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Review Of "The Origins Of English Individualism: The Family, Property And Social Transition" By A. Macfarlane

Frederic L. Pryor

Swarthmore College, fprior1@swarthmore.edu

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Review

Reviewed Work(s): *The Origins of English Individualism: The Family, Property and Social Transition*. by Alan Macfarlane

Review by: Frederic L. Pryor

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chapter, but curiously this is left in the original Danish. All in all, however, this book is a “must” in a good economics library together with some general and specific books on the economy of the golden age of the Saracens.

CAMILLE P. CASTORINA

*St. John's University
Jamaica, New York*

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The origins of English individualism: The family, property and social transition. By: ALAN MACFARLANE. New York and London: Cambridge University Press, 1978. Pp. xv, 216. \$19.95, cloth; \$6.95, paper.

JEL 79-0357

Alan Macfarlane, a social anthropologist and historian, attacks the conventional views propounded by such influential scholars as Marx, Weber, and Macauley, that in the sixteenth century the English peasantry declined as a social group, agricultural production became oriented to the market rather than self-sufficiency, and rural “individualism” arose. He places these crucial events—if they ever occurred in England at all—before the thirteenth century. This means, he argues, that England was “different” from the rest of Europe for at least 500 years preceeding the Industrial Revolution. As the author readily admits, the evidence that he brings is not conclusive; but this provocative and fascinating book provides a framework for some extremely useful further research by economists and historians, not only about England but about other countries as well.

“Individualism” is a verbal jellyfish that takes a myriad of shapes and meanings in the various social sciences; and to summarize what this book is and is not about, it is useful to consider

some of these usages. It can refer to the mix of *goals* (individual versus group) toward which behavior is oriented. It can refer to types of *behavior* (especially economic) and the relative unimportance of group constraints placed on such individual activity. It can refer to the *social and economic context* of behavior: the ability of individuals to act alone in their own interests to improve their situation and the existence of social and economic institutions such as meritocratic selection principles or markets to permit and reward such activity. It can refer to *political and legal systems* based on the concept of “natural rights” adhering to the individual and centering around individual privileges, duties, contracts, and property ownership. It can refer to the orientation of *conscious social theory*, i.e., where the members of society conceive the major motor of change to be individual action, rather than group experience; where the significant context of behavior is believed to be the individual acting alone, rather than in a group; where the ultimate repository of truth is held to be the beliefs of each individual, rather than the doctrines of the group; and where the individuals relationship with God is considered more important than intermediation with God through a group. It can refer to *unconsciously held concepts* of the social space in which a person is defined and the manner by which his acts are evaluated, e.g., to ego-oriented kinship systems, to stress on specifically defined rather than diffuse social relationships, to achieved rather than ascribed social statuses. And it can refer to *personality*, i.e., to independent, straightforward, self-reliant personality structures; and to the ability and desirability of people to develop themselves as unique personalities.

Although such a list can undoubtedly be extended, it is important to note that the various approaches toward individualism are on different levels of analysis; refer to different phenomena; require much different types of evidence for verification; and, most importantly, are *not* necessarily correlated.

Macfarlane defines individualism in a negative manner, that is, in terms of a set of characteristics that are not found in peasant societies. And he walks boldly into the enormous controversy about the nature of peasant society by

defining this concept in terms of important characteristics of rural society in East European states before their industrialization. By such a procedure he ends up with a very narrow definition of peasant society—much narrower than the rather loose usage of the term by economists or the more rigorous definition employed by many anthropologists who are trying to distinguish peasants from tribal peoples. Conversely his definition of individualism is very broad and will not completely satisfy many people. But at least he has framed his definition so that available data can be brought to bear upon it, which is a considerable advantage over many other definitions.

The bulk of this short book is taken up by attempting to demonstrate that the characteristics of peasant society did not apply to England from the thirteenth century onward. He employs not only case studies of villages by historians but materials from his own research on two quite different small areas of England. By utilizing local records, legal textbooks, autobiographical documents, and traveller accounts, he paints a quite different picture of English rural society than most of us have previously viewed.

Some specifics can give the flavor of his argument. In peasant societies land is not individualized but is held by the entire family through time and seldom sold, since it is greatly revered; in England from the twelfth century onward, land was held by individuals (both men and women) and was often sold to nonfamily members, especially since geographical mobility of families was high and since children were sometimes disinherited. In peasant societies the unit of ownership (the joint family) is also the unit of production and consumption; in England at that time the nuclear family (rather than the stem or joint family) was predominant, and the children often worked as servants for other families, rather than for their own families. In peasant societies, there is no labor market; in England at that time, a large percentage of the labor force were servants or hired workers. In peasant society, the families are economically almost self-sufficient, production for the market is small, and cash is scarce; in England at that time, the economy was highly monetized, agricultural production for the market was important, and the exist-

tence of elaborate books of accounts of farms attest to their "rational" attitudes toward money-making (there was even money-lending for interest in rural areas). In peasant societies there is a certain income and social equality between families that work on the land and a large gap in income and social status stands between them and other social groups, so that little mobility occurs between classes; in England at that time, considerable differentiation of wealth among the rural workers could be found and, in addition, some mobility between classes occurred. Finally, in peasant societies women have a low age of marriage, their marriage partners are selected for them, and few remain unmarried; in England at that time, women apparently had a moderate age of marriage, selected their own partners, and, in many cases, did not marry at all.

Once the author moves from relatively concrete phenomena to more subtle characteristics, the argument becomes more tenuous. For instance, he uses the reports of foreign travellers in England not only to adduce further evidence of the details of English rural life, but also to add two new elements: the English rural population had a much higher standard of living than their continental counterparts (a phenomenon we are led to believe was due to English individualism), and the English rural worker had those self-reliant personality aspects—particularly arrogance and bull-headedness—that are also allegedly associated with individualism.

The author's evidence regarding these theses is interesting and pertinent. But how typical were the cases he cites? For only with regard to a few characteristics (mainly associated with land sales and labor force composition) could he calculate any type of aggregate statistics; and these were only for small areas. His task is not made easier by the fact that social and land tenure arrangements differed almost from hamlet to hamlet. Much of his evidence is sketchy; but the evidence brought by others to prove the opposite case, he tries to show, is even shakier. An informed judgement on these matters requires detailed acquaintance with the availability and interpretations of local English records and other documents—a matter for historians to judge.

However, we can make judgements about

Macfarlane's interpretations of this evidence. Of particular concern is his very broad definition of individualism. According to his approach we will find individualism not only in other parts of Europe at that time (e.g., in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century village of Montailou in southwestern France, about which LeRoy Ladurie [1978] has written a fascinating case study) but also in many "primitive" societies that anthropologists have studied. If this is the case, then the usefulness of his concept of individualism may be limited. And focusing on his account of England, we find few important traces of feudalism. Did it disappear as well before 1200 A.D.? Or did it ever exist? Or could England have had a mixed economy where feudalism coexisted with the type of individualism that the author describes?

If Macfarlane's thesis is correct, then much of what we have learned about English economic history must be given up. But we also have an exciting starting point to restudy a number of hoary questions in the social sciences, e.g., why the Industrial Revolution occurred first in England or why English colonies acted differently than those of other nations. The author has posed some new questions in a manner in which they can be answered, so that this book will undoubtedly engender an important debate that will add much to our understanding of economic history and development.

Whatever reservations about his thesis the reader might harbor, his study is extremely enjoyable to read, particularly as an exercise in intellectual daring. You can't say that about many books these days.

FREDERIC L. PRYOR

Swarthmore College

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Economic growth in Britain and France 1780-1914: Two paths to the twentieth century. By PATRICK O'BRIEN AND CAGLAR KEYDER. London; Boston and Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1978. Pp. 205. \$21.25. ISBN 0-04-330288-2.
JEL 79-0062

The subject of French economic growth, never entirely out of fashion since the American debates of the 1950's, is attracting a continuing stream of work in France, Britain, and the United States. Not atypically, the discussion began with broad interpretations and now centers on measurement and specifics. Did France "fail" in any economically meaningful sense, and if so, for what economic reasons (noneconomic explanations being written off as little more than admissions of ignorance)? Professors O'Brien and Keyder attack the problem in the framework of an explicit comparison with Britain. Their title implies that they are viewing the two nations symmetrically from somewhere in the middle of the Channel, but that is not quite the case. England is more nearly the benchmark, France the object of study. Paradoxically, their study suggests a more novel view of the British experience of the nineteenth century than it does of the French.

The explicitly comparative method is useful, since the concept of retardation, so often applied to the French case, begs the question: compared to what? The book has other virtues as well. It is careful and candid in its analysis of biases and limitations in the data, and achieves readability and clear exposition in a difficult area. However, I do have some reservations. Although they cast their argument in the form of an effort at understanding rather than judging (the subtitle is "Two Paths to the Twentieth Century"), O'Brien and Keyder use the retardation hypothesis as their organizing device, despite the fact that crude growthmanship is somewhat *passé*. More seriously, the considerable effort that has gone into this research adds little to our basic store of data. The analysis rests almost exclusively on the now-classic sources: Phyllis Deane and W. A. Cole for Britain (1962); J. Marczewski (e.g., 1965) and his collaborators for France. To be sure, the authors engage in long, sometimes laborious, discussions and exercises regarding the problems and biases in the data, and some of these are useful and original. Too often, however, the purpose seems to be to ward off criticism or assuage the conscience: the available data will be used in the end no matter what.

The central tasks of the book are to compare levels of commodity output per capita, and levels of labor productivity in the production of