

SEWELL JR., WILLIAM H. *Capitalism and the Emergence of Civic Equality in Eighteenth-Century France*. [Chicago Studies in Practices of Meaning.] The University of Chicago Press, Chicago (IL) [etc.] 2021. 412 pp. Ill. \$105.00. (Paper: \$35.00; E-book: \$34.99.)

For the past half century, Marxist readings of the French Revolution have fallen out of favour. Their decline began in the 1960s, when revisionist historians began showing how Marx's "class" categories failed to map onto the political fissures of late old regime and revolutionary France. By the 1980s, second-wave revisionists were putting aside socio-economic analysis and focusing on political culture instead. Although interest in the "socio-economic" was revived around the turn of the twenty-first century, historians writing about it either muted their Marxist sympathies or went to great lengths to distance themselves from the "orthodoxy". Henry Heller's defiantly Marxist *The Bourgeois Revolution in France, 1789–1815* of 2005 cut a lonely figure on the historiographical landscape.

Until now. In this theoretically stimulating and cogently written book, William H. Sewell Jr. offers an unapologetic Marxist analysis of how France came to reject hierarchy and privilege to embrace civic equality and human rights. But unlike the leading Marxist historians of the twentieth century, who stressed class struggle, Sewell draws on Marx's ideas about the commodity form and its egalitarian implications. He argues that the growth of commercial capitalism in eighteenth-century France conditioned people to see society in a more horizontal manner – as comprised of consumers and producers who meet as equals in the marketplace to exchange commodities. "Exchange values", not the social rank or status of the exchangers, are what matters under capitalism. This logic of abstraction – of goods and of people – eventually shaped ideas about social relations more generally. Just as commodities were abstract equivalents subject to the universal benchmark of market pricing, individuals could now be imagined as abstract equivalents subject to the universal rule of law. Commercial capitalism, in short, made the abstract civic equality expressed in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen of 1789 thinkable.

The argument is not new, but Sewell's stimulating Marxist framing of it is. In a 1996 article in the *American Historical Review*, Colin Jones arrived at similar conclusions. He argued that, unlike the medieval "Great Chain of *Being*", which configured social relations hierarchically, "the Great Chain of *Buying*" was "horizontally disposed [...] posit[-ing] an open and relatively egalitarian social organization".¹² Sewell takes this insight further by exploring the connection between commerce and civic equality across several domains: urban public spaces and fashion (Part One), the *philosophie* movement (Part Two), and political economy (Part Three).

The first part of the book, "The Emergence of an Urban Public", is arguably the most persuasive. Elaborating on Jürgen Habermas's concept of the public sphere but stressing its commercial rather than bourgeois aspects, Sewell shows how rank became less visible in eighteenth-century urban public spaces. These spaces – parks, promenades, cafés – were more anonymous, not only because of demographic

¹²Colin Jones, "The Great Chain of Buying: Medical Advertisement, the Bourgeois Public Sphere, and the Origins of the French Revolution", *American Historical Review* 101:1 (1996), 13–40, p. 14.

growth, but also because of the growth of the fashion industry, which, with the demise of sumptuary laws, made it easier for commoners to ape the fashions of the nobles. Social distinctions were still discernible in these spaces, of course, but they were now based on wealth rather than birth or privilege.

Part Two is structured around four case studies of *philosophe* writers. These chapters explore the different ways the philosophes amassed their wealth and how their involvement in commercial publishing reinforced their ideas about civic equality. While Voltaire's wealth owed much to inheritance, the *abbé* Morellet and Jean-Jacques Rousseau depended more on patronage. Of the four, Denis Diderot relied most on income from his writings, at least before Catherine the Great purchased his book collection on extraordinarily generous terms, doubling his annual income.

In offering concise overviews of the careers and ideas of the *philosophes*, these chapters are ideal for teaching the history of the French Enlightenment. How far they go to substantiate the book's central thesis, however, is questionable. It is difficult to see how the varying degrees of dependence on commercial publishing affected the *philosophes'* ideas about civic equality. No matter the degree, all four philosophes espoused it. Sewell might have considered the counter example of the anti-*philosophes*.¹³ These defenders of tradition also relied on a combination of book sales, salon reputation, and patronage, which makes it harder to establish a causal connection between commercial publishing and civic equality.

Part Three examines the crown's fiscal difficulties and the solutions that Enlightenment political economists proposed in the regime's final decades. Facing soaring military costs and debts, reforming ministers sought to curb fiscal privileges and encourage commercial activity to increase taxable wealth.¹⁴ Sewell crystallizes the problem that other historians have gestured at, namely, the regime's "double bind": every attempt to increase revenues by encouraging commercial freedom and broadening the tax base undermined commercial and fiscal privileges – the very foundation of Old Regime society.

Part Three culminates with the *abbé* Sieyès's *What Is the Third Estate?*, the abolition of privilege on 4 August 1789, and the declaration of rights later that month. Focusing on Sieyès's pamphlet is appropriate given how explicitly Sieyès linked commerce to civic equality.¹⁵ Sieyès saw the nobility as parasitical since all the valuable work – from agriculture and manufacturing to public office – was performed by the Third Estate (commoners). Sieyès's wishes were fulfilled on 4 August, when noble deputies in the National Assembly voluntarily renounced their privileges. Sewell follows mainstream interpretation of this event, attributing it to the Great Fear of late July, when chateaux and the feudal documents were under attack by peasants in many parts of France. It is surprising that he did not mention Rafe Blaufarb's re-interpretation of this event since it supports his argument.¹⁶ For Blaufarb, 4

¹³Darrin McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment: The French Counter-Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity* (New York, 2001).

¹⁴Sewell draws heavily from Michael Kwass's *Privilege and the Politics of Taxation in Eighteenth-Century France: Liberté, égalité, fiscalité* (Cambridge, 2000).

¹⁵Sewell wrote a book on the topic in 1994: *The Rhetoric of a Bourgeois Revolution: The Abbé Sieyès and What is the Third Estate?* (Durham, NC, 1994).

¹⁶Rafe Blaufarb, *The Great Demarcation: The French Revolution and the Invention of Modern Property* (New York, 2016), pp. 48–81.

August owed less to the Great Fear than to the political-economic views of the Physiocrats, who sought to separate property from political power (seigneurial ownership conferred certain public powers) and who viewed fiscal and commercial privileges as impediments to economic growth.

While each of the three parts of Sewell's study offers valuable insights into the cultural changes brought about by commerce in eighteenth-century France, the place of capitalism in the analysis is uneven. It is central in the first part, where its egalitarian implications are theoretically framed and empirically demonstrated. But capitalism's role in bringing about the intellectual and administrative changes discussed in the latter two parts is less convincing. That the *philosophes* espoused civic equality because of their involvement in commercial publishing is not established since, as mentioned, anti-*philosophe* writers, who opposed equality, were also involved in the industry. In the third part, it is fiscal pressures, not commercial capitalism, which advanced the cause of civic equality. Indeed, the causal vectors appear reversed: instead of commerce generating ideas about civic equality, it is the push for fiscal equality that generates the urgency to stimulate commerce, in order to increase taxable wealth.

Sewell's study might have benefited from engaging with Pierre Rosanvallon's book on the same topic, *La société des égaux*.¹⁷ Like Sewell, Rosanvallon sees markets contributing to a view of society as composed of abstract equals. But whereas Sewell's analyses all point to one outcome, civic equality, Rosanvallon considers how civic equality developed alongside social differences and inequality across the modern era. He argues that, in the eighteenth century, differences of class, gender, and race were perceived but were "secondarised". That is, equality was seen as "natural" and foregrounded while inequalities were treated as contingent or of less importance. It was nineteenth-century science that naturalized social differences, facilitating the justification of social, racial, and gender hierarchies.

Because Rosanvallon attributes the rise of civic equality only in part to commercial capitalism, he is able to bring a broader set of factors to bear to explain historical fluctuations in Western thinking about equality and difference. Sewell's singular focus on civic equality and its capitalist origins leaves one wondering why its advent in 1789 turned out to be so limited; women and blacks had fewer or no rights. It also cannot explain how civic equality came to be broadened and narrowed in various historical contexts ever since.

Nor does Sewell's account provide a framework for distinguishing sufficiently between democratic and authoritarian forms of civic equality. He briefly notes that the principle traversed the Revolution's various phases but without acknowledging the vast differences between them. Telling a story about capitalism that culminates in the Declaration of Rights of 1789 obscures other stories, such as those of India and China in recent decades, where rapid capitalist growth has been accompanied by authoritarian governance. It may be true, as Sewell argues, that commercial capitalism fosters a view of society as composed of commodities and individuals who are commensurate before some universal measure (market price and the rule of law). More interesting, and arguably more urgent, is an exploration of how civic equality has existed alongside inequalities, including those produced by capitalism, and across a range of political systems, from democracy to autocracy. Capitalism may have made

¹⁷Pierre Rosanvallon, *La société des égaux* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2011).

civic equality thinkable in eighteenth-century France, but it has also created, accommodated, and reinforced forms of inequality and oppression ever since.

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SURANYI, ANNA. *Indentured Servitude. Unfree Labour and Citizenship in the British Colonies*. [States, People, and the History of Social Change, Vol. 4.] McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal [etc.] 2021. xiv, 278 pp. Ill. Cad. \$130.00. (Paper: Cad. \$37.95.)

In 1654, an Irish boy named Ricckett Mecane was kidnapped and shipped to Maryland, then sold as an indentured servant to Thomas Gerrard. In 1661, Mecane claimed to be twenty-one and thus to have completed his term of service; Gerrard sought to extend his bondage for eight and a half more years. Mecane sued for his freedom, but was ordered to serve two more years, after which he appeared in court again – this time as a free man serving on a jury. In *Indentured Servitude: Unfree Labour and Citizenship in the British Colonies*, Anna Suranyi attends carefully to Mecane's story, revisiting it throughout the book to explain how his suit exposes various “contradictory realities” of indenture (p. 3). As one of about 320,000 servant men, women, and children who sailed from British ports to the colonies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Mecane provides a case study of servants' lived experience of the continuum of unfreedom that characterized the legal and labor culture of the early modern British Atlantic (pp. 16–17). Some traveled willingly, while others were coerced or taken by force. Some traveled under contract, others were indentured on arrival; some were transported criminals or rebels. But none, “[e]ven Irish servants like Ricckett Mecane”, were slaves (p. 86). Pointing to the contemporary relevance of Mecane's case, Suranyi addresses and dismisses the “pseudohistory of ‘Irish slavery’” that elides crucial distinctions between white indenture and the enslavement of Africans (pp. 65–70).

Such legal, political, and cultural distinctions between indenture and slavery have been essential to scholarly debates about the histories of race, slavery, capitalism, employment, and empire. Suranyi spotlights one key difference in particular: the fact that, unlike enslaved people of African descent, Mecane and other indentured servants could petition courts to sue their masters. Their ability to do so, and to receive some measure of justice in court, she argues, registers the state's acknowledgment that indentured servants were “rights-bearing members of colonial society” (p. 95). That so many servants did formally grieve their masters' abuses and violations of contract signifies their own “expanding sense of being participatory members of their society, with inalienable rights” (p. 15). By fostering a premise of legitimate rights shared by the state and some of its most vulnerable subjects, indenture was “a crucial factor in shaping ideals of citizenship on both sides of the Atlantic” (p. xii).