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“The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln” by Sean Wilentz

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CSSH NOTES

Julia Elyachar. *Markets of Dispossession: NGOs, Economic Development, and the State in Cairo*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press (xv and 279 pp.).

Julia Elyachar's ethnography of an urban Egyptian settlement in the mid-1990s offers a refreshingly critical and historically situated account of microloans and the neopopulist ideologies that have swept the international development industry. Her thesis is that contemporary development interventions reconstitute the social networks and cultural practices of the poor as part of the free market and as a source of bank profits. These processes, which she calls "accumulation by dispossession," rest on the inculcation of rational, calculating subjectivities and the valorization of the networks and practices of the poor as "social capital."

In the 1980s and 1990s, proponents of structural adjustment denounced large loans to Third World countries for spawning corruption and "top-down" development. Repackaging their concepts to shift from state- to market-led approaches, development experts proposed that microloans administered by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to small entrepreneurs were the key to empowering the poor. In 1991, the World Bank created the Social Fund in Egypt, anticipating that those disenfranchised by structural adjustment would draw on this \$572 million "safety net" of debt capital to survive and help themselves by becoming "microentrepreneurs" in the informal economy. Once regarded as backwards and residual, the informal economy was rediscovered by development experts as the vibrant free market vanguard, unencumbered by the demands of an overbearing state. Microloan providers, Elyachar found, were not interested in whether their borrowers paid taxes, used child labor and corporal punishment, or mishandled toxic chemicals (p. 129). Yet the Social Fund did require, at least on paper, that each borrower employ a minimum of three people. This enabled the Fund to generate impressive statistics on unemployment alleviation.

Much of Elyachar's analysis builds on her contrast between master craftsmen and youth living in el-Hirafiyeen, a government-sponsored settlement on the desert outskirts of Cairo. Master craftsmen, who restore machines and make spare parts, were expelled from northern Cairo by state officials who had the masters' workspaces seized and licenses revoked. With privatization and soaring real estate prices in the 1980s, state officials saw neighborhood workshops as noisy eyesores. "Youth" were male graduates in their thirties who, finding few job opportunities after graduating from college, entered into debt

relations with organizations such as the Social Fund under the theory that they were becoming “microentrepreneurs.”

While the two groups of men overlap in space, Elychar portrays their lived worlds as distinct. The master’s is teeming with sensations, sounds, and smells; he is a node in a dense latticework of social relations extending from his wife and family to workers, customers, and other masters. His craft skill rests on an embodied habitus acquired through years of learning and apprenticeship, his market depends on the steady cultivation of goodwill. The youth entrepreneurs, by contrast, move about as if in a ghost town. In a futile search for an elusive market, they experience space as empty and stark. Their shops are silent and padlocked, Elychar suggests, because they have absorbed the teachings of universities, training workshops, and pamphlets portraying “the market” as an impersonal force in abstract space populated by atomized individuals. Whereas masters (like credit card companies) understand that an initial act of generosity may seal a long-term relationship, the youth’s search for immediate profits repels customers and invites attacks of the evil eye. The youth neglect their conscience (*dameer*), or what Adam Smith called the individual’s “invisible spectator”: the eyes and moral judgments of others, internalized to ensure that “the individual agent in commercial society acts with an eye to what others might think” (149).

Elychar’s sweeping central arguments do not always do justice to her more engaging depictions of struggles and contradictions, agents with disparate agendas, cultural counter-forces, and disparities between development ideology and practice. Debt capital often wound up in the hands of bankers, state officials, and wealthy businessmen, leaving me wondering how much of it reached “the poor” and generated profits from their cultural practices. In trainings, mothers, sisters, and businessmen performed as the microentrepreneurs that development experts imagined themselves rescuing from some alternative fate. These details on how development programs misfire (yet perpetuate) animate our understanding of how social inequalities are created and deepened through the exercise of power at the interstices of state, international organizations, and NGOs (94).

Markets of Dispossession should interest anthropologists, historians, sociologists, and geographers concerned with post-socialism, development, urban studies, and the Middle East.

———Marina Welker, Cornell University

Sean Wilentz. *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln*. New York: Norton, 2005 (1044 pp.).

Sean Wilentz’s sweeping account of *The Rise of American Democracy* traces the contestation of the meaning and place of democracy in American life

from the earliest days of the republic to the onset of the Civil War. The character of that trajectory on this account is that in each passing age and for each attendant transformation of democracy's meaning, Americans more fully realize the promise of democratic principles but often reap its horrific consequences as well.

The strength of the book is its ambition and reach. *The Rise of American Democracy* is scholarly history on a majestic scale rarely attempted by academic historians today. The account spans a century and is national and international in scope. It takes care, for instance, to chronicle the nation's diplomatic history with Britain, Spain, and France and the effects of Western expansion upon Cuba and Mexico. All the more surprising given the book's scope is that Wilentz manages to incorporate giants such as those after whom the book is named as well as a larger cast of lesser known characters from every corner of the republic. He frequently references the disenfranchised and the fringe. The book is virtually encyclopedic.

Historical sociologists will welcome the analytical balance struck between enduring institutional arrangements, unforeseen events, and the agency of political actors. Political scientists of the American Political Development tradition will appreciate the importance the author assigns to organizations like churches and reform societies that are not explicitly partisan. Students of colonialism, particularly in Mexico and Central America, will be gratified to see how their interests fit with the discursive arc of American politics. Historians will scoff at these "advances," and merely recognize it for good history, but they will like that it transcends long-standing debates, since Wilentz tends to synthesize rather than to stake out new ground or take sides.

However, two problems bear mention. Though Wilentz makes frequent reference to the class background of political actors, sociologists of a certain stripe will find too little attention paid to the structural conditions that gave rise to the recurring transformations of American democracy. Moreover, like so many northern historians, Wilentz overstates the power of southern planters in delivering the Deep South to secessionism, referring at one point to their "long-standing domination of the very terms of debate within the Dixie democracy" (p. 771). In doing so, Wilentz omits mounting evidence against southern exceptionalism and the passivity of non-elites.

That aside, *The Rise of American Democracy* is a worthwhile read for anyone interested in American politics. There is something for everybody by virtue of its impressive breadth and depth. Owners of this book will always have a reliable reference guide and a landmark of historical scholarship ready to hand.

Alan Sica and Stephen Turner, eds. *The Disobedient Generation: Social Theorists in the Sixties*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005 (368 pp.).

This interesting text is a collection of the personal and intellectual autobiographies of several prominent contemporary sociological theorists who lived through the 1960s as young adults. It examines the impact of that now mythological decade on their understanding of Sociology, particularly social theory. Most of the authors are Americans, from Jeffrey Alexander to Patricia Hill Collins and Erik Olin Wright (among many others). European theorists such as Hans Joas and Michel Maffesoli are also included. The best of these essays, such as Alexander's, weave personal experience, social change, and intellectual formation into an insightful understanding of the influence of the 1960s on self and social understanding. Though these essays are diverse, a few themes stand out. For most of these authors, the complex and whirlwind changes of the sixties demonstrated the insufficiency of mainstream sociological theories, and the necessity of rethinking the discipline's basic assumptions. Further, the contemporary interdisciplinary turn inaugurated by many of these theorists can be traced not only to the challenges raised by the period, but also to their respective backgrounds, for many of them entered Sociology after concentrating on other disciplines as undergraduates.

Despite Alan Sica's laudatory introductory summary of the decades events, the period meant very different things to different theorists. For some, such as Marxists Michael Burawoy and Erik Olin Wright, the 1960s were central to their later political commitments. For others, like Karin Knorr Cetina, the period represented a time of lifestyle experimentation. As one would expect, many authors, such as Karen Schweers Cook and Saskia Sassen, participated in the era's liberation movements. While almost all of these writers identify with the period's egalitarian ideals, the intellectual concerns of some of them owed more to their experiences before entering college. Especially those from working class backgrounds, such as Bryan Turner and Patricia Hill Collins, felt alienated from more privileged undergraduates at their respective schools. They saw student activists as indulgent elitists concerned with issues that rarely transcended the university context. Others became critical of the sixties because of its dogmatic politics (Alexander), or its raucous populism that sometimes slipped into anti-intellectualism (Andrew Abbott).

The book contains interesting and amusing anecdotes about the backgrounds of many of these authors. In what can only be termed as either an act of courage or obliviousness, several supplied personal photos from the sixties, which are contrasted with contemporary photographs. I was struck by how almost all of these sociologists considered themselves to be outsiders. Some entered the field because it appealed to them as a radical discipline dealing with issues such as race and class, while others challenged mainstream Sociology's conservative understanding of society from within. Almost all of the authors,

especially the Americans, have continued to cultivate this outsider identity. Perhaps this is the lasting legacy of the sixties. Yet this is a peculiar situation for figures who have become central to the discipline, and occupy some of its most prestigious positions. Only Erik Olin Wright commented honestly on issues that all of these theorists undoubtedly faced in this sense, especially tensions between great professional ambition and desires for fame and money, and the egalitarian ideals that they profess. As he writes, “my academic career embodies a series of deep, probably unresolvable tensions: tensions between radical egalitarian and elite academic professionalism . . . between being relevant to real struggles and devoting my energies to refinements of abstract concepts” (p. 348). Many of these essays could have benefited from reflection on such personal and professional compromises.

———Kenneth H. Tucker, Jr., Mount Holyoke College

Pamela Voekel. *Alone before God: The Religious Origins of Modernity in Mexico*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002 (viii and 336 pp.).

Accompanying increased attention to the ways faith guides contemporary political imaginations, social scientists have begun to disassemble religion’s supposedly inherent antagonism to modernity. From Talal Asad’s brilliant genealogy of “the secular” and its politics to Dale Van Kley’s compelling analysis of the Jansenist origins of the French Revolution, scholars have moved promisingly toward the study of religion *within* modernity, not irremediably against it. Written in this same spirit of combating methodological secularism, Pamela Voekel’s *Alone before God* offers a path-marking and persuasive study of the Catholic paternity of Mexican liberalism.

Foregrounding the sphere of piety, the book’s central argument strikes a revisionist blow at persistent notions that modern Mexico was born out of a Bourbon project of secularization. Voekel argues instead that Mexican modernity (individualism, rationality, and nominal egalitarianism) sprang from “something more akin to a religious war” (p. 9)—a high-stakes battle over the definition of “true” Catholicism. On one side, traditional elites lined up to defend a “baroque piety” based in hierarchical communality, external sensuality, and clerical intervention. On the other, a self-styled *gente sensata* (both laity and clergy) advocated an “enlightened piety,” a reformed Catholicism that rested on individual, interiorized, and unmediated spirituality. Politically, these Catholic reformers sought to subordinate birthright and corporate privilege as the basis for legitimate social leadership, replacing them with the virtues of enlightened erudition, self-discipline, and godly moderation.

Voekel charts a definitive transformation, principally between the 1760s and 1820s, among urban elites toward an enlightened Catholicism. Drawing on an impressive database of wills among urban elites, she highlights shifts in charity

(from donations to saints and chapels to bequests to the poor), burial sites (from inside churches to suburban cemeteries), and funeral styles (from lavish to modest). Examining newspapers, religious tracts, and other published sources, Voekel further shows how this new Catholicism remained at the heart of Mexican political culture well into the nineteenth century. The scripture-laden writings of prominent post-independence liberal thinker—José María Luis Mora, for example—suggest how enlightened Catholicism, not secularism, provided a “cultural matrix” for imagining a nation of “virtuous” citizens. Voekel similarly demonstrates, in an original contribution to the history of medical empiricism, how physicians’ emphasis on moderation, self-control, and methodical attention to personal health emerged from the context of the new piety’s focus on individual moral transformation. Modern medical practices represented “not an eruption of the secular into the domain formerly ruled by the sacred, but rather the unforeseen endpoint of a movement profoundly religious from its inception” (184).

Voekel, in a spirit of modesty befitting the enlightened reformers she examines, is cautious in generalizing, or nationalizing, from the regional (Mexico City and coastal Veracruz) and class (urban elite) foci of her study. As she notes, Mexico’s “geographies of piety” in this period remain sketchy, as do popular responses to reform Catholicism. Future historians, upon fleshing out these spatial and social dimensions, will certainly nuance the understanding of how this new piety was deployed as a political and national force. Similarly, this book will generate interesting dialogue with those scholars focused on the Mexican church’s more formal post-independence responses, such as the providential clerical nationalism in Guadalajara studied by Brian Connaughton.

Though the book is often about death, it sparkles with lively and playful prose. Yet, it is the ideas in *Alone before God* that will ensure its prominent historiographical place. For Latin Americanists, in particular, it offers a promising pathway for thinking about the multiple religious currents that have shaped the region’s fitful processes of modernity. With its articulate discussions of Catholic and Protestant theologies, its apt theoretical interventions, and rigorous engagement with Europeanist historiographies, this book will also appeal to a more general audience interested in religion’s ongoing generative capacities in shaping modern sensibilities.

———Derek Williams, University of Toronto