

and policy was the least revolutionary of the range of possibilities on offer from Eastern and Western Europe. As a historian of British economic thought and policy, I have reservations somewhat about the claims made for what was new and what was effective in Germany in relation to the undoubted success of the Anglo-American economic organisation of war, but these are mild criticisms in the face of my admiration for a very impressive first book. We look forward to his second, an economic history of the Third Reich.

Roger Middleton  
*Department of Historical Studies,*  
*University of Bristol, 13 Woodland Road,*  
*Bristol BS8 1TB, UK*  
*E-mail address: roger.middleton@bristol.ac.uk*

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**La miglior legge del regno. Consuetudine, diritto naturale e contratto nel pensiero e nell'epoca di John Selden (1584–1654)**

Sergio Caruso; Giuffrè Editore, Milan, 2001, 2 vols., xl + introduction, pp. 3–1023, price 130.000 Lire/67.14 Euros, ISBN 88-14-08354-1

Sergio Caruso assures his readers that he intends to present ‘a proper study of Selden’, or at least to give a ‘useful’ one. He also aims to fill a gap within the scholarly mainstream—particularly on the Continent—which has neglected to accord due importance to an author ‘more often cited in a conventional way rather than studied in a deep one’. However, Caruso also reminds us of the lack of scholarly studies dedicated specifically to Selden even in the English-speaking academic world, where only 6–7 scholars can be considered to have worked on the man and his thought in any detail.

Caruso points out how Selden’s works have often been valued from completely different points of view, and how this tendency has sometimes led to misinterpretations of them. Selden has mainly been considered on the basis of some of his more peculiar texts, and never from a complete and exhaustive perspective. Some scholars have emphasised his standing as a lay-gentleman; others have chosen to focus on him as a lawyer; others have portrayed him as merely an antiquary, and yet others as a purely religious writer. This tendency to associate Selden with amply different backgrounds and sets of ideas only ever displays ‘a part of the truth’ as it is presented by each of these various interpretations. Furthermore, Caruso underlines the fact that Selden’s theories have determined a great deal of conflicting opinions on the part of his interpreters, particularly regarding his politics: a great many opposing assertions have been made ‘in the name of Selden’. Caruso notes how some interpreters (Bershadsky, Berkowitz, Christianson) have chosen to deal with

Selden's early intellectual phase (the 1610–1630s), whilst others (Trevor-Roper and Richard Tuck) have preferred to look at a later stage of his activity (the 1640–1650s). As a result of this variegated portrayal of Selden, it is evident that the latter group could work on 'more modern subject-matters' than the former group.

In addition, it has to be recognised that different scholars pose different questions to 'the Author', and this implies the reception of different answers. For instance, Bershadsky 'examines Seldenian early Erastianism, to understand by what political and economic motivations he was sustained', while Berkowitz is more interested in looking at 'traditional and new political models'. Whilst Christianson tries to grasp 'what type of lawyer and parliamentarian Selden was', Trevor-Roper discusses Selden's Arminianism, 'and those cultural milieus with which he could build up a constructive dialogue'. Tuck, the historian of mid-17th century political thought, 'analyses the evolution of his political theory in relation to the quick change of circumstances, taking as yardstick his relationship with Hobbes'.

Caruso's interpretation rests upon an idea of Selden as a modern intellectual who, at least in certain significant respects, anticipated the Whig canon of thought. Selden's secular approach to politics and morality, together with his philosophical perspectives, plays a fundamental role in building up 'the pre-liberal framework' within English society after the Glorious Revolution. As Caruso concludes, 'the history of English liberalism cannot be without him'. Caruso does not hesitate to compare Selden's work with that of some famous and altogether better-known thinkers, such as Grotius, Locke and, in particular, Hobbes. As a result of this, Caruso casts new light upon the relevance of a common denominator between these major thinkers and Selden. As far as his similarity to Grotius and Locke is concerned, Caruso evaluates as a significant element the role held by Selden in the passage from a traditional and feudal idea of law to a more modern and liberal one. In this sense, Selden can be legitimately defined as one of the most important founders of a new form of politics, one built on lay pillars. More interesting and, at the same time, more useful in pinning down his interpretation, is Caruso's analysis of Selden's thought in connection with that of Hobbes. It is this subject which has to be seen as 'the crucial problem of every re-reading of Selden'. In fact, Caruso maintains, there is 'a common philosophical ground' between Selden and Hobbes—which does not exclude their distance in matters of religion—and this has to be recognised in their shared Erastianism. Indeed, Caruso follows Tuck closely in agreeing that Selden exerted more influence on Hobbes than Hobbes did on him. Caruso does not, then, endorse those scholars who see Selden exclusively as a father of a new constitutional system (Berkowitz), or who place him in the background as 'a minor character in a bigger play' (Sommerville).

Caruso's book is an accurate analysis of Selden's life and thought, and it is a good book in terms of historical method. Selden's works and his rich intellectual activity are consistently posed in relation to the historical circumstances which accompanied the passage from the age of Elizabeth to the reigns of the first two Stuart monarchs. By doing this, Caruso poses many questions in order to untangle a complex reality and, accordingly, understand the various connections between people's deeds and

their ideas. He offers a detailed description of Selden's intellectual development—which includes his adherence to *jus naturale* doctrines—and, in particular, he focuses on the influential role played by Selden's ideas in Europe and the United States right up to the end of the 18th century. In addition, Caruso highlights the active part that Selden took in many controversial debates during the reigns of James I and Charles I. He also emphasises Selden's high cultural competence, which both monarchs and Parliaments made use of in their political and constitutional battles. Furthermore, as his life shows, Selden was able to cultivate a large series of contacts with many British and Continental writers, historians, poets, scientists and philosophers, with whom and against whom he held his wide variety of theories, which ranged from law to politics, economics, and religion.

In Caruso's first volume, Selden's work is studied chronologically; as this demonstrates, Selden spent most of his time engaged in political and religious controversies. In the second volume, single pieces of work by Selden are analysed, with the aim of offering a complete overview of their origins, purposes and cultural consequences. In this analysis, Selden is portrayed as an eclectic figure, unrivalled in his capacity to face different subjects with an equal level of coherence and competence. His acute knowledge of history and law allowed him to deal with some of the most difficult institutional problems of his time from an impartial and well-informed point of view. From this respect, *Titles of Honour* (1614), *Historie of Tithes* (1617) and the famous *Mare Clausum* (1635)—a response to Grotius's *Mare Liberum*—are all examples of Selden's profound commitment to understanding (and resolving) internal and external legal conflicts.

Although it is not easy to rank Selden within specific intellectual categories, Caruso deems that he was an Erastian as far as his political and ecclesiastical views are concerned, and an Arminian in matters of theology. The use of these specific categories reflects his constant tendency toward moderation and, at the same time, his courage in taking often dangerous positions, and in arguing every sort of 'rational' argument.

Nonetheless, Caruso's main purpose is the depiction of Selden as a modern intellectual and, specifically, as a forerunner in a wide range of important cultural perspectives on society, in particular freedom of speech. For this reason, Caruso pays attention to the *Table Talks*, which include an interesting series of Selden's opinions not just about the very debatable political problems in his century, but also about many more general matters. The *Table Talks* is the result of several conversations that Selden had with his friends: they refer to the period 1634–1654, the last 20 years of his life. Caruso defines this work as 'a sort of encyclopaedia of English wisdom', so that Selden could be considered—because of the vast number of quotations—as 'a British Confucius'. The two key words in Selden's philosophy—as Caruso points out—are *comfort* and *discretion*. Theoretical and ethical aspects are strictly related to each other, since every philosopher is expected to formulate wise thoughts linked with rational and prudent deeds. Erudition is not sufficient, as Selden constantly insisted, to make a man wise. It is necessary that an author is able to express his independent viewpoints, without referring to the so-called *auctores* as a mere polemical instrument.

Accordingly, the *Table Talks* are the best expression of Selden's ideas. In this series of meditations he both criticises and highlights vices, stereotypes, mistakes and habits of both society and the intellectual community, of which he was one of the most representative figures. He intends to challenge any kind of religious, political and ideological restriction on people's capacity to reason and on their freedom of speech. Selden, Caruso maintains, is one of the first thinkers of his age to maintain a pluralism of opinions, which he considers a fundamental pillar of a free and modern nation. In this respect, his direct targets are all those powers that are aimed at preventing any rational and empirical analysis of reality. Selden is an indomitable defender of the liberty of doubting, that is a 'sceptic' who can be considered, at the same time, a companion and a precursor of Hobbes, Locke, and Hume in the genealogy of modern philosophy.

A master of tolerance, Selden was also a brilliant writer. He used enlightening metaphors and persuasive comparisons, and proved his rhetorical skills effectively. This aspect of Selden's work constitutes a further important insight into a thinker who has been often overlooked by traditional scholarship because of his supposed lack of originality. Caruso claims for Selden an extreme clarity in what he wants to communicate and formulate in his writings, which contrasts with those, such as Sommerville, who consider his prose to be 'rather cumbrous'.

Caruso provides us with a well-informed, lively, and deeply meditated book, which does not simply describe, but which also tries to understand a rich selection of texts, and a large number of issues, all of which were to become crucial in future debates. A great strength of the book consists in its wide portrait of an historical period that has turned out to be essential in the formation of a new era. It helps in the re-discovery of a deeply engaged thinker, who—by means of his intellectual work and his active role on the political scene—offered a vivid picture of the century in which he lived, and who wrote supremely well about life, conscience, and politics.

Cesare Cuttica  
*GRC Humanities,*  
*University of Sussex,*  
*Sussex BN1 9QN, UK*

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**The social history of skepticism: experience and doubt in early modern culture**

Brendan Dooley; The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, MA, 1999, 213pp., price £31.00, ISBN 0-8018-6142-X.

This is a book well worth reading, though perhaps not for the reasons hinted at in its title. The core of its argument lies in an analysis of political journalism, first in the