CURRENT BOOKS

SCHOLARS' CHOICE

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THE CULTURE OF CAPITALISM
by Alan Macfarlane
Basil Blackwell, 1987
254 pp. $34.95

A decade ago, Alan Macfarlane, a professor of historical anthropology at Cambridge University, published *The Origins of English Individualism*, an extended essay that provoked widespread scholarly debate about the character of English social development since the Middle Ages. The harsh critical response to that book has not caused Macfarlane to pause, much less retreat, from his pursuit of evidence that what he calls the culture of capitalism was established in England as early as the 12th and 13th centuries.

Macfarlane's controversial thesis posits an English exceptionalism. While other European societies would have to go through the crucible of revolution in order to become "modern," no radical changes were required of English law, economy, family, or social structure. The concept of transition from feudalism to capitalism may be appropriate in the case of the European continent, Macfarlane allows, but no similar discontinuity marks English history. Basing his conclusion on local records spanning several centuries, he asserts that there never was, and never could be, an English revolution. England was the one place on Earth equipped with all that was necessary for a capitalist version of modernity: an unfettered notion of private property, an already disenchanted view of the natural world, a family system that placed no barriers in the way of true love and individual ambition, even a sexuality liberated from the burdens of procreation and the risks of overpopulation.

Now, in a collection of lively and pointed essays, Macfarlane pursues a number of themes that have been central to his work. He is particularly determined to show that there never was such a thing as a peasantry in England, arguing that its smallholders have always acted like agrarian entrepreneurs, buying and selling land without sentimental regard for place, for community, or even for perpetuation of family. In his extended analysis of English family and kinship, he asserts that the English have always been ego-centered, indifferent to kin and ancestry, that their courtships have been based on romantic love from the Middle Ages onward, that parents had no interest in arranging the marriages of their children, and that marriage was always concerned with creating companionship rather than making children. In an extensive discussion of love, Macfarlane makes the case that the English have always been romantically inclined. Given a society where the market already reigned supreme and the bonds of kinship did not matter, it could not be otherwise: "Romantic love gives meaning in an otherwise dead and cold world."

The author goes on to argue that the English have never needed a

sexual revolution, for they have always separated sex from reproduction. Consequently, English women never required liberation. They are, he writes, "full, complete persons without children and they seem for many centuries to have had many roles and outlets—economic, social, and religious—which were independent of their reproductive ability."

In a fascinating chapter on ideas of nature, Macfarlane uses evidence of a precocious English fondness for gardening and pets as proof of a modern attitude of ambivalence toward land and animals. Equally suggestive is his assessment of English attitudes toward evil, which he believes were moderated early on by the pragmatic utilitarianism of a capitalist culture. Moral absolutes never pushed the English to the fanaticism that could be found on the continent or, for that matter, just a few leagues to the north in Scotland. Having never really believed in black magic, the devil, or even hell, they felt no need to burn witches, Jews, or Jesuits.

Given this inherited—almost genetic—modernity, England's history is without sharp breaks and great turning points. Macfarlane would have us reject what he calls the "revolutionary" view of English history, and erase all those old period markers—the Reformation, the English Civil War (1642–51), the Industrial Revolution—which suggest discontinuity. He is particularly scornful of those such as Christopher Hill and Eric Hobsbawm who work in the Marxist tradition, but he is also critical of liberals such as Lawrence Stone who refuse to smooth out the rough contours of the past. Yet this book would bring little comfort to those who romanticize the English past as the locus of long-lost communal and family values. These have had no place in what has been a "dead and cold world" from the Middle Ages onward.

Macfarlane's version of the English past would seem to appeal mainly to those who want to believe in Margaret Thatcher's vision of an English future. His book can, in fact, be read as an extended defense of present Tory policy. The new enterprise culture would seem to be the culmination of 700 years of peculiarly English development, although one wonders what is to be done about the Scots and Welsh with whom the English must now share a nationhood.

But the most troubling aspect of Macfarlane's work is the fact that his definition of modernity does not always square with English society as it is today. Take family and women as examples. If a mark of the modern outlook is indifference to family ties, why is it that family name and family heritage are so important to the English in the 1980s? And even if it could

be proved that a woman's identity was not yoked to childbearing during the 15th and 16th centuries, how can Macfarlane explain away the fact that recent studies have shown that maternity is generally regarded as the mark of "true womanhood" in England today? Perhaps there has been massive backsliding somewhere between the 16th century and now; perhaps England is unique in having moved away from rather than toward modernity. More likely, Macfarlane has pushed his thesis just a little too far, and, in misreading the present, has also distorted the past.

—John R. Gillis, '88

WHOSE JUSTICE? WHICH RATIONALITY?
by Alasdair MacIntyre
Univ. of Notre Dame, 1988
410 pp. $22.95

When Alasdair MacIntyre's last book, *After Virtue*, appeared in 1981, it was immediately recognized as a significant critique of liberal individualism, the foundation of Western moral thought for at least the last two centuries. MacIntyre, a philosopher at Vanderbilt University, charged that this moral tradition has consistently failed to provide a framework for evaluating competing moral claims. Affirming a variety of moral beliefs and practices (hence embraced by liberals and conservatives alike), it does not put forth a unified standard of conduct. As a result, the remnants of now defunct premodern beliefs and habits, the "simulacra" of older ethical traditions, guide moral actions.

All this, MacIntyre concluded, has made for a "moral calamity," expressing itself in nihilism or in ad hoc decision-making strategies. But what was to be done? MacIntyre proposed that the internal logic and tacit cultural assumptions of a specific moral tradition could alone offer a foundation for judging various moral claims. Yet in order to choose one traditional system of rationality over others, one must support one's choice with an account of the historical and cultural contexts in which various types of rationality originate and function.

In *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, MacIntyre sets out to do precisely that, and he begins by making clear what he means by tradition. It is not, we learn, one long and essentially undifferentiated continuum.