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Frühe Neuzeit – Revolution – Empire (1500–1815)

Peter Blickle, Das Alte Europa. Vom Hochmittelalter bis zur Moderne, München (C. H. Beck) 2008, 320 p., 16 ill., ISBN 978 3 406 57171 8, EUR 29,60.

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This book opens with U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's dismissive remarks about »old Europe«. Intellectuals responded by upholding what they saw as best about today's Europe – the »taming of capitalism through social justice«, or the »freeing of politics from religion through secularization,« or the »valuation of social relations over individual autonomy, cultural variety over assimilation, and quality of life over the accumulation of riches« (p. 9–10). If Secretary Rumsfeld had relegated »old Europe« to the dustbin of history, these formulations imply a contrast between a proper modernity, of the European kind, and its evil twin across the water (a proposition equally deserving of deserves challenge, if not in the context of this review). Peter Blickle joins in the debate by proposing deeper foundations for what makes the »old Europe« of the 21st century distinctive. As he says, the idea an »Old Europe« is familiar to historians. Its pioneers include Otto Brunner and Roland Mousnier, and the scholars of more recent decades who have built on their work include Dietrich Gerhard, Niklas Luhmann, and (not least) Peter Blickle.

If Gerhard's »Old Europe« (1981) runs from ca. 1000 to ca. 1800, Blickle's »Altes Europa« begins around 1200, for reasons that are clear if not exactly stated. Though framed as a general account of Europe from ca 1200–1800, the book concentrates on Europe's »urban belt«, particularly Switzerland and south Germany. Blickle himself has of course done much to open up the history of this region, but here he mainly cites younger German scholars, with a good sprinkling of works in English and French. His argument begins with »das Hausprinzip«: the solid, well-built peasant or artisan house, common (in this region) only from about 1200, was the fundamental building block for all social and political relations. Horizontally, »das Haus« extended to a village or town community (*Gemeinde*) in which all house-fathers or house-holders were in principle equal. They and only they participated in the communal assemblies, and made up the law-finding juries whose decisions were valid within town or village limits. Vertically, »das Haus« extended upward as far as the princely or royal house. But the legal and moral autonomy of the house, and of communities formed on this basis, set limits to what lords and rulers could demand. Notwithstanding the spread of Roman law, what Blickle calls »the subsidiarity of law« (p. 138) – that is, the competence within their assigned limits of local juries – was not brushed aside; and one of the principles on which juries insisted was that the needs of the house (*Hausnotdurft*) took precedence over the revenue needs of lords and princes. This was a degree of self-government not found in local communities in other parts of the world: »The process by which jurymen (*Urteiler*) rendered judgment and made laws was both essential and distinctive to Europe« (p. 136). The communal structure of European society found its

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proper theorist only when Johannes Althusius in his »Politica methodice digesta« (1614) made a clear distinction between the social contract (*Gesellschaftsvertrag*) that householders concluded among themselves to form a community, and the lordship or sovereignty contract (*Herrschaftsvertrag*) by which they submitted themselves to a ruler. Although Rousseau blurred this distinction, he also recognized that his political ideas reflected the communal institutions of his native Switzerland. So did Rousseau's 19th century German admirers, culminating with Otto Gierke and his »Genossenschaftsrecht« of 1868, a work whose principles were written into the Weimar Constitution by a Gierke disciples. In sum, »the inheritance that Old Europe has bequeathed to Europe [is] peace, order, and freedom« (p. 276).

This is a partial account of the genesis of European modernity, and like other such accounts – for example, the views of Europe's political development proposed by J. G. A. Pocock or Quentin Skinner – it has within its own limits a great deal of force. If modernity means republican government *strictu sensu* – without a prince – then one should indeed pay disproportionate attention to Renaissance Florence and Puritan England. Likewise, if modernity means a social justice that has tempered the excesses of capitalism, one should indeed pay disproportionate attention to those parts of Europe where the communal ethos had a broad social basis, and flourished for many centuries.

The trouble is that path-to-the-present arguments, of whatever kind, reduce the past to a dark backdrop from which one or two klieg lights shine forward to the future. By contrast, – this is at least my impression – members of the guild are now more inclined to imagine recorded history as a vast tapestry, any of whose dimly discerned patterns may be seized on for purposes of the present moment. Thus modern social justice has many and varied roots in the European past, and so does the principle of communal autonomy. Blickle is rather grudging about contributions to the European tradition of law made by royal and princely courts, but he does allow a few words here and there. The more serious problem with »Das Alte Europa»« is that he gives no recognition whatever to the contributions to Europe's tradition of communal autonomy made by towns like Nuremberg, Venice, or Amsterdam, where oligarchies ruled in the name of the community.

In effect, this is a history of Europe with the bourgeoisie written out.

He speaks, for example, of »the third estate, consisting of artisans and peasants«, which did not achieve parliamentary representation until the 16th century (p. 76). Florence and Strasbourg and Augsburg did indeed have »guild constitutions« (p. 76), but it would have been pertinent to note that Florence in its guild era was usually controlled by the »greater guilds« – merchants, bankers and woolen-manufacturers. Elsewhere Blickle says that while nobility and clergy were recognized as »lordly estates« (*Herrenstände*), everyone else was lumped together under terms meaning »the common man« (p. 161). What of the town councils across 16th century Europe that conducted themselves as lords, and were so addressed by fellow townsmen? That oligarchical and mercantile-minded polity, the Dutch Republic, is not mentioned in this book, except for protests against the magistrate elites in the 1670s.

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Writing the bourgeoisie out of the story means envisioning Europe's economic history from an imagined artisan-and-peasant point of view. Thus if Europe did change over the centuries, the momentum for change came from social protest by society's lower orders, not from the economy. The mercantile economies of the big cities are invisible in this book, perhaps because, in the author's view, markets for long-range trade represented an early form of capitalism; by contrast, local markets for artisan goods, regulated by the magistrates, were free of usury and price-dumping. Moreover, since real income in Germany increased only 50% between 800 and 1800, it may safely be concluded that »trade, including overseas trade, was more or less meaningless for Europe's Gross Domestic Product« (p. 154).

This early-modernist agrees with Blickle that the idea of an Old Europe (beginning a bit earlier) makes more sense of the European story than does the usual distinction between medieval and modern. The argument that he makes for a particular genesis of modernity is not by my lights convincing, but it is not less worthy of attention than other attempts to discern in the past a singular path-to-the-present. If consulted by a publisher, I would recommend translation of 16th-century Europe »Das Alte Europa«. At least among scholars writing in English, the Renaissance-Puritan paradigm for the genesis of modernity has not had enough competition, whereas the communal paradigm, despite the translations of several of Blickle's works, is perhaps not as widely known as it should be.

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