CHAPTER 3

Production, Supply, and Labour Relations at the Naval Shipyards

Few, if any, investments in material goods in the early modern period were of the size of building and equipping fully armed war ships.¹ Navies depended on sustained interaction with their economic hinterlands on a scale hardly matched by other state institutions. Whereas the last chapter dealt with the evolution of the relations between Admiralty Boards and merchants in commercial protection and warfare, this chapter examines the economic impact of the naval economy on the development of capitalist structures in the home economy. After the naval revolution of the 1650s and 1660s with its associated launch of major in-house shipbuilding programmes, the Amsterdam naval shipyard became the second biggest production facility within the Dutch Republic, only surpassed by the VOC shipyard. The shipyards of the other Admiralty Boards were smaller, but nevertheless remained among the biggest manufacturing enterprises of their respective regions.

Naval shipyards are the laboratories for historians of modernisation processes, the evolution of administrative cultures, and the development of capitalist relations. The sheer size of naval shipyards all around the early modern world meant that they brought together hundreds or even thousands of workers at the same premises in an area when most production was still fragmented and small-scale. This created unique complexities in the nature of planning, costing, and coordination. Managers and workers fought over the implementation of technological innovation in a sector still dominated by craft labour. It created huge strains on labour relations as well as friction between state demand and private suppliers.² Whereas in the past much of the literature on war and state formation concentrated heavily on finances, production, and supply for warfare on land, in recent years naval institutions have become the focus of an increasing number of studies on the evolution of states, bureau-

¹ As estimated by Brewer 1988, p. 34.
² These themes are prominently addressed in recent studies on the Venetian arsenal, such as Davis 1991, Davis 1997, Zan 2004, and Zambon and Zan 2007, and on the Royal Dockyards, Morriss 1992, Knight 1999, and Linebaugh 2006.
cracies, and practices of contracting. These debates, however, have as yet largely passed by Dutch historiography on the naval shipyards. Labour relations, supply systems, and management culture have been far more central in investigations of the VOC and of smaller private yards than they have been for the Admiralty Boards. Like the debate on the employment of the navy in commercial protection, the debate on the functioning of naval shipyards is still heavily influenced by the image of a binary opposition between the market-oriented practices of the seventeenth century and the supposedly financially hamstrung, nepotism-infested and lethargic practices of the eighteenth century. This story fits well into nationalist as well as liberal meta-narratives, in which the glorious days when the Dutch ruled the seven seas were undercut by self-serving bureaucrats who managed to replace the frugal merchants at the head of naval direction. Only very recently have historians started to nuance this view, for example by pointing out that in shipbuilding practices at the naval shipyards the eighteenth century was not as stagnant as was long assumed. The previous chapter showed how the shifts in employment and make-up of the fleet were much more adapted to the needs of merchant capital and much less driven by ‘economic decline’ than is often suggested. It argued that far from arising from the removal of merchant capitalists from the helm of state it was their continued power over the state, guaranteed through federal-brokerage arrangements, that caused unbridgeable tensions between the sectional interests of individual groups of merchants and the long-term strategic interests of the Dutch ruling class. Similar conclusions can be drawn for the functioning of the Admiralty Boards in their relation with the home economy.


5 The main work setting out this view remains Bruijn 1970. Most studies on the other Admiralty Boards consisted of short articles, often highly episodic in nature. E.g., Thorkow 1945, van ’t Zand 1998, Enthoven, 2003, Roodhuyzen-van Breda Vriesman 2003. Relevant research into the functioning of the Zeeland Admiralty Board has been done in the rich Zeeland Provincial Archive in recent years, contesting the idea that this smaller Admiralty Board became lethargic and fully inefficient during the eighteenth century. Otte 2004, Veenstra 2008.

6 For the old view of stagnation, see Voorbeijt & Cannenburg 1924. For a recent, more nuanced approach see Hoving and Lemmers 2001.