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Levine, David. *At the Dawn of Modernity: Biology, Culture, and Material Life in Europe after the Year 1000.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001. Pp. vii + 431. CDN$75.00 (cloth).

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Can micro-historical convictions underpin macro-historical interpretations? David Levine has (once again) answered this question resoundingly in the affirmative with his award-winning *At the Dawn of Modernity: Biology, Culture, and Material Life in Europe after the Year 1000*. This book is at once a substantive contribution to scholarly debate about the makings of the modern world and an epistemological statement about how scholars should try to understand large-scale social, economic, cultural, and political transformations. Moreover, it offers an insightful way for us to think about the transformations characteristic of our times.

Levine's previous work well-situated him to pursue the objective of contextually-grounded general understandings of the origins of modernity. As author or co-author of three compelling micro-historical examinations of the changing everyday lives, households, institutions, and economies of English villages during the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, Levine has demonstrated the need to understand large-scale change at the level of individuals and families. In *Family Formation in an Age of Nascent Capitalism,*1 Levine revealed the complex connections between demographic and economic change by reconstituting the families of two quite different villages. Along with Keith Wrightson, Levine then expanded scholarly awareness of such connections to include those of politics and culture in *Poverty and Piety in an English Village,* and in *The Making of an Industrial Society*.2 Unlike many micro-historians, however, Levine has also shown the value of synthetic interpretations that seek to make sense of community-based research results. In *Reproducing Families,3* Levine offered an analytic frame within which the diversity and complexity of rural, village, and urban experiences could be understood as historically coherent. Taken together, these works provided a solid foundation upon which Levine has now moved back in time and expanded his focus to Europe. Moreover, he is ready to make explicit claims about the character of historical change and about the metaphors that historians should use to capture this change.

The focus of *At the Dawn of Modernity* is the period from 1000 to the Black Death in 1348. Levine locates the first phase of early modernization in these centuries involving "the protracted transition away from antiquity and toward the creation of a novel social formation" (2). This transition touched every aspect of European society ranging from family relationships to community attachments to legal structures. The form of the book treats chronology within themes that explore both "top-down" and "bottom-up" forces including feudalism and early modern Christianity, state formation, technological innovation, the social relations of production, and, of course, demographic change. The book concludes with a re-examination of the Black Death and two shorter chapters that summarize the argument and then situate it within current historical debate about the discipline. Levine makes clear that the book is based on secondary sources

(predominantly written in English). His right-brained objective is to re-conceptualize our understanding of the origins of modernity rather than to introduce new evidence to scholarly debate. In so doing, Levine has a great deal to say about the ways in which scholars think about historical change and it is this preoccupation that will attract interest from scholars of diverse times and places.

In order to convey his sense of the character of the "protracted transition," Levine employs multiple metaphors often comparing historical change to Nature's transformations. At the outset of the book, Levine argues that a "new kind of society" took "root" during these centuries, and eventually "grew" into modernity (1). The somewhat placid image of foliage (as well as the rising sun of the book's title) is quickly replaced, however, by the turbulence of water that Levine uses to describe both the interrelationships among historical forces and the distinction between the appearance and substance of historical change. Levine invites readers to picture themselves standing on a beach (representing the "dry land of modern history") in order to peer out at the historical ocean of centuries past. The point of this invitation is to warn readers not to be deceived either by the short-term splash of the specific waves or by the apparent calm of the sea beyond. Rather, Levine emphasizes the "deeper historical currents" of demographic, economic, political, and cultural change that were coursing through the "ocean depths" of the post-1000 centuries (4). By stressing the determining force of these currents, Levine suggests that scholars have not done justice to the ways in which the appearance of modernity was actually the result of previous, long-term, hidden histories of transformation.

Although the book begins with images of land and sea, Levine is particularly drawn to metaphors from the natural sciences, especially those that have been used to describe chemical and biological interactions. In using such metaphors to help explain historical changes, Levine is assuming that his readers will gain insight from comparisons that have emerged from academic disciplines rarely studied in combination with the social sciences and humanities. In the two cultural solitudes characteristic of most campuses, those interested in the making of modernity could not be expected to have graduated with the background necessary to gain insight from references to feed-back mechanisms or recombinant mutations. The key point, however, is that Levine's assumption can be justified by the extraordinary popular interest in the natural sciences that has recently produced frequent best-sellers as well as intense media coverage on mainstream and specialized television channels, newspapers, and Internet sites. Though not learned at school, readers will probably have some sense of Levine's images thanks to those such as Stephen Hawking, Bart Kosko, and James Gleick who have written for non-specialists on the reconceptualizations now becoming familiar in physics, biology, chemistry, and other natural sciences. Not surprisingly, scholars in these disciplines often feel that popularization distorts and inappropriately simplifies their actual perspectives, but the extent of widespread interest in their work (and the common use of their new vocabulary) suggests that conceptual changes are underway that go beyond the details of specific research results. (A few times, it must be admitted, Levine gets carried away by his affection for metaphors and even sympathetic readers may recoil at their multiplication or may find themselves marvelling at the extent to which an image is pursued to convey one thought. In explaining his own effort to use community-based research to construct higher-level interpretations, Levine notes that "As the historians' products have piled up in the barnyard of history, they seem to create a veritable biomass of local studies. The mass ferments, but it is rarely the professional historian who seeks to recycle this composted material and to draw upon the stored energy of these products to increase oxidization and thereby enhance the fertility of our historical understanding" [412]. Happily, though, such instances are rare and, in fact, more discussion of the metaphors would have enhanced their value.)

In choosing his metaphors, Levine is seeking to describe key features of historical change that have become increasingly emphasized in recent decades as scholars have moved beyond debates about narrative and structure to engage the question of complexity (as is increasingly common on the other side of campus).

In re-interpreting the origins of modernity, Levine is rejecting the metaphysical constructs characteristic of modern thinking, including those familiar in everything from Marxism to modernization theories. His

reading of the evidence suggests that analysing modernity from the perspective of modernity is not appropriate. Among the many problems of this perspective is its belief that wholes can be understood in terms of their parts; that appearances represent underlying characteristics; that context is a stage rather than an active force; and that phenomena are not contingent in the real world. In contrast, Levine sees historical change (with specific reference to the origins of modernity in Europe) as a multifaceted, interrelated, indeterminate, ambiguous, contradictory, and context-specific phenomenon that can best be understood by reference to the images that have become familiar in analyses of the non-human environment. In this view, biological evolution is a metaphor for social change. For example, Levine argues that the Black Death (acting in terms of "negative feedbacks") was "akin to a 'biological die-off' in which ecological space was cleared, enabling [social, economic, political, demographic] mutations to develop in relative freedom" (407). The resulting "recombinant mutations" ushered in the second phase of early modernization that perhaps Levine will explore in his next book.

Metaphors have a life of their own, of course, and they too can limit and mislead as well as elucidate. Levine does mean to imply that the "protracted transition" (an expression that appears throughout the book) was, at once, like a tree, an ocean, a mutating organism, or any of the other non-human phenomena that are compared to multiple aspects of the post-1000 Europe. Rather, his argument is that certain key characteristics of these phenomena (subsequent change emerging out of initial features or non-linear and contradictory trajectories producing apparent stability) can all be seen in different ways in historical change. Similarly, Levine certainly does not mean to imply that humans can be understood in non-human ways since he is at such pains to emphasize how individuals and collectivities made history to the extent possible given their historical conditions. In this sense, historical change is implied to be even more complex than any of the non-human metaphors suggest. The question is begged, however, rather than engaged. Levine would reject any suggestion that emotion, whimsy, or psychocultural beliefs are statistical noise, but the extent to which biological evolutionary thinking, for example, fails to capture the even more complex human historical change is left to the reader's own imagination.

The closest that Levine comes to addressing such issues is in the final chapter entitled "After-words." Here, Levine makes clear his sensitivity to the historical-consciousness debate and the distinction between "History" and the "Past" (411-412). He also explains his research strategy by likening it to the Woodward-Bernstein investigative journalism in which significant writings cited by at least two other sources were considered important in the same way as information provided by two unrelated sources was considered reliable. Levine does not mean to imply that this approach was "scientific" in the modern sense but rather that it was simply a way to combine scholarly experience, persistence, and intuition with the fruits of serendipity. But the key words that Levine wants readers to retain after reading his analysis concern the ways in which historical change should be conceptualized. And it is these words that are now increasingly characterizing scholarly work across the disciplines and beyond the social sciences and humanities: words like "complex," "contingent," "reciprocal," "multiple," "indeterminate," "and," "evolutionary," "hybrid," and so on and on. Readers will recognize, of course, that none of these words are the words of modernity but rather of another "new kind of society" (1). Like all historians (perhaps all scholars), Levine thus emphasizes in the end that his real interest is in the future, in helping us gain perspective on the new dawn that is now breaking as modernity is left in the darkness. His closing words refer specifically to the so-called "crisis" of the modern family, but his point is more general since: "Understanding the biological, cultural, and material economies which took place at the dawn of modernity enables us to locate the world we are now making in the disintegration of the earlier worlds we have lost" (423).

David Levine deserves a large and diverse audience, then, well beyond those focused on the making of modernity; this audience should include those interested in the post-1000 centuries (however labelled), those interested in the character of historical change, and those seeking to make sense of the world we now

inhabit. Moreover, Levine's book is a fine example of how micro-historical convictions can, indeed, underpin macro-historical explanations. In fact, his work adds to the increasingly-voiced argument that there is no other way of constructing general understandings of the complex human and non-human world.

Endnotes

1 David Levine, *Family Formation in an Age of Nascent Capitalism* (New York: Academic Press), 1977.

2 Keith Wrightson and David Levine, *Poverty and Piety in an English Village: Terling, 1525-1700* (New York: Academic Press, 1979); David Levine and Keith Wrightson, *The Making of An Industrial Society: Whickham, 1560-1765* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

3 David Levine, *Reproducing Families: The Political Economy of English Population History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).