Privileged Enclaves: Entrepreneurial Opportunities in Eighteenth-Century France

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Privilege—is there any word that better sums up the distinctiveness of old regime France? Questions of privilege were at the heart of political controversies, social conflicts, and economic opportunities throughout the eighteenth century. From the level of a province to that of a single individual, privilege bounded how life was experienced before 1789. The faubourg Saint-Antoine on the eastern edge of Paris is, without question, the privileged urban area best known to historians. Several generations of talented labor and left-leaning political historians have lauded the faubourg for its resistance to corporate despotism and for the employment prospects and liberties enjoyed by its workers, while celebrating the vital role its restive workers played in revolutionary politics from the Réveillon Riots and the fall of the Bastille in 1789 to the Vendémiaire Rising of the Year IV.¹ Until the publication

of Alain Thillay's important work on the faubourg in 2002, however, no one had considered this privileged area as a locus for entrepreneurialism and technological change. Nor had anyone fully investigated the impact of the faubourg on Paris' industrial development as a whole.

Given the sustained attention devoted to the faubourg Saint-Antoine and the other privileged enclaves of Paris, the nearly complete lack of interest in the privileged areas of other large French cities is surprising. This paper will begin to fill that void by considering the significance of the privileged enclaves in the cities of Rouen and Bordeaux. Big-city privileged enclaves functioned as a kind of old regime "enterprise zone," and they were increasingly important components of eighteenth-century France's

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4 The other privileged areas of Paris were the abbey of Saint-Germain-des-Prés and Sainte-Geneviève, the enclaves of Saint-Jean-de-Latran and the Temple, the priories of Saint-Denis-de-la-Charte and Saint-Martin-des-Champs: Kaplan, *La Fin*, 340. All but the faubourg Saint-Antoine were under the control of Paris' corporations: Sonenscher, 104.

dynamic industrial sector. In myriad ways, these privileged enclaves invigorated the urban and thus the national economy. The faubourg Saint-Antoine may demand attention, but to understand the urban economy of old regime France we must also explore these other privileged domains.

In the faubourgs and banlieux of Rouen, there were fourteen privileged enclaves, with the most notable being the parish of Saint-Sever across the river from the old city. Seigneurs exercising the right of high justice limited the tax and police powers of Rouen’s municipal authorities and circumscribed the regulations of the city's corporations chartered by the crown. Four of these privileged areas dated from the sixteenth century, and ten others had been created in 1702 with the "dismemberment of the vicomté of Rouen" by Louis XIV. Of the fourteen, ten maintained separate regulations for the corporate bodies that oversaw industrial production. In the key sector of cotton textiles, worth fifty million livres annually from the generality, the number of master cotton weavers in these relatively small, privileged enclaves outnumbered those of Rouen proper, the realm's fifth largest city, described by contemporaries as "the Manchester of France," by a significant margin: 907 to 727.

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6 These seigneurs included the clergy of the abbey of Fécamp for St. Gervais, the seigneur of Belbeuf, the Countess de Vintimille, the Duke de Montmorency, the Prince de Soubise (Preaux), and the clergy of the church of La Chartreuse de Saint-Julien; Muslet, Remonstrance du parlement de Rouen, 7 Aug. 1779, Archives Nationales [hereafter AN] F12 786.

7 Louis Thiroux de Crosne, Lettre à M. de Tolozan, 27 Aug. 1779, AN F12 786; Goy, Mémoire sur les Bureaux de toilerie établis dans la ville et généralité de Rouen et sur le Commerce de ses fabriques en conséquence de la tournée générale que l'inspecteur des manufactures vient d'y faire, 12 Nov. 1782, AN F12 650; and Goy, Mémoire général
In Bordeaux, ecclesiastical seigneurs from the relevant parish churches loosely supervised the ecclesiastical enclaves \((\text{sauvetats})\) of Saint-Seurin and Saint-André. These two parishes were among the most populous in Bordeaux, and a very high percentage of the city's industrial output was produced outside the control of the mayor, city fathers, and guilds of France's third largest city. Over the course of the eighteenth century, wood- and metal-working as well as the production of cotton textiles and luxury goods for export were increasingly concentrated in these less closely regulated work environments. \(^8\) Tanneries, starch factories, and porcelain works provided not only jobs, but disgusting smells and health risks that the bourgeois of Bordeaux happily relegated to other parishes. The rapidly expanding building trades were also centered in the ecclesiastical enclaves. \(^9\)

Other important privileged enclaves in large French cities included the Vaise in Lyon and the faubourg Croncels in Troyes, but according to Michael Sonenscher, almost every significant urban area had at least one. \(^10\) In all these instances, the privileged enclaves contained a concentration of enterprise and entrepreneurs as well as a volume of industrial output that dwarfed their relatively

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\(^8\) Almanach de commerce, d'arts et métiers pour la ville de Bordeaux et de la province pour l'année commune 1779 (Bordeaux: Bergeret, 1779), Archives Municipales de Bordeaux [hereafter AMB] Ca 1.


\(^10\) Sonenscher, 64.
meager territorial extent. Per capita, zones like Saint-Sever, Saint-Seurin, and the faubourg Saint-Antoine were the industrial dynamos of eighteenth-century France.

As might be guessed, what made these areas so attractive to entrepreneurs was the lessened weight of the strangling web of corporate and municipal regulations so characteristic of the urban old regime. These areas were not completely free of regulation—had they been, how would the privilege have been maintained? How would it have been lucrative? To take one example, Bordeaux's locksmiths sued the clerical seigneur, because in Saint-Seurin a worker was not required to serve an apprenticeship but had only to present his masterpiece and pay eighty livres to become a master. In the city, masters had to serve a three-year apprenticeship and pay 300 livres. The city locksmiths claimed that the lax standards in Saint-Seurin were unfair and undermined the worth of their own privilege because these so-called "masters" were infringing on their protected market. They acknowledged that it was impossible to keep goods made in the ecclesiastical enclaves out of their reserved market: the city proper. The masters of Saint-Seurin replied with a detailed list of all the hidden costs—mostly to pay for food and drink for banquets—that meant that, if anything, their expenditure was greater than that of the city masters. Their mastership might cost only eighty livres, but the food and liquor they had to buy cost another 900! It also took about eighteen months for them to make something worthy of being judged a masterpiece. The greater number of locksmiths in Bordeaux who set up shop in a privileged area suggests that it was easier, cheaper, and faster to establish a profitable business
Despite these advantages, corporate restrictions in Bordeaux were debilitating in part because the guild masters controlled access to raw materials. For example, those who wanted to sell hides had to offer the glovemakers first selection and have their stock picked over by the other leatherworking guilds before a producer in one of the enclaves even had a crack at it. Masters also monopolized coal arriving at the city docks. Bordeaux's guilds deliberately and consistently sought to prevent any increase in the overall number of masters and to keep out anyone unrelated to a current member of the corporation. At the same time, the corporations of Bordeaux sought to choke off the supply of skilled labor to the privileged enclaves by demanding a sort of "right of first refusal" for all newly arrived journeymen. They saw such a demand as a legitimate part of their privilege; in their petition, they argued that they should have their choice among "the best and the most skilled workers because they had more right to the public trust because of their authentic proofs of their [superior] capacity. It is only just that they have the most

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11 Delessart, Lettre à M. de Cotte, 28 Feb. 1780, AN F12 757A; Coqumartin, État des corps et communautés de la ville de Bordeaux, 9 Nov. 1776, Archives départementales de la Gironde [hereafter ADG] C1005; and Mémoire pour les maîtres serruriers sans jurandes habitants la ville et faubourgs de Bordeaux responsif à celui des maîtres jurandés dans la même ville, n.d. [1780], AN F12 757A. The number of shoemakers in the ecclesiastical enclaves was also substantially larger than in the city itself, and their production was largely exported: Heimmermann, "The Guilds of Bordeaux," 27.


13 A number of complaints about the Bordelais can be found in AN F12 757A. See, for example, the charcutiers in 1773.
capable workers to help them."\textsuperscript{14} Repeated attempts were also made to seize goods manufactured in Saint-Seurin or Saint-André that entered fraudulently into the city proper. The available evidence suggests that this attempt to plug the dike with a slender finger of regulation was aimed at ruining particularly successful individual competitors rather than actually stopping the illicit entry of goods.\textsuperscript{15} The guild masters knew they had an immensely profitable stranglehold on many goods and services. Not surprisingly, they wanted to keep it.\textsuperscript{16}

The privileged enclaves countered all attempts to destroy them or assimilate them with advantages of their own. As the masters charged, smuggling goods made outside city limits into Bordeaux was relatively simple, and even when contraband was discovered, unruly crowds repeatedly prevented the authorities from taking action.\textsuperscript{17}

The clerical seigneurs' loose oversight of the world of work meant that laboring for a master was not restricted to formal apprentices; entrepreneurs could also open more

\textsuperscript{14} Gallinato, 47-51 and the \textit{Arrêt de la cour du parlement de Bordeaux} of 26 Jan. 1785 reproduced in the \textit{Journal de Guienne} 162, 9 Feb. 1785. The quote is from the \textit{Adresse à Nosseigneurs de Parlement}, n.d. [1782], ADG 3J E703.

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Adresse à Nosseigneurs de Parlement}, 21 Feb. 1785, ADG 3J E703 and \textit{Adresse au Contrôleur Général}, 31 July 1777, AN F12 757A.

\textsuperscript{16} Their attempts were undermined by the crown's sale of hundreds of masterships between 1781-84. Daniel Heimmermann, "Crisis and Protest in the Guilds of Eighteenth-Century France: The Example of the Bordeaux Leather Trades," \textit{Proceedings of the Western Society for French History: Selected Papers of the Annual Meeting} (1996): 436. Compared to most large French cities, a relatively large percentage of trades in Bordeaux were "free;" in other words, they were outside the realm of corporate regulation: Heimmermann, "The Guilds of Bordeaux," 24-27.

\textsuperscript{17} Heimmermann, "The Guilds of Bordeaux," 24.
than one shop and make any sort of product they wanted. With the rules for hiring and firing rarely enforced, the privileged enclaves attracted heavy immigration from all over southwestern France, leading to somewhat lower wages than in the rest of Bordeaux. The limited power of authority—both corporate and seigneurial—also facilitated the development of Saint-Seurin and Saint-André into centers for journeymen (*compagnonnage*), and Bordeaux was one of the major stops on the *Tour de France*.18

There were considerable drawbacks to being a hub for journeymen. Many masters had to "walk small" when faced with the ability of journeymen's associations to form a coalition to raise wages, change working conditions, or control access to employment. The relative lack of police power by the seigneur combined with the concentration of so many rootless young men in a small area, the rivalries between the brotherhoods, and the presence of nearly all the motherhouses meant that Saint-Seurin and Saint-André were the most violent districts in a generally violent city.19

The rapid growth of industry in Saint-Seurin and Saint-André suggests that the advantages more than compensated for the drawbacks. A major legal challenge to the independence of the ecclesiastical enclaves in 1782 by the joiners contained a grudging admission by the city masters that they faced a serious competitive disadvantage in access

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to labor. They acknowledged that skilled laborers frequently left their employ when they tried to discipline them, forcing the city's masters to poach workers from one another to make up for their inability to attract workers from outside the city or to match the working conditions found in the enclaves.20

With journeymen relatively free to come and go from Saint-Seurin and Saint-André, immigrants could establish themselves much more easily. As a result, entrepreneurs' access to labor, especially skilled labor, a rather rare commodity in the southwest, was not as bounded as in those areas under municipal control. Bordeaux's first factories, which made starch and porcelain, were located in Saint-Seurin. Other innovations both in the organization of labor and in technology, including the forging of crucible steel and the use of coke in iron making, also debuted and remained concentrated there.21 Without the insistence on the exclusive use of traditional methods by the city's guild masters, which they enforced through inspections, entrepreneurs in the ecclesiastical enclaves could experiment with techniques, develop new products, and execute novel designs. In another petition sent to the Parlement of Guyenne, the joiners attempted to denigrate these entrepreneurs by referring to them as "innovators."22 The entrepreneurs of Saint-Seurin and Saint-André would have taken the master joiners' insulting term as a compliment. The "innovators'" utter rejection of a static conception of the market in the enclaves enabled the metropolis of Bordeaux to imitate technological progress in other places and to satisfy demands arising from the fickle

20 Adresse à Nosseigneurs de Parlement, n.d. [1782].
21 Forrest, 13; Gallinato, 48; and Mémoire pour les maîtres cloûtières de la Ville de Bordeaux, n.d. [March 1762], AN F12 757A.
22 Adresse à Nosseigneurs de Parlement, n.d. [1782].
whims of fashion. Since much of the enclaves' production was exported, these competitive issues were particularly significant.\textsuperscript{23} If the southwest of France was a relative technological backwater, without the hothouse atmosphere provided by the privileged enclaves, this hub of the Atlantic economy would have had fewer products to export, thereby limiting growth.

The vitality of Saint-Seurin and Saint-André and their indispensable role in the rapid industrial growth experienced by Bordeaux in the eighteenth century also applied to the fourteen privileged enclaves in and around Rouen. Although the role of these areas resembled those of their southern counterparts, the nature of the urban environment and the industrial economy were vastly different. Upper Normandy was the most heavily industrialized region of late-eighteenth-century France. Rouen was surrounded by a dense zone of rural outworking and semi-urban production stretching up to twenty-five miles in every direction and engaging mostly in the production of cotton textiles, all financed and controlled by the merchants of the provincial capital.\textsuperscript{24} Unlike Bordeaux, where the city was relatively isolated from other urban agglomerations, Rouen was the hub of a "Lancashire on the Seine" closely connected to other industrial centers. This difference had important consequences for access to skilled labor and the ability of urban guild masters to control regional production and technological competitiveness.

The leaders of Rouen's corporate bodies attempted to assert their control over goods coming into the city in many of the same ways as their counterparts in Bordeaux but with even less success. Goods smuggled into Rouen were

\textsuperscript{23} Heimmermann, "The Guilds of Bordeaux," 29.
\textsuperscript{24} Goy, Mémoire, 12 Nov. 1782.
confiscated regularly, and many guilds targeted particularly successful competitors for harassment at the hands of inspectors, customs agents, and the police in the hope of driving such entrepreneurs and their "false workers" out of business. Rouen guilds lodged numerous court cases seeking the right to inspect workshops in and goods from the privileged enclaves as a means of enforcing their regulation of workers and of the manufacturing process. The guild masters of Rouen also sought to force entrepreneurs in the privileged enclaves to join their corporations.

The Parlement of Rouen rebuffed all these efforts by supporting the various seigneurs as part of their defense of provincial privileges. Secure in their protection by the Parlement, the seigneurs even went on the offensive against guild interference from Rouen. In response to a demand that he no longer grant master's status to vinegar-makers because they were not maintaining sufficient quality standards, the seigneur of the faubourg of Cauchoise responded by ordering his juge des manufactures to create a host of new masters. When several other guilds from Rouen complained about this "heedless creation of masters in all trades," the seigneur appealed to the Parlement, which vindicated him. The Parlement's defense of privilege also frustrated the repeated attempts of the royal administration


27 Muslet, Remonstrance du parlement de Rouen, 7 Aug. 1779, AN F12 786.

28 Louis Thiroux de Crosne, Lettre au Contrôleur Général, 24 April 1775, AN F12 786.
either to eliminate these exceptions to guild control or to establish a uniform "right to work" throughout rural Normandy.29

Only in a few areas were the Rouennais successful in asserting control over producers outside the city. Firstly, the merchants sought—with the full support of the royal administration—to ensure that all cotton goods made outside the city were brought to the market hall for inspection before they could be sold as Rouen-made cloth (rouenneries).30 It should be noted, however, that this effort was about maintaining the quality of production to protect exports, not control over labor, techniques, or entrepreneurs. Second, in 1784, the weavers of Rouen convinced the royal commercial council (Conseil de commerce) to apply its manufacturing standards for handkerchiefs to the entire generality. These triumphs in the cotton industry could be attributed to the fact that the bulk of their production was exported.31

The inability of either the royal administration or the guilds to control the privileged enclaves found in the city's outskirts enabled these areas to become the locus for industrial entrepreneurialism in and around Rouen. Saint-Sever vied with the faubourg Saint-Antoine in Paris as the most impressive example of what the freedom enjoyed by a privileged area could accomplish. This district housed

29 de Crosne, Lettre à M. de Tolozan, 27 Aug. 1779; Édit du Roi concernant les Communautés d’Arts et Métiers des villes du ressort du Parlement de Rouen, April 1779, AN F12 786; and Déclaration du Roi, concernant les communautés d’Arts et Métiers du Ressort du Parlement de Rouen, 6 Feb. 1783, AN F12 760.
30 Godinot, Toileries, Toiles fortes et autres et blancards et étoffes de passementeries: Mémoire sur l’État actuel de ces fabriques, 6 Dec. 1777, AN F12 658A.
31 Goy, Mémoire général, 15 Dec. 1787.
many of Normandy's most important manufactures. In addition to a number of fairly large-scale proto-factories devoted to cotton spinning and more than fifty workshops involved in the manufacture or preparation of various types of cotton cloth, Saint-Sever had twenty-three ceramics workshops, many bottle- and glass-makers, and France's largest works capable of lead lamination. The country's nascent chemical industry was centered in Saint-Sever with establishments devoted to the manufacture of nitric acid, sulfuric acid, and copper sulfate located next to a chlorine bleaching plant. All these enterprises were either the first or among the first of their kind in France. A significant proportion of the realm's most adept workers in technologically advanced fields lived or worked in Saint-Sever.\(^2\)

Saint-Sever prospered because of a seemingly limitless supply of skilled laborers, easy access to the national and international marketplace, and the eagerness of entrepreneurs to establish their enterprises away from the guild world's petty regulations preventing technological innovation. It was in Saint-Sever in 1773 that Hargreave's spinning jenny was naturalized in France, and in 1789 many of France's first mechanized spinning machines on the Arkwright model were also located there. Entrepreneurs perfected the process for laminating lead and for making copper sulfate in Saint-Sever. Trial and error resulted in the perfection of the use of steel teeth in the combs used to take the seeds from raw cotton and a more economical use of raw materials in chlorine bleaching. From Saint-Sever, new techniques and improved machines were disseminated.

widely, enhancing the industrial competitiveness of the entire region and encouraging others to try their ideas in this protected district where other innovations had proved so successful.\footnote{33}{Dardel, 129, 131 and Goy, Mémoire général, 15 Dec. 1787.}

Not only did native inventors congregate in this privileged enclave, so too did foreigners, particularly English and Irish. Saint-Sever had an English colony that dated from the Regency. It got a significant boost when the Jacobite John Holker brought a group of cotton workers from Lancashire in the mid-1750s. Once they set up shop, with some financial support from the royal administration, they were able to attract others, both refugees and entrepreneurs wishing to try their luck on the other side of the Channel. In 1789, Saint-Sever had a manufacture of calicos, two machine shops, two innovative dyers, and an earthenware-maker imitating Staffordshire, all run by Englishmen largely with English or Irish labor.\footnote{34}{Dardel, 64, 124; Goy, Mémoire général, 15 Dec. 1787; André Rémond, John Holker: Manufacturier et grand fonctionnaire en France au XVIIIème siècle 1719-1786 (Paris: Marcel Rivière, 1946); and J. R. Harris, Industrial Espionage and Technology Transfer: Britain and France in the Eighteenth Century (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998).}

The government recognized the possibilities afforded by this entrepreneurial haven.\footnote{35}{The state's role in industrial innovation was also apparent in rural areas, but these enterprises were far less likely to diffuse new technologies and their overall economic output was quite limited. See Pierre Deyon and Philippe Guignet, "The Royal Manufactures and Economic and Technological Progress in France before the Industrial Revolution," Journal of European Economic History 9 (1980): 611-32.} From the reign of Henry IV, the royal administration in Paris granted additional privileges to certain entrepreneurs or innovators to set up enterprises in Saint-Sever. After 1750, at least seven royal
manufactures were chartered specifically for this district. Holker received the usual exemptions from certain duties on incoming raw cotton and dyestuffs and from civic responsibilities like militia service, all lasting fifteen years. In addition, he received nearly 90,000 livres over a nine-year period in exchange for keeping a specified number of machines in constant production and allowing other entrepreneurs to see the manufacture in full operation. To encourage the English émigrés to share their craft-based mechanical knowledge, the royal government also established pensions for the skilled workers who came with Holker and promised them bonuses for each French worker they trained to make cotton velour "in the English style." The investment paid significant dividends. Several other establishments on the same model were created in and around Rouen, and thirty years later in the mid-1780s, the manufacture remained "the largest of its type" in France with 200 machines in operation producing almost 3,000 bolts annually worth more than 550,000 livres.36

Several intendants also granted extra incentives to entrepreneurs bringing new techniques or useful expertise. For example, the Englishman Sturgeon, director of the royal earthenware manufacture, was exempted from the Parlement of Rouen's restrictions on burning coal in the vicinity of other habitations.37 State support adapted and added to the privileges enjoyed by entrepreneurs in Saint-Sever to create what might be described as the first French "enterprise zone."38

36 Rémond, 54-55.
37 Goy, Mémoire général, 15 Dec. 1787.
38 In the late eighteenth century, entrepreneurs and inventors in the faubourg Saint-Antoine, particularly those located at the Hôpital des Quinze-Vingts, enjoyed many of the same favors as Saint-Sever. But in terms of the emulation of innovation, Saint-Sever seems to have given
If Saint-Sever, Saint-Seurin, and Saint-André were so successful in developing innovations, why did the royal government or provincial administrations not create other such privileged districts to boost industrial expansion? To contemporary ears, it sounds strange that privileged enclaves were the hotbeds of economic liberty, but under the old regime relief from the myriad regulations binding and limiting industrial production was a privilege, not a right. Under the influence of the physiocrats, generations of royal administrators sought to terminate the legacy of Colbert by diminishing corporate controls and lifting restrictions on laborers and entrepreneurs in order to foster technological innovation and industrial growth.\(^{39}\)

What prevented the extension of the privilege of liberty was yet another essential characteristic of the old regime: "the threat from below." Just as a Paris mob sacked Réveillon's wallpaper mill in the faubourg Saint-Antoine in April 1789, ten weeks later many of the unique establishments in Saint-Sever went up in flames at the hands of machine-breaking crowds.\(^{40}\) Such events reminded everyone of what municipal authorities and the royal administration had known for decades: innovation could have deadly consequences.

Under a system riddled with privilege like the old regime, an extension of the privilege of liberty was untenable without a deep and abiding commitment to the rise not only to more, but also to more technologically important industries. Charles Ballot, *L'Introduction du machinisme dans l'industrie française* (Lille: O. Marquant, 1923).


*Proceedings of the Western Society for French History*
maintenance of order. High-ranking officials like Vergennes, Calonne, and Necker, among many others, wanted the privileges of enclaves like Saint-Sever, Saint-Seurin, and Saint-André to be enjoyed by all the French, but they feared to move too fast in that direction because they well knew the dangers posed by innovation in a traditional society dominated by privilege. No eighteenth-century French regime could escape the tensions between liberty and license, privilege and possibility.41

Perhaps, for French economic policy-makers, creating or maintaining de facto enterprise zones represented a middle way. Without sacrificing public order, these privileged enclaves could help to create the conditions needed for an urban industrial future in which economic liberty was not the exception but the rule. According to the controversial yet important argument advanced by Patrick O’Brien and Caglar Keyder, small-scale enterprises producing consumer goods with a high markup per unit characterized the distinctive French path to industrialization.42 If so, districts like Saint-Sever, Saint-André, and Saint-Seurin functioned as models of entrepreneurialism and technological innovation; the seeds planted in these privileged urban enclaves would bear abundant fruit in the nineteenth century.
