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Allan Potofsky, *Constructing Paris in the Age of Revolution*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. xvii + 345 pp. Maps, tables, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$121.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-230-57471-7.

Review by James Farr, Purdue University.

No one knows more about the Parisian construction industry in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century than Allan Potofsky. He has worked in and published on this field for some years now, and the range of archival research in this book attests to his deep knowledge. If construction, according to Potofsky, was the “second largest economic sector of preindustrial France” behind only agriculture, then he certainly is the one to rescue its history from a chronic neglect by historians (p. xiv).

Potofsky focuses chronologically on a stretch of years, 1763-1815, that most historians assume experienced wrenching economic change and usually include guilds, liberal thought favoring “free” markets, and the role of the state (be it royal, revolutionary, or Napoleonic) in their account. Some, like Steven Kaplan, have seen this as a time when Old Regime monarchical corporatism suffered the liberal assault on guilds and dissolved in the early years of revolutionary fervor, while others, like Michael Fitzsimmons, track the corporate ideal through policy debates about their dissolution and possible restoration from the Old Regime to the royal Restoration of Louis XVIII.[1] Potofsky, then, engages a well-trafficked historiography, but seeks to offer through the lens of the construction industry a broad interpretation about the “singular nature of French economic development as a viable option to British industrialization.”(p.19)

In his demonstration of the path of the “French exception of industrialization” before the industrial revolution, Potofsky employs a variation on Jean-Pierre Hirsch’s analytical motif of *deux rêves du commerce* by adding a third to liberalism and statism, namely corporatism.[2] Moreover, as he succinctly states in the introduction, “the core argument here is that a porous combination of three dreams of commerce...assured the construction industry’s transition from the *ancien régime* to the Revolution”(p. 5). Throughout the period under scrutiny in this book, the three dreams co-existed in a contentious symbiosis “embodied by the Parisian building guilds, the centralizing state, and capital and labor markets”(p. 21). Potofsky weaves his analysis through three specific and evolving contexts: public investment and private commerce in the construction industry, policy debates on the urban transformation of Paris, and the construction industry’s fundamental place in the growth of the modern bureaucratic state. Through it all, he asserts, there was “an essential and durable continuity”(p. 6).

In the opening chapter, “Parisian Building at the End of the Ancien Régime: The Construction Trades, the Pre-Industrial Market, and the Guild Debate, 1750-1789,” Potofsky examines the role of guilds in the expansion of the market economy, joining a growing chorus of historians who now recognize that the notion that guilds were somehow a millstone around the neck of economic growth and innovation was a distortion largely based on the ideologically-biased critique of guilds by the “liberty lobby.” The masters of the guilds of the late old regime had no effective enforcement of monopoly (the reach of regulation was short and incomplete) and were at a loss about how to discipline an increasingly “insubordinate” labor force.[3] Indeed, the doyen of the history of work during this period, Steven Kaplan, throughout his prodigious quantity of scholarship never loses sight of the fundamental

importance of the labor market and the conflict over its control. Potofsky does not much engage this historiography, which is a shame because for many historians beyond France's borders—especially those working on the Low Countries like Hugo Soly—the question of the vitality of guilds within the emerging market-based economies of scale constitutes a vibrant field of enquiry with enormous implications for the unfolding directions of industrialism and capitalism.[4] Potofsky does, however, situate the “guild debate” within his thematic concerns, and appropriately bookends the liberal desire for a competitive construction market (in labor and capital) and a statist dream to “strengthen the visible hand of the state”(p. 50).

In chapter two, “The Revolution and Construction Guilds, 1789-1793,” Potofsky moves beyond the policy debates about guild abolition (an unfortunate historiographical preoccupation, according to him) and penetrates into the actual construction market. To my knowledge, this is new and important material. He notes the slowdown in the housing market in 1789 and 1790 and credits as cause the fear of a breakdown of the corporate economy and the drying up of elaborate networks of credit within it. “Corporations and credit...were intimately linked,” he points out, and the guild was the legal guarantor of the credit of each of its members (p. 76). The sale of the *biens nationaux* temporarily rescued the industry, prompting a minor boom in construction in 1791 and 1792, the prosperity of the spring and summer of 1791 engendering a confidence in a new economic order given legal shape by the passage of the d'Allarde and Le Chapelier laws which abolished corporations and proscribed worker associations.

Lest we think that Potofsky is embracing “the classic narrative of moribund guilds swept away as a mere anachronism in 1791,” he counters by contending that the Revolution in fact “absorbed the corporate universe into its own [subsequent] institutions and practices”(p. 94). Just how corporatism informed the policies of the revolutionary government at this time remains unclear, but an aggressive embracing of statism is plainly evident in chapter three, “Projecting the Revolution on the Parisian Work Site, 1789-1793.” Here we find that the revolutionary government is deeply concerned about controlling the labor force *and* preventing the corruption that came with unlicensed entrepreneurial activity in the wake of the abolition of guilds and associations. And the government selected a project deeply symbolic of the revolution, the construction of the Pantheon, to institute its policies. The chief director of the project, Quatremère de Quincy, championed technocracy in the wish to render the work process “rational” by imposing uniformity of work hours and salaries, and envisioning laborers as “freely contracted working citizens of the nation.”(p. 115). To counter entrepreneurial corruption, the revolutionary government systematically removed private contractors and placed greater authority in the hands of technical specialists, whom Potofsky, echoing Ken Adler, calls “techno-jacobins” (p. 141).[5] Plainly a statist process, the worksite was to be reorganized with a new cast of characters of technically proficient public servants.

In chapter four, “The Building Trades of Paris During the Terror and Thermidor, 1793-95,” we find that workers and entrepreneurs had other ideas and so the revolutionary government of the Terror ramped up the statist dream by imposing repressive measures upon the worksite, classifying wage disputes or profiteering as counter to civic virtue and, ultimately, as counter-revolutionary. It was in this context that the *sans culotte* emerged. Like so many historians before him, Potofsky asks, “what was he?” Was he a purely political invention of radical journalists? Was he Soboul's petty bourgeois signaling the last of the consumer revolts? Echoing Kaplan's conclusion that the *sans culotte* was many things at once, but stopping short of Kaplan's challenging assertion that the *sans culotterie* was more divided than we have realized, possessed no *mentalité*, and comprised no movement at all, Potofsky tracks some of them to former guild masters and finds some of them as large-scale employers, others as Jacobin-office-holders.[6] What he does not find is an identity that supposedly sprang from the

intimate setting of the workshop, but he does conclude that they were held together by a shared sense of being a part of a cadre of revolutionary civic activists.

Given the historiography that credits the Directory government with pursuing the liberal agenda, the findings presented in chapter five, “Reconciling Commerce and Revolution, 1795-1805,” come as something of a surprise. Potofsky finds no breakthrough here to the liberal dream and, when he does locate liberalism, he notes that it was instituted piecemeal as isolated components of pragmatic policy rather than part of a sweeping “prefabricated ideology” (p. 184). The state was continuously teetering on the brink of bankruptcy and was repeatedly confronted with bouts of hyperinflation. The state had no funds to invest, and a crumbling infrastructure and the dearth of credit spelled slowdown in public building as well as private construction until the end of the century.

With the consulate, things change, and statism returns to the fore. In 1799 we find, according to Potofsky, a renewed search for “an efficient police of the building trades...[and] to subdue builders,” part of a much larger “ambition to rekindle [under the prefect of Paris]...the *ancien régime* police idea” (p. 200). The *livret*, or worker passbook, was revived in 1803, immigrant workers were required to register in labor exchanges at the local police commissioner’s office, the Napoleonic code of 1804 suppressed employers’ combinations as well as laboring organizations, and “time-discipline” was legally imposed on the workday, replacing the traditional “task-discipline.” This was statism with a vengeance, marked by logic and rigor, by “state-directed exactitude” (p. 209).

The Napoleonic statist dream, as Potofsky lucidly demonstrates in chapter six, “Constraining Capital, Containing Labor: State Urban Planning of Paris, 1802-1815,” was supported by a detailed, state-sponsored collection of statistics on everything, from population to hospitals, poverty, price of grain, roads, taxes and education. And importantly for Potofsky’s argument, it also gathered information on “the size, the movement, and the salary structure of the working population of France” (p. 222).

Potofsky joins statism in Napoleonic policy and practice with corporatism (we do not see much liberalism here), pointing to the state’s sponsorship of the new *Chambres syndicales* (trade associations of entrepreneurs) that were organizations structured after the former guilds. In 1810, the police prefect Dubois was “convinced that the Chambre syndicale was proving its value to the construction sector, [so he] proffered a soaring defense of the guild order...defend[ing] the corporate order as a third way between state and market diktats” (p. 237). The corporatism Dubois had in mind, however, was a far cry from the “classic idiom of corporatism [of the old regime] as a political and social culture—its defense of a society of orders, its organic conception of orders, its guarding of trade privilege for the worthy few” (p. 240). Under Dubois and Napoleonic administrators, all this “would be jettisoned in favor of sheer social control” (p. 241).

Potofsky seeks to challenge the binary categories of liberal capitalism and state interventionism by injecting a third dream, corporatism, and to demonstrate that the three existed in “porous combination,” driven by pragmatic dictates of contingency and circumstance rather than preconceived ideologies (pp. 5, 244). He succeeds in repudiating the teleological movement to a triumphant liberal market and clearly demonstrates that during this important period of economic transition the hand of the state was pervasive, especially in its revolutionary and Napoleonic guises.

Potofsky may see a porous combination of the three dreams, but readers of this review might be pardoned for seeing the statist dream dwarf the other two. I am convinced by Potofsky dethroning the liberal narrative, but his argument for the prominent role of *corporatism* after the Old Regime seems strained. Perhaps this is simply a question of semantics, but his invocation of the term “corporatism” across his period of study implies that the Old Regime idiom somehow survived even in statist dreams.

Michael Fitzsimmons has recently shown that guilds were never legally restored after 1791, despite a continuous and at times heated debate about them both within and outside of government, which Potofsky largely ignores[7], so what can it mean that “the [Napoleonic] state revived the *ancien régime* corporate bodies” (p. 181)? To suggest that state-organized entrepreneurial guilds, the *Chambre syndicale*, or the chambers of commerce were such corporate bodies is to rob corporatism of much of its meaning. Certainly part of the corporate ethos (if not its full-blown taxonomic function) survived into the nineteenth century, as William Sewell demonstrated in his classic study of the workers movement[8], but Potofsky seems to want to inscribe corporatism *institutionally* into the Napoleonic state. Whatever this corporatism was, it was not the corporate idiom that formed the legal and cultural armature of the Old Regime.

Given his deep expertise, Potofsky can hardly be blamed for writing a book that examines the construction industry during this period. There is much to commend this study beyond what can be mentioned even in a lengthy review such as this one. But can the building trades carry the empirical weight of Potofsky’s larger argument about the French path from the preindustrial to the industrial economy? It may well be that “the building trades comprised the most significant sector of the city’s economy” (p. 24) (although I suspect some scholars might counter with the food trades), but it remains highly debatable whether they led the Parisian economy in its transformation to large-scale industry (pp. 35-36). Potofsky never wades deeply into what industrialism means, nor how the building trades were industrialized. Movement toward economies of scale, which construction seemed to be doing, is not enough; in many sectors of the economy this had been occurring long before the late eighteenth century. More puzzling, nowhere in this book is there any mention of mechanization and the various governments’ concerns about it. Indeed, it seems that the primary reason that the guilds were not restored, according to Fitzsimmons, was because ultimately the various governments—from the Revolutionary to Napoleonic and then to the Restoration monarchy—deemed that guilds could not fit in a mechanized, mass-production economy that the demands of war were calling into being.

NOTES

[1] Steven L. Kaplan, *La fin des corporations* (Paris: Fayard, 2001); Michael Fitzsimmons, *From Artisan to Worker: Guilds, the French State, and the Organization of Labor, 1776-1821* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[2] Jean-Pierre Hirsch, *Les deux rêves du commerce: Entreprise et institution dans la région lilloise (1780-1860)* (Paris: EHESS, 1991).

[3] See James R. Farr, *Artisans in Europe, 1300-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), chapters two and five (“The Craft Economy” and “Resistance to Authority: Masters and Journeymen”).

[4] See, for example, Catarina Lis and Hugo Soly, “Export Industries, Craft Guilds and Capitalist Trajectories, 13th to 18th centuries,” in Maarten Prak, Catharina Lis, Jan Lucassen, and Hugo Soly, eds., *Craft Guilds in the Early Modern Low Countries: Work, Power, and Representation* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2006).

[5] Ken Adler, *Engineering the Revolution. Arms and Enlightenment in France, 1763-1815* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997).

[6] Kaplan, *La fin des corporations*, passim.

[7] Fitzsimmons, *From Artisan to Worker*, passim.

[8] William Sewell, *Work and Revolution in France* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980).

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