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Marc H. Lerner. A Laboratory of Liberty: The Transformation of Political Culture in Republican Switzerland, 1750-1848.

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Marc H. Lerner. *A Laboratory of Liberty: The Transformation of Political Culture in Republican Switzerland, 1750-1848*. (Studies in Central European Histories.) Leiden/ Boston: Brill, 2012. Pp. xvi, 371. Hardback, \$136.

Few nation states embody ideals of freedom and liberty like Switzerland. Embedded within a complex European context while maintaining internal diversity, this Alpine nation with an intricate history remains a powerful case study for historians interested in revolutionary Europe, republicanism, and political modernity. Marc H. Lerner now adds the newest analysis to this broader field. In his view, “the Swiss case is important to the overall project of examining the origins of modern political liberty precisely because of the mixed and blended discourses that resulted from the pragmatic discussions found in republican Switzerland” (8). Rightfully describing Switzerland between 1750 and 1848 as a “laboratory of liberty,” Lerner aims to illuminate “the emergence of modern political liberty in Europe and the modern federal state in Switzerland” (3). His focus on the three cantons Zurich, Schwyz, and the Pays de Vaud provides Lerner with unique possibilities to compare trends and discourses; his use of “controversialist” methodology (22) and his reliance on a wide array of pamphlets and journals to “reveal the fault lines that existed within the Old Confederation and Europe” (11) gives his analysis a sound empirical basis. These aspects provide sufficient evidence and “open a window onto the origins of modern political society” (13).

Within three coherently organized parts Lerner highlights major debates, shifting discourses, and overlapping ideas within the three cantons; he also contextualizes his analysis thus staying true to his objective of moving beyond a national history. Though following a chronological order, Lerner organizes his chapters along “spikes in the numbers of [...] political pamphlets” (24). In Part I Lerner focuses on ideological origins of revolutionary events and political debates surrounding the foundation of the Helvetic Republic. According to Lerner, “a mental revolution” or “ideological shift” (71) is apparent before the revolutions of the late eighteenth century. Whereas Lerner relates his analysis to enlightenment discussions about political authority, republicanism, and liberty, he notes that the widespread appeal to popular sovereignty and public opinion are key in this slow and ambivalent transformation. The

author rightfully expands this storyline with the collapse of the Helvetic republic, noting, “the ambivalence and ambiguity of the Swiss path continued” (133). Building on these findings in Part II, Lerner then concentrates on the “regeneration of a constructed past” (135). Apart from discussing the right to self-rule within this context, the author outlines visions of political society in inner Switzerland. For Lerner, it is the inclusion of the Zürichputsch that sets the stage for “a federal solution to the problems of revolution, popular sovereignty and political liberty” (261), all aspects troubling Switzerland since the late eighteenth century. In Part III Lerner finally discusses “national accommodation” (263). While again emphasizing influences beyond revolutionary France, Lerner concludes by contextualizing and embedding his analysis in the revolutions of 1848. He thus achieves his objectives and outlines how the “melding of radical and less radical strains ultimately produces the historically modern citizen” (6) in Switzerland.

Lerner’s volume sheds new light onto Switzerland as the “laboratory of liberty.” Though highly ambitious in its claims to be a local, transnational, national, and comparative history, Lerner makes the best use of his sources to amply support all of these qualities. Rooted in extensive research in various Swiss archives, his emphasis on public opinion adds a valuable piece and moves the volume beyond conventional intellectual histories. His focus on controversies sustains this attempt, while an emphasis on three cantons gives detailed insights into the disputes of the time. Adding some more cultural shades, references to popular culture, or other methodological nuances might have strengthened the volume and helped it advance further beyond upper class male narratives. In the end, it remains the strength of this volume that Lerner attempts to contextualize and compare the events within Switzerland and a larger European context. These aspects make *Laboratory of Liberty* of use to scholars well beyond the field of Swiss history.

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