

The engine loom and the conflict with the guilds

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The decisive innovation in the ribbon industry was the engine loom, known in German as the *Bandmühle* or *Kunststuhl*. This loom, developed in the Low Countries in the early seventeenth century, could weave several ribbons simultaneously, driven by a single operator through a system of bars and levers. Multiplying the productivity of the weaver many times, it made the production of plain ribbons much cheaper.¹

The engine loom was introduced in Basel in the second half of the seventeenth century. Its introduction is associated with Emanuel Hoffmann, a Basel merchant who is said to have brought the loom to Basel from the Netherlands around 1667.² The Hoffmann family would remain in the ribbon industry and in trade for generations, and in the nineteenth century one of its members, Fritz Hoffmann, founded with his wife's family the pharmaceutical company F. Hoffmann-La Roche in 1896. The line that runs from the engine loom of the seventeenth century to the Roche towers of the twenty-first is one of the remarkable continuities of Basel's economic history, to which Part D returns.

The introduction of the engine loom provoked a fierce conflict. The masters of the weavers' guild, who worked on traditional looms, saw the engine loom as a threat to their livelihood, because it allowed a single operator to produce as much as many traditional weavers, and because its cost excluded small masters and concentrated production in the hands of wealthy merchants who could afford the machines. The guild demanded that the engine loom be prohibited. Similar conflicts took place in other cities: in several German cities and in the Empire, the engine loom was prohibited or restricted by imperial ordinances in the late seventeenth century.³

The council of Basel found a compromise that would shape the structure of the industry for two centuries. It allowed the use of the engine loom, but it limited its use in the city and allowed the merchants to have ribbons woven

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in the countryside, in the villages of the city's rural territory, where the guild rules did not apply. The merchants, who owned the looms or financed their purchase, supplied the rural weavers with silk and designs and bought back the finished ribbons at fixed prices. This system, known as the putting-out system or *Verlagssystem*, placed the control of the industry in the hands of the merchant-manufacturers, the *Bandherren*, and turned the rural population into a workforce of home weavers, the *Posamenten*.

The conflict over the engine loom is a classic case of the tension between technological innovation and the protection of established interests. The guild economy, which Part A described, protected the livelihood of the masters by limiting competition and innovation. The engine loom threatened this protection by allowing capital to substitute for labour. The council's compromise preserved the guild economy in the city while allowing innovation in the countryside, thereby shifting the growth of the industry outside the guild system. The result was an industry controlled by merchant capital and based on rural home work, which dominated the Basel economy until the factory system replaced it in the nineteenth century. Part C examines this industry in detail.

1 Notes

1. On the engine loom (Bandmühle, Kunststuhl, Dutch loom) developed in the Netherlands in the early seventeenth century and its introduction in Basel in the second half of the seventeenth century, see HLS, article "Posamenterei"; the literature on the history of the Basel ribbon industry. To be verified. ↩
2. The introduction of the engine loom in Basel is traditionally associated with the merchant Emanuel Hoffmann (around 1667); see HLS, article "Hoffmann" and "Posamenterei". To be verified. ↩
3. On the opposition of the guilds to the engine loom and its prohibition or restriction in several German cities and by imperial legislation in the late seventeenth century, see the literature on the history of the ribbon industry and on guild resistance to machinery. To be verified. ↩

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