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Laurence Fontaine, *L'Economie morale. Pauvreté, crédit et confiance dans l'Europe préindustrielle.* Paris: Gallimard, 2008. 437 pp. 20.30 €. (pb). ISBN-10: 2070785777.

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In response to present-day calls for a return to the more humane, "embedded" economy that supposedly reigned before industrial capitalism, Laurence Fontaine offers her own reading in this book on the moral economy of early modern Europe. Drawing on her long expertise in French social and economic history and an impressive range of printed primary and secondary sources, Fontaine provides a rich overview of the symbiotic relations that existed among economic exchange, social relations and cultural values in pre-industrial Europe. Despite her rejection of the romanticization she finds in current-day conceptions (to which I return below), the author contends that the economy was indeed "embedded" in the pre-industrial era, declaring that "the economic dimension of a phenomenon was never more than one aspect of a human activity in which the religious, the political, and the social were always mixed" (p. 11, my translation).

At the heart of economic exchange--and thus at the center of the book--were two key mechanisms: confidence, which reduced endemic uncertainty and thereby rendered exchange possible; and credit, which provided the currency for the majority of exchanges. Because the early modern economy was fundamentally unpredictable and access to information was uneven and unreliable, merchants, traders and other commercial actors devoted enormous time and energy to fostering the confidence necessary to do business. Given the institutional and material limitations of the economy, they conducted most of that business through personalized credit arrangements, rather than specie. Credit thus traversed the early modern European world; indeed, one of the major features of that world, Fontaine asserts, was the growth in debt among all social sectors from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries.

Against this general backdrop, Fontaine traces the evolving conflict between what she describes as two opposing economic cultures, one "aristocratic" and the other "bourgeois." According to Fontaine, these corresponded on the one hand to a still vibrant gift economy and on the other to a capitalist economy in which the "business-oriented bourgeoisie and entrepreneurs were the great vectors of a purely economic usage of credit" (p. 46). These two systems of exchange resulted from "two opposing political economies" and in turn generated "totally different practices" (p. 222). Yet in both practice and conception, she emphasizes, the two were in constant interaction.

After a brief foray through contemporary dictionary definitions of key terms (such as credit, gift, confidence and debt), Fontaine begins her study with a series of chapters that focus on practice. Starting with the lowest levels of society, chapter one examines the impact of social relations on poverty, inquiring as to how the nature and quality of individuals' social relations affected their capacity to weather economic crisis and mitigate impoverishment. Fontaine points out that debt was endemic among the struggling households that composed the vast majority of the European population. Faced with constant and unpredictable dangers (of unemployment, illness, food shortages, and credit crises), the poor sought refuge in credit obtained through social relations among family, friends, neighbors, and in the mutual aid of confraternities and other associations. The valorization of generosity in the "aristocratic" economy meant that nobles were more likely to offer relief to the poor in their seigneuries than were calculating bourgeois landowners and employers who insisted on being reimbursed to the last penny. As this example suggests, ties of debt created both horizontal and vertical ties, which in turn fostered both crucial forms of solidarity and oppressive domination.

Chapters two and three lend specificity to Fontaine's story through case studies of practices of debt among peasants and elites, respectively. Chapter two focuses on the circles of lenders to whom peasants turned for loans, starting with the family and moving outward through employers, neighbors, regional elites and, eventually, to strangers who assumed different forms depending on time and place, including Jews, the archetypal foreign lender of early modern Europe. Here Fontaine draws on her own well-known work on migrant peddling networks in the Haute Dauphiné to show the manner by which debt both incorporated individuals and families within local communities and served as a means by which elites dominated the poor and monopolized power. Fontaine nonetheless emphasizes the dynamic forces at work alongside these structural constants, showing that debts circulated as a form of currency and that debtors sought multiple creditors in order to maximize their resources and minimize risks.

Chapter three turns the perspective toward the elites, who, with the exception of those in England, also became progressively indebted over the early modern period and who relied on the same concentric circles of creditors as did their humble dependents. In part, these debts resulted from expectations that elites, from great aristocrats down to urban merchants, should consume ostentatiously and lend generously to those in need, often well beyond their means in both cases. The capacity of different elite groups to resist debt and to weather credit crises, however, varied considerably; merchants were caught between demands for extended credit from noble clients and the need to proffer charity lower down the social scale. Fontaine points, however, to the new figure of the *Homo creditus* that emerged in the seventeenth century, exemplified by Samuel Pepys, who refused traditional injunctions of largess in favor of furthering his own interests.

Chapters four, five, and six focus on networks of credit in urban milieus. Fontaine begins chapter four by noting the ubiquity of informal credit for all types of retail sales. The pervasiveness of small-scale lending and borrowing gave rise to myriad intermediaries and Fontaine details the role of second-hand dealers, petty moneylenders, and other full and part-time professionals--many of them women--who lived off the uncertainties and constraints of the early modern economy. She returns to this theme in chapter six, locating the rise of the *monts-de-piété* (state- or church-run pawnshops) throughout Europe as a response to concerns over the usurious depredations of informal credit-brokers. Fontaine discounts some of this critique, insisting on the necessary role played by petty neighborhood lenders, but she nonetheless emphasizes the utility of the *monts-de-piété*, which largely derived from the crucial role material goods played as a form of wealth. Viewed as charities rather than proto-banks, however, the *monts-de-piété* were generally prohibited from capitalizing on profits and most failed to generate enough income in donations to survive over the long-term.

Chapter five focuses on the problem of women's role in the early modern economy. Fontaine emphasizes the diversity of women's experiences, given the social hierarchies of the period, the heavy weight of life cycle on women's activities and prerogatives, and the many different law codes in operation throughout Europe. She notes that the various forms of discrimination under which women suffered, including their lack of access to capital and to urban labor markets, pushed them into the informal, gray economy. This is why, she argues, we find women so active in the second-hand trades and petty credit-brokering described in chapter four.

Chapter seven centers on the issue of usury. Fontaine draws together three facets of the question: ideological debates about usury; efforts to combat it through legal and institutional channels; and the practical strategies devised across Europe to allow lenders to by-pass such restrictions and impose interest fees. Fontaine notes that the progressive disengagement of the Church (both Catholic and

Protestant) over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was matched by the increasing intervention of the state, whose authorities worried about the impact of indebtedness on fiscal revenue and social instability.

Chapters one through seven provide readers with a nuanced, detailed and extremely helpful overview of the burgeoning literature on the everyday economics of pre-modern Europe. Fontaine does a great service by drawing together and reflecting upon the work of a great many scholars, including her own classic works on peddlers and other economic actors. She not only shows the fundamental importance of credit to economic practice and social relations throughout Europe—and the mutually formative impact they had on each other—she also draws attention to the multiplicity of circuits of credits at all levels of society. Her insights on the role of material objects as exchange objects are particularly illuminating.

The remaining chapters of the book turn from practice to cultural values and political economies. It is here that I find the arguments less sustained by primary or secondary research and in some ways at odds with the substantial findings of the bulk of the book. Chapter eight draws out the opposition between aristocratic and bourgeois economic cultures that constitute an underlying theme of the preceding chapters. Fontaine draws on her readings of a sample of contemporary sources--primarily Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens* and *Merchant of Venice* alongside Saint-Simon's memoirs--to argue for the existence of two distinct, chronologically ordered, and opposed "gift" and "capitalist" economies, each associated with a discrete social group and generative of distinctive practices. For Fontaine, aristocrats and bourgeois conceived of exchange in utterly different terms, the one clinging to notions of friendship, honor, and risk, while the other conceived of it in terms of credit, interest, and calculation. However, her readings of the contemporary literature serve to demonstrate the mutual contamination of these two cultures as the inexorable rise of the capitalist economy challenges its predecessor.

Chapter nine addresses the question of how these two cultures translated into practice. Fontaine argues that noble honor prohibited the practice of bargaining, a central element of non-noble economic life. Bargaining implies equality between buyer and seller, whereas aristocrats conceived of purveyors as dependents whom they favored with protection. It was this stance that allowed noble consumers to dictate wages and prices, to impose steep discounts on presumed hidden interest fees and, most tellingly, to decline to satisfy their accounts for years on end. Their entry to markets thus took the form of ruses compatible with aristocratic values, such as the auction (with its emphasis on risk) and collecting art objects and the curiosities produced by global voyages and the Scientific Revolution. Merchants themselves were, according to Fontaine, affected by the culture of the gift through their personal interactions with noble clients and employees. Credit relations thus curtailed the ostensible liberties of the bazaar economy.

The final chapter returns to the problem of confidence. While the most secure (albeit always hierarchical and conflict-ridden) networks consisted of those uniting common ethnic or communitarian groups, the problem of generating confidence among strangers remained acute. Fontaine emphasizes the contradictory constraints faced by merchants, who were enjoined to qualify for credit by manifesting prosperous appearances and qualities of industriousness, and self-discipline, while also being required to demonstrate their capacity for compassion and solidarity. Showing that you could be a patient creditor was as important as proving your hard-nosed business sense, given that everyone relied on credit and thus faced the constant threat of a credit collapse.

This last point, for this reader, highlights one of my central reservations about this book, the opposition posited between aristocratic and bourgeois economic cultures and practices. My discomfort may be more a question of presentation than substance. Fontaine continually emphasizes the interaction of the aristocratic and bourgeois modes, as well as the conceptual and practical difficulties in separating them. It would be a disservice to her argument not to acknowledge the extent to which she emphasizes the collapse of the oppositions she establishes, both in ideological and practical terms. And yet I find that the language of contamination and corruption, which recurs throughout the book, alongside the insistence on assigning the logic of the gift and the logic of capital to two distinct social groups and the positing of their relationship in chronological terms (first we have the aristocratic gift culture that is then besieged by bourgeois capitalism) sits uncomfortably with the work of two decades or more of social and cultural history that has emphasized the complexity and heterogeneity of such categories as "noble," "bourgeois," "capitalist," et cetera, especially when viewed on a pan-European scale. On the one hand, surely nobles were never dupes of the gift; on the other, its logic was clearly not the monopoly of one social group. The merchants who conceived their identity simultaneously as calculating and compassionate are merely one example of this point. Instead of seeing such complexity as representing a contaminated or tainted position, I believe that a stronger argument would be to conceive of credit and the gift as occupying the same spectrum of thought and activity, one whose nuances could be finely graded, that was widely accessible across social hierarchies, and that permitted great flexibility (and cynicism) for interpreting one's own and others' actions.

The dualistic notion of aristocratic versus bourgeois culture also begs the question of the social groups that belonged to neither category. The many insightful and informative pages the author devotes to the multiple credit strategies of peasants and the urban working poor do not fit easily into this dichotomy. The impressive strategic sense and entrepreneurial spirit Fontaine notes among them did not preclude adherence to notions of generosity, hierarchical reciprocity or other elements of gift exchange. For historians of early modern France, the absence of guilds or other corporate institutions is also striking. One might argue, indeed, that a central purpose of corporate society, and the privileges that accompanied it, was to generate confidence and the credit flows it guaranteed. At the heart of corporate organization lay notions of reciprocity and solidarity with seemingly close affinities to the gift, yet to characterize them as aristocratic seems unhelpful to say the least. Fontaine devotes little attention to the related question of state or local regulation, whereas Philippe Minard's *La Fortune du colbertisme* (which does not appear in the bibliography) argued that Colbert's regulatory apparatus aimed precisely to foster the confidence necessary to permit trade among strangers and, moreover, that many merchants appreciated and clamored for regulations for exactly that reason.[1]

The book's conclusion raises the stakes for these arguments with a return to the present-day concerns articulated in the introduction. Fontaine opposes those who would follow Karl Polanyi's call for a return to "embedded" pre-modern economies by insisting on the oppressive nature of the so-called moral economy, which she defines as the aristocratic gift economy. Far from fostering social equality and solidarity, she argues, it imposed rigidly hierarchical social relations and non-transparent exchanges on the poor and excluded of early modern Europe. Democracy, she asserts, was the historical product not of the aristocratic gift, but of the (relatively) open markets of the capitalist economy. These are large stakes indeed; ones that the complexities of the categories under discussion may not support and that do not, I believe, do justice to the fine-grained, multi-scaled, and geographically and chronologically varied story told in the body of this important book.

NOTE

[1] Philippe Minard, *La Fortune du colbertisme: Etat et industrie dans la France des lumières* (Paris: Fayard, 1998).

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