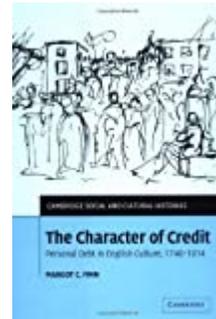


**Margot C. Finn.** *The Character of Credit: Personal Debt in English Culture, 1740-1914.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. xii + 362 pp. \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-82342-5.



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## Questioning Economic Modernity

It has become something of a commonplace in British history to note that capitalism is always emerging. But wherever we locate its point of genesis, most economic historians of Britain agree that the long eighteenth century marked a decisive turning point in the history of modern capitalism. Few would question that in the interval between the financial and industrial revolutions—or, put another way, between the writings of John Locke and Adam Smith—ideas, institutions, and behaviors developed which facilitated the remarkable growth of free trade and the movement of capital. What Margot Finn’s fascinating and convincing new book, *The Character of Credit: Personal Debt in English Culture, 1740-1914*, demonstrates, however, is that this process must itself be problematized. Finn argues, in a series of fascinating and complex (though very readable) analyses, that for all the energy directed in modern English society towards the establishment of “free” individuals liberated from the confines of the moral economy to operate in an unfettered market, opposition to such a conception ran wide and deep in the culture. Viewed through Finn’s analytic lens of personal debt and credit the triumph of modern capitalism appears neither complete nor assured.

Finn’s focus on personal debt and credit allows her to situate her work within two relatively recent and complementary historiographical trends, namely the linguistic turn and an interest in the social history of money. British historians have been moving towards a truly interdisciplinary interpretation of their subject for some time now, and Finn’s decision to study the literary history of personal credit together with its place in English law illustrates the wisdom of such an approach. Her ability to track credit through literature and the law illustrates important and substantive links between the two, ranging from the biographical (most of the authors she studies had too much contact with the courts) to the discursive, as legal discourse is essentially a narrative one. Such a holistic take suits her chosen subject well. Since all media of exchange are both concrete processes and abstract things, it behooves the historian of any kind of money to account for both its reality and representation. Her attention to the social, cultural, and legal history of credit situates *The Character of Credit* in methodological terrain similar to that inhabited by Craig Muldrew’s *The Economy of Obligation*, but while Finn and Muldrew share interests in the social life of money and have con-

tributed essential works to that burgeoning field, they arrive at different interpretations of the process of England's "modernization." [1] Where Muldrew found a society ready, even eager, to embrace the autonomy of the economic individual by the end of the early-modern period, Finn argues for a slower and much more uneven transition from the social to the autonomous individual in modern England.

It is this dichotomy between the two conceptions of the individual that animates *The Character of Credit*. Finn correctly identifies the notion of an individual whose economic activities privileged communal goals—however that community was defined—over personal fulfillment as one of the crucial components of a moral as opposed to a market economy. But even a moral economy has to distribute goods and services. One of the many strengths of Finn's book is her recognition and demonstration that while the use of cash carries with it the values of the market and free trade, the personal debt and credit that is her subject reflect and reinforce the values of common obligation that was thought to bind English society together. Cash payments imply a fundamental abstraction at the heart of the market economy: its ubiquity and universality allow buyers and sellers to conduct transactions without any knowledge of each other. In direct contrast, the retailers and artisans Finn studies would only extend retail credit to consumers whose character they were sure of, which necessitated that all involved in the transaction interacted as social individuals.

An early example of the brilliance of *The Character of Credit* is Finn's connection of such an economy powered by personal credit with the concept of the gift. Gifting practices create obligation and therefore foster deference and reciprocity, in much the same way that those who extended personal credit placed the onus for some kind of repayment on the recipient. Moreover, as Finn convincingly argues and demonstrates, tradesmen who extended retail credit could reinforce the existing social hierarchy at the individual level by offering amounts commensurate with their customers' social status. Finn's crucial insight is that the aims of economies predicated on gifts and personal credit are similar: to ensure the proper distribution of goods and services and maintain stasis in the social order. Because both visions of the economy embed the market within society, they elide the separation of public and private that had become integral to the ideology of domesticity and of free trade. In the place of an autonomous, individualistic man operating as an agent in the marketplace as espoused in liberal theory, Finn recovers a more complex picture of the family enmeshed

in personal credit. In such an economy, women functioned as crucial agents, and objects, of exchange, who often remained nonetheless exempt from the debts they contracted in their husbands' names. Neither wholly autonomous nor bereft of agency, they were instead part of a family unit comprised of social individuals.

To understand the life of the social individual in modern Britain, Finn analyzes the role of personal debt and credit in three key areas: imaginative and autobiographical literature, debtors' prisons, and court contests over debt and credit. In many ways her treatment of these three seemingly disparate topics should serve as a model for interdisciplinary studies of this sort. The links between the three sections are concrete and persuasive instead of artificial, in part because the novelists Finn studies "were obsessed with debt and credit" (p. 25), and this obsession led them to dwell on imprisonment for debt and debt law. Finn uses the narrative link between literature and the law to buttress her broader argument that use of personal credit and attendant notions of the moral economy and the social individual persisted in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain. In their works, novelists and autobiographers proved far more sympathetic to the ideas of reciprocity and the gift than they did to liberal conceptions of the autonomous individual. Similarly, overseers and prisoners alike in debtors' prisons debated whether debt was an affliction from without or a failing from within, and the courts concerned with debt witnessed contests not just between debtor and creditor but between customary conceptions of equity and the newer idea of the contract.

Finn's analysis of credit and debt in the imaginative and autobiographical literature of the period reveals conceptions of the individual, society, and the market that differ radically from, even oppose, those argued for in contemporaneous economic literature. Her incisive rereading of Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*, for example, unpacks a world ordered by gifting practices and the personal debt and obligation among families, friends, and the social strata those practices created. Finn aptly contrasts such a moralized personal economy, as imagined by novelists and reflected by autobiographers, with the autonomous cash nexus given pride of place in economic literature. But at the same time she recognizes that gifts and personal obligation could also be double-edged swords. The heroine of *Pamela*, for example, benefitted from generous giving but refused gifts when it became clear her virtue was expected as repayment. Moreover, the personal relationships of the artist Benjamin Haydon with his landlord and tailor may have allowed him to ex-

tend his credit further than an autonomous lender would have, but charitable giving to the poor could be “calculated to instill a sense of social debt” (p. 82). Such analysis and awareness of the multiple contradictions and tensions that characterized an economy powered by gifts, obligation, and personal debt illustrate Finn’s intellectual rigor and her command of the subject.

Her ability to marshal details without overwhelming her argument or the reader serves *The Character of Credit* in good stead when she shifts ground from the imaginative to the real in parts 2 and 3. Finn’s thorough investigation of the role of debt in English law and in England’s prisons provides material support for the literary study of part 1. Part 2 focuses on debtors’ prisons and their transition from (largely) genteel harbors from one’s creditors to punitive sites where creditors extracted payment from their plebeian debtors. Finn does an illuminating job of reconstructing the world of the debtors’ prison, and demonstrating how, at the early part of the period at least, the internal code of behavior and social structure of the debtors’ prisons echoed the moral vision of economy and society found in the literature. What is perhaps most interesting about parts 2 and 3, taken together, is that Finn found similar forces at work in the debtors’ prisons and in the courts that she studies in part 3. What makes part 3 so effective, moreover, is that it is in the courts that we see most clearly the dichotomy between a customary social individual and a newer, autonomous, economic agent articulated by contemporaries on opposing sides. As the courts struggled over the competing claims of equity (in the moral sense) and contract law, judges continued to mitigate the latter by appealing to the former throughout Victorian and Edwardian England. One of the greatest achievements of this book is the connection drawn between that tension in the courts and a similar dynamic at work in the debtors’ prisons, where some felt that debt was unfortunate but pardonable (a moral comprehension), and others, such as Samuel Smiles, took the liberal view, understanding it as outright theft. Moreover, she demonstrates a similar transition in the prisons and courts alike from toleration of genteel debt to a punitive understanding of plebeian debt, while bringing her analysis full circle by arguing that, at the same time that this institutional transition was at work, many of the authors of part 1 abandoned the debtors’ prisons and debt law as narrative sites. In this way Finn again illustrates her facility with the interdisciplinary method.

By now it should be clear that this reader believes *The Character of Credit* to be an important, accomplished, and highly informative work, and a valuable addition not only to the history of money in England but also to the work devoted to the social life of the economy. This is not to say, however, that questions did not remain by the end of the book—although they were rather more wishes that Finn would have continued with a suggestive line of argument than substantive disagreements. In her discussion of the reform of debtors’ prisons, for example, she attributes much of the impetus for reform to public hostility towards institutional debt that arose as a result of a series of fiscal crises. But arguments against imprisonment for debt had been advanced in the economic literature as early as the 1670s; surely at least some of the energy for reform could have developed as merchants and retailers became increasingly aware that imprisonment for debt impeded the correct functioning of credit rather than enabling it. Finn does illustrate the paradox of debt imprisonment at one point, but in so doing perhaps makes too strong a distinction between the petitioners for “useful credit” in the courts and the followers of Locke’s theories, whom she portrays as opposed to personal credit and the values it embodied. While the dichotomy is correct on most points, it remains nonetheless true that at least some of Locke’s followers and contemporaries in Restoration and Augustan England understood the need for credit instruments when specie was scarce. However, such questions should not obscure the many and varied strengths of Finn’s accomplished work, not the least of which is its questioning of just what it means to be “traditional” or “modern.” The evidence very much appears to be on Finn’s side that “modernity, in its Victorian and Edwardian inflections, was self-consciously assimilated with tradition” (p. 280). If that is so, and if economic practices we have long associated with “tradition” have now been demonstrated to persist well into the “modern” period, what then does it mean to be modern? It is to Finn’s immense credit that her book has provided numerous means to question the assumptions of economic modernity.

#### Note

[1]. Craig Muldrew, *The Economy of Obligation: The Culture of Credit and Social Relations in Early Modern England* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998).

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