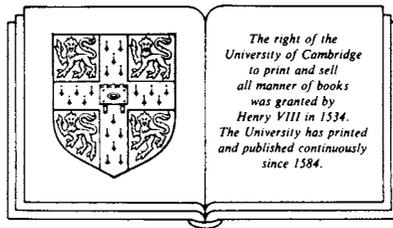


Spinners and weavers of Auffay

Rural industry and the sexual division of labor in
a French village, 1750 – 1850

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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	page ix
1. Introduction	I
2. The pays and the village	7
3. Proto-industrial theory and the pays de Caux	38
4. The golden age of spinning	68
5. Crisis and change in the Caux	86
6. The golden age of cottage weaving	108
7. Marriage and family in proto-industrial Auffay	129
8. Widowhood, remarriage, and the sexual division of labor	162
9. Unwed mothers and their children	178
10. Conclusions: the causes and consequences of proto-industrialization	195
<i>Appendix: vital statistics for Auffay</i>	205
<i>Notes</i>	209
<i>Bibliography</i>	235
<i>Index</i>	251

I



Introduction

In the eighteenth century, travel and the transportation of crops and goods by road or water were laborious and time-consuming throughout Europe. As a result, regions produced grain crops, the staple of the peasant diet, even when the terrain and climate were poorly suited to their cultivation; cities were small; rural artisans produced shoes, barrels, plows, bricks, and furniture for local consumption; and peasant families who were basically identified with farming produced a variety of manufactured goods during the dead season in agriculture. For most peasants, the family's survival depended on the participation of everyone but the youngest children in this alternation of farming and manufacturing.

Some peasant families produced the raw materials from which they made goods to sell in local markets. Linen weavers and cord or rope makers often wove flax or braided hemp from their own plants, and weavers sometimes wove the wool from their own sheep. Other families received raw materials from merchants who put work out into the homes of peasants or cottage workers. Raw fibers or spun thread or yarn might come either from nearby areas or from some distance. All over Europe, weavers who produced high-quality woolens worked with wool from Spain's merino sheep. Silk weavers throughout France depended on the silk produced in the Rhone Valley, where mulberry trees and hence silk worms could be raised. Cotton spinners and weavers worked with cotton from the Orient and the New World.

Sometimes entire families participated in the production process, with children and women preparing raw materials for final production by men. In the textile industry, for instance, women and children cleaned and combed raw fibers and spun yarn for men to weave. Other times, men and women produced unrelated products. Women often spun thread, wove ribbons, made hats, or knit stockings while their husbands worked in the fields, forged iron, milled flour, or cut wood.

In the late eighteenth century, demographic growth and the opening of new colonial markets for manufactured goods encouraged urban merchants to increase production. As long as urban populations remained

small and technology remained simple, production could be increased only by expanding the rural putting-out system, despite the difficulty and expense of transporting raw materials and finished products between urban markets and rural producers.

In 1972, Franklin Mendels identified this expansion of the putting-out system as a distinct stage in the economic development of Europe.¹ Large-scale cottage industries, or “proto-industries” as Mendels called them, were organized in the same manner as their small-scale forerunners. Work was put-out into the countryside by merchants who reclaimed the completed articles for finishing and sale. Unlike small-scale cottage industries, however, proto-industries dominated local labor markets, employing large numbers of rural residents rather than just a handful of families, and the goods produced in the system were sold in national and international markets rather than locally.

Under proto-industrialization, cottage workers were unlikely to know the putting-out merchants who remained in urban areas. Work assignments and money were distributed by traveling porters or local merchants who themselves were now employees of the urban putting-out merchants rather than independent agents. The manufacturing system became less and less personal, and the income and economic well-being of large numbers of people became more and more tied to the vagaries and fluctuations of national and international markets, long before most workers lived in cities and worked in factories.

Proto-industrialization began and ended at different times in different places, appearing in some places, at least briefly, as early as the fifteenth century.² The phenomenon is primarily identified with the expansion of the textile industry in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, and is based on Mendels’s study of the linen industry in Flanders, Rudolf Braun’s study of the cotton industry in the canton of Zurich, and David Levine’s study of the knitting industry in Leicestershire, England.³ The similarities in the experiences of these three regions produced a picture of proto-industrialization that quickly assumed the status of a model to which it was expected other regions (as they were studied) would inevitably conform. Proto-industrialization, it was argued, was most likely to occur in subsistence or pastoral farming regions with large populations and fragmented land holdings, which were being driven out of urban grain markets by richer-soiled, more prosperous regions. As the work available in cottage industry expanded, entire families were drawn into the production of goods for the putting-out merchants. More of the children in these families married and they married at younger ages than

their peasant counterparts because their unions were based not on the inheritance of land or workshops and pain-stakingly acquired dowries but on current income and optimistic assumptions about future earnings. Cottage industry families also bore more children than peasant families as a result of their early marriages and the availability of work for children. This demographic behavior resulted in further population growth and set the stage for family and regional crises whenever work in cottage industry contracted. Such crises became particularly acute when proto-industries began to lose ground to urban factory production in the nineteenth century. As work in cottage industry declined, cottage workers attempted to reduce expenses and maximize household income by forming extended family households. The overabundance of hand workers combined with competition from low-priced, machine-produced goods drove wages lower and lower, however, until most families, having already lost their ties to the land, were forced to seek jobs as agricultural laborers to migrate to urban areas where they entered the factory labor force.

This picture or model of proto-industrialization forms the context for this work on the pays de Caux and the village of Auffay in the old French province of Normandy, the scene of a rapidly expanding cottage textile industry in the eighteenth century. Differences between the Caux and Flanders, Zurich, and Shepshed raise serious problems for the model built on the latter regions, however. The Caux was not a subsistence or pastoral farming region. On the contrary, it was one of the most fertile cereal-producing regions in France. Nor was it a region with fragmented land holdings. Instead, most of the land was contained in large farms and worked by day laborers and domestic servants. In addition, demographic behavior changed very little in the village of Auffay, where a substantial percentage of the population worked for the putting-out merchants throughout the proto-industrial period; this lack of change appears to have been typical of the region. Except for a brief period in the early nineteenth century, when the mechanization of spinning produced high piece rates and constant work for weavers, marriage ages remained stable and high, and couples responded to slumps in demand by limiting child-bearing, migrating to Rouen, and delaying marriage even when the woman was pregnant, not by increasing the number of workers in the household.

The contrast that the Caux provides to earlier studies is important because it allows us to draw a more accurate and complex picture of the economic and demographic consequences of proto-industrialization. It points to the complementarity of urban and rural needs as a determining

factor in the location of proto-industries and shifts the focus from subsistence and pastoral farming to the seasonal nature of traditional agriculture, and from the general fragmentation of land to landpoorness, regardless of its causes, as essential features of proto-industrial regions. The contrast also illustrates that the sexual composition of the agricultural and cottage labor forces was a key factor in determining both the compatibility of agriculture and cottage industry and the social, economic, and demographic consequences of proto-industrialization.

This book is the story of the eighteenth-century urban – rural complementarities that made proto-industrialization possible in the Caux, the breakdown in the sexual division of labor in textiles that allowed it to continue in the nineteenth, and the rural community's adaptation to the social and economic changes that followed in the wake of the Rouen putting-out merchants. It is also the story of a largely female cottage labor force, since the majority of the textile workers in the Caux were women.

In the last decade, the research of such historians as Olwen Hufton, Joan Scott, and Louise Tilly has illustrated the importance of women's earnings to a majority of peasant, artisan, and proletarian families in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe and the prevalence of sexual divisions of labor in the preindustrial and industrializing eras.⁴ Nevertheless, the existing studies of proto-industrial communities have made only passing references to women's work and have not analyzed the sexual division of labor in either cottage industry or agriculture. As a result, they have obscured one of the fundamental features of the proto-industrial labor market and have left us with only half a picture of proto-industrial families and communities. In the Caux, in particular, a focus on male occupations exclusively would underestimate the size of the textile industry, would fail to see the entry of women into the time-honored male domains of nonharvest agriculture and hand weaving, and would overlook the importance of women's earnings to their families and to the region as a whole.

This study integrates research on women with research on proto-industrialization. It examines the experiences of both women and men during the proto-industrial period in the Caux. It also bridges the gap between such highly quantitative studies of proto-industrial regions as those of Mendels and Levine and nonquantitative studies like that of Braun. The book begins with an examination of history, customs, social divisions, and everyday life in the pays de Caux in the eighteenth century, based on government reports, notarial and judicial records, local mem-

oirs, municipal council minutes, and the village *cahiers de doléances* from 1789. These materials provide the human context for the quantitative analysis that follows. That analysis is based on eighteenth-century tax records, manuscript censuses for the years 1796, 1841, 1846, and 1851, and the reconstitution of the families of the 727 couples who married in Auffay between 1751 and 1850.

Family reconstitution is an analytical method developed in the 1950s by the French demographers Michael Fleury and Louis Henry.⁵ It consists essentially of constructing family trees for the residents of a particular area (or occupational group within an area) from birth (or baptismal), marriage, and death (or burial) records. In the eighteenth century, these records were kept for Auffay by the local priests. During the French Revolution, the state officially took over the recording of vital statistics, although the church continued to keep its own records.⁶ Both the priests and the state kept remarkably complete records, although the amount of information in them varies from era to era and recorder to recorder. In particular, the recording of women's ages and occupations varies, apparently according to what the record keeper thought was important.

The reconstitution of families reveals changes in occupational patterns and demographic behavior that cannot be determined in any other way. It makes it possible to study the extent to which men and women pursued one or multiple occupations during their lifetime and whether children followed the occupations of their parents, married into families with the same occupations as their own, and so forth. Reconstitution also yields information about such things as the number of children women bore, the average interval between marriage and the birth of the first child, the length of subsequent birth intervals, the number of couples who experienced the death of an infant or child, and how many children in a family married. The occupational information contained in the parish and civil registers and in the reconstituted family study, combined with that in the eighteenth-century tax roles and the nineteenth-century enumerated censuses, forms the basis for the discussion in Chapters 4 through 6 of the effects of proto-industrialization on male and female occupations, wages, occupational endogamy, family occupations, and the sexual division of labor. Similarly, the demographic information contained in these records provides the basis for the discussion in Chapters 7 through 9 of the effects of proto-industrialization on demographic behavior.

Throughout the study, I have combined quantitative and nonquantitative data in an attempt to uncover both what people did and how they thought and felt. In particular, I have tried to explore how families and

individuals did and did not adapt to developments that at times must have appeared a godsend (the creation of jobs); at other times, a disaster (the demise of hand spinning); and, at still other times, disorienting and distressing (the breakdown of the sexual division of labor). I have tried to understand, or at least to speculate about, what events like the arrival of the putting-out merchants, harvest failures, and the deaths of children and spouses meant to these eighteenth- and nineteenth-century families. In a broad way, I have sought to understand both how the economic system worked and what it was like to live in a proto-industrial community.