
H-France Review Vol. 18 (February 2018), No. 27

Manuela Martini, *Bâtiment en famille: Migrations et petite entreprise en banlieue parisienne au XXe siècle*. Paris: CNRS éditions, 2016. 461pp. 30 €. ISBN: 9782271083326

Review by Minayo Nasiali, University of Los Angeles-California

On April 12, 1926, Marie Taravella married Jérôme Cavanna in Nogent-sur-Marne, a suburb of Paris. Both were the children of migrants who had come from the mountainous region of Northern Italy and their marriage was celebrated because it was supposed to fortify the alliance between the two successful migrant families. Marie's uncle, André Taravella, was a construction site foreman, while Dominique Cavanna was a master mason. Following World War I, members of the two families had formed C&T, a small, local construction business specializing in masonry. Still in existence today, C&T and other family-run construction businesses form the heart of Manuela Martini's impressive study of the interconnections between migration, business, and family history in contemporary France.

In *Bâtiment en famille*, Martini traces the metamorphosis of the French construction industry in the twentieth century and argues that a comprehensive understanding of this history emerges only when considered in relation to migration. While the study focuses mostly on Italian migrants, Martini's broader point is that the history of French building and reconstruction, indeed the very foundations of French infrastructure in the twentieth century, cannot be divorced from the integral role played by migrants who worked as unskilled laborers, master masons, foremen, and entrepreneurs in construction sites around metropolitan France. By exploring the economics of migrant labor, Martini expertly illustrates how a myopic focus on work, or the so-called "push-pull factors" affecting migration, offers only a limited picture of these complicated trajectories. Instead, she asserts the need for a deep contextualization of migrants' lives and experiences within multiple layers including the family, the workplace, the neighborhood, and the regions in which they dwell. Attention to migrants' embeddedness, Martini argues, uniquely shows how skill and expertise are cultivated. It is done literally *en famille* and her attention to the domestic ties among migrants in the construction business demonstrates how formal workplace training is but one of many ways in which knowledge is passed on. Significantly, it is precisely various forms of "family education" about construction and masonry that account for the social mobility of migrants, many of whom arrived in France without skill, and who, through intermarriage or placement by family members, learned the trade and ultimately gained enough capital to start their own businesses.

Such small businesses, Martini argues, have formed an important but often overlooked part of the French economy in the twentieth century. Studies of construction in France, for example, tend to focus on grand narratives charting the role of the central state and large firms in constructing *les grands ensembles* during *les trente glorieuses*. But as Martini points out, the construction industry is much more diversified than is often realized and its very hybridity deserves closer examination. Rather than dismissing small and medium sized enterprises as mere anomalies in a system dominated by larger entities, Martini shows how their significant contributions to the broader economy help to explain how the industry has weathered various downturns including the period following the 1973 OPEC oil crisis.

Moreover, attention to family construction businesses also offers an important counterpoint to assumptions about Fordism and how the steady encroachment of mechanization into a number of industries has served to render workers and their labor redundant. *Bâtiment en famille* underscores how construction is one industry where the so-called mass production revolution has stalled precisely because construction relies on the “necessity of an intelligent workforce capable of elaborating practical solutions to unforeseen problems” (p. 14). By emphasizing the diversity of businesses that make up the industry—and the ongoing role of workers in maintaining it—Martini reminds us that companies are not individuals and they do not operate according to a logic of rational objectivity. She joins other scholars of business history, notably Alexia Yates, to move beyond the study of large firms and policies and to focus on the varied experiences of people at the heart of the industry.[1]

Notably, Martini also argues that her book is a critical contribution to the study of “ethnic enclaves,” borrowing a concept taken from what she terms “Anglo-saxon economic sociology” (p. 11). More specifically, her work examines the complicated ways in which understandings of the workplace and various trades came to be understood in ethnic terms. She asserts that ignoring how understandings of ethnic diversity have shaped the construction industry obscure what she calls the “massively diversified human landscape” in France (p. 11).

Martini utilized census and tax records, as well as oral histories and other materials collected in both France and Italy, to craft a macro-analysis of migrant run family businesses as well as a micro-history of such enterprises in Champigny-sur-Marne and Nogent-sur-Marne, two suburbs within the Parisian banlieue. Part one of the book traces the broad contours of the place of migrants within the French construction industry. She explains how after World War I, the housing crisis and reconstruction effort helped to expand the housing market into the peripheries of major cities. Around Paris, for example, the formation and crystallization of the banlieue was engendered through the construction of *les pavillions* or single-family homes, which, between the two world wars, encouraged the growth of a particular sector of the housing industry, namely, small construction businesses. Significantly, the desire for property and a single-family home, exemplified by the figure of the banlieusard, also coincided with a steep rise in migration during this period. Martini shows how internal migrations, primarily from Limousin, gave way to more international flows as Italians began to settle in France in the early twentieth century and were later followed by Portuguese. Building on Leslie Page Moch’s work, Martini emphasizes that internal and international migration should be studied in a single frame.[2] In the case of the construction industry in France, Martini illustrates how long periods of cohabitation between Limousins and Italians were one significant way in which skills and expertise were exchanged. Moreover, she argues, such attention to the complex pathways of overlapping migrations show how migrants do not settle in cities in homogenous, closed enclaves, but instead dwell amongst each other “even as they and their work is often imagined in ethnic terms” (p. 78).

Drawing from quantitative data taken primarily from the INSEE, Martini shows how the largest increase in small construction businesses was in the interwar period, while during *les trente glorieuses*, small enterprises grew at a slower rate alongside the marked growth of large construction firms. She notes that even at the height of the modernization push following World War II, attention to the heterogeneity of the industry reveals how small firms continued to dominate specific sectors, particularly in masonry. Although Martini relies heavily on quantitative data to tell her story, she is also careful to note the potential limits of such approaches. She describes how various French and European measures for quantifying businesses have focused mostly on counting salaried employees but tend to overlook the self-employed, which skews results in favor of large firms. The result, she argues, is that the significant place of small businesses within the industry is not fully accounted for. Specifically, she asserts that the catch-all term “non-salariat” deserves more attention as it is a hybrid category principally constituted by self-employed master masons as well as their assistants, who are often members of their family (p. 47). Her larger point is that the statistical “anomalies” are where we should look to make sense of building history and such work is best done by historians (p. 73).

Part two of the book describes the “Italianisation” of masonry, and how Italian migrants ultimately replaced Limousin labor in the interwar period. She explains, however, that this seeming take-over of masonry was affected by the great depression and by state efforts to limit “foreign labor” in a variety of industries. She explains that while the recession and new legislation did negatively impact small firms, many Italians found ways to circumvent or manipulate the system, either by becoming naturalized French citizens, or by obtaining false work papers (p. 178). The result was that interwar policies helped to create cleavages and hierarchies between different groups of migrants which contributed to the ethnisation of the industry.

Part three follows specific migrants from the Piedmont and Emilia Romagna regions of Italy to France and details the family histories of their masonry businesses. While many business histories describe how a certain entrepreneurial spirit is a major driving force behind the launching of new firms, Martini argues that this explanation underestimates the importance of the ties between workers and other members of the community. In other words, the situatedness of migrant business owners in their larger neighborhoods is integral to understanding their business trajectories. She illustrates this point in several ways: First, she discusses the workplace and the neighborhood in explicitly spatial terms as important sites where knowledge and skill was shared and transferred. Second, she describes the integral role played by *rabbatteurs*, or brokers, who served as intermediaries between laborers and business owners, and who were often Italian themselves. Third, she engages in a series of close-readings of marriage photographs to show how such unions helped strengthen family alliances. These celebrations were opportunities to reaffirm the social ties of the broader Italian business community and underscored the dominant place of patriarchy within this network. For example, in a number of images, Martini highlights the central position of Dominique Taravella in group wedding photos. He was at once the head of the family and also one of the owners of the C&T masonry firm. Martini’s analysis of these images serves to illustrate the intersections between “private and professional spheres” in the community (p. 320).

Of particular note is Martini’s attention to terms, such as her definition of “enterprise,” and her very careful discussion about sources, methods, and the limits and benefits of the various approaches she utilizes. I did wish at times, however, that she expand her discussion of a few terms and key categories of analysis. For example, I hoped she would engage more comprehensively with concepts such as “migrant” and “foreigner,” especially as she rightly describes the integral role played by colonial and post-colonial migrants in reconstructing postwar France. In addition, as this was a family history of small business, I would be interested to see her engage a bit more with questions of gender. Throughout the book, and especially in the final three chapters, she does indeed discuss the various traits and attitudes, specifically loyalty to the family and pride in work, that characterized the working philosophies of many of these small business owners, but I would be fascinated to see her push this a bit further. Women do appear in the book as occasional employees, secretaries, and of course, as wives, but more engagement with the robust scholarship on constructions of masculinity and femininity might have helped to round out what is already an important, well-argued monograph.

This comprehensively researched, rich, and exceptionally satisfying social history will be of interest to business and labor historians, urban historians, and scholars of migration and housing. Martini moves fluidly between macro and micro analyses of her subject and in doing so gives both a sweeping eagle-eye view of the intersections of migration and construction in France, as well as a detailed, on-the-ground understanding of the particularities and experiences of masons, laborers, and small business owners who settled in the outskirts of Paris. By training her lens on their experiences as migrants and workers, Martini shows how migrant labor has formed an important if overlooked part of the French economy in the twentieth century.

NOTES

[1] Alexia Yates, *Selling Paris: Property and Commercial Culture in the Fin-de-siècle Capital* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

[2] Leslie Page Moch, *Moving Europeans: Migration in Western Europe since 1650* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).

Minayo Nasiali
University of California-Los Angeles
mnasiali@history.ucla.edu

Copyright ©2018 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies

ISSN 1553-9172