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## REVIEWS OF BOOKS

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R. BLISS, *Revolution and Empire. English Politics and the American Colonies in the Seventeenth Century*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1990, pp. IX-299.

Robert Bliss's book on the genesis of Britain's colonial empire in America is innovatory in more ways than one. His interpretation is intended as an alternative to traditional readings of this process which have seen the delaying factors of Britain's colonial expansion in the major political upheavals that occurred in England in the seventeenth century: the civil and religious conflicts, the Cromwellian experience, the restoration of the monarchy and the Glorious Revolution.

Two main arguments have supported this interpretation. Firstly, the idea of the process of empire building as one in which England's desire to control and to exploit economically the colonies was counterbalanced by the latter's drive for autonomy. In times of political and institutional crisis, the tension from the central power weakened and the process of colonisation slowed down. Secondly, the idea that British colonial policy became consolidated only after 1680 when the United Kingdom partly recovered political stability with the restoration of the monarchy.

Since the 1960s this classic thesis on the birth of the empire has been reinforced by a large number of studies which have tended to enlarge the role and contribution of the single colonies while scaling down the political influence of the mother country.

Bliss, on the contrary, argues that it was the course of English political events and the debate that arose out of them which dictated colonial expansion in America, much more so than even the navigation system, mercantile practice or military power. Although the history of the British Empire is marked throughout by the conflict between the central power and the drive for autonomy, the economic, political and even psychological dependence of the British colonies that was established immediately was never eliminated but on

the contrary was consolidated in various ways throughout the seventeenth century.

Abandoning the traditional view of the genesis of the British Empire, Bliss also analyses in a novel way the influence exerted by colonial expansion on British political life.

This does not mean simply seeing how far the conquest of the empire contributed to the growth of internal stability and of Britain's power, but understanding how the American experience enabled contemporaries to look upon their country's complex political reality under a different light. This leads Bliss to the conclusion that Britain and the American colonies had an equal share — although in different ways — in the process of political and institutional renewal that took place in this period.

However, just as it would be wrong to argue that the creation of the colonial empire automatically strengthened Britain, when in fact it might well have drained its strength — as was partly the case with Spain — Bliss warns against the view that the economic and social transformations of the seventeenth century originated solely from the desire for political renewal, even though they did favour the spread of new ideals. English society in the seventeenth century was enamoured of its own past and longed for the return to a mythical golden age. They were many who crossed the Atlantic to fulfil the dream of building, in the colonies, a society that corresponded to the ideal of the past.

To support his thesis, Bliss carefully reconstructs the network of political economic and cultural channels through which the complex ties between the mother-country and the colonies passed and shows how such a structure underwent change in the course of the seventeenth century. On the whole his reading of the events that took place on both sides of the Atlantic during the period under study is coherent to the theoretical postulates he poses at the beginning, although other studies should be made in the direction outlined by this book to confirm the results.

Finally we should note that the emphasis given to studying the evolution of a collective mentality and to investigating the ways — both official and unofficial — ideas and political practice spread from the centre of the empire to the periphery, reveal Bliss's great ability to bring together and successfully exploit very different kinds of historiographical experience.

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H. DIEDERIKS — P. HOHENBURG — M. WAGENAAR (edited by), *The Visible Hand and the Fortune of the Cities. Economic Policy in Europe since the late Middle Ages*, Leicester, Leicester University Press, 1992 pp. 229.

In the history of western culture, few metaphors have been as successful as

the metaphor of the "invisible hand" which Adam Smith first used in a passage in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) and later developed in the second chapter of the fourth book of *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776) to describe the action of forces that bring the actions of each single man into harmony with the progress of society.

In more recent times, scholars have spoken of the presence of a "visible hand" to indicate the role played by entrepreneurs in industrialised economies or, more generally, by the forces which in any period have openly fixed rules for the economic development of a community (see, for example, A.D. Chandler, *The Visible Hand: the Managerial Revolution in American Business*, 1977).

However, while the concept of the "invisible hand" has been applied, by its very nature, to widely-differing economic situations without giving rise to contradictions, its homologue has been subject to contrasting interpretations, mainly because every society defines the forces that control development in its own way and in its own time making it difficult to define unequivocally the characteristics of the "visible hand".

Another controversial point arising over the definition of this concept is the possibility that it might refer to the individual. In other words we need to determine under what conditions the actions of a single person can be distinguished from the actions of the group in which the individual acts (be this a social class, a public institution or productive unit) to coordinate an aspect of collective economic activity. Very closely connected to this problem is also that of defining the role of the "visible hand" during the industrial revolution: in what way can the presence of forces that controlled economic development be reconciled with the practice of *laissez-faire* which is generally held to have characterised this process.

The liveliness of historiographical debate over the interpretation of this concept derives precisely from the implications arising from such questions. An interesting contribution to the debate is the book edited by H. Diederiks, P. Hohenburg and M. Wagenaar which brings together a selection of the proceedings of a conference on the relationship between the "visible hand" and urbanology, held in Leyden in 1988 and organised by the *International Urban History Group*, (now the *European Association of Urban Historians*), which since 1990 has been responsible for the publication of the *Register of European History Teaching Research and Publications*.

As the editors point out in the introduction, the relationship between the action of the "visible hand" and the development of urban centres from the end of the medieval period onwards is inherent to the very definition of a modern town as a place in which the market, productive structures and social bodies take shape and act in a proto-capitalistic way. The authors of the essays contained in this book focus their attention on the economic role of the urban *elites* and on the channels (institutional, political, corporative) through which this role is exercised.

L. Teisseyre-Sallmann and P. Guignet examine this particular aspect of

French urban history while P. Jeannin, D. Ebeling and H. Schulz look at German urban history. The towns of Leyden, Groningen Haarlem and the case of Holland in general are investigated in the essays by H. Brand, P. Kooij, B. de Vries and M. Wagenaar while J. Davis illustrates in a clear and succinct way the substantial failure of the Neapolitan ruling classes' attempts to link the city's urban development to an organic process of economic development.

The two interesting essays which end the book — *The State, the Elite and the Market: the "Visible Hand" in the British Industrial City System* by R. J. Morris and *Managing the Market — Regulating the City: Urban Control in the Nineteenth Century United Kingdom* by R. Rodger — examine nineteenth-century Great Britain, that is to say, the historical context for which the concept of the "visible hand" was originally coined. The two authors believe that the process by which the town councils increasingly undertook to organise an ever-growing number of services, such as the supply of gas and water, transport, the maintenance of parks and roads, public order etc., was geared in such a way as to make the whole community bear the social costs of the building of the new productive system rather than the elite which benefited most from that system.

Consistent with this view, certain aspects of English urban life are analysed, among which we should mention the development of voluntary associations throughout the nineteenth century. According to Morris, mutual help societies to encourage saving and promote reading, religious and lay associations against the use of alcohol and to promote social solidarity, Sunday schools and evening classes, all tended to exercise a very wide-spread form of social control. This thesis may appear to overstated but it certainly deserves to be studied more closely in order to understand through which channels the "visible hand" acted in the century of *laissez-faire*.

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O. FIGES, *Peasant Russia Civil War: The Volga Countryside in Revolution, 1917-1922*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1991, pp. XIX-401.

Why did the peasants take part in the 1917 Revolution? Whole generations of Soviet historians have answered this question largely insisting on the class-conflict element: the peasant revolt was the revolt of the rural proletariat against the rural bourgeoisie. Orlando Figes' work, on the contrary, is part of a general rethinking of the history of the Russian state and the crucial moments of its formation, which began even before the fall and disintegration of the Soviet Regime had posed new and disturbing questions (the book came out in 1989 and was republished two years later in paperback). The author gives a very different interpretation of the events which between 1917-1922 marked the

history of the Volga, a region that was noted in Russia for its consolidated revolutionary tradition (from Razin in the seventeenth century and Pugachev in the eighteenth century to the 1905-6 revolts): the peasants' participation in the 1917 revolution was the reaction of the countryside against the states' violation of local autonomy and the usurping of political and territorial control over village land, undermining the villages' self-governing bodies.

The village, the only true protagonist of the revolution in the countryside, provided an immediate and spontaneous response to the events in St. Petersburg, which is amply documented by the author in the first part of the book, especially in chapters two and three. The village members were bound to one another by economic ties and by their substantial extraneity to the market which was largely replaced by an archaic barter economy and a system of social relations based on reciprocal solidarity. Rather than being rented out or sold, the largest portion of arable land was used as common land (the *mir*). This singular form of resource exploitation did not merely have economic implications. It had shaped the mentality and had defined the cultural horizons of the rural populations for whom public interest and sharing were prominent features in the organisation of their lives. A wide range of common issues was discussed and resolved by self-governing bodies like the meeting of the village council. In the mid-nineteenth century civil servants and government bodies began to penetrate these microcosms, threatening the village council's very foundations and depriving it of its power over important sectors of rural administration like land use, tax imposition and military recruitment. In 1890 for example, the body of country captains was set up, followed by the creation of rural officers who promoted and carried out Stolypin's reform in 1906.

When the news of the Tzar's abdication arrived, administrative bodies and civil servants were removed and replaced by the *volost' Soviets*, spontaneously elected by peasant assemblies and by informal groups in the village. Armed with their own police force and consisting of various subcommittees, the *volost'* were authentic autonomous local governments. The requisites of the Russian village were reflected in the forms of conflict and in its leaders. In this respect the sense of belonging to an entire village rather than to a certain social class prevailed. The village organised its collective forces reproducing traditional politico-social structures. The male adult members, who had always formed the self-governing bodies, now organised and took part in the attack against the feudal lord's castle, independent of social differentiations. The rich peasant, for example, better equipped and supplied with horses and carts led the march during the occupation of the properties belonging to the nobility, even though he rarely took part in their destruction.

Our perspective for analysing the revolution seems therefore to have shifted radically. Rather than being a decisive moment in the development of agricultural capitalism, it was rather part of the far-reaching process of transition from direct to indirect government of the territory and of increasing state intervention in the affairs of local communities with the purpose of extracting

a quantity of resources to strengthen its own politico-military machinery which is so well described by Charles Tilly. Barrington Moore has explained this process in detail. A society that depends on a central authority for extracting the surplus is more vulnerable to peasant revolt than others. On the contrary a highly fragmented society that does not depend on a single central authority and which uses a complex system of sanctions for safeguarding its own unity and for extracting the surplus from the peasants is almost immune from peasant revolt because any opposition is likely to lead to the creation of new segments. The case of South Italy fits this typology quite well, where state intervention in the question of land distribution from the end of the eighteenth century to the end of the nineteenth century was delegated to local authorities. This was a crucial factor in confining the struggle for land possession and keeping it within a local context. If this was an old strategy that the State adopted throughout the modern period to protect itself from rural social unrest, it is also true that through it the local administration's power of control over the territory grew. Thus in the last decades of the eighteenth century, the essential traits of the process of land distribution in South Italy were defined and remained largely unchanged during the whole of the next century, with a fairly insubstantial role being played by centralised institutions, and a much more important role being played by local authorities.

The revolutionary forces crystallised around the land issue. Most of the measures adopted by the *volost' Soviets* concerned the confiscation of private property while the *jacquery* phenomenon aimed at the occupation and destruction of property. Between 1916 and 1922 the proportion of enclosed and privatised land fell from 19% to 0.1% in the province of Samara, from 16.4% to 0% in the province of Staratov, and from 24% to 0.4% in the region of Stavropol. Yet if the revolt against the property of the nobility was bitter, the struggle for the reappropriation of the common lands which had been divided up and enclosed, proved to be even more violent. While the land of the gentry was to be handed over to the peasants, the common lands had always been in their possession. An old and consolidated tradition made any attempt at appropriating them illegitimate. From 1906 when Stolypin's reform was introduced the Volga region registered the highest enclosure rate in Russia. The enclosure movement in the Volga was marked by frequent struggles between the villages and the state machinery, which was used to support the landowners' rights against those of the community. These ways of behaving, however, cannot be interpreted according to neoclassical models which associate individualism with economic rationality and progress and collectivism with irrationality and conservatism. Amartya Sen has drawn attention to the motivations underlying economic behaviour which are not just based on individual interest, bestowing upon them a heuristic dignity. The problem is not one of defining an abstract economic rationality. Groups like classes and communities intervene between the individual and totality and are at the root of many actions which involve a sense of obligation and respect for consolidated

values and rules. At the end of the war, although the primary objective of the revolutionary movement in the countryside was the large-scale destruction of private enterprise, the principle behind the 1922 «Land Code» was based on an attempt to adapt the collective ideal to that of freedom of land possession.

The land was therefore the keystone of the revolutionary phenomenon. As Barrington Moore has explained, the periodic distribution of the *mir* and land in the peasant village, especially after Stolypin's reform, gave rise to generalised land hunger, an alliance between rich and poor peasants, turning the Russian village into a highly revolutionary community. On the contrary, the conservative communities were those in which owners of even very small pieces of land were acknowledged the right to keep their land and continue to be a part, albeit a very minor part, of the community. In other words, the unity of the peasant community was achieved by closely binding the potentially revolutionary members to the social order. Once again South Italy fits this second typology. The conservative tendencies that typified the behaviour of southern villages reflected a very precise concept of land possession based on a strong sense of public interest — «the other way of possessing land» — which derived from and was legitimised by a secular juridic tradition. Paolo Grossi has shown how this tradition — a unique fact in Europe — was particularly persistent and forceful in the case of South Italy: initially concerned with overthrowing the feudal system, it remained firmly anchored to the defence of land as a collective and generalised resource even after the French Revolution, that is, after the proclamation of the principle of full, free and exclusive property.

Within this context the victory of the Red Army takes on a different meaning and interpretation. As is well explained in the second part of the book, the Bolsheviks succeeded in having the better of other political forces not so much on account of military superiority and the capacity of their leaders, but because they grasped the deep significance of the peasant revolt: namely that it was a revolt against the state's having usurped power of control from the village. The Bolsheviks' knew they had to take account of this factor which is why many peasants were elected to the soviets and were involved in mass organisations. As far as the peasants were concerned, the final outcome of the Revolution was a general restoration of the social equilibrium in the countryside to their advantage: full autonomy to the village councils regarding their relationship with the land and the organisation of the agricultural economy, the destruction of the big landowners' power, the lessening of the influence of capitalistic elements, the elimination of the extremes of rural poverty and the strengthening of the average peasant's social dominion.

This study is an exceptionally rich analysis, and is a valuable and innovative contribution to the study of contemporary Russia. But it is not just a reflection on the Revolution and on the political and social dynamics leading to the Bolsheviks' victory. It is also a very detailed fresco of the peasant world and of the features which have characterised it over time, such as the working of the rural economy, the ways of managing local autonomy and the struggle for the

use and possession of the land. Above all, it is an effective and vivid account of the way the old entered the new, that is, of the way the peasant world activated the nerve centres linking the centre to the periphery and penetrated the machinery of the Soviet State, largely determining its form and its essential traits.

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B. KENT, *The Spoils of War. The Politics, Economics and Diplomacy of Reparations. 1918-1922*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1991, pp. XVII+462.

The study of problems connected with the payment of debts and reparations arising out of the first world war has been amply treated in contemporary historico-economic literature. Yet even though much has been written on this subject, Kent's book presents an original interpretation, placing him in that group of Australian historians who in the last few decades have made interesting contributions to contemporary historiographical debate.

Kent argues that the motivation for the financial claims advanced by the victors for war debts and indemnities — which tended overall to annul Germany's economic power — derived more from the attempt to solve internal political and social tensions rather than from any organic strategy to rebuild international markets and to preserve privileged positions.

In the post-war period, the harsh economic consequences that the war had wrought even for the victors, forced the political classes governing those countries to take unpopular decisions, especially in terms of a much heavier regime of direct taxation. These measures were often presented to public opinion as the inevitable consequences of the failure to solve the problem of war debts and reparations. The insistence on advancing financial claims, which, considered overall often appeared contradictory, reinforced this impression in the eyes of public opinion.

The General Election that took place in Great Britain in November-December of 1918 is emblematic of this situation. On that occasion Lloyd George freely gave himself over to rhetoric about the reparations the country should ask rather than to confess to his electorate — which demanded an increase in public spending for social services — that besides being a blood-bath the war had also been a financial disaster for which the tax-payer now had to foot the bill.

The link with Keynes' celebrated work in *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (1919) and in *A Revision of the Treaty* (1922), afterwards taken up again and elaborated on in *Essays in Persuasion* (1931) is quite clear, but the

originality of Kent's work lies in the careful research carried out in the French, English, German and American archives, on the basis of which this process is subdivided into four phases spanning from the end of the war to 1932.

In the first two and a half years of peace, despite the commitments undertaken with the armistice treaty and with the agreements of Spa in July 1920, the claims advanced by the victors were, in the eyes of the author, substantially rhetorical in so far as they did not really aim at solving the problem, and had little influence on conditions in Germany, which had become tragic, above all as a result of the internal consequences of military defeat and political instability.

With the beginning of the London programme of payments in May 1921, France and England sought, under pressure from the United States, to pay back war loans to tighten up the claims towards Germany, but the inconsistent way in which this attempt was carried out and the consequent reaction of the German financial *élite* led to the crisis of the Ruhr and to the mark's hyperinflation in 1923.

The dramatic nature of these two episodes revealed the European powers' inability to find a solution to the problem. It was the United States, therefore, that took the more active role during the third phase of this process, with the promotion in 1934 of the first of a series of international loans aimed at stabilising the mark and the German economy and with the launching of the Dawes Plan in the following year which set out a programme for payment of the reparations from 1925 to 1935, taking account of Germany's real financial situation.

Despite the positive aspects of the Dawes Plan, which as part of its programme envisaged the suspension of payments whenever these threatened the stability of the mark, the Allied Powers failed to apply the only measure that could have solved in a positive way the problem in the long term, namely to reduce the overall sum of war indemnities. Underlying this decision were still extra-economic reasons and the attempt to use external factors as an outlet for internal tensions. This was made evident by the 1929 crisis when it became no longer possible to guarantee Germany the support of international capital. In 1932 the Young Plan, which had supplanted the Dawes Plan in 1930, and which had been presented to public opinion as the definitive solution to the problem of reparations, was thwarted by a substantial moratorium of all war debts.

The author also emphasises the role played by Germany in this process: the hostility of the military caste towards the indemnities imposed by the Treaty of Versailles and the attempt of the financial *élites* to pass the burden of payment onto the workers (as actually happened during the period of hyperinflation in 1923) which helped to reinforce the national-socialist movement and ultimately the Weimar Republic. This, however, is the least convincing part of the book and the author shows some difficulty in fully grasping the complex economic reality of Germany in the 1920s.

Lastly, despite interest for the subject and the interpretation given, the

European reader might encounter some difficulties in reading the book on account of the frequent use made by the author of neologisms and colloquial expressions.

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M. MARGAIRAZ, *L'État, les Finances et l'économie. Histoire d'une conversion 1932-1952*, Paris, Comité pour l'Histoire Economique et Financière de la France, Imprimerie Nationale, 1991, 1,456pp.

This 1,500 pages-odd book is the edited version of a *thèse d'Etat* in 6 volumes, a supposedly extinct (since 1984) French speciality. It constitutes a minute and extremely detailed study of the financial policies pursued by the French government and its interventions in the economy from 1932 to 1952. In 1932 the parties of the left-wing won the general election but were deprived of their victory by successive right-of-centre coalitions which conducted increasingly deflationary policies; in 1952 the first Plan, named after its author, Jean Monnet, came to completion while Premier Pinay succeeded in halting post-war run-away inflation.

The thesis is a mixture of catalogue and chronicle. Its title lists quite explicitly its objects not only by order of appearance but also of importance. In the author's eyes, it is the state that ultimately controls the decisive economic and financial processes: «When a Marxist says "the State", «says Ludwig von Mises», he is overwhelmed by reverential awe». Quite obviously, this tale is a story from the top down.

Most information was collected from government reports, memos, memoirs and official papers as well as from interviews with survivors. Its 34 chapters, arranged in chronological order, are highly descriptive, the author obviously sharing the belief that the fewer theories one has about political bargaining or the way an economy works, the better equipped one is to avoid «biases» in the analysis. Let the facts «speak for themselves». Special attention, in this context, is paid to personal itineraries and careers as well as the power struggle of new and old «quangos» to pass and implement their decisions. Naturally lacking the profusion of equations which nowadays adorn most economic history books, *L'Etat, les Finances et l'économie* abounds instead in abbreviations and acronyms: FME, FDS, FDS, CGP, DREE etc. In addition its style too often cultivates the verbose and the cryptic as if to make good old-fashioned administrative history pass for highly original «economic» history. This is also a study best used with a Paris map adjacent to it. As he is ferried from the rue de Rivoli to the rue de Martignac via the rue de Madrid, an economist will not necessarily feel at ease, at least a Parisian resident (preferably a civil servant) will. Thus, renouncing the

most elementary tools of economic analysis, the author basks in self-coined neologisms supposed to clarify the chronology: «*austéro-libéralisme*», and «*expansoatlantisme*» for instance. Alternatively he recycles popular economic notions to his own particular use. Maybe this concern for humility was designed to avoid outsmarting his interviewees whose economic illiteracy was notorious. We are lectured later about the fact that, for the historian «nothing is exogenous» (implying the ridiculous pretention of the superiority of history to economics) and later on the «endogenisation of the exogenous» without reference to its actual economic significance. One can cast serious doubts on the effectiveness of such a method of compensating for a refusal of technical terminology by way of «clever» puns, *clins d'oeil* and metaphors. Still, one does not gain anything by brandishing here and there «Keynesian» and «Keynesianism» for every government intervention in the economy. This disregard for what schools of economic thought are, can only bring about reductive vision, confusion and oversimplification, or what McCloskey calls «the absurdity of economic history without economics».

The absence of an economic framework and the recourse to such misguided pronouncements are all the more conspicuous when one considers the overall argument of the study. The minute commentary on the legislation, programmes and policies is capped by vague and dubious generalisations. One wonders what the analysis gains by likening the three main government bodies responsible for financial and economic policy to the «Triple Alliance» of 1914. The inferred «psychoanalytical» double-meaning of the subtitle's keyword («conversion») would amount to believing that the government in this period, thanks to the expertise and versatility of its officials, would have converted seeds of social and political conflicts into energy carefully channelled into the economy (see p. 1354). One is left wondering how this might have happened? Or are we in the presence of genuine «climagic?»

Here is the main problem with this kind of study: the choice of a standpoint. By espousing too closely the point of view of the decision-makers the scholar loses his sense of objectivity. The belief that the *commissaires du plan* are best suited to assess the effectiveness of state planning, seems strikingly naive. The historian, however independent, inevitably comes to share if not their beliefs, at least their perceptions, and worst of all their delusions. It never crosses Margairaz' mind that all these quangos he studies so devoutly might not have been responsible for the unprecedented growth of the 50s and 60s. Of course that's what minister and high officials would like us to believe! But whatever it might be, no evidence is offered and one is left wondering why the bureaucratic solution which failed so manifestly in the East to allocate resources efficiently, would have succeeded so well in the West. Perhaps plethora and multi-faceted financial and economic bureaucracies are a luxury that only rich Western democracies can afford. Just as the welfare state was geared towards keeping the working classes quiet and gaining their co-operation, similarly the administrative machine is just a big plaything, the purpose of which is to keep

the ruling classes entertained and prevent them from doing further harm to business.

Equally naïve in this respect, are the portraits of civil servants, motivated only by detached consideration of the public good, only occasionally «haunted by obsessive fears» of budgetary deficit or, if of the opposite persuasion, depression (*ad lib*). As Mises mischievously observed:

«Statolatry has ridiculously clothed everyman in the government service with the glorie of altruistic self-sacrifice who emerges as a saintly being, a sort of monk who forsook all earthly pleasures... in order to serve to the best of his abilities, God's lieutenant on earth...»<sup>1</sup>.

No wonder then that the Ministry of Finances sponsored the publication of this book!

Hayek warned in 1944 that the Western democracies were just copying the very institutions that had made the defeated dictatorships so terrifyingly efficient and which they had claimed to fight on the principles of liberty. Margairaz seems unaware of this claim which is nevertheless highly relevant to his thesis.

Why is it that when it comes to historical issues the French reader is often left to choose between scholarly textbooks and theses of such monstrous proportions? There seems to be yet another reason why France needs American aid: to write argumentative, informed syntheses (see Landes, Cameron, Kuisel, Hoffmann, Baum, Paxton, Kindleberger). In this respect one cannot help but praise the inspiration of the Education Minister when he abolished the *thèse d'Etat* in 1984. Because in France the State does that too.

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J. SKAGGS, *The Cattle-Trailing Industry. Between Supply and Demand, 1866-1890*, Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1991, pp..

This second edition of Skagg's book on the cattle-trailing industry (the first edition came out in 1973), published in paperback, is indeed timely. It confirms the present interest of Anglo-Saxon historiography in subjects related to the pastoral economy (see for example, Biddick's book on the «Other Economy» and in the study of zootechny from a new perspective which questions the traditional assumptions about the sector's backwardness and its role in hindering the expansion of cereal-growing and full agricultural development). A decisive moment in America's epic and widely-portrayed in fiction, until

<sup>1</sup> L. von Mises, *Bureaucracy*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1944, p. 78.

recently the cattle-trailing industry had not been the object of specific study and research even though it was a prosperous business and a sector which attracted the investments of many pioneering families. The author's intention, therefore, is to reconstruct the cattle runs of the second half of the nineteenth century in the regions of North America, particularly of the area between Texas and Kansas, controlled by an enterprising group of businessmen who built up and destroyed fortunes, transporting enormous herds from the south-west to major railway junctions like Abilene and Kansas City.

Even though at a first glance cattle-trailing appears to recall the Spanish Mesta and Italian transhumance, the reader soon becomes aware that there are more differences than similarities. Southern Italian transhumance, for example, as has been described by both eighteenth-century writers (Francesco Longano and Melchiorre Delfico) and contemporary scholars (John Marino, Biagio Salvemini, Doria Musto and Pasquale Di Cicco), was a secular phenomenon which not only shaped the economies of regions like the Abruzzo, Molise and Apulia, but also forged the essential traits of an entire society. The livestock breeders, on the one hand, and the owners of the land they passed over on the other, made up a dominant class which was able to wield great influence in the shaping of economic policy in their respective states. Especially favoured by the geographical features of central and southern Italy and above all by the combination of mountainous areas and plains, and practised in the area between the Appenine ridge — where the animals were brought during the summer — and the Tavoliere, the Roman countryside and, further north, the Maremma — where they spent the winter — transhumance flourished particularly during the early modern period, only to suffer decisive and irreversible decline in the nineteenth century. Yet at the moment of its decline, on the other side of the ocean, the cattle-trailing industry was undergoing expansion, as Skaggs so vividly describes, with quite different characteristics: transhumance was a structural and long-term phenomenon, while cattle-trailing was conjunctural and transient.

In actual fact, the cattle-trailing industry responded to a major imbalance between the supply and demand of cattle in a very difficult period of American history, roughly coinciding with the twenty-five years following the civil war. It was during this period that a quite unique type of entrepreneur emerged, closely related to the more general characteristics of American history in the nineteenth century. «Modern» and «traditional» at the same time, half-way between a breeder and a cattle drover, the contractor performed a role of mediation in the cattle-trailing industry, finding himself at the centre of a wide and complex business circuit. As we can see in the first chapter, he basically organised the transfer of a large quantity of cattle destined for sale on the markets in the north-west on behalf of one or more ranchers, personally assuming all costs and risks. The contractor provided the wagons, the escort, the foremen and the drovers, fixed the routes along the valleys with most water and most grazing land, and settled with Indian chiefs the tolls to be paid on Indian land. He advanced money to the ranchers (often relying on bank loans) who paid him

back at the end of the operation, often speculating on the prices and making big profits.

Without taking anything away from the talent of the entrepreneurs themselves whose virtues Skaggs is so keen to extol, and of their courage and their spirit of enterprise, these factors alone cannot explain the reason for their fortunes. Undoubtedly factors like the destruction of livestock supplies after the war, the high railway costs, the growing demand for cattle from northern industry, from the army and from Indian reservations, all meant that the contractors moved in a context which favoured profit-making and encouraged them to concentrate risk rather than to minimise it. Recently historical schools, particularly Italian, have warned against studying enterprises and entrepreneurs on the basis of neoclassical analysis, that is to say, on the assumption that subjects are able to behave rationally and to maximise profits by calculating the essential economic variables. Both Alberto Banti writing on North Italy and Giuseppe Barone writing on South Italy have shown the invalidity of abstract models for understanding and interpreting historical events. There is no «ideal type» in history. It is only from a careful analysis of the economic, social and institutional features of the context in which the entrepreneur operated that we will be able to understand his actions, motivations and objectives, the causes of success and failures. As far as the cattle-trailing industry is concerned, the business was characterised on the one hand by high risk margins, owing to the great distances involved, the Indian threat and the hazards of viruses and climatic conditions, and on the other hand by the certainty of making big profits at the end of the operation.

It was the search for profit and the attempt to make great fortunes, as Skaggs explains above all in the second, third and fourth chapters in which he draws a profile of the entrepreneurs, which drove the contractors to act as they did. Moreover the search for profit was the one factor common to all the contractors, in contrast to the ways the business was carried out, which varied considerably from contractor to contractor. Some remained tied each other another for many years through successful companies like the Litle, MacDanile, Schreiner and the Light Cattle Company which controlled 30% of all cattle movement in the twenty-five years following the civil war. Others like Captain Eugene Millet, acted on their own or occasionally formed temporary partnerships. Lastly, others, like the Coggins, the Blockers and the Pryors were family concerns in which the family invested its own money, assumed all risks and appropriated all profits, while acting to safeguard family interests and expand family control. If, however, the case of Millet lends itself more easily — with all the aforementioned reservations — to interpretation using the neoclassical model of rational behaviour, the case of the Coggins, Blocket and Pryors brothers shows the total inadequacy of classical tools for business analysis. Decision-making in the latter case was closely linked to family structure and composition. The loyalty to which Skaggs frequently refers formed the basis of the company and often motivated the action of each member. Likewise,

constraints and objectives conditioning the company did not always depend on economic variables but rather were linked to family needs.

However as the author explains in the seventh chapter on the economic impact of trailing, the contractors were not the only ones who benefited from the expansion of the cattle-trailing industry. Texas and other cattle-breeding areas in the west and south-west provided the raw material for industry in the north-east. The whole operation produced a series of multiplier effects increasing wealth and income. 8% of the cattle-trailing costs were spent in the place of departure and were divided between wage costs and expenditure for food and water supplies. At the place of arrival the benefits were enjoyed by the railways which transported cattle to the towns in the north-east where they were butchered and packed. In a city like Chicago, for example, the meat-packing industry was a decisive factor in economic and metropolitan growth. Besides this, in the intermediate phase of the operation there was a string of small villages lying along the cattle-trailers' path which served as provisioning stations where the cowboys rested and spent their money. Only the 'Nationalisation' of cattle-trailing, as Skaggs so clearly points out in the eight chapter, after the 1840s (this period was characterised by the spread of fever and disease) and the prohibition that was widely-imposed on cattle-trailing in different states, signalled the end of the contractors' private activity.

Despite the overall tendency of the author to narrate and describe facts rather than to investigate interpretative criteria and to explain the rationale behind the contractors' economic behaviour, the book is nonetheless an innovatory contribution which broadens and develops research topics on American economic and social history. Apart from evoking the vivid pictures which have become so familiar among the general public through films, it throws light onto one of the long paths taken by modern American society in its evolution and from which it created its extraordinary wealth.

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