The Hemp Industry in the North of Isère from 1836 to 1906: A Microhistorical Approach

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Abstract

The hemp industry was studied here from 1836 to 1906. This research and territorial history of the industry, this dissertation proposes to understand the industrialization of the Tour-du-Pin district to understand its economic evolution. The hemp industry was finished, all the individuals continued their proto-industrial activities, while keeping one foot in the ground and mixing agricultural and industrial activity, good household health, and social identities.

Introduction

“...Our hemp industry in the department of Isère is lost if we...”

For my first Master’s degree, I carried out my research on the hemp industry in the villages of Bévenais, Brangues, Doissin, Le Passage as well as Saint Ondras in the Tour-du-Pin district, from 1836 to 1906. This topic was widely despised and these skilled workers were seen as poverty-stricker. The corpus of sources aims to approach the secret of the survival of hemp activity in the Tour du Pin district, during the first industrial revolution. From then on, what individual, family, and professional strategies did the hemp combers and weavers develop to face the progressive decline of this industry?

What are the roles of pluriactivity in the industrialization of the Tour-du-Pin district? Finally, did the hemp industry contribute to “preparing minds for the silk industry”, as suggested by Jérôme Rojot’s thesis “L’industrialisation du Bas-Dauphiné: le cas du textile (fin XVIIIe-1914)” Or did this industry remain a form of organization of the production of manufactured goods? More generally, we will look at the players involved in the industrialization of the Tour-du-Pin district to understand how the hemp industry developed within a territory whose economy is mainly based on the textile industry: hemp, silk, wool, and cotton.

Materials and Methods

To get as close as possible to these hemp workers, I favored nominative census lists which initially seemed to be the most relevant for the follow-up of hemp workers and their households, from which I extracted the surnames, first names and ages of all the members of their households. Then, I collected information from the households, mentioning at least one hemp worker, while following the categories established by the prefectural institutions, and continued in this way until all the members “disappeared”, to observe their professional reconversion and/or disappearance.

As a result, this primary sources enabled me to locate the communes where hemp work was the most consistent among the communes of the Bévenais, Brangues, Doissin, Le Passage and Saint Ondras. Using the information gathered, I went on to identify possible deaths between these counts, and searched for the names of the individuals concerned to find them in the mutations by death. However, the difficulty of my corpus, consisting of incomplete and fragmented population censuses, was to highlight the ability of these populations to make choices from sources not intended for this purpose. Therefore, my approach was a micro-historical approach, which is to say, a qualitative approach.

To make my research more concrete, I constructed computerized family trees of the households surveyed, showing the heads of households, their wives and children. After this task, I had to consult Industrial Surveys and Statistics to complete the taxonomy of weavers counted in hemp, wool and cotton.

Then, I completed all these data with the inventory after death, mentioning the material and financial assets of the people as well as their activities informed at the time of their death. But in view of the quantity of the contingent studied, I had to target and bring out the most relevant elements. Finally, I transcribed all my data into an Excel spreadsheet, as well as into family trees, which allowed me to create similarities and dissimilarities as well as networks within and between households.

Discussion

In most cases, the lists of names consulted constitute a real limit to my work. I had to analyze whether the results obtained really reflected territorial specificities or whether these sources were biased.

As a result, the following questions remained unanswered: what women and children had an identified activity when the activity of the combers and weavers changes in the censuses? In fact, the inherent logic of censuses remains unclear and does not allow us to grasp the range of activities that make up the social identity of the individuals studied.

In view of the partial state of the census lists by population and in order to obtain a greater representativeness of the territory, the sample analyzed should be enlarged by consulting the censuses for the whole of the North Thiérm region, thus combining a quantitative and qualitative approach. It would also be advisable to go directly to the municipal archives of the municipalities studied with a view to obtaining a more in-depth follow-up of the families analyzed. To a larger extent, focusing on the role of the northern Isère traders in the hemp industry would be relevant: who are they and how do they support the industry and the households living there?

Ideally, finding a good background on the Denantes company, which specializes in the manufacture of hemp canvas in Voiron, would provide a myriad of information and complete my corpus.

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References

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