
H-France Review Vol. 19 (December 2019), No. 264

Xavier Lafrance and Charles Post, eds., *Case Studies in the Origins of Capitalism*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019. 355 pp. \$119.99 (hb, pb). ISBN 978-3030070786.

Review by George Comninel, York University.

For decades, issues of capitalist economic growth in France have been debated, perhaps most notably with respect to whether—and why—French industrialization lagged behind that in other major European countries. These debates do not usually focus on specific issues of what constitutes a *capitalist* economy, but generally presume that all of Western Europe (as least) developed in roughly parallel ways. In this context, it has been broadly understood that the foundation for economic development was trade, that the growth of trade was inherently tied to the rise of towns *not* predicated on landed property, and that this urban commerce contained the seeds of future industrialization.[1]

As historian Robert Brenner notably pointed out, this conception equally underpins the long-standing, standard Marxist historical accounts, despite obvious points of difference.[2] Against this conventional “neo-Smithian” perspective, Brenner argued for historical accounts based on the particulars of developing class relations, with no a priori presumptions of similarity.[3] On these grounds, Brenner identified fundamental divergences in the economic histories not only of eastern and Western Europe, but also in the latter between France and England. Only in England did the rural transformation wrought by the processes of enclosure lead directly to the origin of capitalism, initially in agriculture as opposed to urban manufactures.

Brenner’s historical analyses generated a significant debate in the pages of *Past & Present*, in the course of which French Marxist historian Guy Bois leveled a criticism of them for constituting a kind of “political Marxism”, too much focused on the history of class struggles instead of economic developments within the mode of production.[4] Whether or not this term is truly apt, it has stuck, and the present volume explicitly embraces Political Marxism as a foundation for comparative exploration of capitalist origins and development. The book is dedicated to the memory of Ellen Meiksins Wood, who co-developed Political Marxism as an approach to social historical analysis in numerous books, articles and chapters from the mid-1980s until her untimely death in 2016. In scope, the book comprises not only England and France, but Catalonia, the US, Canada, Japan, Brazil, Turkey and Taiwan, and also engages in a dialog with Marxist feminism. It is an ambitious book in both its theoretical claims and historiographical aspirations, and on the whole it succeeds admirably.

As is to be expected in a book of such scope, the contributions vary in quality. Among the strongest are those dealing with France, by co-editor Xavier Lafrance and Stephen Miller. Lafrance speaks directly to the lag in French industrialization, arguing that actual capitalist development in the economy was absent until the latter part of the nineteenth century, prior to which industrial growth was inherently slower precisely because it was not capitalist. He argues that economic development in the ancien regime was fundamentally traditional—which is to say non-capitalist—and that the main effect of the Revolution was to consolidate non-capitalist social property relations. Far from advancing a capitalist socio-economic framework, the Revolution instead entrenched important aspects of workers' control over their production, directly contrary to developments in England at the same time. The principle of workers' control over production in fact became fundamental to the labour law maintained by municipal or regional conseils de proud'hommes. The fundamental consequence of this approach to labour law was that employers were unable to transform the processes of production to prioritize the interests of profitability, as opposed to the workers' own conception of the appropriate processes of labour. While the findings and arguments presented here are grounded in solid research, well-known to those in the field of French labour law, they may be surprising even to those otherwise well-versed in French history.

Miller's chapter, "Peasant Farming in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century France and the Transition to Capitalism Under Charles de Gaulle", is exactly as advertized, and quite an important piece. The entrenchment of peasant agriculture by the Revolution is a far better recognized phenomenon than that of artisanal manufactures, but Miller's account explores in detail the extent to which such agrarian production was inherently and profoundly non-capitalist. Challenging revisionist historians who have argued for the development of capitalist-type agriculture even in the ancien regime, Miller marshals an impressive range of sources to assert the persistence of specifically peasant agrarian practices into the mid-twentieth century. His attention to both the continuities and changes in the life and work of peasant farmers over a period of two centuries constitutes compelling evidence for his thesis. As he summarizes, "In 1945, subsistence agriculture—with a little budgeting for taxes, rice, oil, coffee and sugar, as well as meat for the holidays—remained common to about four million farms, all unique yet analogous, in villages of fewer than 2000 inhabitants comprising about 45 percent of the national population."^[5] In combination, the chapters by Lafrance and Miller provide a solid case for the argument that the transition to capitalist production relations did not even begin in France until the latter part of the nineteenth century, and only was fully realized under the Fifth Republic. The implications of this for interpretations of early modern French history—particularly with respect to the origin and nature of the French Revolution—are of course profound.

The two chapters on England are also excellent (although I will refrain from engaging in detailed consideration of Spencer Dimmock's analysis of England, which includes extensive critique of my own work). Michael Zmolek's chapter on the long history of the development of capitalist industrial relations in England is a remarkably concise account of the argument in his very impressive *Rethinking the Industrial Revolution: Five Centuries of Transition from Agrarian to Industrial Capitalism in England*.^[6] These chapters on England are cognizant of the need to contrast developments in England with those in France, and do both exceedingly well.

Across the other chapters, what is most striking is the wide range of differences among the historical paths through which the wrenching transformation of social relationships required to establish a genuinely capitalist system of production (with attendant legal and cultural

manifestations) has been realized. Whether in the form of classically liberal historical accounts of the rise of commerce, Weberian accounts of the growth of rationality and desacralization, or standard Marxist accounts of the emergence and rise to dominance of the “bourgeois” class of capitalists, what instead has typically been characteristic of economic history is a profound similarity in processes of social change. Underlying this similarity is not merely the presumed common outcome of capitalism, but an often unconsciously presumed originating condition. Although this might appear plausible in the case of the Western European national societies that ultimately succeeded the once-integrated Roman Empire, it clearly is Eurocentric to expect it of the whole world. Given Brenner and Wood’s work, emphasizing the fundamental differences in historical development even between France and England—not merely neighbours, but directly linked through the Norman Conquest—it is instead reasonable to expect every case of historical development to embody potentially profound divergences.

Regrettably, the only other chapter on European transitions to capitalism is that on Catalonia by Javier Moreno Zacarés. Catalonia is, of course, often recognized to be an outlier, differing not only from the rest of Spain, but also from the south of France and from Italy. This chapter engages theoretically important issues, including a number of points of debate that emerged between Robert Brenner and Ellen Wood. It is notable that very particular historical developments play a crucial role in the analysis offered here, involving synthesis of a range of historical work with a carefully delineated reading of theoretical work. Although the Catalonian historical experience cannot realistically be taken to resemble that of any other society, the combination of differences in original conditions and concrete historical developments, with fundamentally similar consequences and outcomes to other historical processes elsewhere (notably in England) makes for a valuable comparative case.

Given the importance of the recognition of differences even among close neighbours, it is with some disappointment that one must note the absence of Germany, the low countries, Italy, or even the rest of what is today Spain, from the book. This undoubtedly reflects the specific research agendas of those who so far have embraced a Political Marxist approach to history. It will no doubt emerge that future historical work will encompass these and other important cases. There are some clues to be derived from other published work—especially that of Ellen Wood—but for now the primary lesson to be gleaned is that of the diversity of historical trajectories even among the societies of Western Europe.

A significant feature of the book is the inclusion of case studies from outside the European sphere of historical development. Charles Post has already established a reputation for his work on the American road to capitalism, and his chapter here recapitulates and extends that work. The United States is important not only because of its eventual capacity as the dominant capitalist superpower, but especially because of its historical primacy, as a union of the first settler colonies that England established during its own development of capitalism. Post—who inclines towards a somewhat different vocabulary than that of other Political Marxists—incisively distinguishes between the actual agrarian capitalist conditions in England as a colonial power, and the forms of American colonial society. Of particular importance, as would be expected, is the difference between the Southern economy predicated on plantations worked by slaves, and on the one hand the mercantile economies of the Northern seaboard, and on the other hand the petty capitalist development of agriculture in the North and West. As the first extension of the capitalist form of society outside Europe, the US case is particularly important, yet it no more constitutes a general pattern than the differing records of developments in Europe.

The significantly different example of Canadian capitalist development is also included in a chapter by Jessica Evans. As Evans notes, there was a different relationship with indigenous peoples between the French as a colonial power, and the English in the original thirteen colonies. French policy was relatively more open to accepting indigenous societies, and even mutually respectful integration, due to a different colonial emphasis on resource extraction—primarily of fur—and more limited displacement of indigenous peoples through settlement. While this may well have changed over time, the English conquest of New France created a new British reliance on military alliance with indigenous nations relative to the United States following its independence. As a consequence, British rule in Canada involved more dealings nation to nation, including formal treaties, and less outright exclusion of indigenous peoples. This in turn, however, constituted the foundation for a more systematic exclusion of racialized indigenous people in the formation of settler policies and a transformation towards capitalist society. Since the Canadian case is, arguably, even more complex than the American, one might have hoped for a more fully articulated analysis of the various elements. Given that Evans is still a doctoral student, and that there are limits inherent what can be achieved in a single chapter, this is nevertheless undoubtedly a valuable contribution that points towards a new approach to developments in Canada.

The only other chapter engaging with a colonial experience is that of Chris Carlson on Brazil. Given the enormous variety of historical experiences from Mexico, to Chile and Argentina—leaving aside the experiences in the Caribbean, to say nothing of Africa—this leaves an enormous gap. Still, the remaining chapters covering national developments—covering Turkey, Japan, and Taiwan—are each in turn significant. Indeed, once one makes the argument that each national history of historical development will be different—with a potential for truly important divergences it would be unrealistic to expect a single volume to cover the whole of the globe in any adequate way.

An important additional contribution is that of Nicole Leach, which seeks to bring together the Political Marxism that is characteristic of the rest of the volume with a Feminist Marxism grounded in the work of Silvia Federici. While there is room to debate the relationship between broadly conceived “rules of social reproduction” and the social relations of specifically *capitalist* reproduction, there is no doubt a need to subject all social theoretical formulations to a critique from a specifically feminist perspective. Leach achieves this in a way that is both critically insightful and on the whole constructive, constituting a valuable foundation for further analysis of this crucial issue.

On the whole, therefore, one must judge this book not only to be successful, but an important pointer towards further work to come. While it is difficult to evaluate a work that aspires to describe ten different historical patterns of development, this book demonstrates a real basis for comparing the varieties of development in each case. Each of the contributors to this volume has much to say on the central theme of the origins of capitalism across the globe, and the chapters they have put forward provide important points of access. We can only look forward to the future work that each may produce.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Xavier Lafrance, “Introduction”

Spencer Dimmock, “Expropriation and the Political Origins of Agrarian Capitalism in England”

Michael Andrew Zmolek, “‘Compelled to Sell All’: Proletarianization, Agrarian Capitalism and the Industrial Revolution”

Stephen Miller, “Peasant Farming in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century France and the Transition to Capitalism Under Charles de Gaulle”

Xavier Lafrance, “The Transition to Industrial Capitalism in Nineteenth-Century France”

Javier Moreno Zacarés, “The Transition to Capitalism in Catalonia”

Charles Post, “The American Road to Capitalism”

Jessica Evans, “Colonialism, Racism, and the Transition to Capitalism in Canada”

Mark Cohen, “The Peasantry and Tenancy-Market Dependence: Rural Capitalism in Meiji-Era Japan”

Chris Carlson, “Rural Property Relations and the Regional Dynamics of Brazilian Capitalism”

Eren Duzgun, “The Political Economy of the Transition to Capitalism in the Ottoman Empire and Turkey: Towards a New Interpretation”

Christopher Isett, “Uncertainty, Contingency, and Late Development in Taiwan”

Nicole Leach, “Rethinking the Rules of Reproduction and the Transition to Capitalism: Reading Federici and Brenner Together”

Xavier Lafrance, “Conclusion”

NOTES

[1] For example, see Carlo M. Cipolla, ed., *The Fontana Economic History of Europe*, vol. 1 (London: Collins, 1972), pp. 16-19.

[2] Robert Brenner, “The Origins of Capitalist Development: A Critique of Neo-Smithian Marxism,” *New Left Review* I, no. 104 (1977): 54-71.

[3] Robert Brenner, “Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe,” in T.H. Aston and C.H.E. Philpin, eds., *The Brenner Debate: Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 10-63.

[4] Guy Bois, “Against the Neo-Malthusian Orthodoxy,” in Aston & Philpin, *The Brenner Debate*, p. 115.

[5] Stephen Miller, "Peasant Farming in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century France and the Transition to Capitalism Under Charles de Gaulle," in Xavier Lafrance and Charles Post, *Case Studies in the Origins of Capitalism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), p. 98.

[6] Michael Zmolek, *Rethinking the Industrial Revolution: Five Centuries of Transition from Agrarian to Industrial Capitalism in England* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

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ISSN 1553-9172