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Review Of "Hands Of Honor: Artisans And Their World In Dijon, 1550-1650" By J. R. Farr

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Recommended Citation

Robert S. DuPlessis. (1990). "Review Of "Hands Of Honor: Artisans And Their World In Dijon, 1550-1650" By J. R. Farr". *Journal Of Interdisciplinary History*. Volume 21, Issue 1. 131-132. DOI: 10.2307/204926 <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-history/238>

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the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the editors of *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*

Review

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Source: *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (Summer, 1990), pp. 131-132

Published by: [The MIT Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/204926>

Accessed: 11-06-2015 19:40 UTC

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Hands of Honor: Artisans and Their World in Dijon, 1550–1650. By James R. Farr (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1988) 298 pp. \$34.95

This insightful book might well be titled *The Making of a French Middle Class*, for Farr contends that a century of shared economic circumstances and social experiences knit Dijon's master craftsmen into a distinct group, securely situated in the middle of urban society, and that its members' behavior and attitudes demonstrated a sense of common identity. Early modern Dijon was a commercial and administrative town without significant export-oriented industry. Hence the new class arose within a still vital corporate structure and idiom, and its artisans were decidedly noncapitalist in outlook. Nevertheless, Farr argues, they were characterized by an increasingly similar distribution of wealth and property on the one hand, and a "cultural consensus" on the other (2–3).

In six well-crafted chapters, Farr records artisanal efforts to influence both municipal and national governments in order to defend, even extend, profitable monopolies; quantifies growing prosperity; charts heightened endogamy that reinforced solidarity across craft boundaries; discusses the complex ways in which concern for honor structured social relations; presents an artisanal world increasingly preoccupied with order and stability; and examines the means by which Dijonnais appropriated Catholic reform.

The most convincing sections of the book concern work lives, property, and marital strategies. Here Farr imaginatively deploys his archival sources—notably an uncommonly detailed, socially inclusive, and temporally extensive series of tax rolls, and a mass of notarial contracts—distinguishing masters from journeymen and comparing the practices of artisans with those of other urban groups. Historians of early modern European popular culture typically have to infer mentalities from behavior, and Farr is a master of this art: decisions about the choice of godparents, for example, reveal artisans navigating among contradictory claims of patronage and trades-based solidarity.

Thanks to trial records from the mayor's court, Farr also has more direct access to artisanal thought. Yet, despite his finesse and creativity, his account of the attitudes of artisans toward such matters as authority, order, and honor is not entirely persuasive in establishing the existence of a cultural identity distinctive to masters. Part of the problem lies in the sources, which, as Farr notes, rarely differentiate masters from journeymen. He suggests, in fact, that it may be inappropriate to try to demarcate attitudinal boundaries, since journeymen hoped some day to attain mastership, even though their work and life situations increasingly diverged from those of their employers. To be sure, anticipation may well have bred a common outlook. This reasoning, however, challenges both Farr's general argument about the experiential basis of mentality and his thesis that masters comprised "a nascent class" because they were coming to enjoy "their own recognizable cultural characteristics" (265).

Separating specifically artisanal attitudes from those held by the broader society also proves troublesome. Craftsmen were certainly not alone either in their concern for order, stability, honor, and the like, or in experiencing the events—religious conflict and renewal, and political upheaval and reconsolidation, among others—that generated those interests. Once again, Farr is aware of these problems, emphasizing the difficulty of distinguishing artisanal culture from a wider popular culture, or artisanal religious practices from those of other Dijonnais. Yet, because the opinions of other townspeople are but sketchily discussed, the book's argument about the distinctiveness of artisanal mentality—a crucial component of its account of class formation—remains suggestive rather than conclusive.

Hands of Honor's debt to cultural anthropology and social theory is apparent both in its dynamic and situational approach to processes of social and cultural creation, and in its interpretations of the practices and beliefs uncovered. The book is informed as well by the social history of E. P. Thompson, in particular its conception of class as the product of shared experiences that are broadly cultural as well as economic.¹ Scholars in these fields—not to mention all historians of early modern Europe—will learn a great deal from the imaginative methodology and abundance of acute observations of *Hands of Honor*. They will also find a model for studying other towns of the time, especially those of a more industrial nature, where Farr's insistence on artisanal consensus across craft lines and increasing economic homogeneity among masters can be tested in environments more shaped by competitive market forces. However its conclusions may be modified, Farr's book will stand as an important conceptual and empirical advance in our knowledge of early modern artisans and popular culture.

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Policing the Poor in Eighteenth-Century France. By Robert M. Schwartz (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1988) 321 pp. \$45.00

The "Great Confinement" of beggars and vagrants in France has been a popular subject for over two decades. It has allowed historians to examine the poor—a segment of society about which far too little is known—through records that are equally revealing about the growing power and ambition of the absolutist state. Schwartz's book is an impressive addition to this corpus. He has compiled fascinating statistics about the incarcerated poor in Lower Normandy and has worked hard to place them firmly in the context of regional and national poverty. He uses the campaign against the poor as evidence both of the growing

1 Edward P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963).