

The Path Not Taken: French Industrialization in the Age of Revolution, 1750–1830. By *Jeff Horn*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006. ix + 383 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, maps. Cloth, \$45.00. ISBN: 0-262-08352-3.

Reviewed by Paul Spagnoli

The Path Not Taken argues that the Revolution of 1789 determined the French route to industrial development, but not in the way advanced by Marxists and many liberals. In Jeff Horn's view, the pre-Revolutionary monarchy had intelligent plans to develop French industry. One item on their agenda was the 1786 Anglo-French commercial treaty, which Horn insists was a French idea, accepted by the British only under pressure. These French government efforts were frustrated by multiple social and institutional obstacles to change—"feudal" chains, which had to be broken, and were broken, by the Revolution. But even more important than the well-known liberalizing work of the Revolution, argues Horn, was an often ignored wave of machine-breaking in 1789, which left behind "the smoking debris of several years' government investment and entrepreneurial activity" (p. 110). When the psychological effect of this unrest was compounded by the emergence of modern revolutionary politics over the next several years, French entrepreneurs and officials drew the conclusion that as long as workers persisted in their lamentable ignorance on the subject of mechanization, it would be best to preserve social peace by eschewing the effort. Thus "the path not taken": French elites concluded that the British route to economic development via mechanization and the factory was too dangerous, and that France would have to find its own path.

In the Revolutionary Year II (1793–94), it found one such path. In Horn's view, a major goal of the Terror was to intimidate the population into accepting a command economy in order to defeat foreign and domestic enemies and preserve the Revolution. Prices and wages were controlled, food and raw materials requisitioned, and thousands of workers were employed in state workshops under tight discipline. "Fear of the guillotine and the realities of the war crisis protected the vulnerable machinery" (p. 146). And this worked: "the French state proved that...it was capable of directing a staggeringly

widespread and impressively successful industrial effort” (p. 166). After a generation of historians obsessed with Revolutionary ideology, Horn refreshingly returns to what used to be called the “circumstances” of 1793–94. As naïve as it would be to ignore the significance of ideology, it is equally naïve to forget that the Terror involved ruthless measures necessary to save the Revolution amid the crises of the Year II.

In the long run, however, the command economy of the Terror became another “path not taken.” Although it had worked, it was hardly a comfortable experience, and few wanted to try it again after the radical phase ended in Thermidor (July 1794). Instead, government officials like Jean-Antoine Chaptal sought to take the lead in promoting technological change and industrial development by deregulating the market, encouraging entrepreneurial dynamism, and educating as well as disciplining the workforce. This “distinctive deployment of state dirigisme melding theory and practice to further a liberal agenda” made Chaptal “the father of the nineteenth-century French economy” (p. 207). This, the “path” ultimately “taken,” featured protection of the domestic market and export production stressing niche markets and luxury goods. It produced a gradual but successful industrial revolution. By 1914, France achieved a per capita income that was within 20 percent of Great Britain’s.

All this is well argued and based on the author’s extensive research in French archives. The book also includes a useful discussion of labor relations in the decades just before the Revolution, fascinating material on the command economy in operation in 1793–94, a persuasive argument that economic issues shaped the policies (and led to the downfall) of the Napoleonic empire, and a surprisingly sympathetic view of the economic policies of the restored Bourbons. Above all, Horn’s thesis that the Revolution was at the center of French economic history makes a great deal of sense.

And yet, does it entirely convince? Late in the book, Horn admits that “throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, lowering wages was common business practice among French industrial entrepreneurs. They decreased the earnings of their workers to maintain their competitive advantage rather than exploring the possibilities of technological innovation or searching for new outlets” (p. 256). If French businessmen in the 1780s already believed that the way to compete with the British was “by slashing wages,” then did the Revolution really shift France to a different path (p.

47)? And if French workers before and after 1789 could be forced to accept lower wages, why couldn't they be forced to accept mechanization and the factory? Was "culture" (which Horn rejects strenuously, even sarcastically, as an explanatory factor) involved after all? Did French workers in general prefer to accept lower wages than to alter their way of life? Or were French entrepreneurs simply responding to the market situation they actually faced by 1815? "There are three ways to ruin, said the great Rothschild: gambling, women, and engineers. The first two are more agreeable—but the last is most certain" (Charles Kindleberger, *Economic Growth in France and Britain* [1964], p. 156). Was the reluctance to mechanize a sign of French entrepreneurial timidity? Kindleberger thought so, whereas Eric Hobsbawm, quoting the same comment, concluded that "nobody could accuse a Rothschild of not knowing the best way to the biggest profits" (*Industry and Empire* [1968], p. 41).

The Path Not Taken deserves credit for raising such questions—all the more so, given the long domination of a different agenda over the study of French history. Even when Horn's answers are not always convincing, his argument is invariably stimulating and supported by a fascinating array of evidence.

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