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Review: Leonard N. Rosenband, Papermaking in Eighteenth-Century France: Management, Labor, and Revolution at the Montgolfier Mill, 1761-1805 (Baltimore, 2000)

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Papermaking in Eighteenth-Century France: Management, Labor, and Revolution at the Montgolfier Mill, 1761–1805.

By Leonard N. Rosenband. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000. Pp. xv+210. $39.95.

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More than five decades ago, David Landes suggested that the "relatively retarded status" of the French economy could be blamed on French "attitudes and values inimical to the development of enterprise" (*Journal of Economic History* 9 [1949]: 45). Those familiar with more recent work by Landes and Samuel Huntington know that this kind of thesis, one that links national "culture" directly to economic development (or stagnation), is once again very much in vogue. Leonard Rosenband's new book presents an entirely different picture, confronting us with an aggressively entrepreneurial family of French papermakers, the Montgolfiers. This papermaking family, Rosenband convincingly shows, was no bunch of conservative anticapitalists. Rather, the Montgolfiers adapted with great imagination to the challenges posed by high-quality, low-cost Dutch paper, working to transform their mill, Vidalon-le-Haut, into a "theater of experiment, a testing ground for both men and machines" (p. 6).

But *Papermaking* is not about "deskilling," or about the replacement of skilled workers with machines. Rather, as Rosenband emphasizes, the Montgolfiers intended to preserve the time-honored skills of the old paper mills—the "shake" of the vatman, the trained eye of the governor, the sure hands of the coucher—even as they struggled for control over those skills. They aimed, that is, "to uncouple the journeymen's skills from their cultural moorings" (p. ix). Far from being a story about mechanization, then, Rosenband's book explores an audacious attempt to create an altogether new kind of worker: the employee. This new man, detached from the raucous itinerant culture of the journeyman, would heed the wishes of his master rather than the call of his tramping brothers. In Rosenband's narrative, the appearance of Nicolas-Louis Robert's papermaking machine toward the end of the eighteenth century almost seems like an afterthought, like an extension of the Montgolfiers' own vision, rather than a revolution. The advent of mechanization, that is, forms just one part in the larger struggle to wrest control of papermaking from the "tyranny" of the journeymen.

Like the Montgolfiers themselves, Rosenband takes the everyday skills of Old Regime paper workers seriously. After all, the ambitious strategy to appropriate these skills signaled just how much the Montgolfiers valued them. As part of that strategy, the family pursued and won a government subsidy to fund "experiments" which, it was hoped, would allow them to emulate Dutch practices and machines. Rosenband's careful reconstruction of the logic that governed the relations between workers, owners and the

state simply destroys general, oversimplified, overtheorized notions about suffocating regulation and top-down discipline. The truth is that Vidalon-le-Haut's workers—the rowdy loftsman, the moody sizerman, even the drunken coucher—were educating both their masters and the state. And that might just be the single most intriguing thing about this innovative book: despite its focus on labor discipline, state regulation, and eighteenth-century dreams of "applied science," it is "history from the workshop up" (p. 5).

Did I mention that the book is a pleasure to read? Perhaps this is another advantage of devoting one's full attention to a single sector of production. Rosenband has an uncanny knack for conveying the sights, sounds, tastes, and smells of the paper mills. He also writes with feeling, even pathos, about the boisterous culture of the journeyman papermaker; it is, after all, also a story about the extinction of an entire way of life.

It would be easy to overlook Rosenband's important little book amid the cacophony of provocative theses, sexy titles, and colorful dust jackets circulating in today's academic book market. That would be a serious mistake. In little more than 150 pages, *Papermaking* provides a fresh model for historians. Do not be distracted by the evocative imagery and the lively narrative: this book poses a fundamental challenge to many orthodox methods and conventional approaches in economic history and the history of technology. Like most original books, however, it raises as many questions as it answers: Rosenband's sector-specific model fairly cries out for comparative studies in other social, political, and cultural contexts. With any luck, it will motivate others to tend this rich and, until now, relatively uncultivated ground.

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The Modernist Enterprise: French Elites and the Threat of Modernity, 1900–1940.

By Marjorie Beale. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000.
Pp. ix+231. $49.50.

Although *The Modernist Enterprise* can be appreciated by scholars in a variety of fields, it is situated squarely within French history and cultural studies: Marjorie Beale writes that this is "an empirical study of the cultural practice of modernity" in Paris between 1900 and 1940 (p. 4). She examines the ways in which French elites began to "rethink the relationship between culture, commerce, and government," arguing that they hoped to discover "some ideologically neutral technique for resolving the social conflicts and political crises that had plagued the Third Republic" (p. 71). At the same time, elites were "deeply suspicious" of the emergent industrial world