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Xavier Lafrance and Stephen Miller, *The Transition to Capitalism in Modern France: Primitive Accumulation and Markets from the Old Regime to the Post-WWII Era*. London and New York: Routledge, 2024. 229 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. $170.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9-78-0367553005.

Review by Kenneth Mouré, University of Alberta.

France was the obvious country for comparison in discussion of the origins of the Industrial Revolution fifty years ago, when asking "Why was England first?" For the European origins of capitalism, France has likewise been the most interesting country for comparison with England. In this comparative tradition, Xavier Lafrance and Stephen Miller have gathered extensive evidence to argue that the transition to capitalism in France took place in two phases, the first from the 1860s to the 1930s, and the second in a rapid phase of completion after the Second World War.

Their endeavor takes its analytical framework from the work of Robert Brenner and Ellen Meiksins Wood, and Marx's theory of primitive accumulation. A summary here can contextualize their approach and argument. Brenner challenged two conventional interpretations of the origins of capitalism in early modern Europe: "commercial" and "demographic." The commercial variant explained the development of capitalism as a natural growth of European commerce, with the important developments centred in cities and trade. Capitalism evolved from innate human impulses for innovation and improvement that were gradually freed from feudal constraints. The demographic argument saw cycles of population growth and decline determining changes in price and incentives to innovate, with improvements in agriculture eventually unleashing continuous growth of cities, commerce and manufacture. For Brenner, neither interpretation accounted for where and how agricultural productivity first increased to provide the food supply and investment capital necessary to generate continuous economic development. Similar demographic changes had contrary effects in Western and Eastern Europe (especially the impact of the Black Death), and the growth of trade and commerce did not explain the contrast between an agricultural revolution in England and stagnation in France. In Brenner's analysis, differing "social property systems"--the distribution of power and rights between peasant producers, landlords and the state--produced different opportunities and outcomes. Increased efficiency in agriculture required forms of property ownership and power that incentivized investment and gave the security (tenure of leases, property rights) needed to realize and reinvest the profits from increased productivity.[1] French agriculture had long been

seen as trapped in subsistence agriculture with small, fragmented plots and peasant owners averse to risk from innovation.[2]

Ellen Meiksins Wood extended Brenner's analysis in a "longer view" of agrarian capitalism in England. She argues that this marked the decisive step from subsistence to market-dependent agriculture. It increased productivity and engaged new capitalist "laws of motion" that would power sustained economic growth, urbanization, and the Industrial Revolution. England's social property system made the formation of a centralized state a cooperative project between the monarchy and aristocratic landowners, separating economic and political powers. Market imperatives pressed for the consolidation of land holdings and increased investment to improve productivity by the economic extraction of surplus labor (rather than extra-economic extraction by the state). Enclosure dispossessed peasants and imposed a market-based logic for production with new "laws of motion"--the market competition that compelled producers to lower production costs and seek profit for reinvestment to increase productivity.[3] The decisive step to capitalism is the commodification of labor and the new imperatives of market transactions and price competition (both of which, of course, need state support).

Lafrance and Miller use this conceptual framework to assess the transition to capitalism in France, where the social property system gave greater power to peasant landholders, who thus could hold onto small parcels of land and resist consolidation and market imperatives. The book's first chapter covers French agricultural stagnation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, characterized as "growth without development"--increasing output through more intensive labor, and careful attention to the limited developments to improve productivity. The second chapter is on the "non-capitalist" development of industry in France from the *ancien régime* to 1860, relying on the production of luxury goods that did not face the stiff price competition and efficiency demands of mass-produced consumer goods: "Market opportunities, rather than competitive imperatives, [propelled] industrialization from 1815 to the 1860s" (p. 89). Industry and foreign trade developed with specialization in luxury goods that complemented Britain's primacy in mass manufactured goods. Chapter three covers the first phase of the French transition to capitalism from 1860 to the 1920s, initiated by Napoleon III's trade agreements. Chapters four and five explain the steps to agricultural transformation and the rapid modernization of French industry after the Second World War.

Lafrance and Miller argue a strong pessimistic case to explain slow French economic growth, in comparison with English agricultural productivity and the rapid industrialization in England and later in Germany. The commodification of labor in agriculture is the key transformative step they rely on, which makes producers and labor dependent on the market and its imperatives "to specialize, innovate and accumulate" (p. 2). They present the French economic choices as rational, given the relations of property and power: "of all the leading capitalist countries…[France offers] one of the clearest illustrations of rational self-seeking economic behavior, to seize market opportunities, which avoided market dependence and competitive imperatives" (p. 2). However, France's path for development, thanks to social property relations that retained labor in subsistence agriculture, delayed the compulsion, coercion, and competition of the capitalist laws of motion that pushed the pace of development across the Channel.

This definition of capitalism, and France's failure to meet it until the 1960s, is both exacting and restrictive. Many interesting developments in French entrepreneurship and innovation are rendered non-capitalist, as continuations of the merchant practices in carrying goods between isolated markets and avoiding direct competition.[4] Some of the practices deemed non-capitalist--avoiding competition, preferring cartels and protectionism--are obviously not only present elsewhere at the time, but characteristic of the conflict and contradictions in capitalism, then and now. "Competition is for losers," according to Peter Thiel in 2014.[5] The capitalist business world is rich in variety, aberrations and contradictions, not a world of pure competition. The authors give the state a powerful role in *The Transition to Capitalism*, essential in Napoleon III's trade and finance reforms, and in modernization after the Second World War. The state role was necessary "to impose social property relations and rules for reproduction conducive to market competition" (p. 14). How the rules are made, by whom, and how well they work, are factors that would require a much longer book to explore in detail.

The book chapters give well-organized, compact expositions of the authors' arguments with detailed supporting evidence. The prose is dense, demanding careful reading, written for an audience familiar with French political and economic history. The impressive array of statistical evidence in the text, drawn from secondary sources, is not accompanied by charts or tables to clarify the changes in rates of development for agriculture, industry and trade. The Routledge format of abbreviated chapter endnotes obscures the extent of the authors' formidable research in secondary works. Their bibliography is rich in sources old and new.

The book's time span covering more than two and a half centuries requires a focused argument and the exclusion of many fascinating developments in French entrepreneurship and state policy. My current research interest in French food supply during and after the Second World War made me particularly interested to see how they would explain agriculture and postwar reforms in agriculture and industry after 1945 (in chapters four and five). They recognize the importance of the defeat in 1940, which necessitated a reconfiguration of political power and increasing the pressures for reforms. Their focus on the effects on "a more perceptive section of the ruling class" (p. 166) gives a top-down approach to the reform efforts. They give little attention to the economic damage inflicted by war, Vichy policies, and the utility of France's backward agriculture, parcelized in "an infinity of small plots" (p. 35), in frustrating state controls and feeding French civilians. After the war, the demands for change and the support for modernization were widespread, complex and often conflicted, more complex than can be captured in this compressed account.[6] The *Trente Glorieuses* after the war are the key period for the authors' second phase of transition, and the "glory" of the economic growth in the 1950s and 1960s led to disaster, with overproduction and environmental damage in agriculture, and industrial stagnation and labor unrest from the 1970s onward (covered very rapidly in their conclusion).

Meiksins Wood argued in *The Origin of Capitalism* that the capitalist market imperatives created in English agriculture extended, in England and then globally, to alter the dynamics for production and trade throughout the world. The course for developments abroad, imposing new market dynamics, "could never follow the same course as it had in its place of origin."[7] Lafrance and Miller have provided a rigorous comparison to show how the French course differed. The model, focused on the transition from stagnation to dynamic growth in agriculture,

leaves many challenges in tracking capitalism's later evolution and its variations in different cultures. The protracted transition in France, as presented here, is fascinating for the levels and the complexity of the resistance to market dynamics as well as the development along an alternative, gentler path. The model for capitalism as market imperatives of coercion, compulsion and merciless competition makes France's alternative course and late transition look rather admirable. French experience offers a wide range of successes and failures in development, innovation, and obstinacy. Lafrance and Miller provide evidence about the nature and the timing of the "transition to capitalism in modern France" as they define it. Their work should prompt further research on a broader range of practices, logics, and policies that influenced the path of capitalist economic growth in France, as well as on a larger scale in global economic change.

NOTES

[1] Robert Brenner, "Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe," *Past & Present* 70 (1975): 30-75, and the subsequent Brenner debate in that journal, collected in T.H. Aston and C.H.E. Philipin, eds., *The Brenner Debate: Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

[2] Philip T. Hoffman provides a good overview of this literature, which he challenges, in *Growth in a Traditional Society: The French Countryside, 1450-1815* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

[3] Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View* (London and New York: Verso, 2002). Wood provides a very good summary of the Brenner debate and the critique of the commercial and demographic arguments that capitalism existed in embryo and merely needed release from feudal constraints.

[4] For a broader definition of capitalism and an appreciation of French business development, see Michael Stephen Smith, *The Emergence of Modern Business Enterprise in France, 1800-1930* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); his focus is on "modern" capitalism as an evolution from the "merchant capitalism" of the late Middle Ages.

[5] Peter Thiel, "Competition is for Losers," *The Wall Street Journal* (12 September 2014). See https://www.wsj.com/articles/peter-thiel-competition-is-for-losers-1410535536

[6] The complexity is captured well in Herrick Chapman, *France's Long Reconstruction: In Search of the Modern Republic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

[7] Wood, *Origin of Capitalism*, p. 195.

Kenneth Mouré
University of Alberta
moure@ualberta.ca

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