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NEW APPROACHES TO EUROPEAN HISTORY

Transitions to Capitalism
in Early Modern Europe
NEW APPROACHES TO EUROPEAN HISTORY

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Transitions to Capitalism in Early Modern Europe

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Preface

The subject of this book is the economic history of Europe during three and a half tumultuous centuries, focusing on agriculture and industry. It is organized so as to offer the reader a narrative of developments in the major states and geographical areas over time on the one hand, and an analysis of general trends and structural changes that affected Europe as a whole on the other. On each of the multitude of subjects upon which it touches, a vast amount of scholarship exists. To assist students who wish to pursue themes further, suggested readings have been provided at the end of each chapter.

Economic history can be a difficult, even a frustrating, field to study. It is characterized less by dramatic events and famous individuals than by processes that take place over extended periods of time, begin and end at dates that are almost impossible to pinpoint, and involve the efforts of people who mostly remain anonymous. Yet economic history can also be exciting, for it reveals the manifold ways that human beings have acted within the constraints and opportunities offered them by geography, resource endowment, demography, institutions, values, and beliefs in order to produce the goods and services that they need and want. Like every significant discipline, moreover, economic history is replete with controversies generated by scholars seeking both to extend their empirical knowledge and to refine their theoretical understandings. Many of these debates are discussed in this book. Attending to them indicates the state of current research and conceptualization.

This book presumes no prior knowledge of economics, but it may be helpful to define here the most frequently used terms (others are defined when they appear in the text). To begin with, growth and development need to be distinguished analytically, even if the distinction is not always clearcut in practice. Growth pertains to an increase in output, to quantitative change. Because such expansion may be accompanied by an increase in population, scholars differentiate between aggregate growth (expansion of the total output of a society), which may or may not result in improvement for individuals, and per capita growth, achieved when
aggregate expansion of output exceeds population increase. Unfortunately, in the early modern period the shakiness of our demographic information usually makes it difficult to determine whether the latter has occurred, even when the evidence points to the former. Development refers to qualitative change or, as it is frequently termed, structural change.

Both growth and development involved alterations in the ways in which the factors of production, the inputs into the production process, were employed. Three factors are usually distinguished: land, labor, and capital. Land refers, of course, to property used for cultivation, pasturage, woodland, and so forth, but it can also mean other natural resources, such as ores. Labor is physical or mental work directed towards production. Capital, too, is a broad term, encompassing not simply the funds employed in production but also tools, equipment, and other property used to create more wealth. Care needs to be taken not to confuse production (total output of goods and services of an enterprise, farm, or entire society, often used synonymously with output) with productivity, which is output per unit of time (hour, day, etc.). In turn, productivity can be further subdivided. Productivity of labor signifies the output of products divided by the number of workers; of land or agriculture, the output of farm products divided by the amount of land in use. Growth involves increasing the amount of production but does not necessarily entail rising productivity.

Industry is often thought to signify mechanized production; in this book, however, it refers to all processing of raw materials to make non-agricultural goods and services for sale in the market. Therefore, in the pages that follow, industry is at times used synonymously with craft and trade, particularly when manual labor is involved. Both workers and artisans perform manual labor, though in this book the former term is generally reserved for those with little skill who are employed for wages, and for all those working in mechanized factories, whereas the latter connotes skilled workers laboring at home or in smaller shops, whether or not they were self-employed and belonged to guilds. Peasants and farmers may also be used interchangeably, signifying those who work the land. At times, the terms suggest different social relations, a peasant being someone who has to pay the landlord a form of tribute (whether in cash, kind, or services) in order to remain on the land, whereas a farmer is an owner or a tenant owing only land rent. Peasant often carries overtones of subsistence agriculture, but here it includes those who produce for the market.

Finally, the terminological conventions used below need to be pointed out. The first time that foreign terms are employed, they are italicized, but thereafter they are printed in Roman type. Names of provinces, cities, towns, villages, and geographical features such as rivers are given in the
Preface

form currently common in the English-speaking world; but for states I have used the name(s) current in the early modern period. Thus what has been known as Belgium since 1830 is referred to below as the southern Netherlands or (depending on the specific era) the Spanish or Austrian Netherlands. The northern Netherlands becomes the Dutch Republic or the United Provinces from the later sixteenth century. Before the mid-nineteenth century, Germany and Italy were geographical expressions, although enjoying a good deal of linguistic and cultural unity; in this book, the many states that comprised them are grouped together (as Italy and western and eastern Germany) for some purposes, although for others regions are distinguished. The various kingdoms of Spain were dynastically united, but economically diverse; Castile, the largest, and Catalonia, the most dynamic, are treated separately here.

All scholarship is to some extent a collective endeavor, but a synthesis like this one is unusually dependent on the contributions of many others. Many of the works that I have found especially useful are cited in the suggested reading at the end of each chapter. But I have not listed there the numerous books and articles in languages other than English upon which I have repeatedly drawn. Such works are essential reading for anyone wishing to explore in greater depth many of the topics discussed in this book, for which the English-language literature is unsatisfactory or nonexistent.

A number of scholars both European and North American have supplied readings, given parts of my manuscript helpful and critical readings, or otherwise provided aid. For such assistance, I would particularly like to thank James Amelang, Pierre Boule, Francis Concato, Daryl Hafter, Martha Howell, Catharina Lis, Guido Marnef, Joyce Mastboom, John Munro, Hugo Soly, and Herman Van der Wee. I have benefited greatly from comments by the editors of the series “New Approaches to European History” – most of all from a detailed and unsparing critique by Bill Beik – and from suggestions made by an anonymous reader. Richard Fisher at Cambridge University Press has been unfailingly supportive and patient and Vicky Cuthill has helped smooth the production process. All of them share the credit for whatever virtue this book has; I alone am responsible for its shortcomings. I would also like to thank the students in the various incarnations of my course History 24 who over the years have helped to sharpen my ideas and pointed out new ways of thinking about the rise of capitalism. I hope that this book will be useful to their successors. My deepest gratitude goes to the two people to whom the book is dedicated: my wife Rachel, for being patient, and our daughter Koré, for not.
1 Regions mentioned in the text
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2 Towns and cities mentioned in the text