

H-Net Reviews

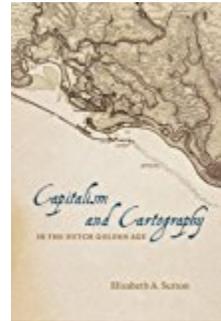
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Elizabeth Sutton. *Capitalism and Cartography in the Dutch Golden Age*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015. 208 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-25478-4.

Reviewed by Robert Tiegs (Louisiana State University)

Published on H-War (April, 2016)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey



The key terms for this work in the Library of Congress revolve around the history of cartography in the Dutch Republic and the development of capitalism. This identification is obviously accurate, but given the option this reviewer would add “innovative,” “interdisciplinary,” and “extraordinary” to the list. In the space of 134 pages of text Sutton takes the reader on an exciting voyage of cartographic exploration in Holland and the Dutch colonies in the Americas in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Through a series of four case studies she explores the production of maps and their role in supporting a capitalist episteme in the Dutch Republic by promoting a rhetoric of positivism, rationalism, and profit as a virtue. The scope and erudition of this work make it worthwhile to scholars across fields and disciplines. In short, this is an exceptional work of scholarship and well worth the read.

Sutton’s abilities as a scholar and writer are clear from the outset as she distills the theories of Karl Marx, Anthony Giddens, Michel Foucault, and Max Weber into a manageable and understandable framework for the reader. She convincingly demonstrates how capitalism necessitated a “rational” bureaucracy to function, which maps helped support. Furthermore, the portrayal of this organization as inherently natural and rational obscured the violence inherent in the system. Sutton states it best, noting “A wholly ‘rational’ bottom-line approach to social structures, economies, and urban development occludes the possibilities of a more organic, amorphous, dynamic, and multivocal presence of multiple realities” (p. 17). The maps which Sutton examines demonstrate how the bureaucratic rationale of capitalism, as developed in the Dutch Republic, promoted a monolithic understanding of social and economic relations that served to silence

dissent.

The majority of maps which Sutton studies were developed by Claes Jansz Visscher, who had important clients and connections with the wealthy elite of Amsterdam. The first case study (chapter 2) demonstrates how Visscher was essentially a part of the “mainstream media” of the period, as maps were a popular media for consumption. His maps were pictorial representations of the ideas of Simon Stevin, who promoted ideas of unity and the importance of an organized system for city planning. Essentially, Visscher promoted the ideals of the Amsterdam mercantile elite, and Amsterdam’s understanding of the state became the predominate. As Sutton demonstrates, even in the earliest capitalist states such as the Republic the connection between politics, money, and the media was striking.

The second case study (chapter 3) examines how Hugo Grotius’s radical redefinition of property from shared and public to private and exclusionary played out in the reclamation of the Beemster Lake. His understanding that private landowners who invested and cultivated their property helped contribute to society became ingrained in representations of the reclamation project. In other words, investing made a person “virtuous” while his capital (gained from his investments) made him “naturally” superior. Thus, by definition, only “virtuous” people invest and contribute to society. Sutton goes on to show how Visscher and others also tied the Beemster reclamation with the Dutch’s supposed Batavian ancestors, who turned a desolate territory into a civilized land through industriousness and ingenuity. The message was clear: the Dutch should invest just as they had done for centuries.

Case study numbers 3 and 4 (chapters 4 and 5 respectively) focus on how these ideas of landownership, profit, and proper rule functioned in colonial settings. The first looks at the short tenure of Dutch rule in Brazil under Count Johan Maurits van Nassau-Siegen. Sutton highlights the lengths to which Visscher and Johan Maurits went to demonstrate their “rationalizing” activities in the colonies. These initiatives helped to support their claims to rightful ownership over the Portuguese and indigenous peoples. For example, a map of Recife (1630) made sure to highlight the walls, churches, and homes while also calling attention to the warehouses which the Portuguese destroyed when they left. This depiction essentially declared the land *res nullius*, or unoccupied, before the Dutch began their colonization. Not surprisingly this view ignored the fact that many of the structures had actually been built by the Portuguese. Other maps depicted indigenous land in much the same way. They often highlighted the civilizing technology which the Dutch built, specifically in sugar production. This portrayal not only legitimated Dutch claims, but also allowed them to focus on the more technical aspects of sugar production, ignoring or minimizing the role of slavery.

Chapter 5, the fourth and final case study, examines colonization activities in New Amsterdam and New Netherland. Sutton does well demonstrating how the maps which depicted the colony again contrasted with the conditions on the ground. Visscher’s work of propaganda painted an image of New Amsterdam as orderly, profitable, and stable, with borders that stretched the ac-

tual bounds of the colony well into English and indigenous territories. As Sutton successfully demonstrates, this portrayal was a call for unity as much as anything as there were serious debates over the colonist’s rights and freedoms as the WIC tried to increase its control and profit.

The final chapter offers a short conclusion and provides commentary on how these historical events and trends are not only relevant, but crucial for understanding our own democratic and capitalist society. This insight and evaluation of present circumstances is the true achievement of the work. We as historians often shy away from commenting on current events (at least I do), and believe that laying bare the historical foundations of particular subject is enough. Sutton’s work serves as a clarion call that perhaps we need to be braver as a discipline. From the outset she is forthright about her biases (relatively young, female, white, bourgeois, and employed in the US academy) and direct with argument. The work is still rooted in historical analysis, but the repercussions on the present are evident and explicit. This understanding is clear in the closing lines of her work: “It is my hope that this study will have provided new insight into the long and problematic tradition of how money and power is allied in visual news propaganda, effectively obfuscating real violence and multiple narratives. Unity is a chimera; solidarity towards equality and multivocality may not be” (p. 134). As Sutton is so clear with her argument (to great effect), let me be equally forthright with mine: read this book!

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: Robert Tiegs. Review of Sutton, Elizabeth, *Capitalism and Cartography in the Dutch Golden Age*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. April, 2016.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=44564>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.