

BOOK REVIEWS

LUU, LIEN BICH. *Immigrants and the Industries of London, 1500–1700*. Ashgate, Aldershot [etc.] 2005. xiii, 366 pp. Ill. £55.00. DOI: 50020859007013260

In the mid-sixteenth century, the English economy was still underdeveloped compared to Italy, the Low Countries, and Germany. Industrial specialization and the development of skills were lagging behind. Many consumer goods were imported from the continent whereas England exported mainly woollen cloth and raw materials. By the early seventeenth century, this was history. Within a short time span London's population had grown to 200,000 inhabitants. The city had developed a great number of consumer industries and produced high-quality products that were just as good or even better than what was formerly imported. In *Immigrants and the Industries of London, 1500–1700*, Lien Bich Luu tries to throw new light on how London expanded its pool of skills and became “the workshop of the world”.

Besides demographic growth, massive internal migration to London, agricultural changes, and the use of coal, the development of markets, and the rise of real incomes, an important element in this development was industrial innovation and the acquisition of technical know-how. It is generally assumed that the process of specialization and innovation in the industries started at the arrival of Protestant refugees from France and the Low Countries. From the beginning of the religious and political troubles in the 1560s and in the course of the Dutch Revolt, waves of Protestant merchants and craftsmen left the Low Countries for London. The proportion of foreign migrants in London was fluctuating between 5 and 10 per cent at its highest at the end of the sixteenth century. Some of these migrants built up a new living in specialized trades and manufacture. The way England treated them is described colourfully in this book.

The reception of migrants, systematically labelled “aliens”, in early modern England is unique in its time. While the English economy was still slumbering, the state and its institutions were powerful and had developed the instruments to register, control, and police immigrants, in a real system of apartheid. The so called “returns of the aliens”, for instance, were rolls of the exchequer containing the names of foreigners living in the city and suburbs of London with details of the special taxes levied on them, which are preserved for several years in the sixteenth century. The extent to which the Elizabethan government tried to regulate society by ruling and policing the smallest details in social and economic relations and processes, is striking compared to the policy of *laissez faire* that seems to have prevailed, for instance in the Netherlands. The aims of this regulation, however, were half-hearted and often contradictory.

The central government realized that immigration could be profitable and tried to attract specialized craftsmen and new skills by granting them patents of monopoly on their skills or inventions and planting foreign communities in provincial towns. In reality it was made very difficult for immigrants to build up a new life in England due to institutional exclusion, discrimination, and widespread xenophobia. During the Elizabethan period the restrictions on economic activities even increased in response to popular discontent. Membership of the stranger churches was obligatory for migrants to prove their status as refugees. Aliens were

prohibited from leasing and purchasing property, could not inherit property, and were not allowed to open shops. They could not become freemen of the city, or members of the craft companies. Their children could not become apprentices with English masters, could not gain freemen status either, and thus were, like their fathers, forced to work clandestinely or in areas that did not fall under the towns' economic jurisdiction.

Londoners became increasingly hostile to the alien communities, as they believed they were the cause of many social and economic problems. Especially in the lower-status trades, such as cobbling and tailoring, the competition for work and the threats of violence and harassment of aliens intensified in the 1590s, years of high prices and food shortages. The temporary collapse of the English textile industry precipitated by the closure of the Antwerp harbour in 1585 was one of the causes of mass migration to London and temporary high prices and unemployment during the last decade of the sixteenth century. English weavers threatened the immigrant textile workers and petitioned for their expulsion in Parliament. Many Flemish, Brabant, and Walloon artificers left for Holland as soon as the situation had become safe there. In Holland the perspectives on integration and social mobility were much better. There they could become freemen, or guild members, and get access to most other social institutions.

The question of why England treated foreigners so differently is not the main issue in this study. Luu suggests that an accumulation of adverse circumstances may explain the troubles: the visibility of the group due to their settlement within a short period of time; the economic success of the specialized artificers in times of economic recession; and the war and religious troubles that fed the fear for spies, traitors, and dissenters. There is a cultural element to it as well. That Dutch beer was poisonous had already been decided in the fifteenth century, and later on pamphlets against the drinking of beer instead of English ale argued that beer drinkers would become as fat and weak as the Dutch. In my view, comparison with other European cities with a large immigrant population leads to another explanation as well. Apartheid was institutionalized in English law and taxation from very early on. The systematic exclusion of aliens from all public and corporate institutions prohibited full integration in society and must have been the real cause of hostility and discrimination in times of crisis.

The central question of this book is how the diffusion of technology and skills took place in this society that was rather hostile towards everything and everybody new and unknown. The last three chapters of the book describe three trades that were dominated by aliens until the early seventeenth century: the silk industry, the silver trade, and brewing. The bureaucracy that England already was in the sixteenth century offers a wealth of information about the backgrounds and characteristics of migrants and the process of settlement in London. Studying the archives of churches, guilds, local and central government, Luu was able to reconstruct the geographical and social mobility of individual migrants or migrant families over more than one generation.

Her work shows that the experiences, success, and failure of migrants in a given society depended very much on their economic circumstances, their migration motive, and the social and economic capital that they brought along. The development of skills among the migrants and the transfer of technology to the native population had a number of stages and its pace was largely determined by the demand for specific consumer goods. The main conclusion of the book is, in fact, that the behaviour of the market determined the moment of the introduction of new technologies, not the moment of arrival of the refugees. The migrants were directed by these market forces, and found their economic niche within the very strict limits set by the receiving society.

The first Dutch brewers, for instance, already supplied beer for the Dutch community in London in the early fifteenth century. The growing demand for Dutch beer offered many jobs for economic migrants from Flanders and the northern Netherlands. In the late sixteenth century, a number of breweries had become capital enterprises employing thirty or more people. The diffusion of brewing techniques, however, only took off when the native population started to drink beer in the early seventeenth century. The first English brewers worked with Dutch personnel.

In the case of silk manufacture, the demand for luxury silk products already existed at the time of arrival of the refugees from the southern Low Countries. The English elite wore silk cloths, ribbons, and garments imported from Italy and the Low Countries. The silk weavers that settled in London were mostly refugees from Flanders and the French-speaking region around Valenciennes. Luu discovered that many of them were not weavers originally. A number of them had been textile merchants. In London these people were not able to continue their former trades, and learned to manufacture silk because of the demand for it, and presumably because they could make use of the know-how and practical support of a network of compatriots in the same trade. The development of skills and technical innovation thus mainly took place in London within the French-speaking community. Who exactly brought the technique to London is unclear. The art of silk weaving was transferred to the English via the training of English apprentices, which was made obligatory for all aliens in the 1570s.

This book is rich in description, but as it does not start from a model or hypothesis on how diffusion of technology works in practice, the source material has given much direction to the argument. The result is a focus on institutions. Of course, skill and technical knowledge may have been transferred mainly by formal apprenticeship and the employment of skilled journeymen or servants. But there may have been other mechanisms of diffusion as well. What about the role of family members for instance?

The focus on archiving institutions may also explain why this book is completely dominated by men. The importance of women and the family as a source of human capital is apparently not questioned at all. In this book women migrated as wives and daughters and did not take part in the labour process. This is not true, of course. Migrant women and older children were hardly in the position not to work. Especially in textile manufacturing and brewing, many women were working in their husbands' workshops, employed by others, or running their own businesses. At least, that was what they used to do in the Netherlands. Why wouldn't they have done the same in London? For that reason also, the choice of a partner must have been crucial for the acquisition of human capital and the diffusion of skill, experience, and technology. The marriage patterns of migrants in various stages of their settlement process are not studied by Luu either.

The book ends with a politically correct plea for a new view on migration. According to Luu, migrants are as vital to the British economy today as they were to the English in the sixteenth century. But if we want to learn from the past, she advises policy-makers to examine the cities of seventeenth-century Holland, which, compared to England, absorbed staggering numbers of migrants and became centres of industrial innovation and spectacular economic growth. That is good advice, but a comparison of the two countries offers an even better insight into the mechanisms of successful settlement and assimilation.

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