

French economic history in the past 20 years

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1. Introduction

This article's aim is to survey work in French economic history in the last twenty years, to the exclusion of books written by foreigners on France, although many of them, especially American and British scholars (Rondo Cameron, John Harris, Davis Landes, Patrick O'Brien etc...), did make major contributions to French historiography. We will focus on works written on the post-17th century period, leaving aside research into the economic history of the medieval and early modern eras, as the authors feel such a survey to be beyond their competence and as research in this field, especially on the Middle Ages, is rather scarce. We shall begin by recalling how economic history was born and raised in France, before moving on to a more detailed survey of research by French scholars in the last twenty years¹.

2. Economic history in France up to the 1970's

The rise of economic history was markedly slower in France than in other industrialised countries, such as Belgium, Britain, Germany and the United States. Up to the 1930s, or even the 1940s, France did not possess a "school" of economic history as such. Studies in this field were limited to a handful of isolated scholars, like Emile Levasseur (1828-1911), the founding father of French economic history, and Henri Hauser (1866-1946), who was to become the first to hold the chair of economic history at the Sorbonne, created in 1927. None of the other seventeen universities which then existed in France had such a chair. Up to the 1930s, the French intelligentsia was not, as a rule, interested in economic affairs. Besides, there was a watertight separation between the Law Faculties, which taught "political economy", and the Arts Faculties, which housed history departments, where political, diplomatic and religious history reigned supreme.

However, things changed in the 1930s, paving the way for the rise of economic history which followed World War II. The experience of World War I, of the following reconstruction and of the 1930s depression brought economic matters to the attention of historians, especially of those of the younger generation. Marxism, which had become influential in academic circles, also acted as a strong promoter of economic history, as studies of economic infrastructures were given the task to explain political superstructures. This trend was reinforced by a vigorous campaign staged by the *Annales* (then the *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*) from 1929 onwards, in order to promote research in economic history². Led by Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, the *Annales'* founding fathers, this campaign was eventually successful. Last, but not least, a major impulse was given by two great

¹ Only a very few articles will be quoted. Unlike in Britain and the U.S.A., the important, seminal articles on some broad problems are rare in French journals.

² Marc Bloch actually had few direct disciples, but his early and tragic death (he was murdered by the Nazis in 1944) made him an inspiration to many people.

professors, Ernest Labrousse³ of the Sorbonne, and Pierre Léon of the University of Lyons⁴. It is difficult to overestimate Labrousse's influence and his role in attracting young historians towards economic and social history. He supervised an astonishing number of doctoral dissertations and his students went on to occupy many of the chairs of Modern History from the 1950s to the 1980s. Indeed, Labrousse's retirement in 1965 was a watershed in French economic history. No successor to his apostolate could be found and French economic history went into a slow decline for want of visibility and leadership. Added to that was the fact that the Sorbonne was broken up into several separate universities, following the May 1968 riots, and that new universities mushroomed from the end of the sixties both in Paris and in the rest of France. In effect, this precluded any single person, however talented, to ascend to the kind of supremacy that Labrousse had enjoyed. Moreover, there was no more unifying paradigm.

The quarter of a century which followed World War II can therefore be considered as a Golden Age for French economic history (as well as being a Golden Age for the French economy!). An unprecedented number of important and high quality works were published, many of which were the results of a *thèse d'Etat* (a bulky dissertation representing at least ten years of research and qualifying its holder for a professorship in French universities). They focused on a handful of research themes, one of the most popular being the history of agriculture and peasantry, with a special interest for the early modern period. The works of Pierre Goubert⁵ (1960) on the Beauvaisis (a cereal growing area North of Paris), of Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie (1966) on the Southern province of Languedoc and of Jean Meuvret (1977, 1987) on the cultivation of cereals and on subsistence crises during the reign of Louis XIV⁶ are but three outstanding examples of this trend. Overseas trade was also favoured by historians in the 1950s and 1960s. Extensive research was undertaken by Pierre Chaunu (1955-60, 1977) on trade between Spain and America, by Frédéric Mauro (1960) on the commercial links between Portugal and its Atlantic colonies -especially Brazil- and by Louis Dermigny (1964) on European trade with China in the 18th century. Jean Meyer (1969), Charles Carrière (1973) and Paul Butel (1974) also produced major studies on the trade and merchants of the three leading French ports in the 18th century: Nantes, Marseilles and Bordeaux.

On the other hand, studies focusing on the 19th century concentrated on manufacturing⁷, transport and banking. Pierre Léon (1953) opened the way with his book on the industrialisation of the Dauphiné, an alpine region in the South-East of France, which was followed by Claude Fohlen's (1956) study of the textile industries in the 1850s and the 1860s. Maurice Lévy-Leboyer (1964) scrutinised industrialisation in Western Europe, with a special focus on France and on industrial finance, and Marcel Gillet (1973) worked on coalmining in Northern France. In transport, the railway company that served Northern France was the object of an outstanding work by François Caron (1973). One should also mention the work of Jean Bouvier (1961), who pioneered in banking history with his study of Crédit Lyonnais's early years, shortly followed by Bertrand Gille (1965-67) with his extensive research into the French branch of the Rothschild merchant bank. Unfortunately, this latter work was left unfinished by the early death of its author⁸. Important work on French economic

³ Labrousse was a marxist, but not a doctrinaire one. Still, he imposed upon his disciples an obsession with short-term fluctuations and a rigid model of *ancien type* economic crises which nobody in France dared criticise.

⁴ Compared to Labrousse and Léon, Fernand Braudel was less influential as a teacher, since the *Collège de France*, where he had his chair, does not grant degrees and so has few regular students.

⁵ Full details of the works mentioned in the text are given in the appendix.

⁶ Jean Meuvret was a great historian and teacher, but so scrupulous that his *magnum opus* was only published after his death. See also J. Jacquart (1974).

⁷ Only a handful of historians looked at French industry before the 1789 Revolution, amongst whom Pierre Goubert, Pierre Léon and Pierre Deyon (the latter for Amiens).

⁸ Bertrand Gille wrote extensively on French banking in the 19th Century, on the iron industry and on technology (1978), but his study of the Rothschilds was in a class of its own.

relations with Germany and French investment in Russia, before World War I, was done by Raymond Poidevin (1969) and René Girault (1973) respectively.

3. *Works of synthesis*

These monographs formed the basis for several series of large-scale works of synthesis, written as the Golden Age neared its end. Many a distinguished historian contributed to an economic and social history of France in seven volumes, under the editorship of Fernand Braudel and Ernest Labrousse (1970-82), which, although now slightly outdated, remains to this day a classic reference book. Pierre Léon (1977-78) edited a less well-known but of equally high standard series of six volumes on the economic and social history of the world, also written by a team of leading French historians. One should also mention the one-man show of Fernand Braudel (1979) in a three-volume series which is *de facto* an economic history of the world in the late medieval and early modern periods. It gained worldwide applause. These major textbooks were completed by three series on the margins of economic history, the first on the history of the French countryside throughout the ages (Georges Duby and A. Wallon, 1975-76), shortly followed by a similar work on French urban history (Georges Duby, 1980-83), and by a much-valued history of technology edited by Marcel Daumas (1962-78).

Another large-scale, but quite different project was the quantitative study of the French economy undertaken by a group of economists led by Jean Marczewski (1961-87), as part of an international plan conceived by Simon Kuznets. Its aim was to build retrospective national accounts for a number of countries and to calculate the growth of their national product -and its components- from the 18th century onwards. Also belonging to this international research project was the famous work by Phyllis Deane and W.A. Cole (1962) entitled *British Economic Growth 1688-1959*. The French study was both much bigger and considerably slower in its progress : fifteen volumes have been published to this date and there are more to come, although some provisional conclusions could be drafted as early as 1965⁹. Those volumes have been widely used, in spite of attracting some heavy criticism. Because they have been trained as historians rather than as economists, many economic historians displayed strong scepticism on Marczewski's findings for the prestatistical age, demanding more careful criticism of sources and expressing distrust for inter- and extra-polations¹⁰. Some of these criticisms were justified, but the project of the Marczewski team deserved serious discussion and not the contemptuous dismissal which it received from many historians. Some even went as far as altogether rejecting the use of aggregates for the early modern period and advocated a different approach, which they termed as "serial history". This approach consists of the careful building of long and homogenous series of economic variables (prices, movements of ships, etc) from archival sources, which, albeit local and fragmented, could be considered as reliable indicators of growth and fluctuations in broader sectors. Typical of this method was the project masterminded by Joseph Goy and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie (1972), which used the leases of tithes to reconstruct indexes of French agricultural output from the 15th to the 18th century. It is also exemplified by the publication of two yearly indexes of French industrial production in the 19th century (Maurice Lévy-Leboyer, 1968; François Crouzet, 1970).

Altogether, the achievements of the Golden Age are - and remain - impressive. Its most important contribution was to extract new and important data from careful and scholarly analysis of massive primary sources. And although the majority of studies had a regional or a sectoral framework, they dealt with broad problems. They nevertheless had some weaknesses. Many were descriptive rather than analytical and lacked a theoretical framework. Among those who did use theories marxism was popular, occasionally spiced, as in the work of Braudel, with elements of the structuralist theory,

⁹ In 1987, Jean-Claude Toutain published some new results.

¹⁰ Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Le territoire de l'historien*, Paris, 1973, pp. 252 ff. See also Chaunu (1978).

borrowed from social scientists¹¹. For a time, under the iron hand of Ernest Labrousse, French historians became obsessed with short-term economic fluctuations and business cycles. Fortunately, this trend was superseded from the 1960s by an interest in long-term economic growth, after foreign scholars (mostly from the United States) had set the problem of the slow growth and persistent backwardness of the French economy. In spite of those inherent weaknesses, French economic history in the sixties was supremely self-confident and aggressive. Its most vociferous supporters went as far as denouncing all other forms of history as obsolete and anachronistic and bound to be eradicated from all but the most conservative history departments, under the assault of economic and social history¹².

4. *Economic history in decline*

Such triumphalism was however short-lived. From the early 1970s onwards, economic history went into decline. The new generation of young scholars was not as eager to enter the field and both the number of doctoral dissertations and of publications began to fall. True, this decline was relative rather than absolute, at a time of rapid expansion in the number of students and university teachers. But it resulted in the loss, for economic historians, of the dominant position they had held for a time.

In some respects, economic history suffered from its very success : the pioneers of the post-war generation had occupied the high ground, and their successors were left with the prospect of redoing for new regions or other sectors what had already been done in the ground-breaking studies of the 50s and 60s. Bright young scholars shied away from a discipline which senior scholars had failed to rejuvenate with new questions and turned to other areas. Historical demography for a time attracted many people. Its progress, admittedly, was very useful to economic historians. It was then replaced in young historians' affections by the history of *mentalités*¹³ and historical anthropology, while at the same time social history tended to claim its autonomy from the mainstream of economic history. Simultaneously, there was a spectacular recovery of political, military and diplomatic history, the latter under the new guise of the history of international relations. Some scholars, who had done their early work in economic history, turned to subjects which had become more fashionable. The French "New History", which came to enjoy wide media fame, did not include economic history. In the early 1980s, some people went as far as wondering whether economic history would survive in France. But these worries proved to be premature, and the fortunes of French economic history have clearly revived in the last two decades.

5. *Revival in the 80's and 90's*

There is no point in denying that France has far fewer economic historians than Britain. The membership of the Association of French Economic Historians (A.F.H.E.¹⁴) is far outstripped by that of the powerful English Economic History Society, which counted up to 5,000 members. The French society organizes a conference every 3 to 4 years, against every year for its British counterpart. And it has a newsletter rather than a fully-fledged journal. In fact, France cannot boast of any publication solely devoted to economic history, unlike the British *Economic History Review*. The *Annales*

¹¹ Many of them actually had no training in economics. On the other hand, very few economists (except the Marczewski team) displayed any interest in economic history. An exception (but dealing with the recent period) was the outstanding book by J.-J. Carré et al. (1972).

¹² In 1961, 41% of French doctoral theses in progress in modern history were devoted to economic and social subjects.

¹³ This word has no direct translation. Cultural history is an approximation.

¹⁴ Association Française des Historiens Économistes, 54 Boulevard Raspail, 75 006 Paris. A new society for the development of economic history has recently been established by Jacques Marseille. Its main aim is to increase the awareness of economic history amongst secondary school teachers.

nowadays only publish a handful of articles in economic history¹⁵; *Histoire, Economie et Sociétés*¹⁶ has rather more of such articles, but also includes articles on non-economic subjects. The only specialised publication is a journal devoted to business history, *Entreprises et Histoire*, which was founded in 1992.

On the other hand, a number of institutions and societies are seeking to promote research and publications in some specialised fields of economic history. The “Committee for the Economic and Financial History of France” is the most important of several such organizations sponsored and financed by the government. It was created in 1989 by the French Ministry of Finance and organizes conferences and publishes scholarly works. It also produces a year-book of “Studies and Documents”¹⁷, some of which have an undeniable value. Another one is the Institute for the History of French Industry¹⁸, set up by the Ministry of Industry. Amongst non-official bodies, one may mention the powerful and active Association for the History of Electricity in France, which sponsored a monumental history of electricity in France (Fabienne Cardot et al., 1991-96). It has also organized a symposium almost every year since 1983 and published their proceedings¹⁹. Other private research organizations worthy of mentioning are the Association for the History of Railways and the Institute for the History of Aluminium, which publishes its own journal²⁰. One could therefore speak of a recent wave of research into French economic history of the last two centuries, which we will now try to survey.

a. General works

France had been badly missing an equivalent of the American or British “Historical Statistics”, that is to say an easy to use collection of long-term series for the 19th and 20th centuries. This is no longer so, with the publication since 1988 of the *Annuaire Statistique* (1988-91). Three volumes covering national product, fuel and power and business enterprises have already been published and more are to follow.

With regard to more general works of synthesis, it is too soon after the publication of the monumental works of the Seventies already quoted to consider new publications on the same scale. Nevertheless, a handful of valuable textbooks have come to complement the work of the earlier generation. Jean-Charles Asselain (1985 and 1995), a professor of economics, has produced an

¹⁵ It has recently adopted a new title : *Annales- Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, from which *économie* has been dropped.

¹⁶ It succeeded in 1982 to the venerable *Revue d'Histoire Économique et Sociale*, which had been established in 1908 and thus was amongst the oldest journals specialising in this field. *H.E.S.*, as it is known, publishes about two special issues a year, which print the proceedings of conferences in economic history. Subjects have included technological change (1983) and Development and the environment (1997).

¹⁷ *Etudes et Documents*, 1989-96, 8 volumes. It has been feared that this committee, established under the Mitterrand regime, would promote a kind of official history. Some leading economic historians have been excluded from this body for reasons which can only be political. The Committee’s publications include guides for research by J. Félix (1994) and A. de Maurepas (1997).

¹⁸ *Comité d'Histoire de l'Industrie*. This institute has also organized conferences and published their proceedings. See for example Alain Plessis (ed., 1993), *Naissance des libertés économiques*, and Emmanuel Chadeau (ed., 1995).

¹⁹ For example *L'électricité dans l'histoire. Problèmes de méthode* (Paris, 1985) or *1880-1980 : un siècle d'électricité dans le monde* (Paris, 1987). For the gas industry, see A. Beltran and J.-P. Williot (1992).

²⁰ Recently, the Post Office, the Savings Bank and the *Caisse des Dépôts* have also started to sponsor research on their history and to publish journals. One could also mention *Les Cahiers. Télécommunications, Histoire et Société*, published twice a year by France Télécom since 1995. There are also local and regional initiatives. The chamber of commerce of Marseilles, for example, sponsors the publication of a history of Marseilles’s trade and industry in the 19th and 20th Centuries; 12 volumes have come out since 1986, including R. Caty and E. Richard (on shipowners), R. Borruey, X. Daumalin and M. Coudurie.

economic history of the world from the 1850s to the 1980s. Albert Broder and Frédéric Mauro (1996) have summarised the economic history of the world during the last fifty years in one volume and plan to work their way backward to the mid-18th century in later volumes. In addition, it is impossible not to mention the three-volume economic and social history of the world from the 16th century onwards by Paul Bairoch (1997), who, although not French by nationality, writes in French²¹. On France specifically, François Caron (1995) wrote an outstanding synthesis on the 19th and 20th centuries, while Maurice Lévy-Leboyer and François Bourguignon (1985) wrote a path-breaking econometric analysis. Several short textbooks for undergraduates have been produced by Jean-Charles Asselain (1984), Alain Beltran and Pascal Griset (1988 and 1994)²², Albert Broder (1993), Dominique Barjot (1995). André Gueslin (1989-93) also edited a collection of four small volumes. The history of French industry has been well covered with two fully-fledged and sophisticated works, the first written single-handedly by Denis Woronoff (1994), the second by a team of historians under the editorship of Maurice Lévy-Leboyer (1996). Geneviève Gavignaud-Fontaine (1996) has written on change in agriculture in the 18th and 19th centuries.

A different group of synthetic works focuses on issues of narrower scope, attempting to draw conclusions from in-depth analysis of existing literature. Patrick Verley (1997) wrote a survey of Western industrialisation up to the mid-19th century. Unlike most recent literature, which focused on supply-side factors, he puts demand as the single most important factor in the Industrial Revolution. François Caron (1985 and 1997b) has written two remarkable and seminal books, the first on the dynamism of industrial societies and the “economics of innovation” and the other on the second and third industrial revolutions²³. The role played by the French state in the economy over the last three centuries is one of the most hotly debated subjects by historians, economists, and politicians alike. Some authors, such as Patrick Fridenson and André Straus (1987), consider government intervention as positive, whilst a more liberal approach prevails elsewhere, for example in the large volume of essays edited by Maurice Lévy-Leboyer and Jean-Claude Casanova (1991)²⁴.

Indeed, the major debate, which had been started after World War II by American scholars about the growth of the French economy, has been going on. Early participants had stressed how slow this growth had been relative to other Western countries. Next, a “revisionist school” emerged: it considered national product per capita (and not in the aggregate) and discovered that its growth was not particularly slow, and that the French economy had not done badly between 1815 and 1914. This debate always had, at least for French writers, political undertones, which it retains, but with a curious reversal of positions. Recently, left-wingers have had a positive view of French economic growth and discovered a specific French model of economic development, in which intervention by the State played a major - and useful - role. On the other hand, liberals declare that such interventions have ended in costly failures and take a gloomy view of the economic history of a country which has been constantly backward and which they see presently as sinking fast into underdevelopment²⁵. However, there is a general agreement that the serious depression that is affecting the French economy in the late 20th century mirrors that of the closing decades of the 19th. This first “Great Depression” has been reassessed by Y. Breton, Albert Broder and Michel Luftalla (1997)²⁶.

²¹ See also C. Beaud (1988).

²² See also their history of technology (1990).

²³ François Caron has established at the Sorbonne a center for the history of innovation and several promising young historians are working under his guidance; see F. Caron (1984). For other works on technology, see L. André (1996) and L. Bergeron (1990).

²⁴ See also Michel Margairaz (1991) on government attitudes towards economic affairs, 1932-52, and Michel Lescure (1982).

²⁵ On this debate see the introduction of François Crouzet, edit., *The Economic development of France since 1870* (Aldershot, 1993), I, pp. IX-XIX.

²⁶ On the role of the state, see also J. Meyer (1983), and A. Gueslin (1992).

b. Rural France, industry, and transport

As far as monographs are concerned, most research has been carried out along the same lines as those of the previous generation. Only a handful of books have been written on rural France. Gabriel Désert (1977) has studied the peasants of Calvados, in Normandy, in the 19th century, whilst Ronald Hubscher (1979) focused on farming in Northern France (Pas-de-Calais) from 1850 to 1914. J.M. Moriceau (1994) studied the large farmers of the Paris area (Ile-de-France), and J.M. Boehler (1994) the peasantry of Alsace in the early modern period. A new development is the active interest showed for the history of French forests, by a group of scholars led by Andrée Corvol (1984)²⁷.

The history of French industry attracted more scholars, who have again produced either sectoral or regional studies. There have been several studies of proto-industrialisation²⁸ and of the transition (which failed in some cases) to the factory system: they concern some districts of Northern (Didier Terrier, 1996; Gérard Gayot, 1998), Western (Claude Cailly, 1993; J. Tanguy, 1994) and Southern France (R. Cazals, 1983; C. Marquié, 1993)²⁹. At the national level, Serge Chassagne (1991) wrote a definitive study of the early French cotton industry, whilst Denis Woronoff (1984) filled a gap in the history of the iron industry by portraying its evolution during the Revolution and the Napoleonic era, demonstrating that it did not stagnate quite as much as had been previously thought. Jacques Fiérain focused on the refining of sugar in French ports and Emmanuel Chadeau (1987) on the birth and development of the aircraft industry in the 20th century³⁰. The regional approach was preferred by Pierre Cayez (1978,1980) in his study of the multi-faceted industrialisation of Lyons and its region in the 19th century³¹ and by Michel Hau (1987), who focused on Alsace, showing that it was the most dynamic and industrialised area of France before 1870³². The rise and fall of the iron industry of Valenciennes and the surrounding area, close to the Belgian border, was described by Odette Hardy-Hémery (1984).

Transport also attracted much research. François Caron (1997a) has just produced the first volume of a major study on the French railways. The early railways locomotives had already been described by Jacques Payen (1988), who was the French expert on steam engines (1969, 1988). The Channel Tunnel unsurprisingly became the subject of several books, of which the best by far is the account by Laurent Bonnaud (1994) of how the project, marred by many difficulties, both political and technical, eventually reached its successful conclusion. Two new directions, respectively the history of telecommunications and the development of transport networks for passengers, goods, energy and information, have been explored under the guidance of Pascal Griset (1991,1996) for the former and Michèle Merger (1995) for the latter.

c. Economic relations with foreign countries

Economic relations with foreign countries, both on the Continent and overseas, have remained a popular field of research. The merchants of Saint-Malo, who traded extensively with Spain and the Spanish colonies at the end of Louis XIV's reign, were studied by André Lespagnol (1990)³³, the French East India Company in the 18th century by Philippe Haudrère (1989). Jean-Pierre Poussou (1983) showed in an outstanding book how the Southern city of Bordeaux prospered on the growth of

²⁷ They have organized a research team and held conferences. See also Denis Woronoff (1990) on forests and the charcoal iron industry.

²⁸ For criticism of the concept, see P. Jeannin (1980).

²⁹ See also the conference volume edited by J. Bottin and N. Pellegrin (1996); it also deals with textile consumption; cf D. Roche (1989).

³⁰ See also his history of life of the aircraft manufacturer Latécoère (1990) and his books of 1995 and 1996.

³¹ See also Morsel and Parent (1991).

³² He had earlier (1976) done a remarkable quantitative study of economic growth in one region - Champagne.

³³ See also Michel Zylberberg (1993) on French businessmen in Spain 1780-1800.

its foreign trade, in particular of its colonial trade, thus attracting migrants from all over the South-Western quarter of France³⁴. The difficult issue of the slave trade, for which Nantes was the major French port, and of its impact upon the economy has been analysed by Olivier Pétré-Grenouilleau (1996), who has also written an overview of French sea-borne trade (1997). Worth of note is a history of the Atlantic Ocean written by Paul Butel³⁵ (1997a).

For the later period, we have a good monograph on trade between France and the German States from the formation of the Zollverein to the Franco-Prussian war (Dagmar Soleymani, 1997), a book on Franco-German economic and financial relations in the 1930s (Sylvain Schirmann, 1995) and a conference volume on French foreign trade from 1892 to the present (*Comité pour l'histoire économique et financière de la France*, 1993c). Economic historians have also been interested in French foreign investment. The year 1977 saw the publication of two major works on the subject. The first is a collection of essays brought together by Maurice Lévy-Leboyer (1977), the second a study of French interests in the Ottoman Empire by Jacques Thobie. Franco-Belgian economic relations in the interwar period and the way they relate to the economic reconstruction of Europe in this period were the subject of an excellent monograph by Eric Bussière (1992). A new field of research was opened by Jacques Marseille in 1984 with a study of the economic links between France and its colonies, with a special interest in the attitude of business leaders to decolonisation³⁶.

d. *From the recent period to the French Revolution*

The “recent” period is attracting a number of economic historians and several conferences have been organized by the Committee for the Economic and Financial History of France and/or by the Institute of Industrial History. We thus have conference volumes on monetary and banking history since the 1920s (*Comité pour l'histoire économique et financière de la France*, 1993b, 1995) as well as on the Marshall Plan and the recovery of France (*Comité...*, 1993a), which has also been studied by Gérard Bossuat (1992). Alain Beltran et al. (1994) looked at how French firms survived during the Nazi occupation and Philippe Mioche (1987) wrote on the Monnet Plan³⁷. However, many important problems, such as the depression of the 1930s, and masses of archival material remain to be explored.

At the other end of the spectrum, the bicentenary of the French Revolution renewed interest in the economic history of the Revolution, which had been neglected for a long time, though Louis Bergeron (1978) had published an exhaustive study of Parisian businessmen in the late 1790s and early 1800s. One must also mention the proceedings of three conferences published in the wake of the 1989 celebrations. The first, edited by Gérard Gayot and J.-P. Hirsch (1989) focused on the uneasy relationship between the Revolution and the rise of capitalism in France. The second chose to highlight the role of the state in French economic and financial affairs during the Revolution (*Comité...* 1991) whilst the third stressed the liberal economic policies introduced by the Revolution (Alain Plessis, 1993). This was supplemented by new research into the *assignats*, the much discredited paper money which was issued from 1790 to 1796 and which caused a virtual collapse of the financial system through hyper-inflation. This is at the centre of works by Florin Aftalion (1987), François Crouzet (1993) and the late Michel Bruguière (1986, 1991).

6. *The rise of business history*

a. *Trends*

³⁴ See also his more general books of 1992 and 1995 (the latter with Jean Meyer) on the history of towns in the 18th and 19th Centuries.

³⁵ See also Butel 1997b on Europe and the Oceans in the 18th Century and his earlier works on the tea (1989) and the opium (1995) trades. Jean Meyer wrote a history of sugar in the same collection (1989).

³⁶ See also J. Bouvier et al. (1986), A. Autheman (1996) and S. Saul (1997).

³⁷ See also R. Frank (1982), M. Lescure (1982), M. Margairaz (1991) and A. Moutet (1997).

The most important development of the last decades is the rise of business history. In the wake of the spread of marxism in the historians' community, business history had long been neglected in France. Many saw firms and business leaders as vile exploiters of the working-class, not worthy of a study in their own right. This was not helped by the decidedly obscurantist attitude to company archives sported by most business firms, which, far from seeking to preserve the company's memory, casually destroyed most of their records whenever the need for more space was felt. This, added to already massive war destruction, left few opportunities for serious business history. This attitude was not specific to France, but was in this case reinforced by an obsession with secrecy shared by most business leaders, the Michelins being the most famous example. Access to surviving records was therefore denied to scholars. Fortunately, this attitude slowly changed from the 1960s onwards, and especially after the 1970s. Several large firms, such as the glass manufacturer Saint-Gobain, have appointed archivists of their own, and many business records have also been deposited in public record offices all over France³⁸. As for historians, they have shown a growing interest in business history. Claude Fohlen (1955) opened the way with a pioneering book on a cotton manufacturer in Eastern France. He was followed by a number of other company histories in the 1960s, amongst which those by Jean Bouvier (1961), by Bertrand Gille (1965,1967) and by François Caron (1973) have already been mentioned and are of special importance³⁹.

However, what was a trickle has become a flood in the last twenty years. A bibliography published in 1995 by Alain Beltran, Jean-Pierre Daviet and Michèle Ruffat lists 601 titles. Some of these studies are limited in size, but others are quite extensive. Since 1992, a journal devoted to business history, *Entreprises et Histoire*⁴⁰, has also come into existence. However, British critics have pointed out that French business history has not matured into a discipline of its own, with autonomous departments in universities. It remains a subsection of economic history and France has of date no equivalent to the Business History Unit (London School of Economics). Still, even economic history does not usually benefit from separate university departments and its teaching remains anchored in traditional history departments, with some inroads into schools of political science and applied foreign languages.

b. Financial and industrial sectors

Amongst this large literature in business history, a number of books stand out. Banking history has attracted much scholarship. Alain Plessis (1983-85) dealt with central banking in his study of the Bank of France during the Second Empire. Eric Bussière (1992b) produced a masterly history of Paribas⁴¹, and Christian Grand (1991) an interesting though rather short study of Neuflyze, Schlumberger and Mallet, a merchant bank born from the merger of three protestant private banks, going back, at least for Mallet, to the 17th century. Marc Meuleau⁴² studied the Banque de l'Indochine. Hubert Bonin (1987a, 1987b, 1987c) has written three books on the Suez Canal Company, on Indosuez (which resulted from the merger of Suez with the Banque de l'Indochine in 1975) and on a large trading company specialised in trade with French West Africa. Banks specialised in credit to farmers were dealt with by André Gueslin (1984).

As far as industrial firms are concerned, textile has been shunted, with the exception of the study of C.P. Oberkampf, a large manufacturer of printed cottons at Jouy-en-Josas, near Paris, in the

³⁸ The late Bertrand Gille played a decisive role in the establishment of business archives departments within public record offices and in having firms' records deposited in them. Unfortunately, all business records which were in the national archives in Paris have recently been moved to Roubaix (Archives du monde du travail).

³⁹ One could also mention G. Thuillier (1959), J. Cavignac (1967), G. Antonetti (1969), P. Guillaume (1966) and S. Chassagne (1971).

⁴⁰ By editions ESKA, 5 avenue de l'Opéra, 75 001 Paris. Efforts have been made to define the aims and methods of business history; see M. Hamon and F. Torres (1987).

⁴¹ And also (1996) a life of H. Finaly, one of Paribas' chief executives.

⁴² Independently, a Japanese scholar wrote on the same bank : Yasuo Gonjo (1993).

late 18th and early 19th century (Serge Chassagne, 1983, Serge Chassagne and Stanley Chapman, 1981)⁴³. Iron and steel have been more fortunate, with several important works on Pont-à-Mousson, a maker of cast-iron pipes which is now part of the Saint-Gobain empire (Alain Baudant, 1980), on Vallourec, a large manufacturer of steel tubes (Catherine Omnès, 1980), whilst Philippe Mioche and Jacques Roux (1988) focused on a steelmaster, Henri Malcor. A much more thoroughly studied firm is undoubtedly the Schneider group of Le Creusot. It was the subject of a superb exhibition on the family, the firm and the company town at the Musée d'Orsay in 1995, which produced a hugely informative and beautifully illustrated catalogue (D. Schneider et al., 1995). Its major historian is Claude Beaud, who unfortunately has only published articles so far (Beaud 1977-1988). Nevertheless, put together, these articles give a detailed picture of a powerful iron, steel and engineering concern. The secondary metal industries and engineering have not been forgotten. Pierre Lamard (1988,1996) contrasted the fortunes of two engineering firms in the Eastern district of Montbéliard, close to Alsace and to the Jura mountains : Japy, a large but now defunct manufacturer of many metal products (including type-writers), and Viellard-Migeon, which grew from a small smithie to become the world number two maker of fish-hooks. In the same area, close to Switzerland, a small but long-lasting family-firm in watch-making has been studied by Nathalie Petiteau (1994). And on the margin between metal-making and the luxury trade⁴⁴, Christofle, a famous maker of silver and silver-plated cutlery and table-ware, was the subject of an enlightening monograph by Marc de Ferrière (1995). Electrical engineering has not been forgotten, with a volume on one major manufacturer of electrical equipment and machinery, edited by Jacques Marseille (1992)⁴⁵. All the major car manufacturers have also been extensively studied, Renault by Patrick Fridenson (1972), Peugeot by Jean-Louis Loubet and Citroën by Sylvie Schweitzer (1982,1992).

But the single French firm which has received the most attention is without doubt Saint-Gobain⁴⁶. This firm was established in 1665 to break the Venetian monopoly on plate-glass. It is therefore one of the oldest surviving industrial concerns in the world. It gradually developed into a large multinational, which is not only a first-rate glass-manufacturer but also a major producer of chemicals and many other industrial products. Claude Pris (1981) and Jean-Pierre Daviet (1988,1989) are but two of its historians. Another multinational, Rhône-Poulenc, a large chemical and pharmaceutical manufacturer, was studied by Pierre Cayez (1989), and Kuhlmann by J.E. Léger (1988)⁴⁷.

Outside of the financial and industrial sectors, there are far fewer publications. Civil engineering has its historian in the person of Dominique Barjot (1992, 1993), who not only wrote a general book on the subject, but also a detailed study of Fougerolle⁴⁸, a leading firm in that sector, as well as fostering other studies into lesser known building and public works firms by some of his graduate students (Arnaud Berthonnet on Léon Chagnaud, A. Burnel on Spie-Batignolles, A. d'Angio). Publishing would have been forgotten but for the work of Frédéric Barbier (1980) on Berger-Levrault from the late 17th to the late 19th century, as would insurance but for the study of Axa by C. Desagher (1995). As for trade, both wholesale and retail, it has received hardly any attention at all, the only work of note being a history of the now defunct Belle Jardinière, one of the earliest department stores in Paris (François Faraut, 1987). The rise and growth of store chains, of super- and hypermarkets still await detailed studies.

⁴³ See also L.M. Lomüller (1996) on Ternaux.

⁴⁴ Which is attracting interest; f.i. M. Atlas and A. Monniot (1995).

⁴⁵ See also F. Torres (1992), V. Rostas (1995).

⁴⁶ It was liberal in opening early its rich archives on which Pris and Daviet based their books.

⁴⁷ See also Nicolas Stoskopf (1991) and Muriel Le Roux (1996).

⁴⁸ Unfortunately, his doctoral dissertation of 1989, in seven volumes, on French large civil engineering firms, has not yet been published.

It must be stressed that business history operates at the microeconomic level, that it deals with firms -the basic unit in an economy- and with concrete cases. It also puts the economic historian in touch with people, be they entrepreneurs, managers or workers. However, one can get too much of a good thing and the accumulation of histories of individual firms can become tedious. French business historians will have to follow the path chosen by American scholars a few years ago and move from the history of firms to the history of the firm. That means focusing on changes in the structure of the firm, in management methods, accounting procedures, research and development, marketing and the recruitment and training of the workforce. Hitherto, this approach has been limited to a few articles in economic history journals or conference papers⁴⁹.

c. The study of entrepreneurs and business leaders

There is one field which has already produced much good research : the study of entrepreneurs and business leaders. It was pioneered by the publication of the proceedings of two conferences, edited by Maurice Lévy-Leboyer (1979) and François Caron (1983). Later, Emmanuel Chadeau (1988) published a book mixing some biographies of leading entrepreneurs with more general views on entrepreneurship and risk⁵⁰. And Jean-Marie Moine (1989) produced an in-depth study of Lorraine's steel barons. Jean-Pierre Hirsch (1991) also threw new light on the business community by analysing the aspirations and attitudes of businessmen in Lille and the surrounding area, which was dominated by the textile industry. Moreover, in the wake of the English *Dictionary of Business Biography*, the Institute of Modern and Contemporary History⁵¹ is currently editing a multi-volume dictionary of business leaders of the Second Empire, which catches, on a regional basis, most of the 19th century French business elite. Four volumes have already been published, with a separate publication in a different format for the entrepreneurs and managers of the *département du Nord*, on the border with Belgium (F. Barbier, 1989). Historians have taken a special interest in business dynasties (defined as families which owned and managed a business for four generations at least). Paul Butel (1991) thus wrote on the wine merchants of Bordeaux and Frédéric Barbier (1991) on the Foulds, a banking family which moved from banking to politics and which also renounced its judaism in favour of protestantism. One should also mention the volume edited by Michel Hau (1989) on three families of industrialists in Alsace and the two special issues of the journal *Entreprises et Histoire* on entrepreneurial dynasties edited by François Crouzet (1995, 1996). French scholars have also been instrumental in developing a new field of research - the historical demography of firms. Two sessions were held on this topic at the Xth and XIth International Conferences of Economic History under the leadership of Philippe Jobert and Michael Moss , who then published their proceedings (1990, 1995).

d. Industrial archeology

A field of research which was explored very late, compared to Britain, is industrial archaeology. The pioneer was Maurice Daumas, who published a large-scale treatise on this subject (1980). Official sponsorship came from the Ministry of Culture, with a research unit devoted to the industrial heritage (*Patrimoine industriel*), which was established in 1983 within the framework of the national survey of monuments and works of arts. Industrial archaeology is now a well-established field with a journal of its own⁵². Several industrial sites have been turned into museums, such as the *Ecomusée du Creusot*, at the heart of the former Schneider iron and steel empire, the *Forges de Buffon*, an 18th century charcoal ironworks in Burgundy, or further East the saltworks of Arc-et-Senans in Franche-Comté. There also have been a fair number of local and regional initiatives to preserve and study France's industrial

⁴⁹ M. Lévy-Leboyer (1980); Y. Cassis et al. (1995), proceedings of an Anglo-French business conference. Also A. Lefebvre-Teillard (1985). Small and medium size firms in the 1920s have been studied by Michel Lescure (1996).

⁵⁰ See also L. Bergeron (1991).

⁵¹ Institut d'histoire moderne et contemporaine; see bibliography under this heading.

⁵² *L'archéologie industrielle en France*.

heritage. For instance, the Haute-Marne, which was a leading producer of iron in the charcoal age, counts its own preservation society⁵³, which produces a journal aptly called *Fontes* (Castings).

7. *Shortcomings and uneasy relations*

As is obvious from the above, French economic historians have been quite productive in recent years. Yet, one must recognize that the discipline continues to suffer from serious shortcomings. The major one is its relation with economics⁵⁴ and the neglect of new methodologies which have been developed abroad.

The “New Economic History” is not terribly “new” anymore, as it emerged in the United States in the late 1950s⁵⁵, and soon became dominant there. In Britain, Scandinavia, Italy, and in Spain the New Economic History also became influential. In France, however, though its existence and progress were not unknown⁵⁶, it made very few converts and was in fact sharply criticised by leading historians, just like the *histoire quantitative* some years before. Many of them were shocked by the use of counterfactual analysis by cliometricians. The hypothesis of a conditional and “contrary to facts” world left them puzzled. They did not realise that traditional history did indeed use counterfactuals, although implicit ones. Cliometricians only made theirs explicit.

French historians were also shocked by the off-hand treatment in some cliometricians’ works of statistical data the accuracy and validity of which was doubtful, and by the lack of any serious criticism of sources. As a consequence, all the work of the “New Economic History” became untrustworthy in their eyes. Moreover, cliometricians worked within a neoclassical framework, which was abhorrent to many French historians who remained influenced by marxism.

However, the main factor which explains the rejection of the New Economic History (in its broader meaning, to include the work of scholars such as Douglass North) is that a large majority of French economic historians was incapable of understanding it fully, because of insufficient or non-existent training in economics and statistics. They had graduated (and still do) in history departments, which offer no formal schooling in economics and mathematics. Besides, their students were and still are very reluctant to undertake any quantitative work whatsoever.

On the other hand, French economists, working of course in other departments, have shown little interest in economic history and have few contacts with historians. A report written in 1993 shows that historical research in departments of economics was confined to a handful of isolated individuals and a few small teams. Few Ph.D's in economic history have been undertaken by economists, and even fewer of the latter have really specialised in this field⁵⁷. For the last decades, the most significant work has been done by researchers at the ISEA/ISMEA unit led by J. Marczewski and then by Jean-Claude Toutain. But the unit has been depleted by retirement and death, so that the task of building up and publishing long-term time series on French economic growth has languished. An important landmark was the publication of Jean-Claude Toutain’s study (1987) of French GDP between 1789 and 1982⁵⁸. Admittedly, a number of efforts have been made to bring historians and

⁵³ Association pour la sauvegarde du patrimoine métallurgique haut-marnais.

⁵⁴ In addition, a potential weakness was created in 1984 by the abolition of the *thèse d’Etat*, which had been a pillar of the French historical school.

⁵⁵ The famous book by R. Fogel, *Railroads and American Economic Growth : Essays in Econometric History*, was published in 1964.

⁵⁶ A book edited by R. Andreano (1977) offered translations of 11 important articles together with a long introduction by Jean Heffer.

⁵⁷ Exceptions would be Jean-Charles Asselain, Louis Fontvieille and of course J.-C. Toutain. Other economists who have published important work in economic history are Joël Broustail and L. Marco (1989).

⁵⁸ Cf supra. J.C. Toutain is now preparing new series on a regional basis.

economists together. In 1994, a conference on “Historical Economics” was organized in Paris⁵⁹. One leading economic affairs institute holds regular top-level seminars in economic history⁶⁰. However, one must recognize that the gap between historians’ economic history and economists’ economic history remains wide open.

A survey of works in both the New Economic History and the kind of problem-oriented, economics-literate economic history that prevails in most other countries will therefore necessarily be a short one. The main work in that field is that of Maurice Lévy-Leboyer and François Bourguignon (1985), on French economic growth in the 19th century. It uses econometric methods and highlights the slowing down of growth in the latter part of the century. Three younger scholars must also be mentioned : Marc Flandreau (1995) for his book on France and the international monetary system in the mid-19th century, Pierre-Cyrille Hautcoeur (1997) on the French financial market and Jean-Pierre Dormois (1997), who carefully compares productivity in France and the United Kingdom on the eve of the First World War, sector by sector and branch by branch. He convincingly shows that in most cases productivity in France was much lower than in the United Kingdom. The only other major work to be mentioned is that of Jean-Yves Grenier (1996) who, with a substantially different approach, since he relies on an institutional rather than an econometric framework, attempts an ambitious survey of the 18th century French economy. Only a handful of articles might be added to this list⁶¹.

There is no doubt that the future of economic history lies in a closer relationship with economics. Economic historians must ask the same questions as economists do for the more recent period, they must deal with problems rather than with subjects and focus on conceptualising rather than simply gathering data. Though Joseph Schumpeter once wrote that “methodology is the last resort of a scoundrel”, some methodological debate would indeed be useful⁶². In particular, French historians must at last resort to modern quantitative methods. In the absence of such a change, one may fear that French economic history will become marginalised relatively to other advanced countries. The exceptionalism of France, which was and still is so loudly praised⁶³, might well become synonymous with stagnation or even backwardness. It is already a bad omen that the first three issues of the new *European Economic History Review* have not included any contribution from France.

Another serious shortcoming of French economic history is its overwhelming concern for France and its relative neglect of foreign countries. Admittedly, this is the case for French historians as a whole, who have been very “insular”, but this trend is particularly marked amongst economic historians⁶⁴; hence a lack of well-researched international comparisons. A number of historians have nevertheless entered this field, with Britain remaining the most attractive country. Both authors of this article have specialised in British studies, with their main interest in the Industrial Revolution (see

⁵⁹ Its proceedings were published in *Economie et Société, Histoire quantitative de la France*, AF 22, April-May 1996. A number of foreign scholars took part in the conference, which was sponsored by 3 Parisian universities.

⁶⁰ The Observatoire Français des Conjonctures Economiques.

⁶¹ See Florin Aftalion (1988) and Patrick Verley (1988).

⁶² The only contributions in this sector are two not very recent books by senior scholars, one by Pierre Chaunu (1978) and the other by Michel Morineau (1989), and a handful of articles.

⁶³ Fernand Braudel and Ernest Labrousse were prone to boast about the superiority of French historians over their British and American colleagues; “ils sont beaucoup moins forts que nous”, said one of their epigones on returning from the USA.

⁶⁴ The accidental choice of industrialisation in Western Europe from 1880 to 1970 being put on the syllabus for the agrégation (a competitive exam to recruit the future secondary-school teachers, which also opens the door to university teaching for some successful candidates) in 1998 and 1999 has generated the publication of a general text-book edited by Dominique Barjot (1997) and of several country studies, which are mentioned below. But it is striking that the volume on the “Benelux” countries is written by three Belgian historians: René Leboutte et al.(1998).

bibliography). Other works on Britain include a monograph on Tate and Lyle, the sugar refiners, by Philippe Chalmin (1983), a study of the city of London by André Guillaume and Marie-Claude Esposito (1993) and an essay on the decline of the British economy (with a strong anti-Thatcherite stance) by Richard Farnetti (1991). Some recent textbooks on the British economy in the 20th century are solid and useful⁶⁵.

On Germany, Michel Hau (1994) recently published an outstanding economic history from 1815⁶⁶, Hervé Joly (1996) a sociological study of German business leaders since 1933, and Claude Diebolt (1995) analysed the relationship between education and economic growth. But apart from those, the country has fared rather badly with French scholars. The rest of Northern Europe has hardly attracted any attention at all, except for the work on the early modern period of two senior scholars, Michel Morineau (1984-85) on the Netherlands, Pierre Jeannin (1996) for the Baltic Area and its merchants, and Marie-Louise Pelus (1981) on a Lübeck merchant. Southern Europe has aroused rather more interest amongst French historians, but not so much in economic history as in politics and international relations. On the Iberian Peninsula, the large-scale long-term study of Catalonia undertaken by Pierre Vilar (1962) is a classic, in spite of its author's pro-stalinist stance. Unfortunately Albert Broder (1981) has so far not been able to publish his monumental work on French investment in Spain in the 19th century. Italy is covered almost exclusively by two scholars, Alain Dewerpe (1985) who studied protoindustrialisation in the rural areas to the North of the country, and Michèle Merger, who is putting the finishing touch on a study of Italian railways. She has also just finished a textbook on industrialisation in Italy (1998). Several French scholars have worked on the French colonial empire and on Latin America, but not much on purely economic problems. On the U.S.A., Jean Heffer (1986) has done a remarkable study of the port of New York and its trade in the 19th century, and the recent textbook by Claude Fohlen, Jean Heffer and François Weil (1997) has excellent chapters on economic affairs⁶⁷. But hardly any study on Asia, not to mention Australasia, has been published.

One could console oneself by stressing that the quality of works on foreign countries compensates for its paucity, but the latter remains very unfortunate indeed.

Postscriptum.

The recent article by George Grantham, "The French cliometric revolution: A survey of cliometric contributions to French economic history", in *European Review of Economic History* 1(1997) pp.353-405, lists a large number of cliometric studies on French economic history, mostly articles written by American scholars. A number of these contributions is critical of accepted wisdom, and certainly deserves to be taken seriously. Important cliometric work is also being done at the "National Institute for Agronomical Research", under the direction of G. Postel-Vinay.

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⁶⁷ See also J. Bourdieu (1996) and R. Perron (1996).

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