

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 Emma Rothschild, Harvard University

The Bas Languedoc was an idyll of provincial enlightenment over the long eighteenth century, in James Livesey's account. In a first episode, based on the administrative archives of the department of the Hérault, the public debt of the sénéchaussée of Carcassonne appears as an innovative medium of public investment, particularly among women. The estates of the Languedoc with their established fiscal powers, presided over by the Archbishop of Narbonne, invested in "public goods," such as roads and bridges, and pursued "development strategies" that were far more convincing, and even "virtuous," than the similar activities of the national state; "all parties in the Languedoc understood the relationship between public credit, taxation and development" (pp. 41, 46, 47).

The medical faculty of Montpellier, in a second episode, is the center of an expanding, cosmopolitan milieu, with students from Switzerland, Greece, and Chandernagor in Bengal. The participants were preoccupied, from the earliest dissertations of the new Société Royale des Sciences in 1706—studied through the archives of the society, also in the archives of the Hérault—with experience and local observation. Botany was a branch of medicine, and Livesey shows convincingly, extending Lisbet Koerner's work on Linnaeus in northern Europe, that the "Linnean project" in Montpellier was not only a network of long-distance inquiry, but also a program of large-scale public involvement in classification (p. 73).[1]

Botany and agronomy appear in the third episode, which is based, once again, on remarkable investigations in the municipal and departmental archives of the Hérault and the Gard. The estates had sought to support the cultivation of mulberry trees since the 1720s, and by 1808 there were four million mulberry trees; "all of these gardens had their gardeners" (p. 90). The abbé Rozier, who had an experimental farm in Béziers, appears as an observer (and theorist) of the collective experience of innovation. The redoubtable figures of Antoine Banal père and Antoine Banal fils, gardeners of the Royal Botanical Garden of Montpellier, known from a fascinating earlier essay of Livesey's in *History of Science*, reappear, social rebels in the hierarchy of the province.

The plow is at the center of the fourth episode, and James Livesey has persevered, here, into the series L of the departmental archives, for the revolutionary period, and beyond. As early as 1788, there was an impressive diffusion of forges, blacksmiths, and, in the diocese of Nîmes, including 548 "*feux* (machines powered by coal, wood or charcoal)" (p. 127). There were the notorious wastelands to be redistributed; there was the vast survey of plows, on behalf of the Committee of Public Safety, or the "search for the republican plow" (p. 137). The popularity of plowing matches, a generation later—the gendarmes and even the army were invoked to police the crowds—was itself, in Livesey's account, an emblem of the new collective reason of the rural Languedoc.

The effect of these inquiries is to provide a vivid demonstration, in the Languedoc, of Tocqueville's hypothesis of the decades before the revolution as a time of innovation in "even the imagination of women and peasants," and also of "public prosperity" in the "social economy," in which "wealth increased ever faster," and "individuals continued to enrich themselves; they became more industrious, more enterprising, more inventive." [2] This has been the presumption, too, of the new economic history of France, from François Crouzet to Guillaume Daudin's demonstration of the importance of long-distance commerce, and the recent investigation by Hoffman, Postel-Vinay, and Rosenthal of the exuberant increase in notarial credit between 1740 and 1780. [3] Tocqueville himself appears in *Provincializing Global History* only as a critic of the provincial estates. But he too was an admirer of the "pays d'états et en particulier du Languedoc," in the title of an appendix to *L'ancien régime et la révolution*. Tocqueville, too, admired the "wisdom, equity, and mildness" of the Languedoc estates, especially in relation to "public works," and to the engagement in decisions about public spending of even the smallest political communities. [4]

Livesey's inquiries are a substantial contribution, in turn, to the now worldwide history of provincial science and provincial enlightenment. This is a capacious genre, from Piedmont to the central plateau of Mexico. In Anglo-American historiography, it dates back at least to Bernard Bailyn and John Clive's manifesto of 1954, in which the "provincial culture" of the "professional middle" and "lower-middle classes," and even their "provincialism"—in this case in Scotland and the British North American colonies—appeared as the source of the "originality and creative imagination" of the eighteenth-century enlightenment. [5] Languedoc and its agronomists belong in this collective inquiry, as Livesey shows, and in those long-distance networks.

Provincializing Global History is framed, in the introduction and conclusion, by two very different and more abstract historical inquiries. One has to do with the cultural origins of the "self-sustaining" industrial or industrious revolution, and the other with the "global hegemony of capitalism," especially in relation to what is described as "subaltern reason" (pp. 5, 158, 166.) These are elusive historiographies, especially in relation to the passage of historical time. Was the divergence of eastern China and western Europe starting in the late eighteenth century, for example, to be explained by inventiveness (over centuries), or particular inventions (in the 1780s), or a new knowledge culture (over the course of the long eighteenth century) or by institutions of property rights (over many centuries)? Was the process by which "markets and political economy stabilized psychology" one that unfolded over a generation, or over the entire course of the "history of modernity" (pp. 158, 161)? And how resilient, even, are these stylized facts of global history, in a time—our own—of radical (economic) convergence between China and Europe, and of radical instability in the political institutions of the Anglo-American West?

The Languedoc fits only approximately, in any case, into the largest investigations of subaltern economic (or intellectual) history. It had "no particular advantages" in the "emerging networks of global commerce," as Livesey writes (p. 5). But it was at the center of France's long-distance exchanges for much of the eighteenth century; exchanges with the Mediterranean and Ottoman world, as in the preceding five centuries. There was the "great international market" of Beaucaire, studied in an earlier economic history, from the 1950s (Pierre Léon), and the "qualitative" road, the "ancient diagonal" from Montpellier to La Rochelle, in which the "circulation of men, ideas, and techniques counted as much as the circulation of merchandise" (Louis Dermigny). [6] As late as 1774, the two greatest depictions of French economic policy—commissioned by the abbé Terray from Joseph Vernet—were *La construction d'un grand*

chemin, now in the Louvre, and *Les abords d'une foire*, approximating the approach to Beaucaire, which is now in the musée Fabre in Montpellier.[7]

Montpellier was itself one of the most cosmopolitan places in France, for much of the modern period; open, like the province, to visitors and learning from the Arab and Greek worlds. The little town of Pont-Saint-Esprit in the Gard was a source of multiple journeys to and from Egypt in the mid nineteenth century, as David Todd has shown in “Micro Histories of Expatriation.”[8] The exchanges continued into the twentieth century, as in *The Parisian*, Isabella Hamad’s novel of Palestinians in Montpellier in the last years of the Ottoman Empire.[9]

Even the eighteenth-century meetings of the estates of Languedoc were a tourist attraction, of sorts. Their activities—the “public utility” of the roads and “agricultural societies,” so vaunted by “the panegyrists of the provincial estates,” in Marcel Marion’s dismissive description of 1923, in contrast to the subsequent “violent reaction that broke out in the province against the abuses of this supposedly benevolent administration” and its “little local oligarchies”—were discussed across Europe.[10] Adam Smith is cited in passing in *Provincializing Global History*. He spent the winter of 1764-1765 in Montpellier, with two aristocratic pupils, having travelled from Toulouse to Agde on the yet-to-be completed Canal du Midi; according to the new study of Smith in the Languedoc by Alcouffe and Massot-Bordenave, it was Smith’s and his students’ duty to “attend all the sessions” of the estates, “even if some did not seem to be of major interest to them.”[11]

Livesey’s account of the multiple local sources of innovation is compelling, but it is not entirely clear, all the same, that the individuals involved can be fitted easily into a history of “subalternity,” or of the lives of “most ordinary inhabitants” of the province (pp. 4, 51). The expansion of private credit in the French provinces in 1740-1780 extended to loans of very small sums, as Hoffman, Postel-Vinay, and Rosenthal have shown. But the subscriptions to the public debt of the Languedoc were for fairly large amounts. The two sisters who were among the creditors, each described as “*fille de service* (female hospital orderly),” are intriguing figures, somewhere to be found, no doubt, in the (online) records of the municipality of Montpellier: was the name “Caiserfues” a clerk’s mistranscription, and were they members of the extended Caisergues family of the Hérault, with its medical eminences, and its branches in Louisiana and Saint-Domingue (p. 17)? Female religious institutions were major investors across the provinces of France, and the nuns, including the *économes* (or financial experts), were often women from wealthy families, who had brought with them large dowries. The abbé Rozier, with his experimental farm, was from a family of officials in Lyon—his father acquired the status of nobility by being controller of war in the province of Touraine—with multiple connections to the national state.

The “public culture of reason” in the Languedoc is counterposed, here, to “coercion” and “rent seeking;” “successful and sustained innovation in Europe must have been despite, rather than because of imperial expansion” (pp. 3, 4, 5). But the “civility” of local innovation was fragile (and the Gard was the scene of one of the first vast counter-revolutionary conflicts of the 1790s) (p. 5). The enlightened local figures, with their connections to the reforming state, were also connected to military power. Pierre Barrère, who appears as a botanist having conducted research in Guyana, and taking a particular interest in the local circumstances of the *pays*, was a doctor in the military hospital in Perpignan, following his service in the tropics; in addition to his botanical history of the colony, he published a study of “degeneration,” called *Dissertation sur la cause physique de la couleur des nègres*.

The cosmopolitan students in the medical faculty of Montpellier came from the French colonies and dependencies, for the most part; Antoine Briegne, who according to the official history of the faculty was the lone student from India (and later a professor and municipal revolutionary), was from a family in the service of the French Compagnie des Indes, in its comptoir of Chandernagor. The Crozat financiers from Toulouse appear in connection with the “financial revolution” in the Languedoc, or the “process of collective learning” by which the “population, down to the most ordinary inhabitants, had learned how to manage the relationships between self-interest, risk and development” (pp. 29, 51). But the foundation of the Crozats’ fortune—as of the South Sea Bubble and the Mississippi Scheme—was the *asiento* or contract to supply slaves to the Spanish empire in the Americas, the slave trade from Senegal, the Crozats’ own Louisiana Company, and their Saint-Domingue Company, trading in slaves to the modern Haiti.

The global historiographies of capitalism, or of the modern self, are only incidental, in the end, to the achievement of *Provincializing Global History*. It is a story, most of all, of continuity and change in a large, disparate, outward-looking provincial society. It is also—and this is not the least of pleasures, in our own difficult times—a story with an optimistic outcome.

NOTES

[1] Lisbet Koerner, *Linnaeus: Nature and Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

[2] Alexis de Tocqueville, *L’ancien régime et la révolution*, ed. J.-P. Mayer (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), pp. 107, 231, 273.

[3] François Crouzet, “Angleterre et France au XVIIIe siècle: essai d’analyse comparée de deux croissances économiques,” *Annales Économies Sociétés Civilisations*, vol. 21, no. 2 (Mar.-Apr. 1966): 254-291; Guillaume Daudin, *Commerce et prospérité: la France au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Presses de l’Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2005); Philip T. Hoffman, Gilles Postel-Vinay, and Jean-Laurent Rosenthal, *Dark Matter Credit: The Development of Peer-to-Peer Lending and Banking in France* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019).

[4] Tocqueville, *L’ancien régime et la révolution*, pp. 329, 332.

[5] John Clive and Bernard Bailyn, “England’s Cultural Provinces: Scotland and America,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., vol. 11 (Apr., 1954): 200-213, pp. 204, 213.

[6] Pierre Léon, “Vie et mort d’un grand marché international: la foire de Beaucaire (XVIIIe-XIXe siècles),” *Revue de Géographie de Lyon*, vol. 28, no. 4 (1953): 309-328; Louis Dermigny, “De Montpellier à La Rochelle: route du commerce, route de la médecine au XVIIIe siècle,” *Annales du Midi*, vol. 67, no. 1 (1955): 31-58.

[7] The two paintings are reproduced as Plate CXIII in Florence Ingersoll-Smouse, *Joseph Vernet, peintre de marine, 1714-1789* (Paris: Bignou, 1926), 2 vols, vol. 2. See <https://www.wikiart.org/en/claude-joseph-vernet/la-construction-dun-grand-chemin> and <https://www.wikiart.org/en/claude-joseph-vernet/les-abords-dune-foire-1774>.

[8] David Todd, “French Expatriates in Ottoman Egypt: Micro-Histories of Expatriation” (2020), available at <https://histecon.fas.harvard.edu/visualizing/egypt/micro.html>.

[9] Isabella Hammad, *The Parisian, or, al-Barisi: a novel* (New York: Grove Press, 2019).

[10] Marcel Marion, *Dictionnaire des institutions de la France aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* (Paris: Picard, 1923), pp. 220, 326.

[11] Alain Alcouffe and Philippe Massot-Bordenave, *Adam Smith in Toulouse and Occitania: The Unknown Years* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), p. 209.

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