

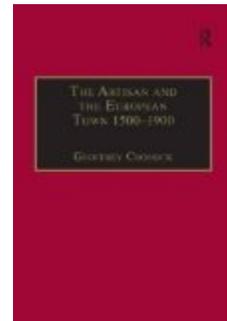
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Geoffrey Crossick, ed. *The Artisan and the European Town, 1500-1900*. Hants, England and Brookfield, Vt.: Scolar Press, 1997. xiii + 263 pp. \$76.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-85928-232-8.

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## The Artisan and the European Town, 1500-1900

“Artisans were in many ways intrinsically rather than just incidentally urban,” asserts Geoffrey Crossick, Professor of History and Dean of the Graduate School of the University of Essex (p. 16). The essays in this collection grew out of a session which he organized at the Conference of the European Association of Urban Historians, held at Strasbourg in 1994. As is typical in a compilation of conference papers, each chapter consists of a specialized monograph that considers a specific aspect of artisanal culture, primarily in the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries, and limited to one city or region. The collected articles are wide-ranging geographically and chronologically, including consideration of regions such as Hungary, Sweden, and the rural Netherlands which are often neglected in artisan studies. However the essays lack a clear thematic or conceptual focus which might have encouraged more of a dialogue between the contributors. Crossick compensates for this in some measure by a useful historiographic introduction, in which he advances key questions that he believes historians of artisanal life need to address. These include the thorny issue of artisanal identities, the role of gender in constructing and supporting such identities, and the continued vitality of corporatism as a cultural ideal among ordinary artisans long after the demise of the guilds. Ironically, only a few of the essays in this collection directly address such questions, notably James R. Farr’s brief for the use of cultural analysis in studying artisan mentalities (chapter 3), Michael Berlin’s examination of the role of guilds in regulating workmanship in early modern London (chapter 4), and Elizabeth Musgrave’s study of women’s place in the craft guilds in eighteenth-century Nantes (chapter 8).

If there is a common thread uniting the monographs in this collection, it is that all concern themselves in some way with the changes wrought in the status and work practices of male artisans by proto-industrialization and/or industrialization. They document the progressive erosion of the independence, social status, and political influence of urban craftsmen under the pressures of the market economy, rising consumer demand, and a new ethic of economic individualism. The consequences are fairly consistent, whether they appear early, as in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England and France, or only in the second half of the nineteenth century, as in Hungary and the provincial towns of rural Holland. They include a growing divide between merchant-entrepreneurs and ordinary craftsmen, increasing specialization and fragmentation in the trades, and escalating competition from unregulated laborers, including immigrant, rural and female workers. The end result is a sharp decline in the social status and political influence of ordinary artisans within urban economies and governments. To document these changes, most contributors employ social-scientific methodology, including analysis of census statistics, tax records, and other empirical data, slighting the culturalist approaches advocated by James R. Farr (chapter 3).

Towns appear in these essays primarily as settings for the analysis of changing artisanal fortunes. They figure as political entities, in which artisans and guilds had varying degrees of influence depending on local customs and national conditions, and as nodes of commerce and production in local, regional or international networks

in which artisans participated. Only two essays deal directly with issues of urban space or urban renovation: Florence Bourillon's study of the stimulating effects of Haussmannization on the *fabrique* producing *articles de Paris* in the Arts and Metiers quarter of Paris (chapter 11), and Natacha Coquery's investigation of the spatial relationship between aristocratic consumers and tradesmen in eighteenth-century Paris (chapter 5). Urban culture and sociability are not featured in these essays, with the exception of Lars Edgren's look at the role of ceremonial in supporting the social order in eighteenth-century Malmo, Sweden (chapter 7).

A number of the essays deal with the theme of social distinction and differentiation: how did artisans define and defend notions of community and rank under conditions in which both were under assault? Lars Edgren stresses the importance of urban ceremonies in Malmo in creating group boundaries that constructed artisans as clearly subordinate to merchants (chapter 7). Elizabeth Musgrave shows how rigid gender definitions of work in eighteenth-century Nantes, designed to counter the rapidly expanding illegal female labor force, limited women's economic participation to specific sectors of the economy considered traditionally female, and subjected women to partimonial restrictions that denied them political and economic rights (chapter 8). Josef Ehmer describes the customs and institutions of the journeymen's tour, or *Wanderjahr*, in southern Germany and Austria, which simultaneously shaped the mentality of its migratory participants, provided a flexible labor market, and satisfied the demands of the authorities for order (chapter 9). Whether through male-bonding experiences, ceremonial, or patterns of gender exclusion, these studies show how in-group solidarities were created among various categories of artisans in European towns.

A second issue taken up in several essays is the degree to which guilds were able to adapt to changing economic conditions, and the survival of the corporatist ethic that they fostered after their abolition. Christopher F. Friedrichs argues that German guilds played a powerful and effective role in representing the interests of artisan masters in the pluralistic politics of the seventeenth-

century German city (chapter 2). Michael Berlin depicts eighteenth-century London craft guilds as flexible organizations dominated by wealthier merchants and masters who had a vested interest in gradually abandoning practices that conflicted with economic individualism (chapter 4). The symbolic language of corporatism and ritualized forms of protest, however, survived among ordinary craftsmen into the early nineteenth-century, fueling artisan radicalism and luddite agitation. Josette Pontet argues that guilds were already obsolete and played little role in the maritime trade-based economy of Bordeaux in the eighteenth-century (chapter 6), whereas Vera Bacskai dates their demise in Hungarian towns to the second half of the nineteenth-century, as independent rural craftsmen increasingly encroached on the consumer market. Pim Kooij finds that the craft guilds in the provincial Dutch capital of Groningen lost their political influence, and artisans experienced a sharp drop in their social status, rather late in the nineteenth-century, as a modernized sector of the economy, founded largely by people from outside the city, relegated ordinary craftsmen to an obsolete group of ill-paid producers (chapter 12).

Taken together, these studies suggest that the demise of corporatism was a gradual process determined by economic and political variables which did not operate uniformly across Europe, and highlight the dangers of generalizing from one city, region or country to another. However they also suggest that artisans everywhere were sooner or later subject to the same macroeconomic pressures, and were able to survive only at the price of hyper-specialization, increasing trade fragmentation, and the reduction of the majority to the status of outworkers for commercial middlemen. The survival of corporatism as a cultural ideal and a reservoir of symbolic protest well into the nineteenth century is one of the more fascinating aspects of this story, and one to which Geoffrey Crossick, who rightly signals its importance, will hopefully devote a new symposium.

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