Roundtable Reflection: The Past and Future of French Urban History

III. Essay:
Privilege and Urban Space
Jeff Horn, Manhattan College

The cities of early-modern France, and indeed of early-modern Europe more generally, were characterized by overlapping and competing privileges. This *bricolage* of privilege—legal, tax, political, and honorific, among others—profoundly affected Europe’s urban experience. Today, I want to consider briefly how privilege shaped the circulation of goods and services before making a few suggestions about how this economic movement and the privileges that undergirded it helps us to understand the rhythms of early-modern French cities.

In my forthcoming book, I argue that the Bourbon state systematically deployed privilege as its most effective means of promoting French economic development. The government’s use of privilege focused on urban areas. The *corporate* regimes of France’s larger cities are an obvious example of how privilege influenced the circulation of goods and services. The influx of raw materials, labor, commercial agents and customers kept France’s cities alive and growing. Urban privilege protected these vital spaces, so necessary as hubs for transportation and communications and as the seat of judicial, clerical and political authorities. But the provision of monopolies to diverse sets of producers also inhibited economic growth.

Beginning under Louis XIV and accelerating after 1750, the French state consciously sought to mitigate the limitations stemming from *corporate* monopolies by granting or

---

strengthening the privileges of competing urban spaces. Located within the confines of a city like Paris’ Faubourg Saint-Antoine or just outside city limits like the Faubourg Saint-Germain, these enclaves were usually controlled by seigneurs who exercised *police* powers because they possessed the privilege of high justice. These enclaves, found in nearly every French city, enjoyed many privileges that stimulated economic development. The most important of these privileges exempted producers from either *corporate* oversight or from the rules and regulations imposed by the state itself. For the purposes of urban economic development, the most important privilege was liberty from the strictures of the society of orders.

Thus, instead of the single melody so many people seem to hear when they think about early-modern cities, the French economy moved to multiple rhythms that had the potential to harmonize into an intricate yet beautiful symphony. Of course, the converse was also true, a cacophonous noise could also result. My research suggests that urban agglomerations in early-modern France generally avoided sounding too many discordant notes.

The privilege of liberty took many forms and applied to many different sized territories ranging from provinces such as Flanders to tiny areas smaller than a city block like St. Jean de Latran in Paris. Nor did most cities have only one enclave: Paris had 13 and Rouen had 14 thereby multiplying the opportunities and complicating the urban environment. State-supported economic development in privileged enclaves produced goods essential to the urban, the national, and even the international economy. Although cities still acted as powerful poles of attraction, privileged enclaves siphoned off significant proportions of incoming labor, raw materials and entrepreneurial talent. This competition challenged *corporate* producers who, on the surface, seemingly had little incentive to innovate: legal monopolies were not as exclusive or as stultifying as many people think. The privileged enclaves furnished choices, alternatives and opportunities that did not long survive the crescendo that closed the curtain on the *ancien régime*. It is also worth noting that the enclaves afforded less closely regulated means of access or escape from French cities that authorities and the *octrois* sometimes appreciated and sometimes sought to eliminate. In urban areas, people dancing back and forth across nominally rigid barriers called the tune far more frequently than is generally recognized.

To give you a sense of the scale and significance of these privileged enclaves, I want to say just a few words about the area surrounding Rouen. Liberated from the constraints of the
corporations and many state mandates, the 14 enclaves in and around Rouen, inhabited by tens of thousands of people, housed more productive divisions of labor, made different and eye-catching thread mixes for warp and weft, and developed refinements in using coal as fuel. Thanks to state deployment of the privilege of liberty to encourage entrepreneurs and inventors, the enclaves contributed disproportionately to technological change. By promoting the establishment of communities of foreigners and by allowing the greater economic participation by women and religious minorities, the enclaves increased the possibility of technical innovation and expanded the supply of entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurs capitalized thoroughly on the industrial opportunities found in the privileged districts turning them into what would today be called “enterprise zones.” In Rouen, dubbed by contemporaries, the “Manchester of France,” cotton textile manufacturers situated in privileged enclaves numbered the city's guild masters 907 to 727.

In Normandy, the existence of cities with particularly effective economic privileges like Elbeuf and Louviers, among others, deepened and sharpened the rhythms of economic development by diversifying the products, approaches and qualities of French manufactures. I do not have the time to identify all the chords, but suffice to say, privilege was essential to the industrial success of the urban areas of Normandy, a process and a goal that was imitated, though not as successfully in many other places and spaces across the length and breadth of the realm.

The final urban privilege that I would like to mention is that of the free ports. Dunkerque retained that status when acquired by France in 1662, Marseille received its free port in 1669 and Bayonne and Lorient in 1784. Tax exemption provided these ports with privileged access to the accelerating tempo of exotic beats that drove global sea-borne commerce. Goods from the Indies, China, the Levant and the Americas were found alongside those of Europe attracting diverse populations, activities and opportunities to these cities. On a smaller scale, the privilege of being a colonial entrepot granted to 9 French cities (Bayonne, Bordeaux, Calais, Dieppe, Le Havre, Honfleur, La Rochelle, Rouen, and Sète) in 1717 allowed goods to be received, warehoused and then reshipped without paying customs functioned in similar fashion.

I hope that this brief glimpse into my project provides some additional perspective on the role of the state in picking the pace of the French economy through the deployment of privilege. I seek to restore a sense of wonder, of the excitement of
possibility to thinking about early modern French cities. Instead of the sedate sway of a repetitive and boringly regular tune, French cities capered to the pulse of deep and diverse rhythms that found expression in the Enlightenment, the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution. I have almost certainly overused my musical metaphors, but sometimes it is difficult to turn the beat around.