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Richard Lachmann, *Capitalists in Spite of Themselves: Elite Conflict and Economic Transitions in Early Modern Europe*

Capitalists in Spite of Themselves: Elite Conflict and Economic Transitions in Early Modern Europe by Richard Lachmann

Review by: Robert S. DuPlessis

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Book Reviews

Capitalists in Spite of Themselves: Elite Conflict and Economic Transitions in Early Modern Europe. By *Richard Lachmann*.

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. Pp. viii + 314. \$49.95.

State formation, the rise of capitalism, and the Reformation are three of the most venerable topics of early modern European history. Yet the many attempts to explain presumed causal links among them remain conceptually and empirically unsatisfactory. Taking aim at long-standing as well as recent contributions to the discussion, this knowledgeable, forcefully argued, confident synthesis deploys elite conflict theory in a spirited effort both to explain the relations among the political, economic, and religious transformations in a systematic way and to revise widely influential Marxist and Weberian interpretations.

Rejecting the primacy of either class struggle or ideological and motivational reorientation, Richard Lachmann postulates that contests among elites determined not only Europe's political trajectories and the changes in its Christian configuration but also its paths of economic development. The autonomous and organized groups of landlords, princes, officials, and clerics that controlled the central institutions of state, society, and faith did not intend to construct—or for that matter obstruct—capitalism. But the actions they took to preserve or extend their power, possessions, and prerogatives at the expense of competing elites had just those inadvertent effects. In particular, contests growing out of the Reformation (in Lachmann's words, "the crucial turning point in European history" [p. 229]) permitted though did not mandate changes far beyond those possible in feudal agrarian or Renaissance urban economies.

Although those staples of comparative history—English parliamentary monarchy and economic advance as against French absolutism and backwardness—hold pride of place here, Lachmann pours new wine into these old bottles. He also explores in a fresh way the important but less often considered cases of Renaissance Italy, Habsburg Spain, and the Dutch Republic, where significant political innovation and nascent capitalism resulted in stalemate, stagnation, even reversal. All five experienced elite contention, yet all but one instance ended in compromises that, albeit unintentionally, thwarted capitalism even as they benefited elites. Only in England did a long process of strife lead to so complete a triumph by the gentry over government, fellow elites, and subject classes that it could appropriate the fruits of a revolution in agricultural productivity effected by the yeomanry and thereafter—again unwittingly—nurture industrial capitalism.

Bold intervention in scholarly debates—at times, in fact, the text reads like a running commentary on current controversies, and the endnotes include additional exegesis—and a dense narrative grounded in an admirably broad selection of historical monographs in English and French distinguish *Capitalists in Spite of Themselves*. Even historians well versed in the issues will find much food for thought in Lachmann's observations on such subjects as the establishment of nation-states, early modern social

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relations, or the limits of popular politics. What is more, his nuanced account succeeds well in balancing structural constraints, the impact of contingent events, and human agency.

Still, both Lachmann's approach and his interpretation raise some questions, beginning with his privileging of elite conflict to explain Europe's diverse patterns of elite power and state structure, the topic to which he devotes most attention. While acknowledging clashes between subordinate and superior groups, Lachmann repeatedly affirms that relations among elites are determinative of change. In this regard, it is instructive to compare his book with Wayne te Brake's recent *Shaping History* (Berkeley, 1998), which also recognizes the significance of elite conflict. Yet because he views authority as continually up for grabs, and thus elite positions as subject to constant negotiation, te Brake holds that "ordinary people" (in Lachmann's terms, "nonelites") enjoyed real power as strategic allies of elite contenders. So whereas both authors discuss, for example, the Reformation and French peasant rebellions, for te Brake, ordinary people were crucial in initiating and implementing these movements, while in Lachmann's telling, they were mobilized and managed by elites. Even when Lachmann concedes that nonelite involvement mattered for political outcomes, he proposes that they stemmed from elites "reaching down" for allies. But in light of the fact that such accommodations characterized four of Lachmann's five case studies, an interactive, interclass interpretation of state formation that incorporates the kinds of popular politics outlined in te Brake's and other recent scholarship may have broader explanatory reach than an elite-conflict one.

Elite conflict seems yet more tenuously related to the rise of capitalism, which Lachmann defines rather conventionally as the emergence of an English-style agrarian structure with typical gentry landlords, tenant farmers, and wage laborers that subsequently provided resources for factory industrialization. Lachmann admits that the link was indirect, and in his story, it seems of minor significance. His brief inquiries into the reasons for the nonappearance of this capitalism in Italy (mainly Florence) and the Dutch Republic turn largely on loss of markets to larger competitors, while the same result in Spain and France is attributed principally to government fiscal exactions. What allowed England to carry out capitalist industrialization first was the yeomanry's agricultural revolution. At best, elite conflict was a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the economic changes Lachmann sketches; it may account for the formation of the types of states that he anatomizes but not the fate of capitalism.

Despite this Scotch verdict, this is an important book that deserves a wide readership as much for its own thesis as for its critical overview of a mass of secondary literature. Both its strengths and its weaknesses suggest, however, that efforts to explain the rise of capitalism in terms of the formation of nation-states and their presumably unitary economies have run their course. As Lachmann himself notes, significant yeoman-type agricultural change occurred widely throughout early modern Europe, but with his eyes firmly fixed on the English model of development, he neglects regions like Catalonia, northern Italy, and Belgium, where agrarian progress was part of a broader economic advance. It is worth noting that these and other similar places were incorporated into composite states, which were much more common than unitary nation-states until well into the nineteenth century.

Lachmann argues persuasively for replacing the blunt analytic category of ruling class by the more discriminating notion of plural elites, and he also astutely if summarily sketches regional differences that shaped France. It might be worth pursuing

this kind of investigation into the core of his subject—unless, of course, English exceptionalism (whether the revised or standard version) is considered an acceptable explanation of the complex history of the rise of capitalism.

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Wonder and Science: Imagining Worlds in Early Modern Europe. By *Mary Baine Campbell*.

Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999. Pp. xiv + 366. \$35.00.

Mary Baine Campbell's *Wonder and Science: Imagining Worlds in Early Modern Europe* is a tremendously learned account of the pleasurable yet uneasy coupling of fictional and scientific discourse in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. The book traces the evolution, and the interrogation, of the epistemological category of "wonder" in a dazzling array of scientific and quasi-scientific texts, both English and Continental. Its primary focus is the "mutually exclusionary process of development" that distills the "brethren discourses of natural philosophy" (p. 6), including geography, cosmography, and anthropology, and ultimately separates those discourses from fiction.

Wonder and Science masterfully illustrates this disciplinary flux—and reflux—of the early modern era, and the book's greatest strengths lie in its sustained focus on the formal and rhetorical synthesis of scientific and nonscientific texts during the period. From Francis Godwin's *Man in the Moon*, which Campbell interprets as a picaresque fiction, to her account of the pornographic elements of Robert Hooke's *Micrographia*, *Wonder and Science* persuades us of the inseparability of the "two cultures" during the Renaissance. As Anthony Grafton's *Defenders of the Text: The Traditions of Scholarship in an Age of Science, 1450–1800* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991) argues for the interpenetration of scientific and "high" humanistic learning during the Renaissance, Campbell's work reminds us that scientific writing was equally indebted to the popular literary conventions of its age.

The experience of wonder has, of course, received considerable attention from historians and literary scholars of Renaissance culture, particularly in recent years. Anthony Grafton and Nancy Siraisi have addressed the "shock of discovery" in their *New Worlds, Ancient Texts: The Power of Tradition and the Shock of Discovery* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992), and more recently, Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park have thoroughly anatomized the epistemological and emotional experience of wonder in their *Wonder and the Order of Nature, 1150–1750* (New York, 1998). Major literary critics of the period, including Stephen Greenblatt (*Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* [Chicago, 1991]) and Louis Montrose ("The Work of Gender in the Discourse of Discovery," *Representations* 33 [Winter 1991]: 1–41), have taken on the subject as well, and while Campbell is clearly familiar with all these works, she makes little attempt to integrate them into her own arguments or, more important still, to differentiate her work from those who have preceded her. Unlike the work of Daston and Park, or the much earlier work of Baxter Hathaway (*Marvels and Commonplaces: Renaissance Literary Criticism* [New York, 1968]), Campbell's work never explores in any depth the complex valences of the term "wonder" during the Renaissance, and her account also suffers from its lack of attention to the rich and manifold resonance of terms such as "marvel"—not to mention "pleasure"—in the literary and philosoph-