

BOX 5.2

INSTITUTIONALISING FRENCH BREAD

[Daniel Bertaux and Isabelle Bertaux-Wiame (1981) researched the 'Artisanal bakery in France: how it lives and why it survives'.] Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame (1981) wrote, disparagingly, about industrial bread as, 'industrial food wrapped in a shroud of cellophane which is sold in the supermarkets of the western world under the somewhat euphemistic label of "bread." Industrial bread accounts for most of the bread sold in the Anglo-Saxon countries of the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Britain. [Similar bread-making industries deploy similar strategies and structures.] Bread is usually produced from within a division of a giant food conglomerate based around vertical integration from flour milling to bread and related food retailing.

Visitors to and residents of France know that typical French bread is a crusty baguette or half pound loaf. It looks good and it tastes good. However, to describe it does not tell us what French bread is. It is clearer, perhaps, if we determine what it is not. First, it is not a standardized, easily transportable, mass-produced product. It is not a heavily marketed, brand-identified, size-invariant, shrink-wrapped, and sliced product sold identically in virtually similar supermarket chains throughout the country. It possesses an inherent quality of 'freshness'. It is perishable, its value being that it is fresh, does perish, and cannot be bought other than on a daily basis. It incorporates everything that industrial bread could never be. So how is French bread possible? How has the market dominance of conglomerate oligopoly bread been avoided? Why should it be that in France and a number of Latin countries most of the bread consumed is made by artisans rather than in factories, and only a small percentage of the market is for industrial bread, whereas in other countries, such as Britain and the United States, it is industrial bread that wins the market?



In France there is about one bakery for every thousand people, a decentralized scattering of small, independent bakeries that manufacture and sell bread, cakes, and croissants from the same premises. The shopkeeper is usually the baker's wife, and the couple is the real economic unit, the man as an artisan and the woman as a shopkeeper. On average, each bakery employs fewer than three workers, usually less than twenty years old. Most of these young men leave the trade sometime between twenty and twenty-five. Many of these very small bakeries are in decline in depopulating urban areas and villages. Newer, larger (employing ten to fifteen people) bakeries making bread for large chains, such as Carrefour, have developed in suburban areas. However, these are still the same kind of artisan bakeries, making the same kind of artisan bread, using the same methods of production. They are just larger.

In 1966, however, traditional methods of making French bread did seem to be under threat. The largest flour-milling group in France, which had a virtual monopoly of the supply of flour to the Paris market, was rumored to be preparing a huge bread factory close to the Seine in order to supply industrial bread to the French market. One day, without warning, the flour-milling company changed the terms of trade. Henceforth, only full truckloads would be delivered, a crippling blow to bakers who had neither the market nor the storage capacity to warrant such an amount. However, after a week of panic, when it looked as if what the big millers desired – the eclipse of the small bakers – might occur, the small bakers discovered some independent mills still functioning in the regions outside Paris, which were on the verge of closing down, owing to a lack of work, that were delighted to receive the orders of the small bakers. The new network functioned quite smoothly after a month or so, at which point the 'big flour-milling company understood it had lost the fight; it went back to its previous policy of retail delivery, lowered its prices to get back its former customers, and put the plans for the factory back in the safe where they are waiting for the next opportunity' (Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame 1981: 161).

Baking bread has always been, and remains, hard work, sometimes for relatively small returns. Before World War II, the working day would often start at midnight, or earlier, with the preparation of the first batch of dough. The oven had to be warmed next, so wood had to be cut, the fire lit, and so on. At around two in the morning, the first batch had to be cooked, and so on, in successive batches through to noon. Lunch and sleep followed till four, when the baker and the young apprentice would attend to their rural rounds delivering bread to the farms. Returning home from this later that evening, they would have time for a few hours of sleep until midnight rolled around again. ➔

The shop opens from eight in the morning, or seven in working-class districts; it may shut from one till four, and then reopen, closing finally at eight, a long day's work to which the shopkeeper-wife 'must add the work of any housewife and mother. The closing day is used not for rest or leisure, but in making up for the accumulated backlog of cleaning, washing, shopping' (Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame 1981: 163). The wives are the street-level workers, the frontline marketers. Good bakers bake good bread, but it is good wives who sell it, who create a regular customer attracted to a particular bread and a particular shop. In addition, wives are also the accountants, cashiers, and trusted confidantes. Wives who become widows can hire bakery workers to continue the business, but husbands who have become widowers, or whose wives have left them, find it difficult to continue in the business without an unpaid and trustworthy partner. Good wives are good investments in more ways than one. It is to the wives' judgment that the reproduction of this whole enterprise falls.

Given the nature of the trade, only someone who had been apprenticed in it could possibly run the business, and, indeed, most present-day bakers were formerly workers who had become self-employed at an early age. Initially, this discovery was puzzling for the researchers. Where would a lowly paid worker in a low-status trade, in all probability with no collateral, raise the significant sums necessary to buy even one of the smallest going concerns? Redefining the problem from the other end of the age spectrum solved the puzzle. Consider an old couple whose life has been their bakery and who want to retire, with no children to hand on the business to. How can they retire? Only if they can sell the business as a going concern, complete with goodwill, to someone who will continue to use the premises as a bakery. For any other purpose, it is just a small shop and workshop, with no intrinsic value over and above that of the market value as real estate. Anyway, premises are invariably rented. All there is to sell is the baker's ovens and machines unless the bakery continues as a bakery, in which case goodwill (stable customer relationships with a specific local population) can return an appropriate monetary value, which the machinery, frequently worn out, will not. The only people who can take over the trade are the young men who have been apprenticed in it. They are the only ones to know the trade intimately. Becoming a self-employed baker consummates the hard union of an apprenticeship, with long hours and low pay. It is this possibility that makes being a lowly worker bearable.

How bakery workers become proprietors and old couples retire from the trade are inextricably linked. The retiring couple lend the necessary money to the bakery worker and his wife. For the incoming couple, its acceptance means eight years of relative hardship and privation as they save to repay the value of the goodwill (based on the value of an average month's sale of bread). For the retiring couple it means placing tremendous trust in the new couple, for the turnover may be a risky business. If they do



not succeed in the trade, then they cannot repay the loan. Actually, the trust is placed not so much in the couple – the bakery worker is trusted to know the trade on the basis of his ten years or so of service – the trust has to be placed in the young woman who is entering the trade, for she is the key to the whole enterprise. She is the secret of the future success of the *boulangerie*. Has she got what it takes to be a good shopkeeper? Can she tolerate the long hours of work during the day and the emptiness of the nights as her husband toils in the bakery? Does she know what being a baker's partner means and entails? Will she resent the customers who, arriving after hours, will nonetheless disturb her because they want, expect, fresh bread? A good baker needs a good partner in life and business as well as money to succeed. If he does not have the former, it is unlikely he will make the latter. A baker's marriage is not just a transaction between marital partners – it is also a transaction between an artisan and a shopkeeper who are bonded together.

... It is apparent ... that the artisan form is not in present danger of extinction from industrial bread. There has been a renaissance of artisanal techniques in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The big mills seem to have completely given up the 'all-industrial' strategy. Interestingly, at least two of them offer increased services to the *boulangeries*, including a brand of bread using specifically selected flours. They provide wrapping papers and bags, signs, and the flour to make a specific baguette as well as some more upmarket baguettes and other breads. This builds up on a tendency to buy more sophisticated breads with, for example, seeds, olives, and cereals, at least in the big towns, from the specialist bakers. Indeed, the latest figures that we were able to find suggest as much. According to data from the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs (*Le Magazine* 26: 12/1996), the independent shops of artisan bakers comprise 75% of the volume (probably more in value), industrial bread has an 18% market share, and retailers like Carrefour (bread produced most of the time in big artisanal units) have 7%. There are still 35,000 *boulangeries artisanales*, and despite a tendency to uniformization that dates back to the 1940s, there are still eighty-one regional breads, with the baguette representing 80% of the purchases. Each shop serves an average 1,570 inhabitants per shop. A new tendency is an increase in the quality of frozen uncooked bread, cooked on demand in small franchise shops with a small oven (such as *Brioche Doré*). They take part of the market in the big towns, for immediate consumption during a lunch break or at teatime. More recent figures for 2000 from the *Confédération nationale de la boulangerie-pâtisserie Française* show that 71.3% of the market is still serviced by artisanal bakeries. The share of franchise and industrial bread has increased but very slowly and not very significantly. We can hardly talk about a paradigm shift in French bread. In some small towns or big villages, although a *boulangerie* can be a very profitable business in the long run, and one will find quite a few Mercedes in the backyards, at the other end, the prospects are modest in small villages and remote areas.



Reference

Bertaux, D. and Bertaux-Wiame, I. (1981) 'Artisanal bakery in France: how it lives and why it survives' in Bechofer, F. and Elliot, B. (eds) *The Petite Bourgeoisie: Comparative Studies of the Uneasy Stratum*, London, Macmillan.

(Clegg et al., 2005, pp. 73–77)