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MEAT MATTERS

Butchers, Politics, and Market Culture
in Eighteenth-Century Paris

Sydney Watts



Figure 1: *Le Boucher* (The Butcher), a late seventeenth-century engraving by François Guérard, shows an artisan butcher serving a female client. The large dog “guarding” the butcher stall exemplifies the important role that domestic animals played in the workplace. Used with permission of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

INTRODUCTION

In September 1774, former Minister Léonard-Jean-Baptiste Bertin (1719–1792) wrote to then Controller General Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot (1727–1781), remarking how the attitude of Parisians toward food provisions had shifted. As he explained it, butcher's meat (that is, beef, veal, and mutton) represented "a commodity in some sort of first necessity, as is white bread."¹ In that same year, a burgeoning demand for red meat—a demand that defied Lenten rules of fasting and fueled an expansive black market—dictated a royal edict to end state-enforced fasting. In October of 1790, the popular consumption of red meat had become a major political issue for Parisian revolutionaries addressing the newly constituted National Assembly.² At the height of the revolution, the Jacobins designated meat as one of the primary goods to fall under the 1793 Law of the General Maximum. A fixed price and rationing were instituted to ensure that every Parisian enjoyed a continuous supply of meat as a dietary staple.

The importance of red meat—the primary good of the butcher trade—grew for Parisians as the city itself expanded. Over 40,000 steer and over twice that number of sheep were needed to provision Paris in 1637 (pop. 412,000). As the city's population surpassed a half-million by the beginning of the eighteenth century, cattle traders and farmers supplied anywhere from 150,000 to 200,000 head of cattle (including cows and veal) and 300,000 to 400,000 sheep.³ Paris rivaled London not only in its size and in its concentration of urban elites, merchants, and artisans, but also as the land of beef eaters, consuming on average 60 kilograms (132 pounds) of beef and mutton per year.⁴ Paris, like London, was the country's center for consumption, a magnet that drew skilled and unskilled labor and raw and finished goods. A network of local and regional markets developed to make the capital relatively rich in fresh meat.

Most French people living outside of Paris considered meat a luxury; Parisians, however, did not live by bread alone. This robust consumption compelled the governing class to acknowledge not only the economic significance of meat, but also its political and social importance for Parisians. The leadership recognized its responsibility for provisioning the burgeoning capital and understood the connection between the food supply and the city's political and social stability.

This large-scale demand for meat underscored its power as a consumable, a power both material and symbolic. Although the decision to consume meat

was governed by its quality, availability, and affordability, its consumption carried more subtle and sometimes contradictory meanings. A meat-centered diet was viewed as the epitome of good living and a guarantee of good health, whereas the violent slaughter of livestock and the gluttonous impulse behind its consumption made it synonymous with carnality and sexual excess. Both the upsurge in the desire to eat meat and the efforts of political leaders to ensure its consistent supply occurred against the backdrop of a transformation in Parisian society and politics, especially the Parisians' changing expectations regarding political leadership, as the onetime subjects became citizens in the 1790s.

This book examines why meat mattered to a growing number of Parisians and explores the political, economic, and cultural matters of the meat trade in order to understand more fully the changing world of Old Regime Paris. Hundreds of guild butchers, along with numerous merchants and street vendors, played a vital role in Parisian life, but we know little about their working lives or about how these victualers responded to rising demand and to the changing expectations of consumers.⁵ The variegated historical landscape of meat consumption and production endowed it with economic, social, and political peaks and valleys. Hence, this study goes beyond the mechanics of production, distribution, and marketing of meat to include the social institutions such as the guild and family firm, the political environment, as well as popular attitudes toward flesh, blood, and violence that shaped the role of butchers in Parisian life.

Master butchers and their journeymen sold not only meat but also by-products such as hides, tallow, and tripe in over three hundred locations throughout the city. Their shops and butcheries lay mostly along the capital's two axes: the boulevard Saint Michel from the south to the boulevard Saint Denis to the north, and the boulevard Saint Honoré from the west to the boulevard Saint Antoine to the east. Proximity to these major thoroughfares allowed butchers to move herds from rural cattle markets to urban butcheries where they were slaughtered as needed. Merchants then transported sides of beef, veal, and mutton to individual shops and the households of major clients. The marketplaces and residential neighborhoods where butchers worked provided easy access for consumers to purchase their daily provisions. Several hundred country butchers and tripe sellers operated small ambulatory businesses by selling meat out of carts and wagons that doubled as makeshift stalls. An equal number of retail meat peddlers carried baskets of goods throughout the city and noisily hawked them. Ministers, the king's officers, and police commissioners oversaw this diverse population engaged in the meat trade—guild members as well as untitled merchants and workers—to ensure that their interests intersected with those of the state. The contradictory policies and competing interests in this world of meat production and consumption demonstrated meat's complex role as a measure of social worth and a source of political power.

This history centers on the meanings of meat, revealing a series of paradoxes inherent in the social life and political economy of this consumable. Primary among the paradoxes is that the government claimed meat as a basic food for all, knowing that, in reality, the bulk of fresh red meat filled the tables of elites. As a tool of distinction, meat's symbolic appropriation worked against the politics of subsistence. In theory, this policy ensured that a certain portion of fresh meat was available and affordable to all. Yet, in practice, production was limited by the state-sanctioned monopoly held by the butcher guild and the few powerful families who dominated the trade. Held by the police to standards of fair commerce and hygiene, butchers annually pledged to provide Parisians meat that was "good, trustworthy, and marketable," while they systematically contributed to a skewed distribution of the meat supply and threatened the public health by their refusal to relocate sites of slaughter from the urban center. The discourse of royal administrators claimed meat was "a good of first necessity, second only to bread." Yet unlike the grain trade, the crown imposed fiscal burdens on the sale of cattle while putting limits on the market price of fresh meat.

An examination of the chasm between the meaning of subsistence in word and subsistence in deed is essential as these seemingly contradictory attitudes and patterns of behavior reveal the complexity of Parisian market culture, especially in the ways in which consumers, producers, and the third parties who regulated and policed the market employed a wide array of social and political symbols and meanings in the course of day-to-day economic exchanges. In this case, what characterized the market culture of eighteenth-century Paris was its overlapping ideologies that, at times, worked at cross-purposes. These countercurrents pitted traditional, paternalistic behavior against modern, individualistic behavior and market practices that were bound by moral and just notions against ones that argued for rational and liberal innovations.

The first four chapters describe the paradoxical circumstances regarding meat. The notions of meat that are at once associated with high status and subsistence needs are discussed in a political context in Chapter 1. The importance of meat as a food staple for the elites of urban society may in fact have artificially elevated it to what royal officials posited as "a good of first necessity," whatever the reality. Few food commodities—namely bread, salt, and wine—were regulated as tightly as meat. A close examination of word and deed is crucial to the resolution of this conundrum. Chapter 2 pursues this historical problem at the level of exchanges in the market. Butchers—the decisive intermediaries in the meat market—shaped the distribution of meat to satisfy a hierarchy of consumers. The resulting hierarchical pattern of consumption competed with the demands of the individual in the marketplace. Chapter 3 explores the policy paradox within the regulation of Paris's provisioning markets. The complex interplay between regulatory

and laissez-faire impulses becomes apparent upon close examination of the livestock trade at Poissy and Sceaux. Cattle traders and merchant butchers engaged in a variety of formal and informal commercial dealings, and royal officers tried to bring greater consistency and transparency to these market transactions through market reforms. Chapter 4 traces the movement of meat to the urban butcher stalls and considers how urban merchants altered the scale of this enterprise to conform to the standards enforced by the Parisian police and the demands of an increasingly carnivorous populace.

The final chapters delve deeper into this market culture by investigating how the guild of master and merchant butchers contributed to the paradoxes inherent to the meat trade. In many ways, the guild monopoly over production and distribution clashed with royal policies promoting abundance and cheapness. At the same time, the government maintained a symbiotic relationship with a guild from which it drew revenue and with which it negotiated commercial regulation. Guild butchers inhabited a privileged, protected space that allowed them to endure difficult times. Their commercial practices must be understood within the scheme of social ranking that characterized the trade and its cultural assumptions of privilege and reputation. The distinctions among apprentices and journeymen, young masters and senior guild officers, butcher widows and independent meat sellers were unambiguous. At the same time, butchers developed strategies to overcome professional limitations and seek out new commercial possibilities that defied the corporate (guild) system. Chapter 5 discusses the formation and governance of the guild, social processes characterized by contention and diversity as much as by solidarity and uniformity. Although the ethics of the corporate system held to a collective notion of mastership as defined by the guild, in fact, the guild's history is replete with discord and competition, inclusion and exclusion. Similarly, Chapter 6 discusses the various life-trajectories of those who entered the trade that further explain the sources of contention and competition, experiences that ranged from becoming a master to exclusion from the guild. Chapter 7 focuses on the family-owned butchery that built its wealth through marriage and lifelong strategies of capital accumulation and preserved its integrity across generations. As social relations were imbricated in commercial relations, the solidarity of the family firm could be equally threatened at moments of marriage and death when property was transmitted. Chapter 8 completes this social study, assessing the ways in which guild butchers acquired property and other forms of capital, namely credit and reputation, assets that influenced a butcher's success or failure with his or her clients and suppliers. Butchers had to negotiate credit relations carefully that at best, cemented the bonds of exchange between butcher and client and, at worst, put butcher businesses at risk of failure.

In the uncertainty that characterized early modern agriculture and food markets, when dearth, disease, and fears of shortage spurred hoarding, malfeasance, and rumors of famine plots, the everyday dealings of butchers and their clients relied upon the strength and stability of kinship and clientage that cemented their commercial relations. As the market for meat continued to grow throughout the eighteenth century, tradesmen circumvented these good faith agreements and sought more formal commercial relationships that followed state-enforced legal codes. One example, addressed in Chapter 3 is the Caisse de Poissy, a lending institution that joined the interests of financiers and state regulators to instill stricter banking methods to provide greater reliability to market transactions and therefore abundance. Market reforms—encouraged by a growing number of nonguild entrepreneurs and meat vendors—challenged traditional merchant practices and the privileged social standing of guild merchants. By the end of the century, the corporate structure could no longer contain individual pursuits to produce and trade in a wide variety of luxury and “populux” goods. An examination of the cleavages both within the guild community and among the workers and merchants at the guild’s periphery brings into focus how butchers negotiated their rapidly changing commercial world.

Following the path of meat and its rise as a consumable reveals the beliefs and practices that structured the meat trade and were, in turn, structured by it. All those involved in the provisioning of meat to this metropolis encountered a variety of individual strategies, as well as conflicting moral obligations about the necessity of meat for the people of Paris. Such a holistic look at the meat trade takes a perspective that is grounded in relationships and institutions, yet at the same time influenced by a world of expanding possibilities and perpetual constraints by market forces, regulatory policies, merchant practices, and social expectations about the food Parisians ate. Taking the vantage point of butchers and viewing their world of work, this study aims to provide a comprehensive response to the question of meat’s importance in Parisian life as it was socially reproduced and culturally constituted.

Conversely, the meat trade offers a unique perspective on how Parisians redefined needs and wants over the eighteenth century. Bringing meat to this metropolis was fraught with contradictory economic policies and market inefficiencies as a result of the transition to a market economy. Previously, economic life was grounded in long-held traditions and paternalistic practices, where individuals held the expectation that each person consume and produce within his or her rank, and the obligation to provide for the commonweal rested on the king. The market economy, akin to modernization, altered how individuals determined their material needs, how they chose what goods to buy, and how they purchased them through cash transactions. The spread of markets and market-mediated consumption both required and intensively promoted the breakdown of the old status order,

resulting in the corrosive (or liberating) effect of monetary relations on traditional society. However, before the triumph of the market economy could take place, a new understanding of resources and consumer needs had to develop: the limiting mindset of the world of scarcity had to be replaced by the mindset of the world of consumption, a world in which the limits of what was possible could be explored.