

Kinship and Capitalism: Marriage, Family and Business in the English-speaking World, 1580–1740. By Richard Grassby. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. xx + 506 pp. Tables, appendix, notes, index. Cloth, \$64.95. ISBN 0-521-78203-1.

Reviewed by John Smail

In *Kinship and Capitalism*, Richard Grassby examines the history of the business family during what might be described as “the long seventeenth century,” paying particular attention to the importance of family and kin during a period conventionally associated with the origins of competitive individualism. The book is constructed around a substantial database that the author has compiled of some 28,000 business individuals (mostly men, and mostly from London) between 1580 and 1740. Data have been coded for ninety-nine variables having to do with family and business behavior, ranging from residence, occupation, religion, and status to marriage, remarriage, and children, to inheritance, partnerships, and apprenticeship. Obviously, the information for any one individual is not complete across all variables, but the size of the data set is such that Grassby’s conclusions are generally based on samples of known cases, which include anywhere from a couple of hundred to well over a thousand individuals.

Using statistics presented in tabular form and copious illustrative examples, Grassby addresses three main topics: marriage, relations between family and kin, and the family and business. Among his most important conclusions are that, as we would expect, marriage was of paramount importance in the business family, in terms of both the accumulation of capital and the daily operation of the business household. Grassby also shows that connections with kin remained important to the creation and daily workings of many family businesses throughout this period. Other issues on which Grassby’s database sheds light include inheritance patterns both within and outside the nuclear family and the paucity of business dynasties emerging during this period. Readers of this journal should note that the book’s emphasis is upon family and kinship as it relates to business families rather than upon business in its own right.

Kinship and Capitalism is an empirical tour de force. The sheer size of the database on which its conclusions are based represents a significant feat of historical scholarship. However, if the book’s empiricism is its greatest strength, it is also its greatest weakness. In the introduction (an unfortunate and unfocused diatribe against the conspiratorial forces of cultural theory), Grassby proclaims himself as a radical empiricist, noting that the historian’s “principal obligation is to strive to get it right, to explain how rather than why events have occurred” (p. 17). Grassby

thus self-consciously eschews any analysis of the big questions that one might expect to be addressed in a book with this title.

This approach creates two problems. First, in the absence of an overarching analytical framework, the long passages that present conclusions drawn from anecdotal evidence come across as tidbits of knowledge with no context. Paragraph after paragraph consists of an opening statement—"Business deals with in-laws, including marriage settlements, could create friction" (p. 230)—followed by a string of illustrative examples. However, the examples typically provide no information other than the individual's name, making it difficult to build up a vision of the historical moment that is being depicted. The reader thus comes away from the book without a sense of the social or economic environment in which Grassby's subjects lived.

Second, and more important, the nominal subject of the book, the business family, never really emerges as an object of historical enquiry. Grassby explains that his sample includes business families with more than £500 invested in trade, but he does not situate this sample within the population as a whole. Thus, although he appears to suggest that the business family in the long seventeenth century is a historical entity worth studying, the conclusions he draws seem to be artifacts of the way in which the database was constructed, rather than insights into the experiences and mentality of a distinct social group. Grassby, of course, rejects the study of mentality as unempirical, but his choice of subject (and even some of his observations about the differences between business and landed families) suggests that, like most historians, questions about causation and mentality are critical to his exploration of the past.

True, Grassby's meticulously assembled database clearly disproves a crass version of modernization theory as it applies to the business family, but few historians need convincing on this point. Indeed, far from being discredited by his findings, most of the recently published work cited by Grassby on the family or business in this period clearly accords with them. He has also uncovered much useful data against which other researchers will be able to compare their own findings. However, in the final analysis, the tremendous effort that Grassby has put into the data set and the valuable evidence he has gathered are not harnessed so as to address the kinds of questions about business families and business behavior during this period that need attention.

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