



Daniel Faget. *Marseille et la mer: Hommes et environnement marin (XVIIIe-XXe siècle)*. Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes (PUR), 2011. 394 S. ISBN 978-2-7535-1384-6; ISBN 978-2-85399-808-6.

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Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (November, 2012)

D. Faget: Marseille et la mer

Marseille's history as an international seaport is of course well known, thanks to its centuries of maritime trade with the Levant and North Africa, the Caribbean and the East Indies, a trade in spices and slaves and the products of France's rich empire. In the eighteenth century, in particular, the riches and grandeur of the city were routinely linked to the prosperity of its commerce and of the great merchant families who dominated the Chamber of Commerce. But Marseille's links to the sea were not limited to *le haut négoce*. Much less vaunted is the history of local shipping, and particularly of fishing, which, as Daniel Faget shows in this pioneering study, was central to the livelihood of many in the city, while it also provided the port with much of its local colour.

The *petits patrons* who worked Marseille's fishing fleet formed a close-knit and structured community in the streets around the Eglise Saint-Laurent, a community that had well-defined family strategies for marriage and social advancement. The fishing industry was largely self-regulating, with disputes traditionally settled by a *conseil des prud'hommes*, but from the end of the seventeenth century the fishermen had become increasingly embroiled in disputes with outsiders who challenged them for control over the fishing grounds of the Gulf of Marseille. Many of these outsiders came to settle in the city, especially Catalan fishermen and sailors from Naples, who brought new techniques and fished more intensively, in the process squeezing the incomes of Marseille fishermen and endangering fish stocks off the Provençal coast. The traditional families were put on the defensive as the Catalans – who first settled in Marseille

in the 1720s – were granted increasing rights and greater access, until in 1786 the *intendant* of Provence allowed them to base 59 fishing boats in the port. The two communities rowed continuously, whether about the supposedly unfair trawling methods used by the Catalans, the reduction in fish stocks, or the advantages which they supposedly enjoyed as foreigners, most notably their refusal to be conscripted into the *milice*, the much-hated militia service. Matters came to a head under the Revolution, when – among the raft of privileges that were abolished in 1790 – the Marseille fishermen lost their rights over their traditional fishing grounds, a privilege that had been granted them by royal letters patent of 1634 and which had been jealously defended ever since. As well as threatening a community with impoverishment, a long-established tradition with a symbolic place in the life of Marseille was being undermined.

The prosperity of the eighteenth-century fishing banks would never be restored, and for much of the modern period – certainly until the First World War – the city looked back nostalgically on the golden age before decline set in, a decline which they tried, with increasing frustration, to analyse and explain. The analysis was only partly political – a plea for protectionism of the sort that had been in place before the Revolution – for few really believed that competition alone had brought on the crisis. The declining fish stocks were not simply the result of overfishing or the introduction of trawl nets, and during the long nineteenth century there was an increasing realisation that it was the ecology of the Mediterranean, and especially of the creeks where so much of the fish

had been concentrated, that had changed. It is this ecological change, and the dependence of Marseille on the continued health of the seabed, that is the real subject of Daniel Faget's study: a relationship between man and the sea that became scientific as well as economic as the city tried to understand what was happening to the environment on which it was so dependent.

Why was a sea that had been at the heart of the city – the Vieux Port around which its fortunes had been built – and which had established its importance to the Mediterranean world now seemingly robbing it of its prosperity and its importance? Their battle against the trawl nets with which the Catalans had scooped larger quantities of fish from the sea bed had been definitively lost; so the fishermen turned their fire elsewhere, on the other marine creatures that were competing with them in the fishing grounds, in particular the dolphins and porpoises whose numbers in the waters off the city had increased almost as dramatically as the fish stocks had declined. These mammals were an easy target, blamed for causing an ecological imbalance in the Mediterranean, and the fishermen hunted them relentlessly from around the middle of the nineteenth century; by 1900, torpedo boats had been acquired to hunt them more murderously. But killing porpoises was more a sign of desperation and hopelessness among the fishing community than a rational response to decline, and what really interests Daniel Faget is less the pathology of the fishermen than the more measured response of the community. Nineteenth-century Marseille, industrialising fast and producing its share of the rising pollution levels in the ocean, became increasingly aware of the impact of that pollution, and

aware, too, of the challenge of industrial development to the fragile ecosystems of the coastline. Even traditional industries, like the city's long-established soap manufactures, were subjected to renewed scrutiny as major polluters of the sea.

Responses took many different forms, but all served to underline the anxieties that Marseille felt about a future which, it felt sure, would remain dependent on the sea and on the health of its waters. There was new concern for the purity of the sea, for cleansing the coastline and filtering seawater. There was greater investment in marine biology and research into the vegetation and the fauna that characterised the seabed. There was a concern that a sea which had always offered protection to Marseille's citizens was dying or becoming poisoned by effluent, leading to calls for ecological controls on industry and helping to establish a tradition of excellence in scientific research. Science, however, did not wholly replace nostalgia. Nineteenth-century Marseille continued to look back on the early modern period as the peak of its growth and development, so that, alongside the scientists and researchers in their laboratories, scholars and collectors devoted themselves to studying the Marseille's history and economy and to cataloguing the many species of marine life which populated the Mediterranean and contributed so much to the texture of the city's economic and cultural life. Today we can appreciate some of the benefits of this concern. Fish stocks and industrial pollution of the Mediterranean are, of course, tightly regulated, and the creation in 2007 of a *Parc National des Calanques* marks an important milestone in the ecological rehabilitation of the waters around the city.

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Citation: Alan Forrest. Review of Faget, Daniel, *Marseille et la mer: Hommes et environnement marin (XVIIIe-XXe siècle)*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. November, 2012.

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