

Fall 2015

Review Of "The Origin Of Capitalism In England, 1400–1600" By S. Dimmock

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Recommended Citation

Robert S. DuPlessis. (2015). "Review Of "The Origin Of Capitalism In England, 1400–1600" By S. Dimmock". *Renaissance Quarterly*. Volume 68, Issue 3. 1081-1082.

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The Origin of Capitalism in England, 1400–1600. Spencer Dimmock.
 Historical Materialism 74. Leiden: Brill, 2014. vii + 400 pp. \$167.

Economic historians of later medieval and early modern Europe have long debated the related issues of the genesis of capitalism, the development of English economic primacy, and the emergence of factory industrialization. The most recent intervention, *The Origins of Capitalism in England, 1400–1600*, provides both a careful, lucid, and detailed overview of issues and positions from the political Marxist perspective advanced by Robert Brenner, and Spencer Dimmock's own research on the small town of Lydd and the surrounding rural Romney Marsh in East Kent.

The first two-thirds of the book comprise a spirited defense of Brenner's interpretation of the transition to capitalism, originally proposed in several influential articles published in the mid-1970s and subsequently elaborated in response to numerous critiques. Brenner argued that capitalism arose in later medieval England as the unintended consequence of landlords' pragmatic attempts to maintain accustomed levels of income and control in the wake of peasant revolt and the decline of serfdom. In most of Continental Europe, according to Brenner, rulers blocked landowner initiatives in order to protect their own ability to levy taxes on the peasantry. In England, however, lords' power within what he termed feudal social property relations established after the Norman Conquest enabled them to enclose and engross peasant holdings, which they subsequently leased out as large-scale tenancies to yeomen employing wage-earning former peasants who no longer had subsistence holdings.

Dimmock's initial eight chapters set forth Brenner's thesis before examining competing explanations propounded by non-Marxist historians and by Marxists who contend that essentially economic contradictions within the old order, rather than conflicts within the structure of property relations, were the crucial impetus for change. Dimmock outlines some recent English-language works on Continental developments that in his telling confirm Brenner's account of why Europe (apart, perhaps, from the northern Netherlands) did not develop English-style capitalism. But his main concern — prosecuted through an animated review of topics focused on by Brenner and his critics — is to demonstrate that a Brennerian approach offers the most convincing interpretation of England's distinctive agrarian history.

In part 2, a local study based on his 1999 Canterbury dissertation, Dimmock reexamines many of the same subjects and reaches a conclusion equally grounded in and supportive of Brenner's thesis. East Kent experienced precocious enclosure and commercialization but, Dimmock contends, remained a subsistence economy until the mid-fifteenth century. Across roughly the next century, however, enclosing and engrossing landlords and their yeoman tenants introduced fundamental change eventuating in a polarized society that even newly invented communal ritual could not bring together.

Dense and combative, Dimmock's polemic is a good read. Quantitative data might have bolstered his argument in critical places (for example, his insistence on the centrality of the long fifteenth century between ca. 1380–1530). Given the profuse references, particularly to English regions, districts, and towns, some maps would have been welcome, as would closer editing of the bibliography to ensure that all footnote references could be traced. Still, as Dimmock ably demonstrates the continued relevance of Brenner's work and the scholarship that it has provoked, this book is a significant resource for specialists in English rural history, as well as for their colleagues interested in the ongoing debate about the origins of capitalism.

Whether the book will end the debate, as the author wishes, is another matter, and not only because of often-sharp rhetoric. Dimmock's claim (following Brenner) that a persistent class and power structure explains English landlords' fifteenth-century triumph seems contradicted by his own emphasis on a novel alliance between landlords and an emergent class of yeomen. Again, the coexistence of markets, rural industry, and small peasant holdings before the fifteenth century suggests that Dimmock's affirmation of a firm distinction between feudal and capitalist economies may need to be modified. On the whole, the economic and social changes that remade the English countryside across the later medieval and early modern periods appear to have been concomitant and interactive rather than sequential and unidirectional, grounded at once in commercialization, rural industrialization, peasant resistance, and landlord–tenant–farmer undertakings.

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