

CHERYL SCHONHARDT-BAILEY. *From the Corn Laws to Free Trade: Interests, Ideas, and Institutions in Historical Perspective*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007. Pp. xiii\_426. \$47.50 (cloth).

The repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 poses one of the most challenging and persistent puzzles for scholars of British politics. The Conservative Party entered government in 1841 on a protectionist platform. Five years later, the Conservative Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel presided over the repeal of the Corn Laws, violating party principles and undercutting the economic interests of the landowning aristocracy. Within a month of the repeal, Peel's government fell and the Conservatives remained out of power for decades. Why would Peel along with many members of the Conservative party endorse a policy that would ultimately lead to their removal from power and send their party into political hibernation for a generation? Cheryl Schonhardt-Bailey addresses this question in a fascinating and groundbreaking examination of the processes that led to the repeal of the protectionist Corn Laws.

Many explanations for the repeal have been proffered in previous studies. These explanations typically focus on changing economic interests, ideas, or political institutions. As Schonhardt-Bailey points out, these explanations tend to fall within traditional academic disciplines, with historians favoring the importance of ideas and political scientists focusing primarily on interests. The main premise of this book is that repeal cannot be understood without reference to both interests and ideas, as well as institutions. All three play an important role in the political process that led to the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846. British industrialization and emerging capital markets generated increased interest in (and demand for) free trade. The institutional changes brought by the 1832 Reform Act helped to ensure the political success of the Anti-Corn Law League. The ideas used by both the League and Peel to argue for repeal, particularly the idea that repeal was a means by which to preserve the landed basis of Parliament, helped to ensure the support needed from both Conservative MPs and peers to repeal the Corn Laws in 1846.

The organization of this book is intellectually appealing. The first half of the book explores the demand side of the story, tracing through the causes of increased support for free trade and decreased demand for protectionist policies. The author then goes on to illustrate how increased demand for free trade along with fundamental changes in Britain's economy during this period cumulated in the emergence of Britain's first modern, national-level political interest group: the Anti-Corn Law League. The political success of this group was due in part to both institutions and ideas. Schonhardt-Bailey argues that the Reform Act of 1832 provided the League with the means either "to purchase directly or encourage others to purchase voting rights for free traders in county constituencies" (105). The League also used ideas with broad appeal, such as national prosperity, morality, and the injustices of an aristocratic monopoly, to generate support for repeal where such support was not available from economic interests alone. The emergence and political success of the Anti-Corn Law League demonstrates support for Schonhardt-Bailey's main premise: that economic interests, ideas, and institutions interacted in important and previously unobserved ways in the political process leading up to repeal.

As Schonhardt-Bailey correctly points out, the demand side is only part of the repeal story. Increased demand for free trade generated political pressure for repeal, but it was "not inevitable that a Parliament of landowning aristocrats would acquiesce" to these demands (28). Why would landed aristocrats, who made up a large majority of the House of Commons even after the Reform Act of 1832, vote against protection for agriculture? This

is even more puzzling in the case of the House of Lords, where unelected peers had virtually no incentives to respond to demands for repeal.

The second half of the book takes up this question. The incentives for MPs and peers to vote against their own economic interests in response to greater demands for free trade are examined in chapters 7–10. The author convincingly argues that the incentives to supply repeal came from fears of mounting pressures for parliamentary reform. Members of parliament, particularly the Peelite Conservatives and the peers, saw repeal as a means to preserve the landed basis of Parliament. This idea was first introduced in parliamentary speeches in 1846 and provided Peelites with a way in which to vote in line with their constituents' interests in free trade while simultaneously remaining loyal to conservative ideals.

This book has many strengths. It tells a nuanced, detailed story, which is intuitively and intellectually compelling, that brings together the effects of ideas, institutions, and interests. Empirical support for this story is found using multiple methods and historical sources. Schonhardt-Bailey makes use of both quantitative and qualitative data from multiple and diverse sources including directories, newspapers, death duty registers, income tax returns, voter registration rolls, voting records, and parliamentary speeches. These sources and methods are described in depth in the text and the five appendixes. Perhaps one of the most interesting methodologies utilized by the author is one that readers may be less familiar with: computer-assisted content analysis. Schonhardt-Bailey uses this methodology to analyze the content of parliamentary speeches and newspapers. The speeches made in the House of Commons demonstrate evidence of increased support for free trade in the years leading up to 1846. However, the idea of repeal as a means to preserve the landed basis of Parliament does not appear in MPs' speeches until 1846. This provides convincing evidence in support of the author's argument explaining the timing of the repeal. A comparison of speeches' content between the House of Commons and House of Lords provides additional insights regarding the political process leading to repeal.

This evidence, combined with the many other convincing findings often illustrated in well-designed graphics, leaves me with only one question: What have we learned about the world from this detailed study of what the author described as “an anomaly of spectacular proportions” (2)? I think that we learn quite a bit. However, the author devotes only four pages (out of 290 pages of text) to this question. I would have liked to see more on this point.

Schonhardt-Bailey provides a definitive account of one of the pivotal economic events of the modern world. Her innovative work will be of interest to political scientists, economists, and historians alike, all of whom will learn plenty from this intelligent and innovative book.

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