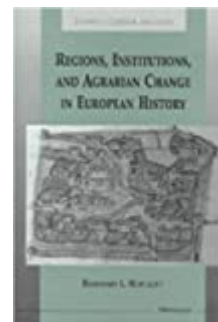


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Rosemary L. Hopcroft. *Regions, Institutions, and Agrarian Change in European History (Economics, Cognition, and Society).* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999. xiv + 272 pp. \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-472-11023-0.



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Explaining pre-industrial divergences in the agricultural performances of European nations has been a major preoccupation of agricultural and economic historians for decades, and constitutes, if not the holy grail of European economic history, at least one of its consecrated mugs. Professor Hopcroft's book belongs to this sprawling enterprise. Like Adam Smith, she thinks that the critical factor was the presence or absence of secure property rights in land and its produce. Good property rights encourage agricultural innovation and investment by narrowing the gap between private cost and private benefit and by reducing uncertainty. Ill-defined property rights do the opposite. It stands to reason, then, that regional agricultural divergence in the early modern era must have been, to some degree, due to ex ante differences in agrarian institutions affecting the exercise of private property rights in land. The institutions Professor Hopcroft thinks are most important are the ones associated with communal supervision of crop rotations, the timing of agricultural operations and guaranteed free access of people and their livestock to other people's land. In brief, the book addresses the age-old issue of whether "communal" agrarian customs constituted a significant impediment to agricultural improvement.

This is well-tilled ground, which historians have cropped so frequently that its soil is in danger of be-

ing exhausted. Professor Hopcroft claims to have invented a new fertilizer that combines the purported insights of the new institutional economics with the traditional techniques of comparative history. The institutional part shows why "communal" forms of agrarian organization should have been relevant to agricultural performance; the comparative part tries to show that they were. The demonstration compares agricultural institutions and early modern agricultural histories in England, France, the Low Countries and Sweden. As studies of this type are legion, she differentiates her product by making the comparisons not on nations but on but on eighteen regions that comprised them, distinguished chiefly, though not exclusively by the form of their agrarian regime. In principle the extra observations should increase the degrees of freedom enough to control for factors other than the agrarian regime. This assumes, however, that the variables subject to the analysis are well-defined and that they possess a common metric across the sample of regions. In addition, for the study to transcend conventional national comparisons, the regional units should be defined independently of the states in which they happen to be located. This book meets neither of these conditions. The "regions" are drawn from national historiographies, and thus do not cross national boundaries, while variables like "access to markets" the "strength" of communal regulations,

“feudalism” and “propensity to seek communal solutions to conflicts over access to resources” that enter the analysis are not defined nor probably are they definable. This looseness means that the comparisons can prove nothing about the impact of communal regulation of agriculture.

The extent and importance of communal regulation of agriculture in the open-field districts of Europe where they flourished is in any event greatly exaggerated. Professor Hopcroft competently surveys the standard literature on the topic, but misses the important fact that most of the scholarship on which it rests was conducted before the Second World War at a time when the study of agrarian institutions was badly infected by the view that the shape of the fields, vernacular architecture, peasant costume, dialects, tools and agrarian regulations expressed the lasting “genius” of the folk (a term Marc Bloch finessed by calling it “rural civilization”). After the War social anthropologists and historians placed functional constructions on some of the elements of the agrarian regime – most notably on the choice of techniques and communal regulations. However, they maintained the original typological framework of analysis, which minimized the variability of local agrarian regimes, and hid from view the need to explain that variability in terms other than a rigid historical path-dependence linking the observable institutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth century to a dim medieval and pre-medieval past. Professor Hopcroft accepts this historiography, which allows her to treat “communal” agriculture as a pre-determined variable rather than an endogenous one in her comparisons.

The book is organized as a general argument followed by a series of national case studies, somewhat belying the claim that the analysis is about regions. Chapter 1 surveys single-cause models of early modern agricultural development and finds them inferior to a comprehensive multivariate approach. Chapter 2 supplies a somewhat potted account of the types and origins of European field systems. Chapter 3 analyses the institutions from the standpoint of transactions cost, and sets out supposedly testable hypotheses such as “development will be most likely in countries and regions where state institutions (particularly legal institutions) and policies decrease transactions costs involved in production and exchange.” Chapters 4 through 8 carry out the tests of hypotheses on England, the Netherlands, France, Germany and Sweden. Chapter 9 concludes that “less-communal” institutions were critical in creating the agrarian conditions for agricultural innovation. Readers unfamiliar with the standard literature on European agrarian history

may benefit from the bibliography, but on the whole the material is rather dated and the conclusions drawn from it are unexceptional. This is not a book that will change anyone’s mind about the topic it treats.

It is also essentially a book in historical sociology rather than historical economics. As a doctoral dissertation in sociology, it no doubt meets the analytical standards of its discipline, but it is far from meeting those of professional historians and professional historical economists. Historians will be dismayed by the cavalier utilization of secondary sources taken at face value; economists will be appalled by its failure to meet elementary definitional requirements of logical analysis; scholars specializing in the history of agrarian institutions will wonder whether the book’s failure to discuss comparatively recent work arguing the contrary hypothesis that common field practices had little long-term effect on the history of agricultural improvement (Meuvret 1971 and 1987; Grantham 1980) is intentional or just grossly negligent. Fundamentally, however, this is a work that should not have been undertaken by a fledgling scholar, even one as obviously intelligent as Professor Hopcroft. The risks of reasoning from secondary works in history are so great there ought to be a standing order preventing anyone who has not won her spurs in hand-to-hand combat with original sources from undertaking it. This is not because primary sources speak with unforked tongues – quite the opposite. But they can be made to tell something like the truth by testing them against each other and against the whole body of scholarship that concerns them, and by reviewing that literature in their light. This multi-dimensional triangulation is what gives seasoned historians and seasoned historical economists a sense of what to trust and what to test. This is not a skill lightly acquired. How many times have economic historians witnessed an accomplished economist constructing hypotheses out of stylized facts that have long been proven to be false, in the gullible belief that if the work once passed a referee, its results must still be valid, something he would never do in his own field of expertise. Professor Hopcroft is not an accomplished economist, but she has fallen into the same trap. Deans being who they are, assistant professors have to publish books that should not be published. The best one can hope for is that these books stand untouched on university library bookshelves, where the only damage they do is to the library budget. It is painful to see an obviously talented and promising scholar waste her gifts on an enterprise that cannot but fail. The work shows a strong and vigorous mind working with tools that are inadequate to the

task. As failures go, this is a promising one.

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