition. We can only guess at the less-than-friendly reception that the butchers gave to the information gatherers to earn this unflattering write-up in the *Encyclopedia*. Indeed it seemed to Diderot that:

one avoids these inconveniences by looking in the provinces for all the knowledge of the arts that one can collect there: one is known there; one talks to people who are not suspicious; the money is rarer, and the time less dear. From where it seems to me evident that one would educate himself more easily and less expensively, and one would have better instructions.⁹

We should recognise however, as did Diderot, that even the most frustrating of the workers were not typically trying to be malicious. They were concerned with protecting their own livelihood. This acknowledgement maintains that the workers had something valuable, something worth protecting, and as the *Encyclopedia* was attempting to make universally accepted, manual workers possessed something worthy of respect. There is another aspect to the practice of butchers to consider, and that concerns how they are depicted within the illustrative plates. From the account that is given within the text, we could assume that butchers are depicted as coarse and violent individuals. Yet, in one of the few illustrations of butchers, this is not the case.

The plates of the *Encyclopedia* tend to be uncluttered depictions of an occupational practice, drawings of tools, or perhaps examples of the craftsmanship involved. In short, they are rather idealistic illustrations of the various processes that are involved in a craft or occupation. A drawing found in volume II of the plates depicts some of the activities of a butcher's shop. Here we see a surprisingly uncluttered shop where one worker at the left side of the picture is beginning to butcher a sheep, while two workers standing nearby are conversing. Both of these workers appear to have chopping axes at their disposal. Moving from the centre of the image to the right, we see a worker raising a large mallet ready to swing it

⁹ *ENCYCLOPÉDIE*, 5: 647.

down onto the head of a beef cow while another worker steadies the animal by grasping a horn. In the background hang the open carcasses of two slaughtered animals, awaiting the final steps in the butchering process. A woman observes the scene from a balcony to the left.¹⁰

While there is some indication of the potentially macabre element that could be found in this shop, the effect is muted as there is only one severed head on the floor, and a complete lack of blood or gore. While again, this must be recognised as an idealised image, it is certainly not in keeping with Diderot's opinion about butchers given in the text. It portrays an undesirable occupation, yet the truly visceral element is missing. Hence, we seem to have another asymmetry, a turnaround if you will.

While Diderot had hoped to promote the arts in the *Encyclopedia*, he specifically took shots at butchers within the text, bringing about an asymmetry within the text. Looking at this particular depiction of a butcher's shop, that asymmetry is then overturned, and one is left to wonder just what Diderot's intent actually is. What is depicted are men working at a useful, yet underappreciated occupation, in conditions that while not ideal, are nonetheless tolerable.

Another example of illustrative asymmetry is related to the previously discussed category of *FRAMING or CARPENTRY*. In one particular illustration depicting the processes of shipbuilding, processes that utilised all that the art of carpentry could muster, the viewer is shown an image of a ship under construction in a dry dock. In the foreground the keel of a ship is depicted in the beginning stages of construction. At the top of the image, in the background stands another ship whose hull is nearly complete. Workmen are measuring, sawing, notching, carrying, and dragging sections of wood for the ships. One workman even sits in the foreground smoking a pipe. Yet, within the image are men in ancient garb, perhaps sages, two of whom are discussing, or disputing some point, while a third who stands on the right side of the image appears to be presenting a design for a ship that is obviously out-of-date. What the purpose these characters might have is unclear, and in an endeavour that was as meticulously planned as the *Encyclopedia*, they appear as incongruent figures. They are thus asymmetrical with the rest of the image.

There are other matters of symmetry and asymmetry to consider, some of which lie beyond the confines of this brief presentation. For example, Stephen Werner argues, along with others, that the Encyclopedic plates,

¹⁰ Gillispie, Charles C. *A Diderot Pictorial Encyclopedia of Trades and Industry, Vol. II*. New York: Dover Publications, 1987 : 387. Plate visible on University of Chicago site:

http://portail.atilf.fr/encyclopedie/images/V19/plate_19_10_1.jpeg