Book Reviews

Comptes rendus

Henry Heller. *Labour, Science and Technology in France, 1500-1620*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. Pp. xii, 258.

Henry Heller sets out in this book to challenge the prevailing orthodoxy regarding economic development under the *Ancien Régime*. He considers the *Annales* paradigm, with its emphasis on climate, geography, demography, popular culture, and above all on the “longue durée” of Fernand Braudel, as a “profoundly conservative” view, one that cannot possibly do justice to the bubbling activity he finds in sixteenth-century France. Heller’s view is not without its own problems, but he does successfully present a refreshing new assessment of a period in French history that seems unduly maligned in most current academic discourse.

Pity the poor French in the sixteenth century. Distracted by useless dynastic wars in Italy for the first half of the period, then embroiled in religious civil wars for most of the second half, whatever progress they might have made towards a modern economy was undone in the turmoil of a misguided age. Worse still, capital formation in such a society was long ago dismissed by Marx as mere “primitive accumulation,” incapable of generating the more vital “modes of production” associated with Britain’s eighteenth-century industrial revolution. France in the 1500s was one of the largest and richest countries in Western Europe, and her failure to take the next steps towards industrialization has given rise to a minor scholarly cottage industry. What the Marxists have spared, classical economic historians criticize; for them, the French state shoulders much of the remaining blame. Whatever enterprise survived the turmoil of the age was burdened by heavy taxes and crippled by maladministration; together, these sapped France’s inherent vitality.

Heller disagrees with much of this. France was plagued with problems, he admits, but discerning individuals like the learned potter Bernard Palissy (a major figure in Heller’s earlier *The Conquest of Poverty: The Calvinist Revolt in Sixteenth-Century France*) saw clearly what ailed the French economy and prescribed sensible remedies. Nor was Palissy a lonely voice. One of the great strengths of this book is Heller’s recounting of literally dozens of similar-minded individuals: inventors like Jacques

Besson, Jean Errard, Agostino Ramelli, Ambroise Bachot, Joseph Boillot, Ambroise Paré; agrarian reformers like Olivier de Serres, Pierre Belon, Claude Bigottier (France's answer to "Turnip" Townsend), and the collaborators Charles Estienne and Jean Liébault, and many, many more.

Perhaps more significant is Heller's revisionist argument that the French bourgeoisie in the sixteenth century grew rich and politically powerful despite civil war and government mismanagement. As Heller reconstructs French economic history, the general economic distress of the later sixteenth century fell more harshly on the peasants and rural smallholders than on the urban grand bourgeoisie. Indeed, the post-war period sees what he terms a "Bourbon economic restoration" under the guidance of Maximilien de Sully, Henri IV's "minister of everything," that lasted—on-and-off—until the middle of the 1600s. In stark contrast to the views of Braudel and Le Roy Ladurie, Heller's France is a vital and progressive place, and one where the crown is already beginning to play that *dirigeant* role that the French state still thinks of as its special prerogative.

This is a book that works more as social and economic history than as history of science, no matter what the title implies. The sciences it considers are almost entirely technological in nature, and Heller does not seem to consider that military matters might have produced anything of note by way of science or technology. Worse, it is often hard to see how the technological writers he presents had much effect on the French economy.

Nevertheless, it is always exciting to see someone resisting established historical orthodoxies, and Heller has made a fine start. In his final pages Heller accuses the *Annales* school of having "exhausted itself" in the pursuit of an "extreme determinism" that leads to "untenable" conclusions. These are strong words, and, French intellectual culture being what it is, Heller will no doubt be called to account for them many times over. It should be interesting to see where this leads.

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Arlette Jouanna. *La France du XVI^e siècle. 1483-1598*. Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1996. Pp. xviii, 688.

Les progrès sensibles de l'historiographie dans les dernières décennies, notamment grâce à l'école des *Annales*, ont paradoxalement rendu plus difficile la construction des grandes synthèses historiques. S'il est permis de traiter longuement de la comptabilité en partie double ou des circuits du transport des grains, dès lors que tout cela compte autant que les "cadavres des rois" (Goubert) au regard de l'histoire, il devient plus malaisé de recueillir et de sélectionner devant l'abondance des études pointues les aspects qui méritent d'être retenus et de déterminer leur place dans la présentation générale d'un siècle. Deux études sur la Renaissance ont brillamment relevé ce défi et