

Migration, labour and entrepreneurship in construction.

Deneweth, Heidi

Published in:

Aedificare. Revue International d'histoire de la construction

Publication date:

2018

Document Version:

Final published version

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Deneweth, H. (2018). Migration, labour and entrepreneurship in construction. Review of Manuela Martini, Bâtiment en famille. Migrations et petite entreprise en banlieue parisienne au XXe siècle. *Aedificare. Revue International d'histoire de la construction*, 1(2), 260-264.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



CLASSIQUES
GARNIER

SABATHIER (Cécile), NÈGRE (Valérie), CARVAIS (Robert) et DENEWETH (Heidi), « Comptes rendus », *Ædificare*, n° 2, 2017 – 2, *Revue internationale d'histoire de la construction*, p. 237-266

DOI : [10.15122/isbn.978-2-406-07734-3.p.0237](https://doi.org/10.15122/isbn.978-2-406-07734-3.p.0237)

La diffusion ou la divulgation de ce document et de son contenu via Internet ou tout autre moyen de communication ne sont pas autorisées hormis dans un cadre privé.

© 2018. Classiques Garnier, Paris.
Reproduction et traduction, même partielles, interdites.
Tous droits réservés pour tous les pays.

*
* *

Manuela MARTINI, *Bâtiment en famille. Migrations et petite entreprise en banlieue parisienne au XX^e siècle*, Paris, CNRS, 2016, Collection Alpha, 472 p.

Manuela Martini, an expert in labour history, has written an interesting book on small ethnic family firms in the Parisian *banlieues* during the 20th century. She focuses on the sector of construction that has long been one of the most important industrial sectors, after clothing/textiles and food. By 1975, France registered over 1.5 million construction workers in public works and private construction. Since each construction site is unique, building requires specific problem solving, risk handling and a flexible use of labour. Management and labour are therefore crucial factors, whereby labour costs often outweigh capital investments by the firms involved. Notwithstanding its importance, economic and business history have largely neglected this sector, probably because of its atypical character, it being dominated by small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and many independent workers and subcontractors. Martini contributes to both disciplines by putting private construction, and more specifically masonry, in the spotlights, and by focusing on SMEs and family firms, which are still largely underrepresented in business history compared to large firms and innovative entrepreneurs. The most important reason for choosing the construction sector, however, was the fact that it attracted many foreign workers during the 20th century, favoured upward social mobility, and offered ample opportunities to set up business. Martini follows the trajectories of Italian immigrants from their places of origin to three Parisian suburbs, where they started to work and set up small family firms. The most important contribution of this book lies in the fields of migration history and ethnic business history.

The first part of this book offers a most welcome quantitative analysis of the construction sector in 19th- and 20th-century France. Martini distinguishes three major trends. The period 1820-1880 was characterised by a continuous growth of 3 % per annum ; 1880-1950 was a period of slower growth (0.6 % per annum) ; 1950-1980 (*Les Trente Glorieuses*)

witnessed a renewed and strong growth. In contrast to other industrial sectors and notwithstanding technological innovations, employment rates increased from respectively 5 over 7 to 11 % of the active population. Martini offers an overwhelming amount of detailed figures, but important to remember is the dominance of small enterprises, with 63 % of all construction workers employed in small firms (up to 20 employees) and 25 % of them even in micro-firms (up to 5 workers). Apart from that, many men were isolated workers or seemingly self-employed : people having an independent status but often working for one and the same contractor. Subcontracting is crucial in construction since it moves the problem of labour recruitment to an external partner, and it diminishes the cost of production by increasing labour productivity and externalising problems of supervision and coordination. Surprisingly, the French construction sector employed high rates of foreigners : 20 % during the Interwar Period, 15 % shortly after the Second World War, and up to 30 % in the 1960s. These figures are extremely high compared to the Netherlands where foreigners did not exceed 2 % of construction workers until the end of the 20th century. Although foreigners are highly visible in modern statistics, France already had a long tradition of regional migration in construction. From the 17th century onwards, people from the *Limousin* and *La Creuse*-regions were highly appreciated for their construction skills and plasterworks. Most of them were seasonal migrants, travelling in groups to and from Lyon and Paris. In the late 19th century, Northern Italians started to penetrate this market, and in the Interwar Period they already constituted 10 % of all construction workers ; 1 on 2 foreigners was of Italian provenance. Both groups, *Limousins* and Italians, had in common their skills, a work ethos leading to high productivity rates and perhaps most important of all a specific form of group organisation developed during migration trajectories.

In the second part of this book, Martini zooms in on three suburbs in the east of Paris that witnessed a population growth of 35 % during the Interwar Period : Nogent-sur-Marne, Le Perreux-sur-Marne and Champigny-sur-Marne. Although she gives no full figures for the number of enterprises and the participation of foreigners in the entire region of Paris, she chooses these locations because of the (supposedly) high rates of Italian construction workers in the two former suburbs and of *Limousins* in the latter. Unfortunately, the book holds no systematic

comparison between these two highly appreciated ethnic groups of construction workers, and the Limousins gradually disappear from the analysis. Although one of the research questions is how migrant workers acquired the necessary skills to create a highly qualitative production and how they were able to set up their own businesses in due time, little attention is given to specific construction skills compared to autochthonous workers, or to the economic and financial aspects of these family businesses, although some of them, such as Ponticelli and Cavanna & Taravella were successful firms that left archives and descendants who provided a lot of information during interviews. From a business historical point of view, this is a missed opportunity. A very interesting chapter on the institutional constraints on foreign workers and their unintended effects compensates this to a certain extent. The crisis of the 1930s, not very different from more recent economic crises, ignited the need to protect national labour markets from foreigners by imposing employment rates. 'Noble' professions such as carpenters or new technological professions such as electricians admitted only 10 % of foreigners, whereas percentages in the D-factor (dirty, dusty, dangerous and difficult) were much higher. Declining demand caused the disappearance and bankruptcy of medium-sized enterprises or reduced them to small enterprises whereas many foreigners returned to their countries of origin. Several other labourers who had lost their jobs started to work as *tâcherons*, people appointed for the execution of one part of the construction or one specific element. Subcontracting was very attractive for building contractors, but *tâcherons* who were not registered in the Trade or Crafts Registers could not be held responsible for the payment of wages or compensations in case of accidents. Building contractors therefore stimulated their *tâcherons* to register anyway and set up their own one-man or small businesses. This was extremely attractive to foreigners, since independent workers did not need a passport to work, this was only required for paid labourers. The final effect was an ethnicisation of entrepreneurship. Not surprisingly, entrepreneurs of foreign origin knew how to hire workers from their own place of origin, bring them to France and regulate their status afterwards. A secondary long-term effect was the increasing importance of subcontracting (in the 1960s already 1/3 of all works and probably more if small firms would be taken into account).

A very good read is the third part of the book in which Martini leads us to the Nure Valley in Northern Italy, where most Parisian construction workers had originated. Their backgrounds as sawyers provided them with the necessary skills and networks that made them excellent construction workers and subcontractors as well. Contractors and clients alike appreciated their co-operative and managerial skills in mixed-aged teams, their sense for perfection, and high productivity levels. A second element was that these sawyers, as opposed to other occupations in their home villages, lived in extended families, most often brotherhoods that helped overcome problems related to seasonal migration : income sharing, child care, ... These risk coping strategies can be detected in their later business models as well, especially in these ethnic family firms, such as Cavanna & Taravella that enjoys the main focus in the second half of this book. In this case, two brothers-in-law and their families shared house, income, work, and kept the firm undivided until later generations restructured it. This is an excellent part in which migration history and ethnic business history are perfectly interwoven.

The last part of the book deals with management and labour in ethnic family businesses, and is based on written sources and interviews with descendants of Cavanna & Taravella. It gives a pretty good impression of fraternalistic and paternalistic relations between entrepreneurs and workers, and illustrates the importance of trust and intermediation. These small family businesses are typically managed by members of the core families, whereas more distant family members were active in the middle management. All of them had to start as workers on construction sites and gradually climbed to other levels in the firm, which guaranteed them the necessary respect from their workers and a decent understanding of the job. The book concludes with a chapter on management, labour and wages. Martini embeds this in the historiography of internal labour markets, characterised by enduring labour relations, recruitment through specific "entrance jobs", on-site formation and promotion through mobility chains defined by customary norms. She convincingly demonstrates that internal markets are present in SMEs as well as in larger firms. Although there was a high turnover of workers, those who stayed longer than two years usually remained for a long term and often became foremen, before they set up their own business elsewhere. Unfortunately, the part on wages is a missed

opportunity. Martini demonstrates the mechanisms of wage formation : age at recruitment, skills, expertise, hours worked, and other factors in which she refers to regression analysis and comparisons between migrant-workers and autochthonous workers, but neither the analysis itself nor the wages, their evolution and the comparisons are presented in this book. This is a pity, since the figures and the wages would have made this an excellent book for comparative research.

The strength of this book is the combination of migration history, economic history, labour history and business history with a strong focus on small enterprises and ethnic family businesses in the construction sector. Every strand of research is embedded in the appropriate historiography and contributes to it by bringing new insight to the fore. At the same time, the author expects too much from her readers who are not necessarily specialised in all of these disciplines. Key concepts and debates are often taken for granted (eg internal labour markets), although the footnotes offer references for further literature. The book opens with a very wide perspective on construction in 19th and 20th century France but gradually narrows down to the business history of Cavanna & Taravella, and occasional references to Ponticelli. To grasp the specificity of these successful ethnic businesses, I would have appreciated a more systematic comparison with similar businesses by people from the *Limousin* and with autochthonous businesses, and more information on the financial structure of these firms. However, this would have required a second volume. The value of this one is the quantitative material on the sector of construction, its focus on migration (place of departure and place of arrival), the relations between workers from a same provenance, and the cultural and social aspects of the firms involved.

Heidi DENEWETH
Postdoctoral fellow of the Research
Foundation Flanders (FWO)
Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Belgium)