

The weavers and their dependence

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The rural weavers, the *Posamenter*, lived in a condition of economic dependence that historians have described in various terms. They owned or rented their looms, which were expensive and often financed by credit from the merchant. They received their material and their orders from the merchant's agent. They were paid by the piece, at rates fixed by the merchant, so that their income depended on the volume of orders, which fluctuated with the market. When the market was good, the weavers could earn more than they could from agriculture, which made the villages prosper. When the market was bad, orders dried up and the weavers fell into poverty.¹

The weavers combined weaving with farming. Most of them had small holdings of land on which they grew vegetables, kept a cow or a few goats and cultivated vines or orchards. The income from weaving allowed families to live on holdings that would not have supported them otherwise, enabling population growth in the villages. The combination of weaving and farming also provided a buffer against crises: in bad years for the ribbon trade, the family could fall back on its land, and in bad harvests, weaving provided cash to buy food.

The whole family participated in the work. Men usually operated the looms, women and children wound the silk on bobbins, prepared the warps and assisted in the weaving. Children began working at an early age, which was common in the period but became a subject of criticism and regulation in the nineteenth century. The factory legislation of the canton of Basel-Landschaft and later the Federal Factory Act of 1877, one of the most advanced in Europe at the time, limited the working hours of women and children and prohibited the employment of young children in factories.²

The dependence of the weavers on the merchants was a source of social tension that contributed to the political conflicts of the nineteenth century. The rural population of the canton of Basel, excluded from political rights

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by the city, resented both its political subordination and its economic dependence on the city merchants. When the revolutions of 1830 spread across Europe, the countryside rose against the city in a conflict that led to the division of the canton in 1833, which Part D examines. The economic structure of the ribbon industry, with its concentration of capital in the city and its dispersion of labour in the countryside, was one of the roots of this division.

1 Notes

1. On the living conditions and economic dependence of the Basel Posamentier, see the literature on the social history of the Basel countryside. To be verified. ↩
2. Federal Act of 23 March 1877 concerning Work in Factories (Fabrikgesetz), which limited the working day to eleven hours and prohibited factory work for children under fourteen. To be verified. ↩

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