



## Capital enthusiasm

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## Capital Enthusiasm

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Jordana Rosenberg. *Critical Enthusiasm: Capital Accumulation and the Transformation of Religious Passion* (New York: Oxford Univ., 2011). Pp. xi + 216. \$65

*Critical Enthusiasm* brings together an important set of issues in the eighteenth century in a densely argued book drawing on a range of disciplines. The foundation lies in literary studies (with extended treatments of Shaftesbury and Swift), but the ambition extends to intellectual, economic, and colonial history, informed by an array of theoretical sources, including Marx, David Harvey, Henri Lefebvre, Raymond Williams, and Fredric Jameson. The complexity of themes does not lend itself to easy summary, but there are a number of major premises: enthusiasm is neither a “remnant of a religious past” in the eighteenth century nor is it a “hallmark of secularization” (3) in its sociable or aesthetic incarnation. Rather, it “encodes” a defining contradiction in the period inherent in the “spatio-temporal manifestation of the logic of capital accumulation” (4). Perhaps the simplest way to characterize this inquiry would be as an extended meditation on the theses concerning religion and capitalism provided by Weber and Marx. The motivation is to “historicize” these issues and to question a narrative of modernity that depends on an account of religious enthusiasm as superseded by the secular.

The first chapter considers a range of figures who discussed enthusiasm, from Locke, to Shaftesbury and Hume. Rosenberg explores how eighteenth-century historicist thought relied analyzing enthusiasm as well as how religious historicism was itself bound up with histories of capital accumulation. The second chapter investigates the Camisard controversy, in which French enthusiastic “prophets” arrived in London in the early eighteenth century and were met by stiff opposition, despite their status as refugees from Catholic absolutism. This chapter also discusses common law vs. statute law and the new provisions for capital punishment, which in turn defended the interests of capital accumulation. The third chapter introduces a spatial dimension to the argument, looking at moral philosophy in a colonial context. Reading the Carolina constitution, which Locke participated in drafting, alongside the third Earl of Shaftesbury’s letters on his Carolina holdings, leads to the conclusion that “racialized blackness functions in the period to secure an ideology of market self-regulation” (100). The fourth chapter returns to the Camisard episode and some of the literature produced by Camisard exponents. These works offer a nonsecular understanding of space that enables us to identify the unevenness of capitalist development. The closing chapter focuses particularly on Swift’s poem “A Description of a City Shower,” which produces “an enthusiastic spatialization: a composition of the spatial complexities of capital accumulation into poetic arrangements” (152).

The scope of the study and its large claims mean that *Capital Accumulation* deserves to be taken seriously, but the result is not without difficulties. Although there are brief references to events in the English Civil War, the prime instance of enthusiasm remains the Camisards. This historical moment is indeed fascinating and reveals a host of tensions and contradictions that are well described here, but it means that the evidence of “enthusiasm” brought into consideration is surprisingly narrow.

51 The lack of reference to accusations of enthusiasm against Quakers, or for that matter  
 52 Methodists, is puzzling, especially in a book with a transatlantic orientation. Quaker  
 53 commerce and antislavery agitation might have proved an interesting complement, for  
 54 example, to the book's concerns. Shaftesbury features centrally, yet his essay "The  
 55 Adept Ladys or The Angelick Sect" (1702), a satirical account of various enthusiasts,  
 56 including a severe Quaker woman, goes unmentioned. This is significant, since  
 57 Shaftesbury's essay, while engaging in his familiar raillery, does not appropriate  
 58 enthusiasm as a positive term. The brief engagement by Rosenberg with Hume's  
 59 *History of England* is certainly merited and could have been expanded; however,  
 60 there is no attention to his important essay "Of Superstition and Enthusiasm" or to the  
 61 *Natural History of Religion*, other than a single reference in which it is mistitled (34)  
 62 as the *History of Natural Religion* (nor for that matter did Gibbon write the *Rise and*  
 63 *Fall of the Roman Empire* mentioned on the same page).

64 The attempt to integrate enthusiasm with capital accumulation remains  
 65 problematic. Quite apart from the considerable conceptual challenges of pursuing  
 66 such an argument, one has to acknowledge significant missed opportunities for  
 67 discussing relevant textual evidence in the period. Hume's crucial essays on the  
 68 balance and "jealousy" of trade, on commerce, money, taxes, interest, and public  
 69 credit might have been explored. It is unfortunate that no treatment is given to Adam  
 70 Smith's analysis of enthusiasm in *The Wealth of Nations*, particularly his claim,  
 71 contra Hume, that, instead of fostering enthusiasm, competition among religious sects  
 72 in the market for followers has a moderating effect, provided enough sects are in the  
 73 mix. While Locke's critique of enthusiasm in the *Essay concerning Human*  
 74 *Understanding* (in a chapter added to the fourth edition, 1700) is discussed, the  
 75 potential for making some connection with Locke's elaboration of his economic  
 76 position during the crisis over English coinage in the mid 1690s is not pursued. The  
 77 relationship between enthusiasm and religious toleration is not developed, nor is the  
 78 issue of miracles, treated both by Locke and Hume, in which the issue of testimony  
 79 figured crucially.

80 The author is much more intent on developing Marx's analysis of primitive  
 81 accumulation that served as capitalism's genesis myth. Yet the attempt to link this  
 82 satisfactorily to Shaftesbury runs into problems not merely because, as Rosenberg  
 83 states, "Shaftesbury does not explicitly refine any economic principles" (59), but  
 84 more significantly because the argument turns on an analogy between what  
 85 Shaftesbury says about religious history and what Marx says about primitive  
 86 accumulation. In his critique of priestcraft, Shaftesbury had complained about the  
 87 "accumulative Donation" authorized by magistrates who allowed in "new modes of  
 88 worship, new miracles," and saints supplied by different religious orders. But can we  
 89 conclude on this basis that the "mythic history of accumulation" is "an allegory for  
 90 the conditions of incipient imperial capitalism" (59)?

91 This is one of many examples in the book of using debatable readings to  
 92 sustain large historical claims. In chapter 3, for example, Shaftesbury is quoted from  
 93 his essay "Sensus Communis," where he remarks that "as for policy, what sense, or  
 94 whose, could be called 'common' was equally a question. If plain British or Dutch  
 95 sense was right, Turkish and French sense must certainly be very wrong" (quoted on  
 96 111). Rosenberg regards this as a reference to "mercantilist policy" without  
 97 explaining why. On this basis, she concludes that "in saying that British and Dutch  
 98 senses are similar, Shaftesbury condenses the historical alliance of Dutch banking  
 99 with British industry into a relation of likeness" (111). This leap does not seem  
 100 warranted. In fact, Shaftesbury is setting up a contrast between forms of political

101 policy, differentiating Turkish and French absolutism, on the one hand, from British  
 102 and Dutch adherence to political liberty on the other (which he chooses to relativize at  
 103 this point for his purposes). We seem to be a long way in this context from “naming  
 104 the desire for an identificatory substitution at the heart of British mercantilist policy”  
 105 (111).

106 Subsequently, Rosenberg quotes Shaftesbury’s comment in his essay “Sensus  
 107 Communis” in which he imagines an Ethiopian “transported on a sudden” to Paris or  
 108 Venice during the carnival where everyone wears a mask and costume. She rightly  
 109 observes that this individual is cast in the role of the moralist who laughs at the  
 110 ridiculous. Shaftesbury also states that if the same person laughed equally hard at a  
 111 “natural face and habit,” he would make himself ridiculous. The reflection depends on  
 112 negotiating difference and distinguishing a just standard from what is distorted and  
 113 false. I am not persuaded by Rosenberg’s reading that the “sudden transport” refers to  
 114 enthusiasm, or that whiteness is here “naturalized to code universal subjectivity”  
 115 (115), or that “the potential for accumulation that is the hallmark of the putatively free  
 116 market is engineered through the deliberate and violent coding of skin color as racial  
 117 difference” (117). The “Ethiopian anecdote” is seen—even more curiously, given the  
 118 reference to Paris and Venice—“as the invocation of a spatial fix that is  
 119 simultaneously a racialized logic that pertains in the colonial context” (119).<sup>1</sup>

120 The concluding chapter on Swift makes some promising points about  
 121 enthusiasm and literary form. *A Tale of a Tub* is considered briefly (162), but the  
 122 neglect of Swift’s fundamental text on enthusiasm, “A Discourse Concerning the  
 123 Mechanical Operation of Spirit,” is unaccountable. Instead the chapter focuses on  
 124 “Stella’s Birthday” [1727] and the “City Shower”. The close reading of these poems  
 125 is often suggestive, though we reencounter a dilemma that pervades the book when  
 126 the attempt is made to tether the themes of enthusiasm and capital. The advice to the  
 127 addressee of the “City Shower” in the face of the impending storm, “If you be wise,  
 128 then go not far to Dine, / You spend in Coach-hire more than save in Wine,” is  
 129 elaborately glossed in the context of Marx’s analysis of commodities and the creation  
 130 of equivalences in exchange between different goods. The reckoning of exchange “in  
 131 terms of the money form” is ostensibly “invoked in Swift by its glaring absence”  
 132 (175). The poem “recalls the invisible yet potent reach of the commodity form, which  
 133 subsists on yet another violent abstraction, that of labor itself” (175).

134 *Critical Enthusiasm* has both the appeal and weakness of a self-authorizing  
 135 discourse, inadvertently replicating the object of its study. There is much to wrestle  
 136 and contend with here, and the critical intelligence behind the study makes one look  
 137 forward to a second book which has had more time to steep.

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<sup>1</sup> For a more recent account which discusses the subject more successfully, see David Sigler, “Shaftesbury Takes an Ethiopian to the Carnival: Foreignness, Subjectivity, and Intersubjectivity in ‘Sensus Communis’,” *The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation* 53:1 (2012): 23-40.