

Labour transformations and social unrest in Madrid, 1750-1836

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ABSTRACT

The Spanish pre-capitalist social organization of labour was threatened in an unprecedented way by the state, the merchant capital and some prosperous artisans during the last decades of the eighteenth century. The interests of these three agents came together to challenge the principles of the guild system and even its continuity. Within a negative economic context, the Enlightenment's governments were determined to undermine the said Old Regime institution which guaranteed a more equitable distribution of the social product and was therefore considered a nuisance and worth abolishing. The dismantling project coming from above was accompanied by an acute crisis at the very heart of the guilds themselves, due to the increasing impoverishment and proletarianization of their labourers. Taking into account both artisans' ideology and Enlightenment discourse, this paper examines how these processes were manifested in the city of Madrid. Focussing on the period 1750-1836 allows us to assess the economic changes which were implemented during the last decades of the eighteenth century and how they affected the artisan labour force. Finally, we shed some light on the guilds' resistance which was most evident in the decade of 1820, and question those views of guild abolition which are exclusively based on a legal approach to the 1834 and 1836 decrees.

KEYS WORDS: Guilds. Work. Eighteenth Century. Madrid.