

Macrosociologies -- The Fountain of Privilege: Political Foundations of  
Markets in Old Regime France and  
England by Hilton L. Root  
Contemporary Sociology; Washington; Mar 1996; Dobbin, Frank;

Volume: 25

Issue: 2

Start Page: 212

ISSN: 00943061

Subject Terms:

Social change  
Revolutions  
Political science  
Nonfiction  
Industrial development  
History  
Feudalism

Geographic Names:

France  
England

Abstract:

Review.

Full Text:

Copyright American Sociological Association Mar 1996

The Fountain of Privilege: Political Foundations of Markets in Old Regime  
France and England, by Hilton L. Root. Berkeley: University of  
California Press, 1994. 280 pp. \$45.00 cloth. ISBN: 0-520-08415-2.

FRANK DOBBIN Princeton University

The Fountain of Privilege tackles some of the big questions of comparative  
history: Why did France exit feudalism through revolution, while  
nearby England did so through gradualism? What are the political requisites  
of economic modernization? Hilton Root answers these questions in  
explicitly theoretical terms, promising to bring together the method of social  
history with the theory of rational choice. He also promises a

deductive approach that will transcend the historical particulars of the cases at hand.

The book is engaging, compelling, at times brilliant. But it is neither especially rational choice nor especially deductive. Despite his proclaimed affinities, in practice Root shows us that rational choice institutionalism (a.k.a. positive theory of institutions PTI) and historical institutionalism (a.k.a. state-centered theory) have matured along parallel lines. Root's main argument would surely be music to the ears of both armies.

This book is very much in the traditions of Alexis de Tocqueville and Theda Skocpol. Like Tocqueville, Root explores the relative fragmentation of France's prerevolutionary elite by looking to the administrative and political structures that emerged under absolutism. Like Skocpol, in explaining revolution Root is more concerned with the conditions that undermine elite unity and state integrity than with the conditions that lead to popular revolt. Revolts are common enough, but where elites stick together revolts do not turn into revolutions.

Root's thesis has to do with the structure of the eighteenth-century English and French states. England and France organized distributional conflicts in the political sphere very differently. England's parliamentary system created a process of negotiation among elite factions--a process that incorporated diverse groups into politics and gave them a common interest in the continuity of the state. The parliamentary system permitted deals to be struck among factions competing for the nation's resources, deals that served many interests at once. By contrast, French absolutism created a series of vertical contracts between the crown and various elite factions that produced little sense of common interest and gave each faction an interest in regime turnover, for each (if not every) faction might strike a better deal with a new ruler. French absolutism depended on vertical cronyism rather than on horizontal deal-making. It did not produce elite unity sufficient to guard the state against revolt. The catalyst in Root's formula is economic expansion and the growth of markets. Expansion creates new distributive demands among groups with growing resources. England's parliamentary system proved more flexible for incorporating new groups with new claims, and more efficient for redistributing income and forming stabilizing political deals.

Root is not simply repeating the hackneyed refrain that capitalism depends on democratic political institutions. English parliamentary rule was, in important ways, both less democratic and less fair in its redistributive consequences than was French autocracy.

Yet he does contend that modernization depends on the institutionalization of trust, credibility, and monitoring, and that the Old Regime fell because it could not provide these; Georgian England enjoyed political stability and unbroken modernization because it could.

The Fountain of Privilege shows that historical institutionalism, with roots in political science, and rational choice institutionalism, with roots in economics, have grown closer, rather than farther apart. Excise a few paragraphs about motivating questions and a few about metatheory, and this book could come from either camp. Both camps presume that actors are self-interested. Both presume that political institutions shape the way actors will construe their interests. Both presume that institutions shape the strategies actors will use to pursue those interests.

At the same time, in the questions it leaves unanswered, Hilton Root's new book highlights what sociologists have to bring to the institutional table. State institutions created different political games for elites in England and France, thereby shaping social behavior in consequential ways. But state institutions are patterns of social behavior themselves. The question remains, how did those institutions become cognitively and intersubjectively lawful, such that French and English elites did not begin playing different games when their interests warranted?