

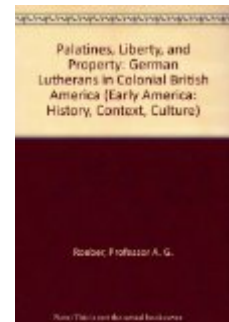
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



A. G. Roeber. *Palatines, Liberty and Property: German Lutherans in Colonial British America*. Baltimore, Md. and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993. xiii + 432 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-4459-1.

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Conventional wisdom has it that the earliest German Americans assimilated quickly the culture of their new country and easily embraced the political philosophy of their English neighbors. This is true, it is said, because these immigrants had no relevant models to apply in America. A. G. Roeber's work, *Palatines, Liberty and Property*, thoroughly refutes this theory. Professor Roeber ably demonstrates that rich and varied political cultures of the eighteenth century German Southwest crossed the Atlantic when its people came to settle in colonial America. Using the concepts of liberty and property, he shows how these cultures adapted to the American environment, until finally, in the mid-eighteenth century, a truly German American culture arose. This culture not only understood and embraced the revolutionary spirit, but contributed to the birth of a new form of government.

Yet this work is much more than a theoretical treatise on changing perceptions of key political vocabulary. It is a grand portrait of the lives, passions, and world view of Southwest Germany in the eighteenth century. Using an amazing range and number of wills, inventories, court records, correspondence, and other village records, Roeber details the way common villagers perceived and defended their *Freiheiten*. He shows that Palatines so valued this complex web of ancient rights and freedoms that concern over property and inheritance dominated village life. He traces the world view that saw property as not belonging so much to an individual as to families and clans, with property brought to a marriage treated separately from that acquired during a marriage. While individually held, property and liberty were defended by the community (4).

The author shows us how the Palatines, Wuerttembergers and others resisted the pressures of absolutism, population expansion, and the values of Lutheran Pietism to maintain an ever weakening grip on the property and freedom they needed to survive. They passionately held their privileges and grew ever more suspicious of rulers and others who abused their trust (Part I). Roeber then traces the transplantation of these concepts with the migrants to a new land. He chronicles the disputes south Germans had with their new English neighbors, showing us how the Germans misunderstood others and how they themselves were misunderstood. He describes how their Halle Pietist Pastors and leading tradesmen engaged in a debate over the meaning of liberty and property. The Pietists advocated a definition of liberty as the freedom to serve, while the tradesmen put forward the idea of liberty as the freedom to choose (Part II). *Palatines, Liberty and Property* concludes by chronicling the emergence of a German American definition of liberty and property. In the end, German American Lutherans came to understand liberty as the freedom to choose and viewed political freedom and private property as closely connected (Part III).

Roeber appends to the volume a series of very helpful currency exchange tables, eighty pages of detailed endnotes, a bibliography, and an index. Along the way, he also provides detailed surveys of the history of Lutheran Pietism and the early history of Lutheranism in America. Most studies of seventeenth and eighteenth century Lutheranism observe their subject from an ecclesiastical viewpoint. These sections provide a fresh perspective for the study of these disciplines, approaching them from a social perspective.

Roeber's book breaks new ground as the first major work to so detail the lives and history German immigrants to America before the revolution. It tells their story like no other study. Historians of Germany, colonial America, and American Lutheranism will indeed find that this monograph adds important insights to their own work. This book will also be fascinating to genealogists

and amateur historians, although it will be slow going for those without a background in history at the undergraduate level.

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