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Sébastien Vosgien, *Gouverner le commerce au XVIIIe siècle: Conseil et Bureau du commerce*. Paris: Comité pour l'histoire économique et financière de la France, 2017. x + 546 pp. Tables, notes, annexes, bibliography, and index. 39€ (pb). ISBN 987-2-11-129391-5.

Review by Lauren R. Clay, Vanderbilt University.

In the decade since the 2008 global financial crisis, there has been an outpouring of interest among historians in economic policy-making and its relationship not only with economic outcomes, but also with politics, society, and intellectual life.[1] *Gouverner le commerce au XVIIIe siècle: Conseil et Bureau du commerce* joins this conversation by exploring the making and enforcement of economic policy at its very highest levels in Old Regime France in the *Conseil de commerce*. Created by King Louis XIV in 1700 to advise the ministers of the King's Council, the Council of Commerce (which was renamed the *Bureau du commerce* in 1722) embraced the mission of "governing" French manufacturing and commerce.[2] It fulfilled this role, through several minor reorganizations, until its dissolution in 1791. Although the Council was technically a consultative body that offered opinions, in practice it drafted *arrêts* for approval; authorized or denied new manufacturing regulations; arbitrated conflicts between corporate guilds; weighed in on issues related to taxation and trade; and determined whether or not to grant or renew economic *privilèges*. Presiding over matters involving intendants, chambers of commerce, merchant courts, and the Farmers General, it settled jurisdictional disputes. Effectively, for economic issues, it served as France's court of final appeal.

The author, Sébastien Vosgien, describes the need for an "étude purement institutionnelle" of the Council of Commerce, and his study follows this traditional framework (p. 29). Drawing on the Council's procès-verbaux, dossiers, opinions, and other records in the F 12 series in the *Archives nationales*, the book begins by describing the operations of the Council. It then traces patterns in the policy norms that the Council defined through the thousands of decisions it rendered. The Council's embrace of privilege during the heyday of *colbertisme* in the early eighteenth century, it demonstrates, was followed by a midcentury liberal turn, characterized by efforts to lighten and rationalize France's regulatory regime, with limited success. Economic growth, Vosgien argues, was not the only consideration as the Council debated "comment concilier prospérité et préservation des fondements politiques, sociaux, et économiques du royaume" (p. 9).

Gouverner le commerce draws extensively on existing scholarship on the Council of Commerce by scholars including David K. Smith, Thomas Schaeper, and Harold Parker, and its argument is indebted to Philippe Minard's study of Jean-Baptiste Colbert's eighteenth-century legacy, *La fortune du colbertisme*. [3] Although the book covers well-travelled territory, it complements these studies with its broad chronological scope that encompasses the full span of the Council's operations and with its focus on the administration of law.

The study is divided into three sections, with a total of nine chapters. Part one, which lays the groundwork, is structured around three questions: "qui prend les décisions? Comment s'insèrent-elles

dans l'espace institutionnel et juridique déjà saturé de la monarchie? Enfin, quelle est leur nature?" (p. 29). Of the participants in the Council of Commerce, only the *commissaires*, who included *conseillers d'État*, *directeurs de finances*, and the police lieutenant of Paris, enjoyed voting privileges. Also attending meetings were deputies nominated from the new network of chambers of commerce as well as the Six Corps of Paris, who advised on cases in a non-voting capacity. To the frequent frustration of their home institutions, these deputies' prescribed role was not to intervene on behalf of local interests, but to base their decisions on the general interest. When relevant, two representatives of the Farmers General also attended meetings, as did technical experts called by the Council. The parties who brought their conflicts or requests to the Council were explicitly excluded from meetings. As they gathered to debate matters of production, commerce, and trade, the members of the Council articulated the principles with which the French state policed the economy.

The Council exercised such broad economic authority, this study explains, because it stood at the top of the institutional pyramid that included merchant courts, chambers of commerce, intendants, and the General Farm. Chambers of commerce, most of which were established in the early 1700s, facilitated communication about regional trade and manufacturing between France's most important commercial ports and manufacturing centers and the Council. They forged ties of solidarity between "l'homme de commerce" and the royal government (p. 111). The intendants, who had the authority to forward dossiers to the Council, acted as gatekeepers. The Council also responded to issues raised by the Secretary of State for the Navy and the Controller General of Finances. Intendants compiled dossiers for the Council with background on contentious issues. Critically, they also implemented its decisions locally. The Farmers General, whose perennial concerns with fraud brought them into regular conflict with merchants, were forced to temper their demands through dialogue with commercial deputies and commissioners.

Vosgien emphasizes that the Council was a responsive institution—it did not set its own agenda but responded to a vast array of issues raised by individuals and corporate groups in literally hundreds of French cities and towns. Nonetheless, the administrative centralization that the Council facilitated was "draconienne" (p. 124).

Part two focuses on the Council's work during the first half of the century, when it followed "une politique économique colbertiste" (p. 199). During an era in which "[a]cheter et vendre sont des actes politiques," royal administrators and businessmen alike embraced state protection as a means to manage risk (p. 203). The Council's work is characterized as developing organically from existing norms and practices in "un mouvement convergent: les opérateurs privés recherchent le compromis optimal avec l'administration, qui ne se contente pas d'imposer des normes rédigées en autarcie" (p. 209).

Vosgien explores the ways that the Council managed competition, which it viewed as potentially dangerous and destabilizing, through the granting and renewal of *privileges*. The royal government supported private initiative by granting access to captive markets that were intended to generate a sufficient degree of profit. The author compares the Council to a gardener who selects and nurtures the seedlings that are most likely to thrive. Approval for a new enterprise was not guaranteed; the Council could include restrictions; and the process could be time-consuming and expensive. Yet any ambitious French entrepreneur saw a privilege as necessary for success.

In part three, *Gouverner le commerce* describes the rupture that marked the Council's sense of mission beginning around 1750, when its commissioners embraced more liberal attitudes towards production and trade. The commercial deputies, in contrast, maintained more diverse—and often more traditional—views. Under the influence of *laissez-faire* advocates Vincent de Gournay and Jacques Turgot, the Council became "un lieu réel de débat et de réflexion en matière de politique économique, voire de théorie" (p. 371).

Increasingly, the commissioners' values conflicted with the Council's institutional mission. At this time,

the number of dossiers that the Council discussed each year declined precipitously. From an average of well over three hundred cases a year in the late 1720s and 1730s, this fell to fifty or fewer most years from the late 1750s to the mid-1780s. During the 1750s and 1760s, the Council frequently resisted issuing new monopolistic privileges, refused to renew corporate statutes, and embraced time limits on new privileges for entrepreneurs. Certain local occupations were declared free simply by issuing an instruction to the intendant. In 1776, Colbert's legacy was attacked directly when Turgot abolished the guild system. (It was reestablished, with some modifications, just months later.) If change was underway, the Council's desire to limit economic regulation and to facilitate economic integration met significant obstacles. Privilege was endemic. The domestic market was fragmented into different tax and legal regimes, and internal trade was hampered by tolls and weak transportation networks. The Council was restructured in 1788, but a brief reinvigoration of its activities could not save it during the Revolution. When the National Assembly assumed legislative authority and established its own Committee of Agriculture and Commerce, the Council's work quickly became redundant. It was officially abolished, along with the chambers of commerce, in 1791.

This study achieves its detailed chronological sweep by making certain sacrifices. It considers the Council as a self-contained body operating in relative isolation. Surprisingly, significant economic policy debates such as the conflict over printed calicoes in the 1750s and the Eden Treaty, which liberalized Anglo-French trade in 1786, are hardly addressed. The same is true for the endemic smuggling that undermined the authority of the French state.^[4] The book might have seized opportunities to engage with recent research that explores the nexus of the state and the economy, such as Amalia Kessler's study of changes in eighteenth-century commercial law through the prism of the Paris Merchant Court and Jeff Horn's analysis of "privileges of liberty"—legal exemptions that freed entrepreneurs from honoring existing privileges.^[5]

By focusing closely on the language of the Council's decisions, the energy and color of guild conflicts and the urgency of commercial disputes it assessed are muted. Readers are not given the opportunity to follow cases from their origins in local conflicts as they made their journey to the Council, sometimes helped along with the support of well-heeled Parisian lobbyists.^[6] In its findings, however, *Gouverner le commerce* raises questions about the social and political implications of the Council's administrative practices. Did the background of petitioners—artisans versus elites or manufacturing guilds versus individual entrepreneurs—change across the 1750 divide? *Gouverner le commerce* suggests that the Council's structure enabled various constituencies to have a voice in policymaking. During the late Old Regime, as the commissioners "opinent pour la liberté," would stakeholders such as chambers of commerce and corporate guilds have agreed that their concerns were being heard (p. 383)?

In sum, *Gouverner le commerce* constitutes a rich resource for scholars of commercial law, political economy, economic history, and the administrative state. Rather than offering the last word on this expansive subject, the book invites future scholars to take up where it leaves off.

NOTES

[1] Among the many works addressing these themes, the most prominent has been Thomas Piketty's bestselling *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

[2] To avoid confusion, in this review I use Council of Commerce to refer to both the *Conseil de commerce* (1700-1722) and the *Bureau du commerce* (1722-1791).

[3] David K. Smith, "Structuring Politics in Early Eighteenth-Century France: The Political Innovations of the French Council of Commerce," *The Journal of Modern History* 74 (2002): 490-537; Thomas J. Schaeper, *The French Council of Commerce, 1700-1715: A Study of Mercantilism after Colbert* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 1983); Harold T. Parker, *An Administrative Bureau During the Old Regime: The Bureau of Commerce and Its Relations to French Industry from May 1781 to November*

1783 (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1993); Philippe Minard, *La fortune du colbertisme. État et industrie dans la France des Lumières* (Paris: Fayard, 1998).

[4] On the Eden Treaty, see Charles Walton, “The Fall from Eden: The Free-Trade Origins of the French Revolution,” in *The French Revolution in Global Perspective*, ed. Suzanne Desan, Lynn Hunt, and William Max Nelson (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), pp. 44-67. On printed calicoes, see Felicity Gottmann, *Global Trade, Smuggling, and the Making of Economic Liberalism: Asian Textiles in France 1680-1760* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). Michael Kwass draws attention to the scope and significance of smuggling in *Contraband: Louis Mandrin and the Making of a Global Underground* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

[5] Amalia Kessler, *A Revolution in Commerce: The Parisian Merchant Court and the Rise of Commercial Society in Eighteenth-Century France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); Jeff Horn, *Economic Development in Early Modern France: The Privilege of Liberty, 1650-1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

[6] For a more socially and politically embedded approach, see Smith, “Structuring Politics,” p. 524.

Lauren R. Clay
Vanderbilt University
lauren.clay@vanderbilt.edu

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