From the website of Robert Darnton (www.robertdarnton.org).

Literary Demand: Sources and Methods

The Problem

Incomplete and unreliable sources make it devilishly difficult to compile statistics about the production and diffusion of books in early modern Europe. In England, only a minority of newly published books were entered in the registry of the London Stationers' Company. In Germany, the catalogues of the book fairs of Leipzig and Frankfurt exclude a great deal of popular literature along with a large proportion of works from southern and Catholic regions. And in France, the official records are misleading in several ways. The registers of requests for book privileges exclude everything that was not submitted for formal approval by the censors—that is, probably the majority of all new publications. Records of books submitted for other kinds of permissions—permissions tacites and permissions simples—are unrepresentative in other ways. There are no records of works that were allowed to be sold by informal arrangements with the police—so-called simples tolérances and permissions de police. And the enormous production of books that were printed outside France and marketed inside the kingdom cannot be estimated. I would guess that it constituted more than half the books in circulation between 1769 and 1789.[1]

Background

Why such a high proportion? The approbation of a censor and the conferral of a privilege did not merely certify that a book contained nothing that would offend religion, the state, morals, or the reputation of an important personage. They served as a royal stamp of approval for the quality of the book—its style and contents as well as its ideological correctness. True, censorship became less rigorous during the last years of the ancien régime. But it took money, time, and trouble to obtain even a permission tacite, which was given more freely but did not convey an exclusive right to sell a book (unlike privileges, which functioned as the precursors to modern copyrights) and yet required the

approval of a censor. The Parisian booksellers guild (Communauté des libraires et des imprimeurs de Paris) dominated the publishing industry, having destroyed most competition from provincial publishers, especially in Lyon and Rouen, during a trade war in the seventeenth century. Backed by the state's office for the control of the book trade (Direction de la librairie), the members of the guild profited from the exclusive right to print and sell books in the capital and a virtual monopoly of access to privileges for new works. They reinforced their power by policing the trade in Paris—that is, by inspecting book stores, printing shops, and the book shipments that arrived at the city gates—and they often developed networks of client booksellers in the provinces. The crown attempted to correct some of the disadvantages suffered by the provincial dealers in new regulations on August 30, 1777; but it never succeeded in restoring much competition.

In the face of these constraints and costs, many authors and provincial publishers preferred to have their books produced outside France and to market them inside the kingdom while arranging for the legal authorities to look the other way. Dozens of publishing houses sprang up like mushrooms around France's borders, extending from Amsterdam through the Austrian Netherlands and the Rhineland to Switzerland and Avignon, which then was papal territory. Foreign publishers of French books had done a brisk business during the sixteenth century in order to satisfy the demand for Protestant works. In the eighteenth century, they produced nearly all the works of the Enlightenment along with everything else that could not pass the censorship. But they made most of their money from piracy. The term may seem misleading, because publishers in Geneva or Amsterdam did not violate local laws by reprinting books that had originally appeared in Paris. No international copyright agreement existed. But when they sold their editions inside France, they aroused the fury of the owners of the original privileges, who were nearly always booksellers in the Parisian guild. (Authors could not sell books themselves before the reforms of 1777 and rarely did so afterward.)

The provincial booksellers, by contrast, were natural allies of the foreign publishers, primarily because of economic factors. They usually could procure pirated books at lower prices than the originals, which had to be produced

according to quality standards set by royal regulations. Conditions varied, but paper, which represented half or more of production costs depending on the size of the pressrun, normally was cheaper outside France. The pirate publishers also undercut the Parisian editions by eliminating what they called “typographical luxury”—for example, wide spacing, generous margins, and the use of expensive fonts of type. They reprinted books that were selling well, according to reports from their Parisian agents and provincial customers; and they did not have to advance capital to purchase the original manuscripts from the authors. True, they needed to have their books smuggled into France, but they could count on allies among the booksellers who inspected shipments in distribution centers like Rouen and Lyon. Despite occasional breakdowns, the illegal distribution system supplied relatively inexpensive books to a broad public everywhere in provincial France. This kind of publishing, based on pirated and uncensored editions, had developed into a major industry by 1750, much to the chagrin of royal officials, who deplored the flight of capital to foreign manufacturers. It outdid the upscale, Paris-centered, and guild-based system in linking production to demand.[2]

The STN: Measuring Demand

How to measure demand? That is the problem addressed by the following statistics and documents. They all come from the papers of the Société typographique de Neuchâtel (STN), the only publishing house from this era whose archives have survived. The enormous collection of STN documents reveals literary demand in two ways: first, by letters with orders for books sent by booksellers in nearly all the important cities and towns of France from 1769 to 1789; second, from various account books, where the STN’s clerks recorded the orders and the shipments sent in response to them. Thanks to help from a series of research assistants over the last fifteen years, I have transcribed several hundred of the most important letters and compiled the orders they contain into the statistical tables, which can be consulted by links to the name of the booksellers and also to the names of the cities where they operated.

The first question to arise concerns the representativeness of the STN material. No comparable source exists. In an earlier study, <u>The Forbidden Best-</u>

Sellers of Prerevolutionary France (W. W. Norton, New York, 1995) and its companion volume, The Corpus of Clandestine Literature in France, 1769-1789, I was able to calculate and map the demand for forbidden books—not pirated works but books that were unambiguously illegal, as determined by contemporary criteria—and I could check my results against a few complementary sources, such as reports on police raids in book shops, confiscations in the Parisian customs, and special catalogues of forbidden books. In contrast, the statistics given here cover books of all kinds—that is, all the works that circulated in the French market during the twenty years before the Revolution. How could one publisher's trade represent such an enormous variety of literature?

As an index to the overall market, it can only be approximate; but the STN archives, which contain about 50,000 letters, are rich enough to provide an adequate sample of the demand for books as it was expressed in the correspondence of booksellers located nearly everywhere in France. In order to appreciate the importance of this evidence, it is necessary to understand two factors that characterized Swiss-French publishing in the eighteenth century: first, the way houses like the STN operated, both as publishers and as wholesalers; second, the way booksellers in France ordered books. Both illustrate the ways early-modern publishing differed from publishing today.

Why Publishers Were Wholesalers

The STN rarely published original editions, unless it was commissioned to do so by authors who covered the costs. It reprinted books that were already selling well. In choosing them, it studied the market carefully and followed advice that it received from the best informed booksellers in its vast network of clients. But it did not sell only the books that it produced in its own printing shop. When it printed an edition, usually at a run of about 1,000 copies, it commonly traded a large proportion—100 or more copies—for an assortment of an equal number of books in the stock of one or more allied publishers. Exchanges were usually calculated according to the total number of sheets involved in the trade; and when the STN selected an assortment, it chose the books that it thought would

sell best. In this way, it minimized risk, for it could not be sure that an edition it printed would sell out or would sell rapidly enough to cover the investment of its capital; and at the same time, it maximized the value and variety of its own stock. When a bookseller ordered a work that it did not have in stock, the STN often procured it by an ad hoc trade or a discount purchase with an allied publisher in Lausanne, Geneva, Bern, or Basel, who operated in the same manner. Publishing as practiced by the major Swiss houses was therefore inseparable from wholesaling, and cooperation among the publisher-wholesalers meant that they could draw on a large corpus of literature, a kind of invisible, floating stock, which was available to all of their allies.

The Importance of Exchanges

The importance of exchanges in this publishing system has never been noted by historians, except in the case of Germany, where it functioned as the primary means of marketing books until the late eighteenth century.[3] In Switzerland, it continued to be a vital force until the French Revolution, and it spilled over into Swiss relations with certain houses in Lyon, Avignon, and even the Low Countries, despite the transport costs. Of course, the Swiss publishers often competed, but they also created alliances, which reinforced the links created by the exchange trade. Sometimes they published books together, sharing costs and risks. Joint publications were especially effective in speculations on pirated editions, when it was crucial to beat other pirates to the market before the demand dried up. At various times the STN concluded formal treaties with the Société typographique de Lausanne and the Société typographique de Berne so that all three houses combined forces to pirate books systematically and on a large scale.[4]

The swapping and pirating arrangements meant that the STN built up a large and varied stock of books, but some were more important than others in the general pattern of its trade. It sold more copies of books that it had printed than it did of books that it procured by exchanges. In describing its business in its commercial correspondence, it distinguished between “livres de fonds” (its own editions) and “livres d’assortiment” (general stock), and it separated them in its

account books, where each of its own editions had a separate account in contrast to the exchanged books, which were grouped together in a "compte d'échanges." While studying the statistics, therefore, one should allow for the greater weight attached to the titles published by the STN. They are set off by different coloring, and the "livres d'assortiment" can be studied both separately and together with the STN's editions. The overall stock of the STN grew to be enormous by the mid-1770s. In 1773 the STN claimed, "There is no book of any importance that appears in France that we are not capable of supplying."[5] Its catalogue of 1785 contained 700 titles, and an inventory of its warehouses in 1787 included 1,500 titles.

How Booksellers Ordered Books

The broad range of the books supplied by the STN was in part a response to the way booksellers placed orders for them. Provincial retailers tended to be cautious in ordering. They often arranged sales in advance with their own customers before committing themselves to purchase books from a foreign supplier; and rather than scattering orders among many suppliers, they usually restricted their trade to a few reliable houses. They tended to wait until they had accumulated enough items to group them in a single order. But they did not speculate on large shipments of one work unless they detected an unusual surge of demand. Instead, they ordered small numbers of several books and sent in new orders for those that continued to sell. Returns did not exist in the eighteenth-century book trade. (In very rare cases, such as the liquidation of stock after a bankruptcy, books might be sold "en commission," but those arrangements had no resemblance to the modern practice of returns.) Therefore, booksellers rarely ordered more than a dozen copies of a single title (by ordering a dozen they sometimes got a free thirteenth) and ordered enough titles to form a shipment large enough for them to take advantage of cheaper rates.

Books were shipped unbound in bundles of sheets packed into bales (binding was normally arranged by individual customers and sometimes by retail booksellers). Wagoners would not accept bales that weighed less than 50 pounds, and they often gave discounts for bulk shipments. Small shipments, sent

in packages (ballots as opposed to balles) weighing less than 50 pounds, had to go by coach at a much higher price. The distinction between the wagon (voiture) and the coach (carrosse) was crucial in the book trade, because books had a relatively low value in relation to shipping costs. Also, the recipient normally had to pay for them in cash upon delivery. The letters of booksellers read like an endless wail about the cost of shipping.

Trust and Capitalism

Booksellers sometimes played suppliers off against each other in order to extract the most favorable terms, but they also developed special relationships with particular publisher-wholesalers, who could be flexible about payments, give their orders priority, and offer occasional discounts. Instead of dispersing their business among many suppliers, therefore, they often concentrated it among a few whom they could trust. Trust ("confiance") was a key term in the long-distance book trade (and probably in early capitalism everywhere), owing to the need to avoid cheating. The tricks of the trade could be exploited endlessly by entrepreneurs who operated far away from the home territory of their victims. Some publishers announced that they were printing a book merely in order to see whether the demand was sufficient to justify an edition—while at the same time deterring a competitor from publishing it. And they often played favorites with their shipments so that some booksellers creamed off the demand before others in the same area received their copies. The publisher-wholesalers suffered more from abuses of confidence than the retailers, especially in the shadier branches of the trade. Once they had won the trust of the STN, marginal dealers like Malherbe of Loudun piled order upon order, until they drew most of their stock from Neuchâtel, always finding an excuse to avoid paying bills of exchange on the date of maturity. On the other hand, some scrupulously honest retailers, such as Charmet of Besançon, also sent the bulk of their orders to the STN, because they preferred to draw large numbers of books from a single supplier whom they had known for many years and who had proved to be both reliable and flexible if difficulties arose. Either way, the accumulation of orders makes it possible to

form a general idea of the business of a bookseller who traded regularly with the STN.

Research Strategy: A Flawed Approach

I emphasize this point, because it bears on a critical decision about the best method for compiling statistics. It would be possible to work through all the accounts of the STN (beautifully kept registers called "journaux," "brouillards," and "mains courants") and to record the sale of every book to every customer. I considered this strategy when I began to study the STN's accounts along with its correspondence in the 1960s. It raised the prospect of tracing the diffusion of French literature everywhere in Europe. But closer examination showed that the results would be misleading. Although the STN corresponded with many hundreds of booksellers located everywhere from Moscow to Naples and Budapest to Dublin, most of its correspondents placed very few orders—often only one or two, "par essai," as they put it. A few titles in the STN's catalogue or in the prospectuses for new editions, which it regularly circulated through the mail, would catch their eye, and they would make a trial purchase in order to assess the quality of the editions, the cost of transportation, and the time it took for the books to reach them. The great majority did not renew their orders, because they found that they could get better terms or quicker service from another supplier, usually one closer to home or one more firmly connected by ties of trust. Therefore, the STN often sold only a few copies of a particular book in a large area or an entire country, and the small number of copies that it managed to sell cannot be taken to typify the trade of the bookseller who bought them. The irregular, hit-and-miss quality of the sales records makes it impossible to generalize about the diffusion of individual works. Also, unfortunately, the data is too thin for one to reach conclusions about the general character of large markets such as Spain, Portugal, Denmark, Sweden, England, and Germany.

Misleading Sales Records

Consider the example of a great best-seller, Voltaire's Candide. The STN's accounts make it possible to plot every copy sold by the STN on a map of Europe, but the statistics are so trivial as to make the map useless.[6] Fourteen copies were sold to booksellers in Moscow and Saint Petersburg, and none at all were sold in Spain, Portugal, the Low Countries, Britain, and Scandinavia. Can one conclude that the demand for Candide was greater in Russia than in all those other countries and that it had ceased to exist it in most of Western Europe during the years 1769-1789? Certainly not, because booksellers in those countries drew supplies from other publishers and wholesalers. Gabriel Cramer, Voltaire's publisher in Geneva, did a large trade in the Iberian Peninsula and probably sold many copies of Candide there, but one cannot know for sure, because all that survives from his papers is his "Grand livre" or general account book, which mentions his customers but not the books they bought.[7] Voltaire exerted great influence on the cultural life of Berlin, thanks in large part to his relations with Frederick II; yet the STN did not sell a single copy of Candide there. By 1769, the book market in Berlin and all of Northern Germany had fallen under the dominance of Philipp Erasmus Reich, the publisher who transformed the German trade,[8] but Reich never had any contact with the STN. In fact, it is very difficult to follow the STN's sales in Germany, because most of them took place in the book fairs of Leipzig and Frankfurt from which they went to unknown destinations.[9] The STN did not even sell them at the fairs by itself but worked through middle men such as Johann Jacob Flick and C. A. Serini of Basel and Emmanuel Haller and the Société typographique of Bern. The diffusion of the books left no trace in the STN's accounts. What the accounts do reveal is an extensive trade, by sales as well as exchanges, between the STN and other Swiss houses, who then sold its books within their own commercial networks. The ultimate destination of those books, which represent at least a quarter of the STN's business, cannot be determined.

Many of the same problems apply to the study of the STN's sales in France, its largest market. It never did much business in Paris, where the booksellers' guild, reinforced by the police, did everything possible to eliminate competition from foreign publishers who specialized in pirated editions. Provincial dealers

were attracted by the STN's relatively cheap prices, but they often made a trial order to test the quality of the STN's editions or the effectiveness of its supply lines, and never came back. A delay in the shipment or a large number of spoiled sheets (défets) was enough to dissuade them from establishing regular relations. Their names show up once or twice in the STN's account books and then disappear. To be sure, the STN gradually built up a network of its own, but the process was irregular and uneven, making it difficult to compare sales in one city with those in another. In fact, most of the STN's contacts with retailers did not lead to enough sales for one to sketch even a tentative profile of their trade. Only in exceptional cases, such as the sales of the quarto edition of the Encyclopédie, can one draw on the STN archives to follow the diffusion of a book geographically and sociologically.[10] And one cannot trace a large proportion of the STN's books beyond its dealings with the middlemen in Geneva, Lausanne, Bern, and Basel. I see no way around a disappointing conclusion: any attempt to compile statistics by indiscriminately counting every sale recorded by the STN is bound to be fatally flawed.[11]

Research Strategy: A Valid Approach

Instead of lumping all of the STN's transactions together, I have opted for a strategy of sampling, and I have combined quantitative with qualitative analysis. To gauge the extent to which the orders of a bookseller can be taken to represent his business, it is necessary to compile an adequate number of them and also to read the letters in which they appear. Only by careful study of the correspondence can one determine the context of the sales, the conditions that determined their limits, and the nature of the rapport between customer and supplier. Booksellers usually wrote terse, business-like letters; but after they developed "confiance," a trusted relationship with the STN, they often interspersed their orders with personal remarks and reflections on the trade. Far from restricting themselves to business, their commercial correspondence then opens up a fresh view of life in provincial France, because in some cases, one can follow a bookseller from the time he sets up shop, gets married, develops a family, takes sick, and dies. Letters from neighbors and other merchants

complete the picture. For all their homeliness—in fact because of it—the letters make fascinating reading. Hundreds of them can be sampled on this web site. If studied along with the statistics, one can get the feel of the book trade as it was embedded deep in the social order of the ancien régime.

The Sample

Only a few of the many hundreds of dossiers in the STN archives offer such a rich view. I have selected eighteen of them and, with help from research assistants, have transcribed all their letters, identified the books they ordered, and tabulated the number of copies ordered for each title along with the number of orders and the dates of their occurrence. Each bookseller's business had its own character, but the eighteen sample dossiers conform to a general pattern. They provide a fairly reliable measure of the demand for books over a large area of provincial France: the Eastern provinces, down the Rhône Valley, across Provence and Languedoc, up the West Coast to the Loire, along the Loire Valley to Burgundy and back through the Franche-Comté to Neuchâtel.

Favarger's Tour

That was the itinerary of Jean-François Favarger during his five-month tour de France in 1778. In his diary and correspondence, which are available on this web site, he reported on all the booksellers he met, and the STN's replies, in addition to its written instructions, guided him in his attempts to sell books, settle accounts, and assess the trade in every town along his route. The richness of this documentation complements the correspondence of the booksellers themselves. Therefore, it is possible to compare a horizontal view of the trade in 1778 with a vertical perspective derived from letters that stretch from 1769 to 1789. I studied all the dossiers of all the STN's customers in the rest of France, but instead of attempting to extend the statistical sampling beyond Favarger's itinerary, I decided to concentrate on the parts of the archives where the documentation was densest.

Demand and Supply

By combining quantitative analysis with a critical reading of the correspondence, it is possible to make inferences about the sale as well as the demand for books. In fact, the orders of the eighteen booksellers correspond quite closely to the books they actually received. But they sometimes ordered books that the STN could not supply, either because it did not have them in stock or could not procure them from other publisher-wholesalers. In account books known as livres de commission, the STN's clerks recorded the orders on the left (verso) page of the register and the shipments on the right (recto) page. The disparities between the two facing pages demonstrate that the STN frequently failed to fill an entire order. But in the records of the eighteen booksellers, the match between the orders and the sales was usually very close, and therefore, the following statistics can be taken as a rough measure of the diffusion of books as well as a more accurate picture of the demand for them.

This argument may be convincing as far as it goes, but does it go far enough to support sound conclusions? In advancing it, I am aware that I want my statistics to be significant—a danger that calls for some self-criticism. What are the deficiencies in the strategy I have just described?

Problems with Statistical Samples

In some cases, the statistical base may be dangerously thin. Among the eighteen booksellers in the sample, Constantin Lair of Blois ordered the smallest number of books—only 34 titles in all. He was a schoolmaster and small-time vintner, who sold books as a sideline, but his letters indicate that he depended on the STN for most or all of his supplies. Despite the modest size of his orders, I have therefore included him in the sample to illustrate the business of a marginal dealer in the capillary sector of the book trade. Veteran professional booksellers in large cities—Rigaud in Montpellier, for example, and Mossy in Marseille—placed regular, carefully calculated orders with the STN, but they also drew supplies from other publisher-wholesalers such as the Société typographique de Lausanne and the Société typographique de Berne. I cannot be certain that the

books furnished by the other typographical societies were similar to those sold by the STN, even though they drew on the same basic stock by means of their exchanges.

Evidence from Other Publisher-Wholesalers

In order to form a general idea of the business of the allied Swiss houses, I have studied their correspondence with the STN. Some of their dossiers are enormous—631 letters from the Société typographique de Berne; 223 from the Société typographique de Lausanne in addition to 151 separate letters from its director, Jean-Pierre Heubach, and 83 from his associate, Jean-Pierre Bérenger; 421 from François Grasset of Lausanne; 207 from Bartélemy Chirol of Geneva; 130 from Jean Abram Nouffer of Geneva; and 75 letters from C. A. Serini of Basel. The constant flow of correspondence as well as exchanges among the publishers shows that they sold the same kind of books and many of the same titles. Their catalogues, which are included in the letters, are also essentially the same. Retailers like Rigaud and Mossy often ordered the same book from two or three of the Swiss houses in order to be sure of receiving an adequate supply on time and to spread out the risk of confiscation.

It would be incorrect, however, to claim that the STN archives are rich enough to represent the trade of all the publishing houses in Switzerland. They contain only three letters from the important Genevan publisher, Gabriel Cramer. Unlike the Neuchâtelois, he printed a great many original editions, especially of Voltaire's works. He never developed close contacts with the STN, because he resented its pirating, notably when it reprinted his edition of Voltaire's Questions sur l'Encyclopédie behind his back (and with the complicity of Voltaire). Similarly, the STN did not trade extensively with Barthélemy de Felice in nearby Yverdon, probably because he built his business around his expurgated and expanded edition of the Encyclopédie, which competed with the STN's speculation on the quarto reprint produced in Geneva, Neuchâtel and Lyon. The secondary literature on Swiss publishing contains a great deal of valuable information, but not enough to make systematic comparisons.[12]

It is therefore possible, although unlikely, that the business of other Swiss publishers differed substantially from that of the STN or that the Swiss trade as a whole had a different character from that of the Low Countries. But I have not found any indication of fundamental differences in studying the correspondence of Pierre Gosse Junior of The Hague (59 letters), J. L. Boubers of Brussels (35 letters), Clément Plomteux of Liège (15 letters), and other publishers to the north of France. When the directors of the STN made business trips through the Low Countries, they got a cool reception from most of the publishers they visited, because they were treated as rivals in the general struggle to sell the same kind of books. The prevalence of piracy everywhere around France's borders meant that dozens of publisher-wholesalers competed to satisfy the demand on the same French markets. So the flow of pirated works that reached France from The Netherlands via Rouen was probably very similar to the current that passed from Switzerland through Lyon. I must hedge that assertion with a "probably," because I have no solid proof. But to support it, I would insist on a key characteristic that distinguished early modern publishing from publishing today. Today's best-sellers are produced by one publisher who sells many copies of the same work, usually by reprinting several large editions, sometimes by selling off the paperback rights. In the eighteenth century, best-sellers were produced by many publishers in many small editions (usually about 1,000 copies) and sold on the same markets at the same time. That is why libraries now contain so many different versions of the same eighteenth-century works.

An Overview: 1,145 Titles

As to the solidity of the statistics published below, I believe that they provide an accurate measure of the STN's trade in France, even though they represent only a sample of all the orders it received. They cover 1,145 titles—that is, books ordered by the 18 French booksellers between 1769 and 1789. Whether that sample can serve as a measure of the French trade in general is another question. It is difficult to estimate the number of new works produced each year in France; but if one relies on the record of requests both for privileges and for tacit permissions, the total number of titles for the period 1750-1789 comes to

about 30,000. The annual number, which did not vary greatly after 1767, came to about 750.[13] The total number of titles that passed through the trade of the STN during the twenty years of its existence must have been considerably higher than the 1,145 in the sample compiled from the orders of the 18 booksellers. Yet the total in that sample is the equivalent of about eight per cent of the new legal works that appeared in France during the twenty years of the STN's existence—not a random eight per cent but rather a selection of works that would sell best, according to the professional judgment of the STN and its allies. They made it their business to satisfy demand. In doing so, they furnished their customers with all kinds of highly illegal books in addition to pirated editions of the legal works that sold well. As the annual production in the illegal sector cannot be calculated, it is impossible to make an estimate of the proportion of total book production represented by the sample 1,145 titles. Nevertheless, I think the sample provides a valid indication of what books actually circulated on the literary market place and what French readers most wanted to buy.

The relative importance of particular works, individual authors, and specific genres is much more difficult to determine. The statistics given here show the demand for each of the 1,145 works, and they provide a rough profile of the trade of each of the 18 booksellers. Best-seller lists indicate the books that enjoyed the greatest demand, both in the business of each bookseller and among all of them taken together. Of course, best-seller lists are often flawed today, owing to difficulties and deficiencies in sampling orders; and one should not expect a great deal of precision in lists of books that were most in demand two and a half centuries ago. I can claim only that the lists given here provide a good guide to the preferences among the French for the literature that was available to them in book shops between 1769 and 1789.

Unevenness in the Sources

Three additional difficulties need to be taken into account. First, the uneven success in the STN's business during those twenty years means that the volume of orders it received was not consistent. It did not develop an extensive trade in France until 1771. In June 1783, the French state took effective measures

to stanch the flow of illegal and pirated works from abroad. By the end of 1783, the STN ran into serious financial difficulties and had to cut back on its activities, selling off its accumulated stock rather than expanding its business with numerous new publications and exchanges. Therefore, the most revealing statistics come from the period 1771-1784. Those covering the last five years of the ancient régime are less reliable.

Secondly, some titles weigh more heavily than others in the statistics based on the orders that the STN received. As mentioned, booksellers often ordered what their customers had requested, and they also followed their own instinct about what would sell, particularly when they learned of new publications from their commercial correspondence and from advertisements in periodicals. But in placing orders, they commonly chose from the works that appeared in the STN's catalogues, which it sent out frequently to booksellers everywhere in France. A title from the STN catalogue tended to attract more orders than a title that did not appear in it, just as the STN's own publications outweighed its livres d'assortiment in the pattern of its trade. An analysis of the statistics should take account of such factors, and it also may run into difficulties in interpreting the geographical distribution of the orders. If a bookseller in Marseille asked for nearly the same books as one in Besançon, did the similarity derive from the common character of the source they consulted when they sent in their orders? Or did the relatively wealthy and educated elite who bought books have the same preferences in both cities, perhaps even everywhere in France? I don't know, but I am struck by the lack of a local flavor in most of the orders. One must allow for special cases, such as the high demand for Protestant books in Nîmes, for medical treatises in Montpellier, and for works on viticulture in Bordeaux. But it could be that the same tastes, at least in the realm of contemporary literature, prevailed everywhere in the upper ranks of society, despite the great diversity in regional cultures.

Finally, I should point out that the statistics express a few characteristics that were peculiar to the trade of the STN. Although it did not specialize in any particular genre, it dealt heavily in Protestant works, and it drew on networks of Huguenots to market them in France, especially in cities like Nîmes and La

Rochelle. It did not include many Catholic books in its stock, although at one point it offered to print a breviary for the Cistercians in Cîteaux. Therefore, the statistics give a rich picture of the demand for religious books among French Protestants, but not for religious literature in general. The STN did not carry some other kinds of literature—chapbooks, professional manuals, and most varieties of textbooks. It did, however, sell a great many works aimed at children, and it developed something of a specialty in travel literature. Highly forbidden books, such as pornographic novels and personal libels, made up a fairly important portion of its business. But it did not specialize in them. In response to the demand from booksellers, it procured them by arranging exchanges with marginal publishers like Jacques-Benjamin Téron and Gabriel Grasset of Geneva, who speculated in the most dangerous (and usually the most profitable) sector of the trade. Despite some of its own publications, such as d'Holbach's Système de la nature and Voltaire's Questions sur l'Encyclopédie, the STN did not particularly favor works of the Enlightenment philosophers. It carried a large assortment of ordinary books—"mid-list" works, as they are known today—and it invested heavily in best-sellers, or whatever it thought would sell best.

Built-in Bias?

Did the judgment of its directors express any personal bias, either of taste or ideology, when they chose what to print and what to exchange? They had opinions of their own, of course, but nothing indicates that their principles, values, and attitudes differed substantially from those of their contemporaries. After reading thousands of their letters and studying their own publications (two of the founding partners of the STN, Frédéric-Samuel Ostervald and his son-in-law, Jean-Elie Bertrand, did not merely publish books; they also wrote them), one gets the impression that they were cultivated, enlightened, and rather conservative gentlemen, fairly typical of the elite in the Swiss principality of Neuchâtel and Valangin, which had governed itself under Prussian suzerainty since 1707. Ostervald, the principal partner, was 56 in 1769. As a member of a distinguished family, he had held important positions in the city government, where he defended the interests of the bourgeoisie, and he had published a

treatise on geography, which confirmed his position as one of the town's leading men of letters. Bertrand was a learned professor in the local collège and a pastor, until his exclusion from the Vénérable Classe des Pasteurs in 1771, when the STN published a clandestine edition of d'Holbach's atheistic Système de la nature. (It also published two refutations of the Système.) A volume of his sermons suggests that Bertrand subscribed to a conventional version of Christian morality, one far removed from the materialism of d'Holbach. Samuel Fauche, the third partner of the STN, left the company in 1772 after a quarrel over a libelous pamphlet that he had secretly slipped into an STN shipment in order to market it on his own, and he then resumed his trade as an independent bookseller. He was replaced in 1777 by Abram Bosset de Luze, a wealthy businessman with literary interests. Everything one knows about them suggests that the men who directed the STN held views that corresponded in a general way to enlightened ideas but that they did not use their business to promote the Enlightenment or any other cause. Their primary goal was to make money, "the moving force of everything" ("le grand mobile de tout"), as they put it in their correspondence.[14]

A Conclusion and an Invitation

They did not always succeed. In fact, their near bankruptcy in 1783 could be taken as evidence that they had a poor record in linking supply with demand. But their financial difficulties resulted from other factors, notably the measures adopted by the French government to restrict imports of illegal books, including pirated editions. Therefore, even when it failed to fill them, the orders that the STN received from its customers constitute the best source for discovering what the demand for French literature actually was on the eve of the Revolution. The best available source. By pointing out its deficiencies, I do not mean to discourage the study of the statistics. On the contrary, I want to make them available for others to analyze and criticize. There is, after all, a great deal at stake in this kind of research, not only for the understanding of prerevolutionary France but also for the study of literature and of history in general.

Note on Statistics

In the following lists of books that were ordered by the eighteen booksellers, the titles of works printed by the STN appear in green; those printed by the STN in collaboration with the Société typographique de Berne and the Société typographique de Lausanne appear in brown; and those printed by the STN in collaboration with two Genevan publishers, Abraham Nouffer and Barthélemi Chirol, appear in blue.

In some cases, the STN sold copies of a book from its general stock and later decided to print its own edition of that book. The statistics take account of that irregularity in the sources by noting in a separate column the number of copies ordered for the STN edition. For example, in the case of Louis Sébastien Mercier's popular Tableau de Paris, the STN sold 26 copies to various customers before it produced its own edition; and therefore the orders for the Tableau de Paris appear as 300 copies of which 274 came from the STN edition.

Notes

[1] For a survey of the literature and a discussion of the problems of measuring French book production before the nineteenth century, see my essay originally published as "Reading, Writing, and Publishing in Eighteenth-Century France: A Case Study in the Sociology of Literature," Daedalus (Winter, 1971), 214-256 and available in this web site under "Research." On the inadequacy of the registers of the Stationers' Company, see D. F. McKenzie, Making Meaning. "Printers of the Mind" and Other Essays (Amherst, 2002), chapters 4 and 5. On the unrepresentative aspects of the Frankfurt and Leipzig book fair catalogues, see Reinhard Wittmann, "Die frühen Buchhändlerzeitschriften als Spiegel des literarischen Lebens, Archiv für Geschichte des Buchwesens 13 (1973), 614-932 and Reinhard Wittman Geschichte des Deutschen Buchhandels (Munich, 1991), 111.

[2] As an example of the economic concerns of the French administrators of the book trade, see Chrétien-Guillaume de Lamoignon de Malesherbes, Mémoires sur la librairie, ed. Roger Chartier (Paris, 1994; text composed in 1759), 85-86.

[3] See Wittmann, Geschichte des Deutschen Buchhandels, chapters 3 and 4 and Johann Adolf Goldfriedrich, Geschichte des deutschen buchhandels vom beginn der fremdherrschaft bis zur reform des Börsenvereins im neuen Deutschen Reiche (1805-1889 (Leipzig, 1886-1909), vol. 3.

[4] I have developed this argument more fully in "The Science of Piracy: A Crucial Ingredient in Eighteenth-Century Publishing," Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century 12 (2003), 3-29 and available on this web site.

[5] STN to Astori of Lugano, April 15, 1775 in the archives of the STN..

[6] These criticisms apply especially to The French Book Trade in Enlightenment Europe, 1769-1794, ed. Simon Burrows (2012), online at http://chop.leedsw.ac.uk/stn/.

[7] See Giles Barber, "The Cramers of Geneva and their trade in Europe between 1755 and 1766," Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century, 30 (1964), pp. 377-413 and Georges Bonnant, "La librairie genevoise dans la peninsule ibérique au XVIIIe siècle," Genava, 9 (1961), pp. 104-124.

[8] See Goldfriedrich, Geschichte des deutschen buchhandels, vol. 3 and Wittmann, Geschichte des deutschen buchhandels.

[9] See Jeffrey Freedman, Books Without Borders in Enlightenment Europe. French Cosmopolitanism and German Literary Markets (Philadelphia, 2012), chapter 1.

[10] See The Business of Enlightenment: A Publishing History of the Encyclopédie, 1775-1800 (Cambridge, Mass., 1979) and "The Encyclopédie Wars of Prerevolutionary France", which is available on this web site.

[11] For another version of this argument, see my review essay, "The French Book Trade in Enlightenment Europe, 1769-1794," Reviews in History (December, 2012) at <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1355>, which is also available on this web site.

[12] This is not the place to include a bibliography of this large subject, but the reader can follow up the numerous references in two collective works: Cinq siècles d'imprimerie genevoise , eds. Jean-Daniel Candaux and Bernard

Lescaze (Geneva, 1981) and Aspects du livre neuchâtelois, eds. Jacques Rychner and Michel Schlup (Neuchâtel,1986).

[13] See François Furet, "La "librairie" du royaume de France au 18e siècle," in Livre et société dans la France du XVIIIe siècle vol. I (Paris, 1965), pp. 7-14 and Robert Estivals, La Statistique bibliographique de la France sous la monarchie au XVIIIe siècle (Paris, 1965), pp. 213-291. The estimate of 30,000 new titles for the 40 years before 1790 is probably high, because many requests for privilèges, permissions du Sceau (an authorization like a privilege but one that did not convey the exclusive right to sell a book), and permissions tacites did not result in actual publications. Also, many of the requests concerned proposals to reprint works whose privilèges had expired. There are no records for casual authorizations such as simples tolérances and permissions de police, but they mainly concern ephemera. Of course, all of the official records exclude illegal literature. The STN sold a great many books that would not have been submitted for any kind of authorization by state officials, but it pirated an even larger number of legal and quasi-legal works. It also sold works published earlier than when it began business, but it concentrated heavily in the trade in recent literature.

[14] Bosset to STN, April 1, 1780. For biographical sketches of the STN's partners, see Biographies neuchâteloises, ed. Michel Schlup, vol. I (1996), pp. 197-201 and L'Edition neuchâteloise au siècle des Lumières. La Société typographique de Neuchâtel (1769-1789), eds. Robert Darnton, Jacques Rychner, and Michel Schlup (Neuchâtel, 2002), pp. 67-70.