

A Review of Thierry Rigogne's *Between State and Market: Printing and Bookselling in Eighteenth-Century France.*¹

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In his book *Between State and Market: Printing and Bookselling in Eighteenth-Century France*, Thierry Rigogne examines the book printing and selling industry of *ancien regime* France. He relies primarily upon a series of surveys taken of the French government officials in charge of administering the trade of books, most notably a survey taken in 1764 by Antoine de Sartine, *directeur de la Librairie du rayaumé*. However, he uses this survey as a baseline to compare to other surveys conducted during the eighteenth century. In doing so Rigogne provides a picture of the way the book trade developed over the course of the eighteenth century, especially in the countryside. He paints a picture of an absolutist government trying, and failing, to control this market.

Rigogne starts off with an analysis of the 1764 survey. It was essentially a printed questionnaire sent out to Sartine's subordinates, known as *intendants*. The replies were largely based on statements by government officials in charge of the book trade in certain areas, or by members of book printing/selling guilds. The responses seem to have been remarkably frank, given much of what they report.

Specifically, the survey paints a picture of the failures of policing the French book trade. Inspections of booksellers were not carried out. Whether because of a problem in determining jurisdiction, or due to sheer laziness, the policing action that was supposed to be taken up was not. This applied to booksellers as well as importers of foreign French language books. The jurisdictional problem was that it was not always clear whether enforcement was in the hands of local guilds, local police or royal officials. This lack of clarity created a window through which books that did not pass censorial muster could be relatively easily obtained.

One place the *ancien regime* was successful in controlling the trade to some degree was in the publishing houses. Rigogne argues this was done largely by brute force, however. The government tended to discourage the development of new publishers, and tried to limit printing to large publishing establishments found in cities. These establishments could be more easily monitored. What publishing

¹ Thierry Rigogne, *Between State and Market: Printing and Bookselling in Eighteenth-Century France* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2007).

²Rigogne, *Between State and Market*, 10.

remained in the rural areas of France was largely dependent on support from local political leaders to survive. They would essentially use these print houses as propaganda distributors. But over time the rural print shops closed up.

This seems to be in direct opposition to what happened in the book selling industry. Once a heavily protected guild that required specific entry requirements, the government began issuing rights to sell books for money. This practice undermined the guild structure. And these were just the sellers authorized by the French Crown; others were authorized by local authorities, as the law outlining who could allow a person to become a bookseller was not clear. Add in the mercers and peddlers who were essentially unregulated, and the situation grew increasingly problematic. So while the French printers/sellers had to deal with escalating control from the government, retail outfits had many fewer restrictions. Thus the system benefited the retail outfits at the producers' expense.

As time went on the retailers began to dominate the book trade. Able to sell books published outside of France, they had a distinct advantage, especially given the lax enforcement. Ultimately this led to a wealth of books being available to the general public, many of which would never have been approved or had been banned in France. Rigogne claims a 1923 law regulating the publishing industry in Paris was the origin of much of this confusion. When the law was expanded to cover the whole of France vast parts of it did not apply to many of the new areas it covered, leaving them in a legal gray area. This led to a situation where the government had strict censorial control of the publishing industry, but actually had very little control over the book trade. The idea that this contributed to the proliferation of ideas contrary to the interests of the French Crown is not explicitly stated, but is implicit in the argument.

Rigogne does attempt to look at the actual market for the books by looking at what was sold by the printers/sellers. But more interesting is his picture of a large trade network of books linked to outside foreign markets. By this means the structure which was supposed to ensure books that were not approved did not enter the country actually was used to move books, which might or might not be legal, around the country. Given the small towns in which these books often ended up had no enforcement arm of their own this often meant if a book managed to avoid being inspected in a city it would make its way to some bookshop somewhere to be sold under the pretense that it had been approved on the way to the store. Once a book passed from one area to another it was easy to claim one had no reason to suspect a book was not approved.

Rigogne does put together a very good picture of the overall structure of the book trade in the eighteenth century. The surveys he uses as his primary evidence are quite detailed in their quantitative data. The numbers of booksellers and printers in each area are present, as is a great deal of other information about the printers. The sellers get a much less intensive treatment, again showing support for Rigogne's thesis. His sources give a very good picture of this structure.

Beyond that, the sheer breadth of the research he has done is quite astonishing. His study entailed looking at a large number of these surveys that were conducted throughout the eighteenth century. None were as detailed as the 1764 survey, but they held important information nonetheless. Putting these surveys together to form a narrative is an excellent piece of scholarship. It provides a good map of the book trade during this period, giving places, movements and numbers. In this respect it is not only a good analysis, but it adds substantially to our understanding of the overall nature of the French economic world.

That is not to say it is without limitations. He does not really examine the content of the black market trade. This is not quite fair, as he does examine what types of books are being published by the French printers/sellers. But as Rigogne showed, this is only a small portion of the books being imported and sold in France. He never makes the crucial step of examining what books are actually entering the market through extra-legal means. There is some justification for this. No one was going to confess to selling illegal books. This is more of a limitation on Rigogne's sources rather than his scholarship. But in choosing these sources he certainly limits himself to an "official" account as opposed to a more detailed look at the content of the trade he is describing. Given the idea that illegal material was entering the country due to lax controls by the government is a part of Rigogne's thesis, one would think he would actually try to prove his hypothesis. Ultimately I am not sure what evidence of this actually exists. Nevertheless, it is not very well addressed and somewhat lessens the impact of his analysis.

One note that should be made about this book is that Rigogne often quotes heavily from the French surveys. This is acceptable, as having the original text is always more useful than merely having a translation. But every quote in his book is in French and he provides no translation. This limits the utility of the book at least for the purposes of this review. The book will mainly be useful to those who are fluent in both English and French, which would include most American French historians. Also, at times the sheer number of quotes becomes somewhat ponderous. This is not so much of a critique as it is an explanation of

why this analysis is limited by the amount of information that is actually presented in English. *Je n'ai pas lis des français très bien.*³

Still, Rigogne's book is quite useful as an analysis of the French book trade from the top. It is a thoughtful look at an aspect of the Enlightenment that has often been overlooked. It answered a great many of my questions about the relationship between the absolutist monarchy and what it saw as the politically charged, socially destabilizing and religiously heretical texts that the Enlightenment authors produced. It brings into question just how absolute absolutist France was, given how much difficulty the government had in censoring objectionable literature.

³"I don't read French very well."