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James Livesey, *Provincializing Global History: Money, Ideas, and Things in the Languedoc, 1680-1830*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020. ix + 214 pp. Figures, notes, and index. \$45.00 (hb). ISBN: 978-0-3002-3716-0.

Review Essay by Peter M. Jones, University of Birmingham

James Livesey gives notice in the title of his book that he is not proposing a conventional history of the Languedoc before, during and after the French Revolution. Instead the province provides him with the frame for a case study intended to defend the notion that European regions rather than nation states were the primary incubators of global experience in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The kind of globalism he has in his sights is not the advent of capitalism and imperialism in a narrowly economic sense, but the gestation and embrace by the population at large of a culture of reason. Of the “ideas” enshrined in the title, therefore, the key one is rationality, whereas “money” (public credit and trust) is part of an argument to explain where the new culture of reason came from. As for the word “things”, we should infer a reference to material culture and everyday objects, in this instance the farmer’s plough. Given the book’s unusual methodological approach and rather eclectic subject matter, the test to be met must be: does it amount to more than the sum of its parts?

The Languedoc has been well tilled by historians in this period, but the author does not agree with any of those who came before him. He particularly objects to interpretations that lay stress on social stagnation, rural immobility, rent-seeking, that is to say surplus extraction by elites, and, as the revolution approached, economic crisis.[1] Even Alexis de Tocqueville is taken to task despite his recognition of the vigour of local life in the Languedoc prior to 1789 and his admiration for the public-spiritedness of the Provincial Estates.[2] If we drill down, says Livesey, we will find in the Languedoc a veritable “laboratory of novelty” in which the modern world is visibly prefigured.[3] Unpackaged, this notion underpins his contention that the province of the Languedoc and no doubt others like it elsewhere in Europe constituted a “cradle of global experience” (p. 167).

What is this developing culture of reason? It is what some historians call a knowledge economy, but with the important rider that the author does not view the expansion of social reason purely as a top-down phenomenon reliant on diffusion for its eventual adoption within the wider community. Nor does he regard the revolution of 1789 as the one and only key moment in its gestation, despite allowing that the institutional and legal reforms of the revolutionary era hugely facilitated the growth of an interactive culture of reason. The “enlightened” Provincial Estates had already begun the process. If there was a particular moment when the direction of travel in the province altered, it probably occurred around the middle of the eighteenth century.

Disentangling the elements of the Languedoc’s knowledge culture occupies three of the five chapters of this short book. Given the nature of the enquiry this is not something that can be done in a direct and straightforward fashion. However, the author has already identified the areas for consideration in three previously published articles and they give the reader clues as to what to

expect.[4] The main sources used to shed light on the shifting cultural landscape of the province are tax records, the archives of Montpellier's academies and societies, and the correspondence of local savants.

If the Languedoc was known to visitors and to travel writers for one thing above all else in the eighteenth century, it was expenditure on communicative infrastructure (roads, bridges, canals, ports, etc.). James Livesey investigates this expenditure closely and shows how it was financed. Ordinary people lent money in the form of *rentes perpétuelles* (loans paying interest indefinitely unless the capital is redeemed) and in so doing became stake-holders in the province's public credit system. Even supposedly sedentary village communities grasped the advantages to be gained from new roads capable of taking wheeled transport and solid masonry bridges spanning river torrents. They supported such expenditure being added to their tax rolls and in the process their cultural outlook, argues Livesey, was perceptibly enlarged. In these pre-revolutionary decades the concept of the public good, he implies, was being pioneered in the province of Languedoc. A detailed and informative analysis of behavioural change within the savant community of the Montpellier Académie royale des sciences (or Société as he prefers to call it) extends this notion of a horizon shift which did not wait upon the events of 1789. Natural knowledge was being redefined and made more accessible, hierarchies were being challenged and to some degree flattened, and expertise re-located in social strata that did not of necessity form a part of academe. Indeed, "cognitive authority" (p. 103), was being acquired by some who actually lacked the equivalent level of social authority.

These observations are reinforced and extended by means of an excursion into the cultural world of ancien-régime science. The early adoption by Montpellier's botanists of the Linnean system was both socially levelling and empowering inasmuch as it enabled local *érudits* and savants to communicate at a distance. The Montpellier Académie was able to assert its independence from Paris and build an alternative network model with a significant extra-regional and even trans-national reach. Economic botany which seems to have developed precociously in the Languedoc gave a boost to agronomy as well, which in turn helped nurture a culture of agricultural improvement. Evidence that the agricultural reform agenda was not confined to the gentleman farmer elite is found in the responses to the land clearance Declaration of 1766 which took effect in the Languedoc in 1771. Whilst noting that the complete freeing-up of peasant agriculture waited upon the events of the Revolution, Livesey draws our attention to cases of innovation and crop diversification in response to the market opportunities that new roads and canals were bringing within reach, even of those who were not large landowners or surplus-generating ecclesiastical institutions.

Objects can also drive forward change in a community which is dynamic and susceptible to new forms of cultural messaging, argues the author. As an example, he cites the case of plough technology. He thinks plough design improved significantly in the course of the eighteenth century and that the Montpellier Académie played a leading role in this process. What hindered the adoption of a variant of James Small's swing plough in the province was not so much peasant distrust of innovation or a failure of social communication, as the absence of a truly favourable institutional environment. The lack of a body of appropriate expertise capable of evaluating new agricultural machines in a meaningful way counted for a good deal as well. But again, these tensions were largely resolved once disincentives to risk taking and private ownership, notably the

legal restrictions imposed by ancien-régime privilege, had been removed. “Economic and social innovation was ubiquitous in the province”, he submits, “but it was not secure and was vulnerable to political reverse” (p. 129). When did conditions finally grant free rein to the type of technological rationality developing out of collective learning in rural Languedoc? Not until the 1830s, according to Livesey, when ploughing matches familiarised a wider community of users with methodically conceived and engineered agricultural machines. The swing plough in this new genealogy becomes the “republican plough” (p. 137), and the author cites it as “an index of the communicative possibilities opened up by the Revolution” (p. 143). To put matters succinctly, then, a dynamic learning community evolved in the Languedoc which owed much to a socially-embedded reason. The province cradled the global because the norms and standards of technological knowledge culture would eventually be adopted world-wide.

Much of the theorisation which informs James Livesey’s approach to the Languedoc is relatively new and drawn from post-colonial scholarship, it should be said. However, the book will remind some readers of the concept of *sociabilité méridionale* or interactive social learning which Maurice Agulhon formulated in the 1960s as a preliminary to understanding the political shifts happening in eastern Provence during the same pre- and post-revolutionary period.[5] Other historians and notably the recently deceased Georges Fournier found that the notion of an interactive culture of sociability could also be applied to certain village habitats in the Languedoc.[6] The Languedoc was a vast province, however. Contemporaries divided it into upper and lower portions and several mountainous hinterlands. The grain-based economy of Upper Languedoc was very different from that of the Mediterranean zone as Georges Frêche long ago pointed out.[7] Unlike the Lower Languedoc it was not particularly innovative and lacked dynamic industrial activity. In fact, the Toulousain was not even able to maintain control of its own trade in grain. It is questionable, therefore, whether a unitary provincial experience can be identified and turned into some kind of explanatory model with global ramifications. Notwithstanding his thesis the author seems to me to acknowledge as much: most of his arguments are supported with evidence drawn from the towns and villages of “the fertile coastal plain” (p. 91) and specifically the districts that in 1790 would form the departments of the Hérault and the Aude.

That said there was certainly something highly unusual about the tax and public credit system of the Languedoc. For a start the institution of the *compoix* or cadastral register meant that royal and provincial taxes were distributed very precisely.[8] James Livesey could have made more of this point because it rendered taxation more participative than was the case in the *pays d’élections*. Everyone had an interest in the *allivrement* and the structuring of local government ensured that a goodly number of inhabitants had some voice in the decision-making process. It was not a fair system, however, because most of the diocesan *compoix* were ancient and had not been updated to take account of changes in land use. Therefore, the sums raised to meet the royal tax demand and to service the province’s accumulated infrastructure debt were distributed unevenly. Agricultural land in Upper Languedoc, for example, was more heavily taxed than in Lower Languedoc: one reason among many why enterprise and innovation made better social sense on the coastal plain. The author makes much of popular participation in the province’s debt financing operations, but I do wonder how widespread the practice of ordinary people investing their life savings in perpetual *rentes* actually was. Presumably a search in notarial archives would provide the answer, but it would be a massive undertaking. If, as one historian suggests, almost a third of the province’s debt was owned by nobles from Paris and Versailles it is hard to see how the system of public credit in

the Languedoc could have “endogenously generated new standards of public rationality” (p. 34).[9]

Just why the Estates of Languedoc suddenly embarked upon a policy of public works in the 1760s, having neglected to do so during the previous half century, is something of a puzzle. The slow spread of a utilitarian culture of improvement is one explanation to be sure, but the arrival on the scene of prelate-administrators (Loménie de Brienne in Toulouse and Arthur Richard Dillon in Narbonne) may have played the key role; also the liberalisation of the grain trade in 1763-64. New roads, canals and enhanced port facilities financed on the backs of ordinary people who used them pretty infrequently were a gift to anyone with a surplus of grain or wine to get to market.

For all their road-building zeal the Estates seem to have been rather equivocal in their support for agriculture, however. In this sphere the initial impulse came from the centre rather than the province. As Livesey notes, the Estates dragged their feet when invited by the intendant to support the establishment of a Société d’agriculture. But he rejects the conclusion of other historians that their procrastination was motivated by a desire to curb the influence of the intendant. Yet the Estates turned a deaf ear when the civil diocese of Castres also proposed an agricultural society at the sub-provincial level, one, moreover, that addressed the besetting weakness of such bodies in that it sought to enlist the energies of working farmers in each parish. Achieving “rural Enlightenment” (p. 100) in the Languedoc and its successor departments was a problem no matter what administration was in charge, it seems to me. The author identifies numerous elite figures engaged in vanguard agricultural activity of one sort or another (Antoine Banal father and son, Edme Beguillet, Jean-Jacques Brunet, Henri-Louis Duhamel du Monceau, Mouret de Saint-Jean-du-Bruel, François Rozier), but very few ordinary farmers actually applying a culture of reason in their fields appear in the pages of his book.

Perhaps this is too much to ask: the effectiveness of emulation is notoriously hard to document. He does point to the evidence of land clearance, though. In the eighteen years during which the royal Declaration was in force in the province, around 40,000 hectares of land was converted for crops, much of it in Lower Languedoc (civil diocese of Narbonne). Potentially, therefore, the policy created an opportunity for rational peasant enterprise. However, the data collected by both the Estates and the intendant’s sub-delegates urge caution. Nowhere was clearing applied to more than one percent of the total surface area and, after an initial spurt of enthusiasm, it seems that about half of the land opened up reverted to rough pasture and scrub. For every landowner big and small who made a move in the direction of viticulture there must have been dozens of day labourers who cleared small gardens, took a few subsistence crops and then abandoned their exhausted plots.[10]

What of the plough? The Estates of Languedoc did try to interest farmers in new prototypes. Around 1780 they sent specimens of a small wheeled plough to every diocese, but the reports they received back were not very encouraging. This scarcely suggests an ambition to innovate, but it may well fit in with the author’s argument that the institutional environment simply did not incentivise new modes of thinking before 1789. But did the Revolution really make much of a difference in this sphere? When William Maclure travelled from Montpellier to Sète in 1807 he encountered one horse stick-ploughs reminiscent of Antiquity which scratched the soil about two inches deep.[11] He did not notice “a stratum of peasant innovators” who were using the swing-

plough, either because they did not then exist or, more likely, because the “republican plough” (p. 137) remained a novelty whose use was confined to rural elites. The rationality which the author invests in the swing-plough is open to interpretation in any case. Machine rationality was very far from being a universal as he seems to suggest: it was a function of the user and might apply at several levels. Mediterranean farmers may have chosen to retain the antique stick-plough precisely because it did not cut too deep and thereby expose moisture in the soil to evaporation.

The conclusion that I draw from these remarks can be stated quite briefly. It is that James Livesey’s case study of the Languedoc has a burden of interpretation placed upon it which is simply too great. The analyses of tax and debt funding; contests over the status of knowledge among savants; networking and communications strategies; and the agency of objects all contain points of considerable interest. However, they do not combine together very well in support of his overall argument that the province was both the primary locus of life for most Europeans in the eighteenth century and the cradle of global experience.

#### NOTES

[1] See Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Les paysans de Languedoc* (2 volumes, Paris: S.E.V.P.E.N., 1966); William Beik, *Absolutism and Society in Seventeenth-Century France: State Power and Provincial Aristocracy in Languedoc* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Michel Péronnet, “Réflexions sur les Etats de Languedoc: une histoire intermédiaire à l’époque moderne” in Anne Blanchard, Henri Michel and Elie Pélaquier eds, *Les Assemblées d’Etats dans la France méridionale à l’époque moderne* (Montpellier: Université de Paul-Valéry, 1995), pp. 107-128; and most recently Stephen J. Miller, “The Estates of Languedoc in Eighteenth-Century France: Administrative Expansion and Feudal Revitalisation”, in D. W. Hayton, James Kelly and John Bergin eds, *The Eighteenth-Century Composite State: Representative Institutions in Ireland and Europe, 1689-1800* (London: Palgrave, 2010), pp. 183-204.

[2] Alexis de Tocqueville, *L’Ancien Régime*. Edited, with introduction and notes, by G. W. Headlam (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969).

[3] James Livesey, “Les réseaux de crédit en Languedoc au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle et les origines sociales de la Révolution,” *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, no 359 (January-March 2010), p. 35.

[4] See “Les réseaux de crédit en Languedoc au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle et les origines sociales de la Révolution”, *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* no 359 (January-March 2020): 29-51; “Botany and Provincial Enlightenment in Montpellier: Antoine Banal père et fils, 1750-1800”, *History of Science* 43 (2005): 57-76 and “Material Culture, Economic Institutions and Peasant Revolution in Languedoc, 1750-1830”, *Past & Present* no 182 (June 2004): 143-173.

[5] See Maurice Agulhon, *La sociabilité méridionale, confréries et associations dans la vie collective en Provence orientale à la fin du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*. (2 volumes, Aix-en-Provence: Publications des Annales de la Faculté des Lettres, 1996).

[6] Georges Fournier, *Démocratie et vie municipale en Languedoc du milieu du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle au début du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Toulouse: Les Amis des Archives de la Haute-Garonne, 1994).

[7] Georges Frêche, *Toulouse et la région Midi-Pyrénées au siècle des Lumières (vers 1670-1789)* (Paris: Editions Cujas, 1974), pp. 836.

[8] See Bruno Jaudon, *Les compoix de Languedoc: impôt, territoire et société du XIV<sup>e</sup> au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2014).

[9] Stephen Miller, “The Estates of Languedoc in Eighteenth-Century France: Administrative Expansion and Feudal Revitalisation”, p. 195.

[10] Frêche, *Toulouse et la région Midi-Pyrénées*, pp. 265-69.

[11] See John S. Doskey, ed, *The European Travel Journals of William Maclure* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1988), p. 102.

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