

Transitions to Capitalism in Early Modern Europe

Between the end of the Middle Ages and the early nineteenth century, the long-established structures and practices of European trade, agriculture, and industry were disparately but profoundly transformed. Revised, updated, and expanded, this second edition of *Transitions to Capitalism in Early Modern Europe* narrates and analyzes the diverse trends that greatly enlarged European commerce, permanently modified rural and urban production, gave birth to new social classes, remade consumer habits, and altered global economic geographies, culminating in capitalist industrial revolution. Broad in chronological and geographical scope and explicitly comparative, Robert DuPlessis' book introduces readers to a wealth of information drawn from throughout eastern, western, and Mediterranean Europe, as well as to classic interpretations, current debates, new scholarship, and suggestions for further reading.

Robert S. DuPlessis, Professor Emeritus of History at Swarthmore College, has published widely on the history of textile industries, material culture, and consumption. His most recent works include *The Material Atlantic: Clothing, Commerce, and Colonialism in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), for which he was awarded the Jerry J. Bentley Prize by the World History Association in 2016. He has received fellowships from The John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, The Camargo Foundation, The National Endowment for the Humanities, the Fulbright Foundation, and the Surdna Foundation.

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Transitions to Capitalism in Early Modern Europe

*Economies in the Era of Early Globalization,
c. 1450–c. 1820*

Second Edition

Robert S. DuPlessis

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Preface

This book recounts Europe's economic history and the emergence of a radically new socioeconomic system across three and a half tumultuous centuries marked by bitterly contested religious reform, far-reaching cultural innovation and scientific revolution, and contentious state formation within Europe, together with expanding overseas trade, colonial settlement, and empire-building. Organized chronologically as well as by sector, *Transitions* seeks to elucidate the complexity of early modern economic history: broad general trends and structural changes that affected Europe as a whole; important national and regional differences; the diverse impacts of social, political, and cultural influences on economic life; constant interplay between European and global developments. It draws on the extensive scholarship written on the subjects it discusses, particularly recent work that has introduced fresh topics while also redefining long-held interpretations. To assist students who wish to learn about topics in greater depth, suggested readings have been provided at the end of each chapter.

Economic history can be a difficult, even a frustrating subject. Though not lacking dramatic events and famous individuals, it is more often characterized by processes that take place over extended periods of time, begin and end at dates that are almost impossible to pinpoint, occur unevenly and discontinuously over time and space, and involve the efforts of people who mostly remain anonymous. Yet the study of past economies 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 to produce the goods and services that they need and want. Examining the formations that preceded the currently hegemonic capitalist order also underlines the historically contingent nature of all economic systems: rather than inevitable results of intrinsic laws or propensities, they are historically specific structures that humans have produced and can alter.

Like every significant discipline, economic history is replete with controversies generated by efforts to extend empirical knowledge and advance new explanations. Some debates arise from diverse theoretical commitments. Others concern methods of and results yielded by techniques employed to construct and interpret data regarding an age notoriously lacking in many types of basic economic information. This book draws eclectically but critically on a variety of approaches and findings to try to understand – both across Europe and within specific states and regions – the functioning and transformation of early modern economic structures and practices.

Familiarity with economics is not required for understanding *Transitions*, but frequently used terms and concepts deserve definition. *Production* denotes the process of creating goods and services by an individual, household, enterprise, economic sector, or entire society; *productivity* the ratio of output (the volume of goods and services turned out) to the volume of inputs, the resources required by the production process, as measured by criteria such as hours of labor, quantities of raw materials, extent of acreage plowed. Three inputs or *factors of production* are usually distinguished: land, labor, and capital. Land refers to property used for cultivation, pasturage, woodland, and so forth, but can also include other natural resources, like ores. Labor is physical or mental work directed toward or expended in production. Capital encompasses both circulating or working capital – the funds or claims on funds (credit) needed for wages, raw materials, and other operating expenses; goods in process and finished but not yet sold; and amounts owed for goods sold but not yet paid – and fixed capital, the physical assets (land, buildings, and equipment) used to produce goods and services. Though often transferred in non-market transactions, land, labor, and capital were increasingly exchanged in *factor markets*. *Commodity markets* for raw (primary) materials and *product markets* for finished goods date back to antiquity, but they too took on increased importance in the early modern era. No more than in other periods, however, were markets “free,” as they were regulated both by formal institutions (such as city and state governments, guilds and other corporate institutions, and religious authorities) and by informal norms, conventions, and practices.

Growth signifies an increase in output, conventionally measured in per capita terms to distinguish between *extensive* growth (expansion of the total output of an economy’s goods and services due to and only matching increased inputs of factors of production) and *intensive* growth (sometimes called *development*), in which improved skills, technological innovation, and/or more efficient use of land, labor, and capital result in productivity gains that outstrip demographic increase, enabling

improvement in living standards.¹ *Industry* is often taken to mean only mechanized production; in this book it refers to any processing of raw materials to make goods for exchange and therefore may be used synonymously with *craft*, *trade*, and *manufacturing*. Both *workers* and *artisans* perform manual labor; here, *artisan* connotes a skilled worker laboring at home or in a small shop. *Peasants* and *farmers* may also be used interchangeably to designate those who work the land. At times, the terms suggest different social relations: a peasant owes a landlord both a land rent and tribute (whether paid in cash, in kind, or by service), whereas a farmer is a property owner or a tenant owing only land rent. Peasant often carries overtones of subsistence agriculture; here it includes those who produce for the market.

Transitions considers *capitalism* an historically specific system of organizing the production of material wealth that entails distinctive asymmetrical relations between the classes engaged in economic activities. In a capitalist economy, individuals and groups who possess both circulating and fixed capital directly organize production by hiring laborers to turn out agricultural and/or industrial goods using the capitalists' land, labor, raw materials, plant, and equipment. Capitalists' profits consist of the difference between the costs of their capital inputs and the price their output receives in competitive markets. To gain or preserve advantage in those markets, capitalists are under continuous pressure to innovate to cut production costs. Capitalism grew up within and shared components with the multiple non-hegemonic economic formations specific to early modern Europe. To some degree, demesne lordship, peasant proprietorship, petty artisanal production, and proto-industry all featured market exchange, private property, and wage labor, and all could – and often did – experience growth. As we shall see, however, the key relations and dynamics of each differed fundamentally, if diversely, from those that defined the capitalist order that supplanted them.

Finally, the terminological conventions used in *Transitions* need mention. Non-English terms are italicized only on first usage. Names of settlements, political units, and geographical features are given in the form currently common in anglophone economic historiography. From

¹ Scholars have constructed historical estimates of per capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP, the market value of total output of a given economy in a specific period, corrected for inflation and expressed in terms of a standard currency in order to indicate purchasing power parity across economies). For pre-industrial economies, such calculations unavoidably rely on sparse data; lack information about income distribution and sustainability issues; and omit household production, payments in kind, barter, and other non-market activities that loomed large in early modern times. This book cites such estimates as rough approximations of trends in economic performance, not as evidence about individuals' welfare.

the later sixteenth century, the erstwhile Low Countries are therefore referred to as Belgium (the southern provinces ruled at various times by Spain, Austria, and/or the Bishop of Liège), and the Dutch Republic or United Provinces (the independent northern provinces). Before the mid-nineteenth century, Germany and Italy were geographical expressions, not political entities; in this book, the many states that each encompassed are sometimes analyzed together, sometimes by region. The various kingdoms of Spain were dynastically united, but economically diverse; here, Catalonia, the most dynamic, is often examined separately. The catchall term northwest or northwestern Europe designates the northern and southern Low Countries, England and Wales (after the 1707 union with Scotland, Britain), northwestern Germany, and northern France; Mediterranean Europe includes today's Italy, Spain, and Portugal; east Elbia includes today's east central and eastern Europe. While mentioned at times, the Balkans, then under Ottoman rule, and European Russia are not extensively examined. For the sake of brevity, the modern terms Indonesia and India are primarily used, though individual Indonesian islands and separate states on the subcontinent are named when relevant. Despite the many differences within states, only state-level data are usually available and presented in *Transitions*.

All scholarship is to some extent a collective endeavor; a synthesis like this one is unusually dependent on the contributions of other scholars. Many works that I have found especially useful are cited in the notes and suggested readings, though the latter includes few of 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 topics discussed in this book for which the English-language literature is unsatisfactory or nonexistent. This revision has also benefited from the works of and discussions with Pierre Gervais, John Styles, and Giorgio Riello; comments and suggestions made by my students over the years, by colleagues in various venues, and by several anonymous readers; and the support of my editors at Cambridge University Press.

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Map 1: European Regions



Map 1: (cont.)

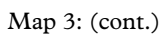


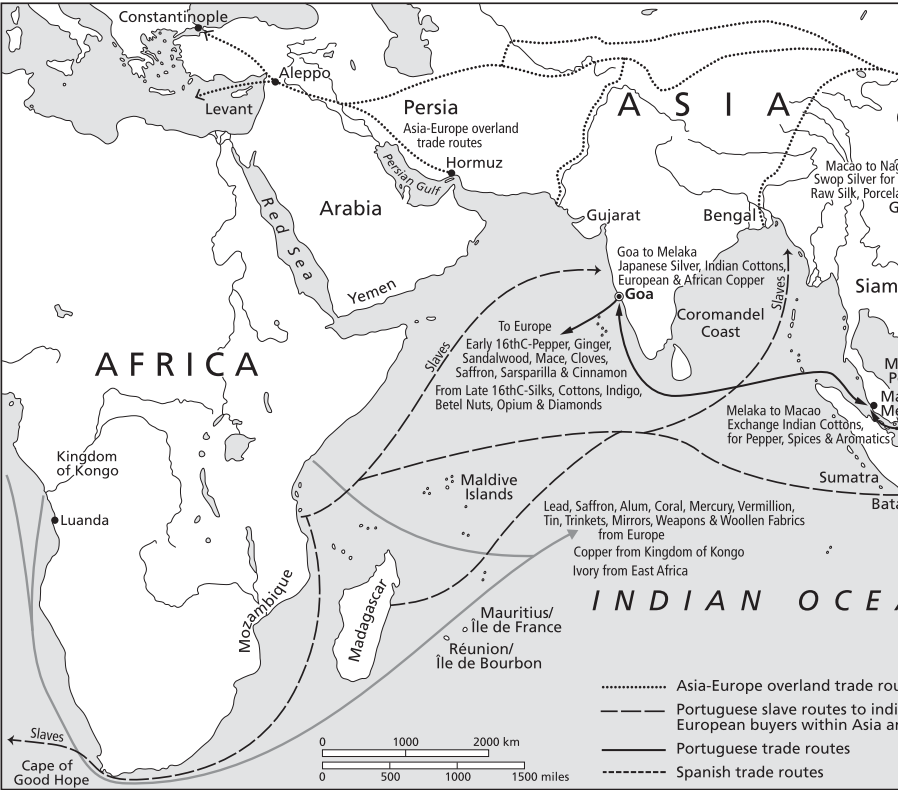
Map 2: European Towns and Cities

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Map 3: Europe's Overseas Atlantic Commerce





Map 4: Europe's Asian Commerce