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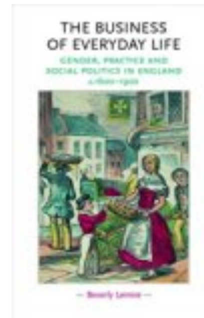
Beverly Lemire. *The Business of Everyday Life: Gender, Practice and Social Politics in England, c. 1600-1900.* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005. xii + 257 pp. $80.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7190-7222-2.



Reviewed by John Smail

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In a 1994 article in the *Journal of Economic History*, Jan de Vries argued that the debate between demand-side and supply-side explanations for the causes of the Industrial Revolution was unlikely to resolve itself unless historians acknowledged a parallel "industrious revolution" that was taking place within the household during the same period.[1] His point, obvious when one thinks about it, is that production and consumption are intimately connected inside the "black box" of the household in the decisions about how much its members would work and how much they would spend. In *The Business of Everyday Life*, Beverly Lemire occupies this same analytic terrain, looking in detail at English households in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. Lemire's book is more than just an application of Vries's insight to this particular time and place, for she significantly extends and enriches the paradigm in two ways. First, Lemire draws attention to the central role that women played in household members' everyday practices in the market. Second, she shifts focus from the production/consumption nexus *per se* to the credit relationships on which both depended and through which they were connected. The result is an interesting and important book that should shape the way in which historians consider this period.

The book's organization mirrors the complexity and richness of the interlocking topics Lemire studies. A narrative is embedded in this analysis, for it is clear that ordinary householders in the seventeenth century negotiated credit, earnings, and consumption quite differently than their descendants two centuries later. However, an analysis of the developmental arc that takes us from early modern to modern is secondary to the book's argument. Its chapters, instead, are structured by topic: the first three cover different aspects of credit, while the remaining three are discussions, respectively, of fashion, savings banks, and plebian numeracy and accounting. By framing her argument in this manner, Lemire focuses on three interrelated themes that shaped the context within which the processes of social and economic change of these centuries took place.

The first of these themes centers on an analysis of the importance of women as active agents in the world of plebian credit. In the early modern period, for example, women, as Lemire shows in her analysis of the surviving papers of several pawnbrokers, predominated as borrowers and also as key individuals in the networks of social capital in the community. As alternative means of saving emerged, particularly the savings bank from around 1800, women continued to play a crucial role, again making up a significant number of the depositors in such institutions and a significant share of the total amounts deposited. Crucially, Lemire shows that plebian women, as well as men, adopted the providential ethos and the numeracy and accounting skills that gave a savings account meaning. To be sure, the fact of women's active involvement in the economic sphere is not in itself surprising; however, Lemire's focus on credit shows that plebian women's role as economic agents within the household needs to be understood as a type of entrepreneurship with all the implications that it has for understanding the pace and nature of economic and social change during these centuries.

Second, Lemire shows that plebian households were very much invested--both tangibly and emotionally--in the developing world of consumption and fashion. They did so in a way that used household goods as, what was in effect, an alternative currency. In good times, families accumulated possessions, enjoying them for both their use and status value, but always with the knowledge that they could be converted into cash should the need arise. These patterns created a huge secondhand market for everything from clothes to furnishings. This aspect of Lemire's work makes two important contributions. It shows that fashion played a role in shaping consumption patterns across a broad social spectrum, extending down into plebian households rather than being confined, as has often been assumed, to the middling ranks and above. And, her analysis confirms the trend in recent work in the field arguing that fashion trends originated from different social loci rather than always being the result of social emulation.

Third, Lemire explores the developing class dynamics of this era, best understood as the tension between policies that middling reformers sought to impose and the practices of plebian households. Her fascinating account of one early effort, the short-lived Charitable Corporation of the early eighteenth century, describes the attempt to provide small-scale loans for the deserving poor that would avoid the perceived immorality, and usurious interest rates, of loans from pawnbrokers. The very concept of the corporation recognized that the poor had legitimate needs for small-scale credit, and its structure (a joint stock company like the Bank of England) signaled that the poor were part of the growing commercial economy. The corporation, however, fell victim to a South Sea-like fever of speculation and mismanagement, and its collapse had the effect of cementing the public perception that plebian borrowing was caused by improvidence.

If the Charitable Corporation represented a failed attempt to bring middling respectability to plebian credit practices, the emergence, almost one century later, of small-scale savings banks was more successful. Established in both urban and rural settings, these banks provided a safe place for the laboring poor to accumulate savings, ideally by means of regular deposits that would build over time. While the middle-class reformers who championed these institutions believed that they were bringing providential values to the poor, Lemire suggests that the clear success of these banks may have had more to do with underlying changes in the economy and society rather than reformers' efforts. In this instance, Lemire's analysis of social politics suggests that historians need to pay attention to the roles that credit and consumption played in the emerging political and social differences of this era.

As the book's title suggests, Lemire sets out to reexamine plebian households as if they were, in effect, businesses. Doing so allows her to include ordinary women and men as actors in the long process of social and economic change that created a "monetized, industrial, and numerate society," while at the same time forcing us to take a broader and more inclusive view of what those processes of change involved (p. 227). The result is a complex and satisfying argument that should be incorporated into the way that historians interested in the intersection of cultural and social history think about this period.

Note

[1]. Jan de Vries, "The Industrious Revolution and the Industrial Revolution," *Journal of Economic History* 54 (1994): 249-270.