

Book Reviews

A Culture of Growth: The Origins of the Modern Economy. By Joel Mokyr. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017. xiv + 403 pp. References, index. Cloth, \$35.00. ISBN: 978-0-691-16888-3.

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Reviewed by Simon Ville

Joel Mokyr's latest book continues his long line of publications seeking to explain the origins of the modern economy, the subtitle of this work. Here he moves backward from previous work on the technology of the Industrial Revolution and the Enlightenment to look at cultural shifts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that made possible sustained modern economic growth. Schumpeterian-style major innovations are the key to growth, and it is the exceptionalism of Europe, especially Britain, that is again Mokyr's focus. As ever, his work is elegantly written, full of thoughtful propositions, and supported with purposeful evidence.

There are various aspects to his "model" of cultural change. At its core are shifting attitudes toward the natural world that facilitate the accumulation and diffusion of "useful knowledge," a term previously employed by Mokyr to refer to information of economic value. Led by "cultural entrepreneurs," especially Bacon and Newton, an elite scientific community learned to challenge long-accepted ancient assumptions and develop scientific methods of measurement and experimentation to generate mostly superior modern knowledge. Ideas were shaped within this community and the best ones selected through a cooperative market among members of the Republic of Letters. These ideas were then communicated with artisan innovators through improved technologies of shipping, mail services, printing presses, and exposure to public education systems. Contemporaries were imbued with the sense that growth represented progress, that it was possible and desirable, and that one should be persuaded by the optimism of these notions. The state also mattered, or at least the fragmentation of government across Europe. In a variant of ideas also associated with North and Bin Wong, Mokyr argues that a politically fragmented Europe created competition among nations for the brightest and the best and thus fostered an attractive environment for heterodox views and novel perspectives. God (when placing man at the center of nature and supporting human capital) and institutions (when progressive and interactive with culture) were also

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contributors. While proposing a theory of cultural change, economic and business historians will take heart in the fact that entrepreneurship, competition, and markets are at the center of Mokyr's thinking.

The thesis is quite compelling at first blush but some deeper concerns emerge on closer inspection. Timing and the sequence of causality are two significant issues. Cultural change is a gradual and not necessarily linear process. The shifting attitudes that Mokyr associates with the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries can also be identified in both earlier and later periods. The expanding scientific and professional interest in the natural world is also commonly associated with the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The growth of scientific and research-oriented public museums in Europe gradually superseded the royal and aristocratic natural-history vanity collecting of the early modern period. Broader public interest, and therefore the artisanal link that Mokyr addresses, has also been seen as a later phenomenon.

Linked to this is the role of the so-called Republic of Letters, variously written about by other scholars. It is portrayed largely as a caring, sharing group of scholars who used the new methods and attitudes of its cultural entrepreneurs to agree on the best solution to many scientific problems. This sounds rather optimistic and Panglossian, especially when we learn that one of the main incentives for researchers was personal recognition and patronage. The support of a major patron would surely affect the success of competing ideas. The best ideas are often thwarted for long periods, and self-seeking individuals will do their best to fight off their rivals for recognition even if this involves not sharing knowledge. It was not all "open science." Mokyr mentions the important work of Margoscy but not that of Kinukawa, who cautions that there existed distrust in the early modern period between the code of reciprocity and the code of profit. Mokyr depicts the Republic in public-good terms, on the one hand, while also writing about the market for ideas. As we know, public goods are often under-supplied in the marketplace. The paradox of knowledge also reminds us of the particular difficulties of forming an effective market for information.

Mokyr seeks to provide a cultural explanation of subsequent growth-inducing technological change, and yet many of the drivers of his model are themselves communication technologies. Other writers have shown that organizational changes in shipping are particularly associated with the eighteenth century, while its main technological innovations and the coming of a broad international postal service came in the nineteenth century. Similarly, the railways made a big difference to travel and communication in nineteenth-century Europe. Comparable observations might be made about public education. This is not to say that the

early modern period was static on these fronts, but neither does it seem to stand out as exceptional enough to trigger a major shift in cultural attitudes.

Where does Mokyr stand on the Great Divergence debate? There are some interesting comparisons in later chapters between Britain and China, where the latter is said to have had the wrong form of enlightenment, education, and business community. Mokyr locates himself between the Californian School and the long-run Eurocentrics by emphasizing the medium-term changes in conditions between Europe and the rest. While not the big history of the likes of Morris, his approach seems more akin to a modified Eurocentric view than to the Californian School. His somewhat perfunctory dismissal of the latter is indicative of judgments made elsewhere in the book—opposing ideas are said to have been demolished, mistaken, or shortsighted and in various parts of the book he niggles at Stephen Epstein. It might have been preferable to make clear in one place the nature of their differences.

This book is, nonetheless, a stimulating and enjoyable read. Like the Republic of Letters movement, its appearance and constructive discussion will contribute to extending our understanding of the origins of economic growth.

Simon Ville is senior professor of economic and business history at the University of Wollongong. He is coeditor of The Cambridge Economic History of Australia (2015) and author of "Australia: From Family Networks to Boom and Bust Groups," in Business Groups in the West: Origins, Evolution and Resilience, edited by Asli Colpan and Takashi Hikino (forthcoming 2017).

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Capitalism: A Short History. *By Jürgen Kocka, trans. Jeremiah Riemer.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016. viii + 198 pp. Bibliography, notes. Cloth, \$26.95. ISBN: 978-0-691-16522-6.

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Reviewed by Scott A. Sandage

It isn't often that the towering figure in a field of study (or several) distills a half-century of learning, productivity, and insight into a pocket-sized synthesis of theory, history, and historiography for the benefit of students—a category that in this case includes not only undergraduate and graduate students but also less learned (read: all) colleagues worldwide. Such is the favor done by the author of *Capitalism: A Short History* for the benefit of the rest of us. Since earning his doctorate in 1968, in the first wave of new social historians, Jürgen Kocka has published seminal