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Capital Enthusiasm

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Jordana Rosenberg. *Critical Enthusiasm: Capital Accumulation and the Transformation of Religious Passion* (New York: Oxford Univ., 2011). Pp. xi + 216. \$65

Critical Enthusiasm brings together an important set of issues in the eighteenth century in a densely argued book drawing on a range of disciplines. The foundation lies in literary studies (with extended treatments of Shaftesbury and Swift), but the ambition extends to intellectual, economic, and colonial history, informed by an array of theoretical sources, including Marx, David Harvey, Henri Lefebvre, Raymond Williams, and Fredric Jameson. The complexity of themes does not lend itself to easy summary, but there are a number of major premises: enthusiasm is neither a “remnant of a religious past” in the eighteenth century nor is it a “hallmark of secularization” (3) in its sociable or aesthetic incarnation. Rather, it “encodes” a defining contradiction in the period inherent in the “spatio-temporal manifestation of the logic of capital accumulation” (4). Perhaps the simplest way to characterize this inquiry would be as an extended meditation on the theses concerning religion and capitalism provided by Weber and Marx. The motivation is to “historicize” these issues and to question a narrative of modernity that depends on an account of religious enthusiasm as superseded by the secular.

The first chapter considers a range of figures who discussed enthusiasm, from Locke, to Shaftesbury and Hume. Rosenberg explores how eighteenth-century historicist thought relied analyzing enthusiasm as well as how religious historicism was itself bound up with histories of capital accumulation. The second chapter investigates the Camisard controversy, in which French enthusiastic “prophets” arrived in London in the early eighteenth century and were met by stiff opposition, despite their status as refugees from Catholic absolutism. This chapter also discusses common law vs. statute law and the new provisions for capital punishment, which in turn defended the interests of capital accumulation. The third chapter introduces a spatial dimension to the argument, looking at moral philosophy in a colonial context. Reading the Carolina constitution, which Locke participated in drafting, alongside the third Earl of Shaftesbury’s letters on his Carolina holdings, leads to the conclusion that “racialized blackness functions in the period to secure an ideology of market self-regulation” (100). The fourth chapter returns to the Camisard episode and some of the literature produced by Camisard exponents. These works offer a nonsecular understanding of space that enables us to identify the unevenness of capitalist development. The closing chapter focuses particularly on Swift’s poem “A Description of a City Shower,” which produces “an enthusiastic spatialization: a composition of the spatial complexities of capital accumulation into poetic arrangements” (152).

The scope of the study and its large claims mean that *Capital Accumulation* deserves to be taken seriously, but the result is not without difficulties. Although there are brief references to events in the English Civil War, the prime instance of enthusiasm remains the Camisards. This historical moment is indeed fascinating and reveals a host of tensions and contradictions that are well described here, but it means that the evidence of “enthusiasm” brought into consideration is surprisingly narrow.

The lack of reference to accusations of enthusiasm against Quakers, or for that matter Methodists, is puzzling, especially in a book with a transatlantic orientation. Quaker commerce and antislavery agitation might have proved an interesting complement, for example, to the book's concerns. Shaftesbury features centrally, yet his essay "The Adept Ladys or The Angelick Sect" (1702), a satirical account of various enthusiasts, including a severe Quaker woman, goes unmentioned. This is significant, since Shaftesbury's essay, while engaging in his familiar raillery, does not appropriate enthusiasm as a positive term. The brief engagement by Rosenberg with Hume's *History of England* is certainly merited and could have been expanded; however, there is no attention to his important essay "Of Superstition and Enthusiasm" or to the *Natural History of Religion*, other than a single reference in which it is mistitled (34) as the *History of Natural Religion* (nor for that matter did Gibbon write the *Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire* mentioned on the same page).

The attempt to integrate enthusiasm with capital accumulation remains problematic. Quite apart from the considerable conceptual challenges of pursuing such an argument, one has to acknowledge significant missed opportunities for discussing relevant textual evidence in the period. Hume's crucial essays on the balance and "jealousy" of trade, on commerce, money, taxes, interest, and public credit might have been explored. It is unfortunate that no treatment is given to Adam Smith's analysis of enthusiasm in *The Wealth of Nations*, particularly his claim, contra Hume, that, instead of fostering enthusiasm, competition among religious sects in the market for followers has a moderating effect, provided enough sects are in the mix. While Locke's critique of enthusiasm in the *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (in a chapter added to the fourth edition, 1700) is discussed, the potential for making some connection with Locke's elaboration of his economic position during the crisis over English coinage in the mid 1690s is not pursued. The relationship between enthusiasm and religious toleration is not developed, nor is the issue of miracles, treated both by Locke and Hume, in which the issue of testimony figured crucially.

The author is much more intent on developing Marx's analysis of primitive accumulation that served as capitalism's genesis myth. Yet the attempt to link this satisfactorily to Shaftesbury runs into problems not merely because, as Rosenberg states, "Shaftesbury does not explicitly refine any economic principles" (59), but more significantly because the argument turns on an analogy between what Shaftesbury says about religious history and what Marx says about primitive accumulation. In his critique of priestcraft, Shaftesbury had complained about the "accumulative Donation" authorized by magistrates who allowed in "new modes of worship, new miracles," and saints supplied by different religious orders. But can we conclude on this basis that the "mythic history of accumulation" is "an allegory for the conditions of incipient imperial capitalism" (59)?

This is one of many examples in the book of using debatable readings to sustain large historical claims. In chapter 3, for example, Shaftesbury is quoted from his essay "Sensus Communis," where he remarks that "as for policy, what sense, or whose, could be called 'common' was equally a question. If plain British or Dutch sense was right, Turkish and French sense must certainly be very wrong" (quoted on 111). Rosenberg regards this as a reference to "mercantilist policy" without explaining why. On this basis, she concludes that "in saying that British and Dutch senses are similar, Shaftesbury condenses the historical alliance of Dutch banking with British industry into a relation of likeness" (111). This leap does not seem warranted. In fact, Shaftesbury is setting up a contrast between forms of political

policy, differentiating Turkish and French absolutism, on the one hand, from British and Dutch adherence to political liberty on the other (which he chooses to relativize at this point for his purposes). We seem to be a long way in this context from “naming the desire for an identificatory substitution at the heart of British mercantilist policy” (111).

Subsequently, Rosenberg quotes Shaftesbury’s comment in his essay “Sensus Communis” in which he imagines an Ethiopian “transported on a sudden” to Paris or Venice during the carnival where everyone wears a mask and costume. She rightly observes that this individual is cast in the role of the moralist who laughs at the ridiculous. Shaftesbury also states that if the same person laughed equally hard at a “natural face and habit,” he would make himself ridiculous. The reflection depends on negotiating difference and distinguishing a just standard from what is distorted and false. I am not persuaded by Rosenberg’s reading that the “sudden transport” refers to enthusiasm, or that whiteness is here “naturalized to code universal subjectivity” (115), or that “the potential for accumulation that is the hallmark of the putatively free market is engineered through the deliberate and violent coding of skin color as racial difference” (117). The “Ethiopian anecdote” is seen—even more curiously, given the reference to Paris and Venice—“as the invocation of a spatial fix that is simultaneously a racialized logic that pertains in the colonial context” (119).¹

The concluding chapter on Swift makes some promising points about enthusiasm and literary form. *A Tale of a Tub* is considered briefly (162), but the neglect of Swift’s fundamental text on enthusiasm, “A Discourse Concerning the Mechanical Operation of Spirit,” is unaccountable. Instead the chapter focuses on “Stella’s Birthday” [1727] and the “City Shower”. The close reading of these poems is often suggestive, though we reencounter a dilemma that pervades the book when the attempt is made to tether the themes of enthusiasm and capital. The advice to the addressee of the “City Shower” in the face of the impending storm, “If you be wise, then go not far to Dine, / You spend in Coach-hire more than save in Wine,” is elaborately glossed in the context of Marx’s analysis of commodities and the creation of equivalences in exchange between different goods. The reckoning of exchange “in terms of the money form” is ostensibly “invoked in Swift by its glaring absence” (175). The poem “recalls the invisible yet potent reach of the commodity form, which subsists on yet another violent abstraction, that of labor itself” (175).

Critical Enthusiasm has both the appeal and weakness of a self-authorizing discourse, inadvertently replicating the object of its study. There is much to wrestle and contend with here, and the critical intelligence behind the study makes one look forward to a second book which has had more time to steep.

¹ For a more recent account which discusses the subject more successfully, see David Sigler, “Shaftesbury Takes an Ethiopian to the Carnival: Foreignness, Subjectivity, and Intersubjectivity in ‘Sensus Communis’,” *The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation* 53:1 (2012): 23-40.