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Julia Adams. *The Familial State: Ruling Families and Merchant Capitalism in Early Modern Europe.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005. xi + 235 pp. $35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8014-3308-5.

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Historical Sociology vs. History

Two fundamental concerns of historical sociology have always been the origin and nature of modernity. In response to modernization and dependency theory, which seemed to present modernity as an objectively describable condition, previous generations of historical sociologists studied comparative issues in early modern European history, especially themes emphasized in that body of theory, such as democratic revolution and the emergence of the nation-state. Those sociologists (one thinks of Charles Tilly, Theda Skocpol, Barrington Moore, and Immanuel Wallerstein) enriched not only the questions historians asked but substantially influenced the social history written in response. Yet sociology's influence faded in the face of disillusionment with quantitative and economic approaches (including but not limited to Marxism) and the wave of cultural history influenced by anthropology and linguistic theory.[1] Among younger historical sociologists, a new wave of interest in the early modern state-society relationship seems to be emerging, one that moves more strongly into issues (social discipline, gender relations) developed by practitioners of the "new cultural history."[2] In her new book on the relationship of gender to developing states, Adams claims to be "charting ... new territory in the study of the formation of European states" (p. 12). However, while Adams adds some elements to her account, especially gender and the colonial economy, if this work is indicative of the "new" historical sociology, it provides us primarily with another version of the story rather than new questions, different approaches, or perhaps most importantly, new characterizations of the genesis and trajectory of the early modern state.

Adams's book is organized in an introduction and six chapters. Her introduction outlines her interest in the Netherlands, as an example not explained effectively by world-systems analysis and one that challenges an alleged oversimplicity in feminist theories of early modern politics. She introduces the term "familial state" to mean a state that ties paternal rule to particular political and economic arrangements made between the heads of families. These arrangements, she asserts

throughout the book, allowed both the Dutch economic upswing in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by cementing family authority and economic interest to that of the developing state--and caused its downfall after the late seventeenth century insofar as its connection to patriarchal concerns meant that the developed state limited their ability to respond to a changing economic and geopolitical situation. The remainder of the chapter is concerned with statements on the utility of her methodology for the book's theme. Chapter 1 introduces the term "patrimonial nexus." Drawing on Max Weber, Adams asserts that patrimonial governance "parcellize(s) downward," is "crosscut by peculiarly patterned tensions," and "is a fixed form that paradoxically allows for institutional innovation" (pp. 17-18). In such systems, governmental legitimacy is based on notions of tradition, so that any novelty or innovation requires significant justification. Sovereign trading companies, seen by contemporary governments as a means to hegemony, were one such innovation, though their influence was mitigated by existing property relations and elite corporate organizations, as well as the often problematic relationships between corporations. Patriarchy, on the other hand, "an image or ideology of paternal rule that may link familiar with macropolitical, economic, or other sociocultural practices" (p. 32), was a legitimating move, one that could be made by merchant elites as well as monarchs, and an essential aspect of early modern political authority. Chapter 2 discusses the mercantile features of Dutch rule, as well as threats to it from different corporations within the Dutch polity and the transformative effect of ruling on the groups that ruled. The story begins after the Dutch Revolt, when Amsterdam replaced Antwerp as the major Dutch trading port and after which Dutch elites first attempted to replace the Habsburgs, initially by reverting to the tradition of the ***Stadholder*** as manifested in the House of Orange, then by attempting to constitute a state by prohibiting venality of office and concentrating political control via the Raad van State. About 1500 families participated in these arrangements, which were held together by the leading role taken by Holland's regents, who supported the state with their financial clout. Adams minimizes the role of Calvinism as a unifying factor, particularly for the period after 1620, an odd choice given that Calvinism served as one of the major tools for putting this particular group of families on the political map. One outcome of the success of the Amsterdam patriciate in unifying Dutch families was the chartering of the East Indies Company (VOC) in 1602 with a twenty-one-year monopoly. At the same time, this success carried the seeds of its own disintegration in the form of inter-corporate competition, as when the Amsterdam city council and the VOC directorate sabotaged the West India Company, a decision characterized here as premature and in effect damaging to the familial state's interests. Thus it is not enough to trace the eventual decline of the Netherlands as a hegemonic power as a consequence of economic difficulty, since the by-that-point increasingly inflexible patriarchal structure of the state was a major contributing factor to the loss of political and economic power. At the height of the Golden Age, a gradual transformation of the merchant elite into a rentier elite occurred, as members of the patriciate lent capital to the state, thus securing their incomes (because they decided rates of interest on government bonds), even as they continued to determine who would stay in power. Chapter 3 examines the familial aspect of this system of governance in an atmosphere of struggle for control between various actors who wanted to constitute the state. In particular, Dutch families sought to pass on political privilege by conserving or expanding it via marital alliances and inheritance practices that focused on producing and supporting the single male heir. Such practices produced feuds between competing families that could block state development as much as enhance it. Chapter 4 applies the model of the familial state to England and France, where inter-familial rela-

tionships and commercial interests were also vital to the constitution of the state. It seems odd to assert as a novel argument that various aspects of the French system of venality impinged negatively on French economic development (Colbert noted this at the time) and created a political investment in the state among participating families (p. 113), since these are classic, albeit contested, claims of a great deal of secondary literature already, of which Adams' apparatus suggests she is at least partially aware.[3] Chapter 5 treats the economic decline of the Dutch Republic in view of the transformation of Dutch elites to a rentier class; Adams argues that this decline was caused neither by war nor fiscal crisis, but by a governing elite incapable of responding to such challenges because (as a patriarchal group) it was invested in maintaining the very familial identities that had supported the rise of the Dutch commercial empire in the first place. Chapter 6 returns to the French/English/Dutch comparison to argue that families were key to shaping state, commercial, and colonial projects in all three settings.

Although Adams repeatedly stresses the novelty of her account, many of these claims will sound familiar to historians. Adams's chief contribution in her own view is that of adding "gender" to the mix via the discussion of family, patriarchy, and patrimonialism. She charges that up until now scholars of early modern state development have "miss[ed] the potential political importance of familial coalitions of male officeholders implanted in the wider apparatus of rule" (p. 33) and consequently understated the gendered character of states. Thus "bringing in the component [of] family elucidates what theorists of state formation have previously treated as purely politico-economic patterns and problems" (p. 104). It is hard to understand the first claim, given that most of an entire generation of European historians devoted their energies to studying the participation and activities of nobilities and civic elites in early modern European governmental projects (these themes are especially well studied for Italy and France, for instance). Readers familiar with that literature will only be able to accept Adams's claim if they are ready to assume that "family" is a different category than "nobility" while "family" and "gender" mean the same thing. The restatement of gender as "patriarchy" does not really mitigate this problem, because the primary consequence of patriarchy in Adams' view is a (detrimental) inertial tendency in dealing with new economic or political challenges in view of political arrangements that privilege tradition over innovation. Laying Max Weber aside, Adams demonstrates no inherent relationship between such privileging and gender arrangements; indeed, European elites often behaved in value-conservative ways with regard to matters that appear to have little relationship to gender. In *War, Religion and Court Patronage in Habsburg Austria* (2003), for example, Karin J. MacHardy used Pierre Bourdieu's notion of ***habitus*** to explain why Bohemian Protestant nobles felt unable to convert to Catholicism when it would clearly have been in their political interest to do so. Insofar as Adams's "patriarchy" describes Dutch families as working together to pursue a common interest, it bears a strong resemblance to what historians used to call "class." And "class" explanations for early modern political change are rife, especially in the works of the previous generation of historical sociologists.

Because Adams emphasizes the role of counterfactuals in argumentation, it seems to fair to ask two questions in response to her incorporation of patriarchy as an explanatory factor for the behavior of Dutch elites: first, were these governing families either risk-averse or hostile to innovation ***because*** they were patriarchal (and, by extension, is patriarchy really the factor that made early modern governments inflexible)? Secondly, had the Dutch state not been "familial," i.e., patriarchal, would the decline of the Dutch economy and empire have been preventable because the families would have been conditioned to behave differently (that is, would the absence of patri-

archy somehow have eliminated their interests as a class as well)? The reader of this book will be inclined to answer "no" to both questions, so it seems that the factor of patriarchy as introduced here is not a sufficient explanatory factor for understanding either the development of the Dutch state or Dutch economic decline. Adams would probably respond here that the point is not a single-factor explanation, but the confluence of factors; still, the inclusion of the term of patriarchy as employed here--not as a means of distinguishing between the behavior of different groups or classes or actors, but as a pure descriptor--leaves the reader at a loss as to the novelty of the insight that actors and groups involved in trying to impinge upon the state struggled for power, or that families used particular dynastic strategies (pursuit of marital alliances and attempts to close the elite) in their attempts to pass on political privilege. These were staple arguments in the historiography of European social history in the 1970s and 80s, which suggested that such behaviors were typical of nobilities and burger elites throughout western Europe.

Adams may have more of a point in noting the neglect of "family" issues in the work of feminist political theorists of the early modern state, whose works have tended to focus on gender as a political or philosophical category (Carol Pateman) or as a cultural code for certain political behaviors associated with gender that changed over time (Joan Landes) rather than as an issue of family, *per se*. Still, without a definition of the "gender" category that distinguishes it convincingly from "family interest among a particular social segment," it is hard to see from this account why it should supersede class theories of the emergence of the early modern state. Because they behave in ways that benefit their social group, Adams's "patriarchal" or "patrimonial" actors could just as well have been women as men. Moreover, both Landes and Pateman treated gender as a perceived distinguishing factor among potential political actors, a project that Adams does not pursue. Adams's familial state thus appears to have had only one gender. While gender histories do not necessarily have to focus on women, it is hard to see why a gendered account of political or class behavior is necessary if the gender of the participants appears to hold little or no decisive bearing on that behavior.

Another factor of this account that Adams deems important is her comparative approach, which is intended to reveal alternative paths of early modern state development. Of course, the results of a comparison depend strongly on what is being compared. The choice of England and France is key because until fairly recently, modern historians considered them to be nearly singular models of successful state development. Adams seems unaware of debates conducted over the last decade concerning the nature of the state in the Holy Roman Empire and its subsidiary entities.[4] Indeed, she seems trapped in a historiography of western Europe that, in a peculiar early modern twist on the superseded *Sonderweg*, insists on the primacy of the English and French examples as sole models for the development of the nation-state. Ironically, such assumptions rest on just the stereotypes cultivated by the modernization literature Adams wants to leave behind.

Given that merchant elites of the sort Adams examines were common in central and southeastern Europe, many historical readers will find themselves confused about the book's neglect of a comparative project that would have had a much stronger potential to challenge our received notions about the emergence of the European nation-state once we leave behind, as the current historiography does, that the nation-state as it emerged in England and France, was some sort of ideal. One suspects that a comparison to German-speaking areas was not undertaken because, by the sixteenth century, the German cities and territories taken separately or together did not constitute a leading unified economic force in early modernity, nor did they create a colonial empire

at the time. A caution about the relevance of the colonial comparison: if the lack of an early modern colonial empire was the reason for the choice of England and France over the burgher elites of German cities, it makes the portions of Adams's argument relating to colonialism--as the definitive reason for picking this comparison--much more important than they seem at first glance.[5] The rise of the Dutch empire, moreover, was conditioned on the defeat or decline of its two major competitors, the Hanseatic League and Venice--a piece of the story not included in this book that not only points out the abrupt beginning of its narrative but also raises questions in the reader's mind about which comparisons might be most useful. Prehistory of its subject is not a strength of this book. Its picture of state arrangements before the period it describes neglects the results of the last fifty years of research on medieval constitutional history: according to Adams, feudal reciprocal governmental arrangements were a "hoary practice" (p. 16) and pre-modern monarchs were "predatory" (p. 20). We read further that "rulers in feudal and early modern Europe ... proffered or withdrew favors at will," and that "property rights ... were liable to systematic violation" (p. 26). Cynics will wonder, on the basis of this description, what distinguished these regimes from modern democratic states.

But back to the general problem raised by potential comparisons to the Holy Roman Empire: once we acknowledge the extremely limited meaning of Adams's definition of "patriarchy" or "gender" and then go on to acknowledge other models of early modern state development beyond that associated with France and England--another one of the claims Adams wants to push--from the perspective of research on the Holy Roman Empire and Italy, the issues that Adams outlines about civic elites and familial matters are all familiar. Hers is hardly the first work to examine the effects of family relations in the burgher elites of trading cities on governmental arrangements, a matter studied heavily for the free imperial cities of the Reich.[6] That these cities also formed coalitions for the pursuit of common political interest is also well known. If we look away from the cities as non-constitutive of states and insist on limiting comparisons to German territorial states as further on the path to the nation-state in the period, still Adams seems unaware of the long tradition of research on the relationship of the representation of gender to governance in the German dynastic states exemplified in the work of Heide Wunder, for example, or Ulrike Strasser's arguments in ***State of Virginity*** (2004) about the role of gender factors to the establishment and stabilization of the early modern Bavarian state. A developing literature--one thinks of the work of Rebekka Habermas--treats gender in the German bourgeoisie of the eighteenth century; and of course extensive focus has been devoted to the relationship of the developing urban bourgeoisie to German national politics after the Napoleonic Wars.

To outline briefly the comparative potential of another series of cases that reveals just how familiar Adams's argument will be to historical readers, we can also turn to the long historiography of gender studies that bear on dynastic and political relations in Venice (Stanley Chojnacki's work, which indeed distinguishes between the roles of women and men as political actors, is suggestive). Adams might also have drawn upon an older literature on the decline of Venice (most of it published before 1962) that reflected on aspects of the outlook of the Venetian patriciate (strongly closed, heavily patriarchal) as a factor in this development.[7] Her brief gesture toward Florence to argue that it is not a useful comparison will need to be read in dialogue with two recent articles that relate early modern Florentine networks and patrilineage to the development of credit practices.[8] Experts on Italy will also take with a grain of salt her claim that "the VOC was one of the first examples of a limited liability company" (p. 50).

Although it is potentially interesting to compare the Dutch Republic to England and France, particularly since the Netherlands hardly receive the attention they deserve in the secondary literature, very little of Adams's argumentation will strike readers of historical literature on Italy and the Reich as novel; her questions will be standard fare for scholars who have studied early modern civic elites and their trading, political, and economic practices. French historians will also be surprised by her claims of novelty with regard to the matter of family-sustaining behaviors. Strangely, however, Adams describes her explanation as an alternative to a "purely historical event-based style of narrative explanation" (p. 10). In our age of interdisciplinarity, it is time to stop using our interlocutors' disciplinary assumptions as straw men for arguments, especially in cases where they prevent us from making the argument in the first place. Just as historians know that sociologists understand that details, anomalous events, and contingent factors can be important factors in historical explanations, surely sociologists understand by now that historians do more than simply explain things by telling their readers what happened via a chronological narrative. The ample number of historical studies that have already plowed the terrain Adams traverses should be taken as proof of the ability of historians to assemble and assess structural factors as a role in their explanations. In the past, they were helped out and encouraged in this task by historical sociologists. It's hard to understand what Adams's brand of sociology has to add.

Notes

[1]. Traced most recently in Geoff Eley, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005).

[2]. Signaled by the book under review as well as by works such as Paula Miller, *Transformations of Patriarchy in the West, 1500-1900* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998); and Philip Gorski, *The Disciplinary Revolution: Calvinism and the Disciplinary Revolution in Early Modern Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

[3]. For aspects and variations on this argument, see, among a sea of literature (on families, venality, and support of the state): Barbara Diefendorf, *Paris City Councillors in the Sixteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983); (on venality and its consequences): Hilton Root, _The Political Foundation of Privilege in Early Modern England and France (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994). One thinks as well of the magisterial works of Robert Forster.

[4]. Summarized in one of the most important recent contributions to the discussion: Georg Schmidt, *Geschichte des alten Reiches: Staat und Nation in der frühen Neuzeit, 1495-1806* (Munich: Beck, 1999).

[5]. For a convincing discussion of the portions of Adams's argument that relate to the role of the VOC, see Leslie Price, "The Dutch Republic and the Familial State," *Comparative & Historical Sociology* 17, no. 2 (Spring 2006): 7-11. Adams' reply appears in the same issue, pp. 15-18.

[6]. A nice comparative summary of this matter written at a level accessible to students is found in Christopher R. Friedrichs, *The Early Modern City, 1450-1750* (London: Longman, 1995); in the same vein, see also his *Urban Politics in Early Modern Europe* (London: Routledge, 2000).

[7]. James C. Davis, *The Decline of the Venetian Nobility as a Ruling Class* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1962), which followed upon works by Massimo Petrocchi, Marino Berengo, Giovanni Tobacco, and Gaetano Cozzi.

[8]. John F. Padgett and Paul D. McLean, "Organizational Invention and Elite Transformation: The Birth of Partnership in Renaissance Florence," *American Journal of Sociology* 111 (2006): 1463-1568; John F. Padgett and Paul D. McLean, "Economic Credit and Elite Transformation in Re-

naissance Florence," *American Journal of Sociology* (forthcoming).

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