

Steven Laurence Kaplan. *The Bakers of Paris and the Bread Question, 1700-1775*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1996. 761 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-1706-7.

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The Bread World We Have Lost

Is there yet more to be said, three volumes later, on the subject of bread? Steven Laurence Kaplan wagers there is quite a lot indeed, offering yet another massive book, this one avowedly the “final installment of my investigation of the subsistence complex” (p. 15). What is new and how does this latest and last work relate to the earlier installments of bread’s history?

In *Bread, Politics, and Political Economy in the Reign of Louis XV* (2 vols., The Hague, 1976) Kaplan inaugurated this long project by studying the laws and police operations through which the monarchy endeavored to control the grain and flour trades. Focusing on liberal ministers’ efforts, from 1763 onward, to free the grain trade from traditional restrictions and on eventual defeat of those efforts by successive poor harvests and intense popular opposition, Kaplan added subsistence politics to the repertoire of struggles known to have sapped popular confidence in the monarchy during the decades preceding the Revolution. Limiting himself in *Bread, Politics* to public policy and debates over reforms, Kaplan scarcely touched upon the consumers, or the operations of the trade in grain and flour that the monarchy sought to control, or the social groups—from small farmers and traders to millers and bakers—who worked it. These dimensions of the “subsistence complex” would come to the fore, in turn, in the ensuing three books.

Consumers took center stage in *The Famine Plot Persuasion in Eighteenth-Century France* (Philadelphia, 1982). Here Kaplan placed the so-called Flour War of 1775, the well-known protest which ultimately defeated

the attempted freeing of the grain trade, in the context of responses to five earlier eighteenth-century crises of dearth and high prices. The *pacte de famine*, the paranoia in 1775 that a conspiracy of monarch and monopolists had contrived to turn natural abundance into popular starvation, was, Kaplan showed, a longstanding habit of mind not only among the poor but also among elite observers unable, otherwise, to account for scarcity. Such suspicions about a profiteering rather than paternal king were again, like the struggles of subsistence politics, key corrosives of public trust in the background to Revolution.

Provisioning Paris: Merchants and Millers in the Grain and Flour Trade during the Eighteenth Century (Ithaca, 1984) turned to the practices of distribution as well as the succession of persons through whose hands grain passed on its way to the baker. The millers, in particular, came into focus: their fortunes, economic vulnerability, marriage strategies, and work experience. Three transformations in provisioning emerged from Kaplan’s analysis, each of which probably improved the trade and increased supplies in tandem with the city’s population growth but, at the same time, complicated policing. Technical innovations reduced spoilage and increased yield by as much as one-quarter through “economic milling.” “Commercialization” multiplied privately contracted exchanges which bypassed traditional markets. Eliminating middlemen streamlined the flow of foodstuffs into Paris but obscured that flow from view, rendering it difficult to police. The government appeared indecisive, sometimes tolerating such new practices and sometimes invoking

the regulations which formally prohibited them. But its actions, Kaplan suggested, might more justly be seen as relatively coherent responses to alternating situations of scarcity and abundance through which the government's own unchanging responsibility was to see that this jerry-built provisioning system satisfied the city's needs.

Now, *The Bakers of Paris and the Bread Question* reprises and extends the same approach and themes to the ending stage of the long process: the fabricated bread (Part One), the artisans who supplied it (Part Two), and the policing of bread's baking and exchange (Part Three). The humble loaf becomes a protagonist of numberless material forms and personalities in an opening discussion so bulky and so lacking in yeast that only an *amateur* could savor it. The central insight here is that the range of breads acceptable to Parisian tastes was narrower than that available to them. As dependent as the mass of the population was on bread for the preponderance of their calories and as uncertain as the relentless daily search for it could often be, Parisians of even lowly rank insisted on wheaten and white loaves, and by so doing exacerbated the precariousness of supply. Thus, culture—rather than material conditions alone, or mere market forces, or economic rationality—set the terms within which provisioning problems would have to be solved.

Kaplan goes much farther—for this reader, too far—with bread's cultural meanings, its “immense symbolic charge” (p. 567), baptizing it “the material and spiritual nucleus of French civilization” (p. 29) and likening it to the Eucharist. It was for and through bread that the ruler, baker, and consumer alike made the sacrifice which sat at the heart of Old Regime society and gave the state its legitimacy. Bread stood for what needed to be given up in order for society to live in peace. The author's heaping up of proverbs, legends, and conceits entertains until it fatigues, but it does not entirely persuade the reader that bread “participated in the civilizing process...the relentless everyday demands of bread construct the pattern of daily life in Paris as tellingly, and as subtly, as the elaborate protocol of Versailles governs social life in the gilded cage” (p. 10). Nor will many readers be carried along with Kaplan's rhapsodizing that in an era before bread was desacralized into a mere staple, it bore “the indelible and ineffable mark of holiness...mediat(ing) between sacred and profane, life and death, here and beyond” (p. 3).

More deft and persuasive is Kaplan's analysis of the way the loaf concluded its long journey from the field through the mill to its baking and ultimate acquisition

by consumers. Here Kaplan unearths details of practice which contrast with formalized regulations and so corrects the erroneous depiction of provisioning as monopolized by all-powerful guilds. Most of the bread consumed in Paris did not come from masters, was not sold in shops, and was not even baked within the city itself. The breadways of Paris were “a decidedly pluralistic landscape” (p. 115). A second remarkable revelation of Kaplan's recreation of “breadways” is the credit nexus—or what Kaplan dubs “The Great Chain of Credit”—through which consumers financed their daily bread. Shop bakers became “neighborhood bankers” in a kind of ground-level analogue to the mechanisms of *haute finance* which long ago caught historians' eyes. Overall, credit was “the hidden lubricant of the moral economy; along with the just price, it was the chief gyroscope of socioeconomic stability” (p. 571).

In part two, Kaplan devotes more than half *The Bakers of Paris and the Bread Question* to the working and personal lives of the bakers themselves. Beneath the supposedly corporate city described in guild regulations lurked a cast of characters more richly varied and more transgressive in their activities than a look through the guild's eyes would own. For masters, the guild did provide the framework for interactions with the authorities and enforced the hierarchy of artisanal identities and work rules. But it neither absorbed their lives and work—some masters ignored or challenged the rules—nor ever solved their greatest need, which was for a means of managing their cash flow problems. Their precarious position as simultaneous creditor and debtor, deeply entwined in the structures of the trade, made failure not a mere stroke of ill fortune during crises, but a constant of good times as well as bad. Nor was the guild as prejudicial a transmitter of *maitrise*, (i.e., mastership) as its critics, contemporary and more recent, have alleged. Few bakers ever became masters because of the complicated logistics and costs of setting up, not because cooptative recruitment shut newcomers out (80 percent of new masters came from outside the trade's family lines). And the trade was far from coterminous with the corporation. Below board, the lines of makeshift communication and informal cooperation between master bakers who were mandated to supply bread and the *forains* who did so clandestinely effaced in practice the lines of jurisdictional demarcation which the guild's chartering formally imposed.

The bakers' personal lives Kaplan sketches through summary statistics of fortunes as well as good stories and compelling vignettes. Overall, bakers were not as wealthy as they were suspected of being, ranking in the

“lower-middle range of artisans and merchants” (p. 576). Individual bakers may have been “greedy” as charged, but as a group they were caught in the crossfire between dealers and consumers, their suppliers having more leverage over them than they had over their customers. As was widely the case in the Old Regime, “marriage was the most serious business affair of the baker’s life” (p. 302), for his wife needed to bring to the marriage skills for the trade (buying supplies, keeping accounts, managing credit, selling) as well as her cash dowry if they were to prosper together. Kaplan finds “a surprisingly large number of women” (p. 123) among the sellers of bread within the city. But by discussing women only as an in-demand commodity under the topic of marriage, after omitting them from the earlier description of the operation of the baker’s enterprise he, no doubt inadvertently, minimizes unduly their place in the story.

In the world of bakery workers, Kaplan finds little solidarity between masters and journeymen, decreasing chances for upward mobility, and alienation of journeymen from the privileged corporate structures they wished to join. Apprentices and journeymen met varied treatment at their master’s hands, but probably were made miserable at least as much by unhealthy working conditions, low pay, backbreaking work, and dim prospects as by their master’s severity. Insecure, restless and often embittered, they learned, in the tavern or inn while passing together their scarce leisure time, how to express their struggles against their masters in abstract principles and the language of legal precedents which later marked working-class consciousness.

The third, least lengthy, but (perhaps for this reason) most powerful section of the book is devoted to the policing of bread and bakers. Recalling abbe Ferdinando Galiani’s dictum that “Bread belongs to police and not to commerce,” Kaplan reviews the way the government-cognizant that social peace and its own stability rested upon its satisfying “the social contract of subsistence that bound governors and governed” (p. 492)—set out to assure delivery of enough bread with the expected quality at an affordable price. Generally, the state’s work was conscientious, as skilled and informed as circumstances could possibly allow, and effective. Excepting only two interludes of physiocrat-inspired deregulation, the “state remained steadfastly committed to the consumer interest...its covenant with the consumer-people” (p. 551). The regulators—hands-on, close to the trade and to the traders whose work they were regulating, driven by professionalism rather than by any Enlightenment taste for systematizing—endeavored to fine-tune their means for

balancing supply and demand. “Inter alia, what distinguished eighteenth-century authorities from their predecessors was the growing conviction that a mastery of the technical issues could dramatically enhance their chances of mastering the political ones” (p. 439).

Though misrepresented as all-controlling by the laws, as oppressive by the bakers they impinged upon, and as arbitrary by the physiocrats who sought to deregulate the market, the police in their practice were empirical, pragmatic, and flexible. Savvy enough to understand that they had to enable both the people to eat and the bakers to make a profit, they alternately freed the market and hedged it with paternalist constraints. Their modus operandi is illustrated by the handling of price controls (*taxation*), which, though provided for by the law, were infrequently applied. “Contrary to general belief, bread prices in Paris were habitually *not* set by the police. In times of relative subsistence ease, they were largely the unmanaged (but never unmediated) fruit of what we call market factors.... There was no ‘normal’ maximum bearing the lieutenant general’s imprimatur. Provided the bakers respected standard operating procedures, they policed themselves...so long as calm prevailed” (p. 519).

Interpretative and factual revisions of this magnitude make *Bakers* an important and impressive work of scholarship. Above all, the book frees the bread world of the Old Regime from three tendencies which have distorted it: an uncritical acceptance of Enlightenment polemical pronouncements as if they were mere descriptions of the situations on which they commented, a fixation on periods and instances of crisis, and “the overwhelming freight of the Revolutionary telos” (p. 18). To remedy the first, Kaplan over and over again, with an animus toward the *philosophes*, which is even more salient in *Bakers* than in his previous works, presses the need to see through their *parti pris*: “We should have no illusion about the rigor and reliability of the Enlightenment gaze...the systematic nature of the militant physiocratic critique has badly misled historians” (pp. 572-73). To redress the second, he focuses firmly on the endemic rather than the epidemic, on everyday, ordinary operations rather than on their occasional breakdowns, on “the prose (rather than) the poetry...the rut of routine...(valuing) the daily rut for its weary ruttedness” (p. 10).

Finally, to distance his subject from the Revolution, Kaplan chooses 1775 as his terminal date. Inevitably—since the Revolution broke out in subsistence crisis and the revolutionaries would revisit, in short order, all the same issues of the subsistence complex that the Old

Regime rehearsed—the Revolution lurks in the story still. And inevitably there is something unsatisfying about leaving the story littered with suggestive allusions to ways in which the bakers’ story might turn out to have been linked to 1789. But Kaplan knows his limits. In his view, the period after the ministry of Turgot “opened a new conjuncture” (p. 18) and therefore needs its own study and its own historian to deal with the “explosive density of the Revolutionary materials...it would require

more lifetimes than I could marshal to attend to both tableaux” (p. 18). That the questions are now too complex for easy answering is the milestone harvest of Kaplan’s own four-volume history of the bread world we have lost.

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