

# H-Net Reviews

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**Timothy L. Alborn.** *Conceiving Companies: Joint-Stock Politics in Victorian England.* London and New York: Routledge, 1998. ix + 297 pp. \$85 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-18079-5.

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Since the early twentieth century, the joint-stock company and the state have together exemplified modern bureaucratic institutions. For even longer, companies and states have wound their way through an inconclusive cycle of proposals to regulate, deregulate, or otherwise adjust their boundaries. *Conceiving Companies* suggests a new perspective on the rise of large-scale companies by locating their origins in political and social practice. In the process, it challenges the clear division between the state and the market that has shaped regulatory theory and policy. In the same way, Alborn questions the standard dichotomies of City versus Industry, and gentleman versus philistine, as arising too much from our seeing those times through spectacles manufactured in our own.

The book is divided into three sections, each on a different facet of “joint-stock politics.” The first section surveys the East India Company and the Bank of England, two expressly political institutions which needed to adjust to new tendencies in the nineteenth century to view companies as more properly part of the market. The second locates England’s early joint-stock banks in the voluntarist and regionalist political culture of the 1830s, then traces their departure from these origins through the end of the century. The final section argues that Victorian railways, in shielding themselves from state intervention, neglected their public relations with creditors, customers and workers, and suffered economically as a result.

Alborn’s main contribution is to focus on the “political” identity of early corporate enterprise, in contrast to earlier historians who have posited either a heroic story of corporate growth set against a backdrop of regulations

and other outside impediments to maximum economic efficiency, or a story about the birth of the regulatory state valiantly preserving democracy from the worst ravages of large corporations. These approaches lose sight of the fact that companies have never been merely profit-maximizing machines subject to recurrent breakdowns owing to the human error of inept state intervention, nor have they been merely selfish agglomerates of capital in need of supervision by accountable state authorities. Of course companies do have to make money and states are the ultimate non-profit organization, yet companies have always had important political accountability to shareholders, customers, workers and suppliers, as well as environmental and other interests. So Alborn offers a new definition of the modern company as an institution that proactively employs a dynamic balance of political and economic means to achieve economic ends.

Recovering the modern company’s political past suggests a need to re-examine what constitutes “success” for companies: was it realistic, let alone in their own and the public’s best interest to try and depart from their earlier conception as public institutions which both originated in and were responsive to political concerns? In turning their back on “politics,” companies were making a calculated political decision to oppose the emergence of a more centralized democratic state in Victorian times. The resulting state and the resulting relationships between the state and companies have had important economic and political consequences. To what extent, and by what measures, was and is this “successful”?

Alborn points out that, by virtue of participating in a culture of voluntarism and regional politics, promoters

of Victorian companies arrived at their task with a specific range of assumptions about how to raise revenue and delegate authority. These provided them with new insights into what economists today would recognize as more efficient methods of organizing capital.

In doing all this, Alborn synthesizes and extends existing scholarship but, like most other contemporary scholars of Victorian England, he systematically ignores what was the most important ingredient of the socio-political culture of the time - religion. The roots of religion were of course in the "private" sphere, but the "pub-

lic" sphere till at least the end of the First World War cannot be understood without reference to it. In that sense, Alborn is still too much a child of our times, though he attempts systematically in other ways to raise himself beyond it.

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