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Review: Liah Greenfeld, *The Spirit of Capitalism: Nationalism and Economic Growth* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001)

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ued to use magic in a wide range of practical contexts in the early modern period, despite the claims of some educated men that all such activities were inherently demonic. Similarly, the teachings of Protestantism and reformed Catholicism were largely absorbed into the conceptual framework of the magical world. This view chimes in with the work of Reformation historians such as Gerald Strauss and Geoffrey Parker, who have argued that the reformers largely failed in their efforts to “Christianize” the European population in the sixteenth century.¹ It also echoes the research of Robert Scribner, who found that German peasants were treating images of Luther as magical objects in the late 1600s.²

For Wilson, the magic of the premodern age was largely defensive in nature: it offered a limited protection against the dangers of an unpredictable and often threatening environment. Church bells were rung to stave off thunderstorms, the leaves of certain plants were worn to protect their owners from illness, and the bodies of the dead were treated with ritualized care to ensure the safe transition of the soul into the afterlife. Historians of witchcraft have also noted the basically defensive nature of popular attitudes toward magic. Wolfgang Behringer, for instance, has suggested that the large-scale witch persecutions in early modern Germany were based on popular fears of weather magic during a period of exceptionally poor harvests.³ *The Magical Universe* sets out the wider context in which such fears were expressed and thereby contributes to our understanding of these terrible events.

It is, above all, the wealth of documentary evidence in Wilson’s book that makes it such an engaging read. His pages teem with memorable inhabitants of the magical world, from the weather witches of fifteenth-century Germany to the nocturnal “ghost pigs” of early modern Scandinavia. He also draws on a mixture of learned and popular texts, as well as literary sources, which demonstrate that magical attitudes permeated all levels of society. This material is presented in a framework of thematic chapters, relating magic to the agricultural calendar, the human life cycle, and the treatment of disease. The book is lucid and accessible and should appeal to both students and academics. It provides an excellent introduction to a central aspect of the mental world of preindustrial Europeans and connects with many more specific themes in social and religious history.

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The Spirit of Capitalism: Nationalism and Economic Growth. By *Liah Greenfeld*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001. Pp. xi + 541. \$45.00.

Liah Greenfeld’s main thesis is straightforward: nationalism causes economic growth. Building on the claims of her previous book, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992), Greenfeld takes it as an established fact that “nationalism

¹ Gerald Strauss, “Success and Failure in the German Reformation,” *Past and Present*, no. 67 (1975): 30–63, and “The Reformation and Its Public in an Age of Orthodoxy,” in *The German People and the Reformation*, ed. R. P. Hsia (Ithaca, N.Y., 1988), pp. 194–214; Geoffrey Parker, “Success and Failure during the First Century of the Reformation,” *Past and Present*, no. 136 (1992): 43–82.

² R. W. Scribner, *Popular Culture and Popular Movements in Reformation Germany* (London, 1987), pp. 323–53.

³ Wolfgang Behringer, “Weather, Hunger, and Fear: Origins of the European Witch Hunts in Climate, Society, and Mentality,” *German History* 13 (1995): 1–27.

is the constitutive element, or the organizing principle, of modernity" (p. 4). The logic of Greenfeld's most recent book, *The Spirit of Capitalism*, follows, like a syllogism, from the earlier one: if nationalism causes modernity, and if modernity presupposes economic growth, then nationalism must cause economic growth. The two books also share many shortcomings: a lack of respect for historiography, a penchant for building broad generalizations out of meager anecdotal evidence, and a tendency to lodge historical "examples" in a prefabricated schematic model.

Greenfeld is unabashedly presentist. She wants to know why "modern economy" emerged in the first place. Her answer? Nationalism appeared in England during the sixteenth century, thereby "transforming social consciousness by 1600." This developing sense of national identity, in turn, imbued the nation with a "new spirit" or "motive force," thus giving England, despite its paltry resources, a competitive edge over other societies (p. 23). This is Max Weber with a twist. Nationalism, as defined by Greenfeld, replaces Weber's "Protestant ethic" as the real spirit of capitalism and provides all the things that Weber's Protestantism could not: egalitarian attitudes, social mobility, free labor markets, personal dignity, international competition, and a commitment to constant growth.

From there, the book pretty much writes itself. Nationalism, having first taken hold in England, spreads like a contagion to other nations, creating economic development wherever it goes. Greenfeld's chronology will seem familiar to anyone who knows the standard literature on industrialization and modernization. France ("The First Convert") contracts England's bug in the eighteenth century, with the spirit of capitalism following "on the heels of a nascent national consciousness" (p. 132). Backward Germany gets the spirit around 1850, but not before the Romantics whip up a little nationalist fervor in the early part of the century. Farther east ("The Way of Japan"), we learn that the Japanese became rabid nationalists at the end of the nineteenth century and that, some four decades later, their economy began booming. Finally, in the United States, the War of 1812 fanned nationalist sentiment. This, we are told, allowed self-interest to be "redirected into new channels" like the manufacturing industry. By 1850, infused with the nationalist spirit of capitalism, the American economy had its turn to shine.

If you think this all sounds a bit contrived, you're not alone. Can one possibly believe, for example, that a few eccentrics hanging around Jena and writing about blue flowers and the mystery of the self-positing "I" were responsible for German industrialization? Is it really credible that the Physiocrats, who were briefly in vogue before being thoroughly humiliated by a little ambassador from Naples, could have retarded the economic growth of the entire French nation? Anything is possible, I guess, but some evidence would be nice. The important point here is that Greenfeld's inflexible theoretical framework forces her into a kind of intellectual contortionism, as she stretches the bounds of common sense to support her main thesis. Moreover, she routinely overturns or ignores whole schools of historiography without ever really seeming to notice. The first chapter, entitled "The Capitalist Spirit and the British Economic Miracle," runs only twenty-nine pages; of these, five pages are devoted to Adam Smith, ten more to the seventeenth-century mercantilists John Wheeler and Samuel Fortrey, another eight to Daniel Defoe, and most of the rest to the Hanseatic League and the Company of Merchant Adventurers. For guidance, Greenfeld relies on a few scholarly introductions from the 1930s. I find it difficult to comprehend how this crucial chapter, which must bear the weight of Greenfeld's entire argument, could be so thin. Can she really suppose that *any* analysis of a few prominent economic writers, no matter how trenchant, could substantially change the debate about "how it all began"? The truth is that Greenfeld has an odd penchant for confusing economics with the economy, as if the two were interchangeable.

The strangest thing of all about *The Spirit of Capitalism*, though, may be its tendency to blend novel and even iconoclastic ideas with isolated strands of older historiography. Greenfeld never seems to have considered that history is unstable, that it responds to the interests and needs of each passing generation, that its larger conclusions are under constant negotiation and revision, and that historians themselves might be more than mere fact gatherers. As a result, the book is full of sentences like this: "Historians agree that, by any standard, 'the economic and social forces that determined the forward course of English and French history in the first half of the nineteenth century had no counterparts in Germany'" (p. 214). I could not determine the source of this particular quotation (the book amalgamates its notes in a confusing way), but in my experience "historians"—the implication here is *all* historians—agree about very little, and certainly not about something so vague and fungible as "economic and social forces." Still, Greenfeld's desire to find the elusive historical common ground is understandable, because her entire argument depends on it. That is, if economic development did not happen in just the way she claims, then she is adducing causes for a phantasm. Thus, although Greenfeld is careful to distinguish herself from the great herd of economic historians, she nevertheless relies on the validity of their "conclusions." Whereas they concentrate on the "how" of development, Greenfeld explains, she wants to focus on the "why." "I deal only with desire and leave the question of capability to economists and economic historians" (p. 21). In fact, this approach leads Greenfeld to see unanimity where none exists. She takes David Landes's work as gospel, parroting his well-known thesis that Britain led the way in all aspects of economic and technological development, while the rest followed. This is certainly neither the time nor the place to discuss the merits of Landes's model. My point is that Greenfeld has somehow mistaken a raucous, ongoing debate among economic historians—really an argument over first principles—for consensus. What she takes as the rock-solid foundation of her argument, then, is even now shifting like sand under her feet. "Historians," that is, do not agree at all about the genesis of "modern economy." It is the book's fatal flaw.

It could be that I'm just another cranky, narrow-minded historian who dislikes Greenfeld's habit of ignoring "disciplinary fences." In fact, though, I am quite sympathetic to the tradition of historical sociology she represents. And yet, despite self-conscious ties to Max Weber, Greenfeld seems uncomfortable in her own disciplinary skin. "An anonymous reviewer," she writes, "wondered about the disciplinary affiliation of the author. . . . I regard this as one of the most flattering compliments ever paid to my work (thus deserving the place at the head of this list of acknowledgements), all the more so since my "true" disciplinary identity—I was trained as a sociologist/social anthropologist—apparently remained hidden; I have mixed my accents well" (p. ix). This "anonymous reviewer" was certainly no historian of the social sciences. *The Spirit of Capitalism*, with its frequent appeals to "social reality," its recurring biological metaphors, and its calls for a "unified approach" to the study of social processes, reads like the second coming of Albion Small, that remarkable grandfather of American sociology. Small, however, was somewhat more candid about his own plans and ambitions. He envisioned sociology as the queen of the social sciences, as the great synthesizing force that would put social science on the road to truth and objectivity. It was a grand vision once, in those optimistic years before the First World War, but we "social scientists" have meanwhile lost the faith. It will take something considerably more profound than *The Spirit of Capitalism* to change that.

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