REDESCRIPTIONS
Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory

Book Review: *Europa im 19. Jahrhundert* by Willibald Steinmetz, Neue Fischer Weltgeschichte. Bd 6., S. Fischer, 2019, 762 pages. ISBN: 978-3-10-010826-5

BOOK REVIEW

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Willibald Steinmetz' opus magnum on Europe in the nineteenth century addresses the question of how to conceptualize Europe in its historical dimension. It is one of a twenty-one-volume world historical project based on the notion that the term 'world history' connotes a totality in space and time, the idea of a whole, which does not exist. The solution is not to retreat to a history of nations and states but to see the world in terms of its regions and the dynamics within and between them as networks and differences. This is the context given by the publisher and the series editors. The publisher's assumption seems to be that the pattern of interaction between the world's regions will appear through the whole series rather than from the individual volumes, which each focuses on the internal dynamics of the selected world region. With this approach, the question emerges about why a focus on the regions would be preferable to a focus on the nations. The addition of the regions or the addition of the nation: Where is the world? Is it true that the idea of the world does not exist?

With the publisher's supposition, Steinmetz sets out to demarcate his research object in time and space. His demarcation offers a splendid demonstration of ambiguities and plasticity: the Mediterranean and the Atlantic, for instance, as both division and bridge in the spatial definition of Europe's external borders. In this way, he avoids fixing lines where there are fluctuating boundaries or cross-border entanglements. However, for reasons just mentioned, Steinmetz applies this wisdom to an analysis of the region called Europe from within, rather than exploring Mediterranean and Atlantic, or Eurasian, ambiguity and entanglement.

The demarcation of time meets with the same problem. The nineteenth century is from 1800 to 1899, but nobody today would write a history with those limits. What reason would there be, given the continuous flow of time, to draw a line on New Year's Eve in 1899? None. Nevertheless, historians used to draw lines, for example, when monarchs died, revolutions happened, or wars began or ended. Eric Hobsbawm talked about the long nineteenth century from 1789 to 1914. Others have preferred defining the century as the period between the Congress of Vienna in 1815 and the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. Steinmetz raises question marks about this conventional

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periodisation of history by arguing for epochal shifts that are not determined by singular, precise and punctually demarcated high-political events, but by longer periods of accelerating transformation. As it is difficult to summarize the whole area within one time frame, such transition periods do more justice to the fact that a space like Europe has so many different histories.

Instead of 1800 as a temporal borderline, Steinmetz discerns a long transformation from around 1770 to around 1830. One axis in this period of intense transformation is the political revolutions from the American/French dual revolution to the European upheavals around 1830. This period coincides with the beginning of the industrial revolution, but here Steinmetz throws doubt on using it to help define his period. The industrial revolution had its early phase during the decades around 1800, but the transformation was slow and characterised by continuous development during the entire nineteenth century and does not therefore, Steinmetz argues, provide a clear demarcation. He is no doubt right when he says that the label revolution is misleading for such a gradual transformation. However, a counter question is whether industrialisation and the emergence of industrial capitalism wasn't, in fact, such a radical change, so that its initial phase might fit perfectly well into the epochal rupture that marked the decades around 1800. On the other hand, Steinmetz refers to the 'new global imperialism' as a marker of the epochal shift, but here one might ask whether 'colonialism' is not a more appropriate term for this phenomenon with its considerable continuity to the older history of the trade companies supplemented by an increasing transformation of trade stations into settlements in the initial times of the nineteenth century. Steinmetz refers to the Russian colonisation of Siberia and England's of India (which was not a settler colony). However, in India, 1857 marks a more decisive step from the trade company era directly to imperialism.

Correspondingly, Steinmetz outlines a second transformation period between around 1880 and 1920. The latter certainly signaled the breakthrough of a new society and a new international order. The new society was a mass society and the emergence of a more radical kind of democracy than reflected by the previous middle-class-centered orders. The Russian revolution, too, contributed to this development, before Stalin ended it. Steinmetz lists good arguments for 1880 as the beginning of this intensified transformation. Also, a new intensified imperialism with greater state involvement and military backing would fit better here than as a criterion for the first transition period. One could discuss whether one shouldn't locate the beginning of the second transformation a decade earlier, at around 1870, with the French-German War that dramatically shifted the geopolitical configuration of Europe, the Great Depression that began with the 1873 financial bubble. (The Great Depression was the name used for it until the 1930s depression, which adopted the label, forcing economic historians to rename the first one The Long Depression.) The depression led to the emergence of conservative social nationalism (Disraeli, Bismarck, Kjellén and several others) as a bulwark against the European establishments' growing threat of socialism and class struggle. The threats of the Paris Commune and the rumbling class struggle language provoked a conservative counteroffensive, which tried to build a more organised modernity. Another argument for the early 1870s being the beginning of an intense transformation period is the establishment of a new kind of international law, which was used as an instrument supporting imperialist acceleration, the 'gentle civilizer', according to Martti Koskenniemi's aphoristic label.

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These remarks on the volume's demarcation of space and time are all details for discussion and do not take away the overall impression of a convincing periodisation of Europe around transformative sequences. It is particularly interesting that Steinmetz connects his periodisation to Reinhart Koselleck's *Sattelzeit* concept ('saddle time'), which refers to the decades before and after the French revolution when key political concepts shifted meaning, from one metaphorical stirrup to the other. The opposing pair of stirrups were connected by the singular saddle. The concepts remained the same, but they fundamentally shifted meaning. Koselleck's case in point is 'revolution', which before the French revolution had the literal meaning of rolling back, recurring, in a cyclical time perspective that underpinned Aristotle's political theory, where in a vicious cycle between tyranny, oligarchy and anarchy, and in a virtuous circle between monarchy, aristocracy and democracy, the future, on principle, was known from the past. In the *French* revolution, the meaning of revolution shifted to its opposite, signaling progressiveness, a spearhead into the future. Metaphorically, the meaning moved to the other stirrup. Koselleck himself became doubtful of his metaphor, but Steinmetz shows that it works for his two transformation periods.

The analysis of the nineteenth century occurs in four fields: society, economy, culture and politics, which all are entangled. In their inter-dynamics, together they made up nation and state building in the nineteenth-century Europe under the slogan of progress. Optimistic or skeptical, linear or dialectical, secular or religious, political-economic, utilitarian, idealistic, socialistic or positivistic: under the image of progress the nineteenth century shifted the interpretative framework from theology to teleology.

In each of his investigative fields, Steinmetz lays out a European panorama through comparative discussion. He analyses shared European and national or local particularities. By means of case references he investigates both what is shared and what is particular or deviates from the broader pattern. The book provides a rich empirical illustration of ambiguities and contradictions that reinforce or weaken the European dimension. With clarity and erudition, the author develops this creation of Europe in a masterly way. Particularly innovative is his exploration of the cultural field covering knowledge and ideology production in academic and artistic work, music, art and literature. Composers, painters, writers and scholars in natural sciences and humanities, commented for or against each other on progressive European state and nation building using an accelerating number of -isms: socialism, liberalism and impressionism. The transition from classicism to romanticism in music reflected the transition towards a more progressive time. However, on this point, a small remark would be that Beethoven should not be bundled together with Mozart and Haydn in the Viennese musical scene of the decades around 1800. He should be in the other stirrup with Schubert with whom he created romanticist programmatic music in which one hears progress, and which stands in stark contrast to the classicists' elegant recurring pirouettes. Vienna 1800 underpins the *Sattelzeit* thesis.

All in all, as the nineteenth century unfolded, schools of thought and art emerged increasingly and with shorter time intervals between them. Secession and disaffiliation became key words as time sped up and the conflict between orthodoxy and a challenging heterodoxy became ever more intense, bursting onto the scene with accelerating frequency. What mattered was the capacity for renewal. Steinmetz' entanglement of culture with political, economic and social processes – culture defined as production of art and knowledge for the interpretation of societies – is a great achievement that contributes to a new understanding of Europe. Reinhart Koselleck would have liked this extension into an analysis of culture.

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Steinmetz investigates the emergence of social formations in the four entangled fields, such as *Bürgertum*, a concept that has a broader coverage as a social formation than bourgeoisie as it also includes the citizenry and the educated classes, entangled with the aristocracy rather than separated from it. Was the imagination of a social formation linking the aristocracy to the poor classes nothing but a chimera of the historians, an ideological construct and an invention? Steinmetz asks, and he answers 'Yes!' There was no European *Bürgertum* in the nineteenth century that was possible to define or empirically demarcate. However, as Steinmetz emphasizes, this argument is not to say that ideological constructs and invented traditions cannot be socially effective, and from this point of departure *Bürgertum* existed as a historical reality. On this point, one could refer back to the first paragraph of this review and the question of the idea of the world as a whole. The imagination of a *Bürger* society transcending class demarcations and confessional and language barriers was attractive and became an idiom and a lifestyle with considerable refulgence. *Verbürgerlichung* as a cultural norm meant striving for independence, concern about your property, social advancement through education, separation between male-defined work and the female-defined home-sphere, individuality, control of the emotions, refinement of the taste and aestheticisation of everyday life.

The period 1846–1852 was a condensed and fermentative, agitative and alarmed period that entangled Europe in revolution and reaction. The period saw rural riots against poverty, struggles for peasant emancipation from their feudal fetters, and urban fights on the barricades for individual and national freedom. Impoverished rural proletarians and subsistence peasants struggling against bad crop and famine seemed to be in tune with intellectuals raising barricades for political and economic freedom, but they weren't. Steinmetz untangles the threads. When Reinhart Koselleck and his two French co-authors Louis Bergeron and François Furet wrote their volume on the era of the European revolutions (1780–1848) in Fischer's world history (*Fischer Weltgeschichte*) more than 50 years ago, they saw 1848 much more in keeping with 1830 and the independence revolutions in Southern Europe in the 1820s. 1848 was the time of national independence and civic rights, a revolution for liberal values against the restoration of imperial power in Vienna. Steinmetz broadens the view of 1848 to include revolts against hunger in the wake of bad crops in Portugal, Galicia, Poland and elsewhere. Revolts against poverty and for individual and national freedom were two different sets of demands with two different carrier groups. They were both intertwined in revolutionary dynamics, but they were far from coordinated.

Across the thematic fields, Steinmetz investigates four intertwined trends in Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century and up to 1920: the formation of nations, the expansion of state power, the expansion of political participation and the imperial expansion. He maps in great detail how the trends reinforced each other and created tensions and oppositions between them. He documents their various local/national expression in a pattern of European community as well as difference. Nationalism became the superior ideology subordinating other intellectual currents accompanied by constant provocation of new tensions and crises. Rising nations threatened established states and empires, seeing them as peoples' prisons. Conservative governments reinforced state power as an instrument to ward off claims for democracy, parliamentarianism or minority nationalism. Adherents of these claims considered state bureaucracy, the police and the military as their adversaries. However, conservative defense strategies also operated through social

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policies as instruments of integration against the polarizing class struggle perspective. Growing claims for political participation often led to tension between democracy and parliamentarianism as opposed to mutual reinforcement. Regimes with strong parliamentarian orders blocked expansion of suffrage, for instance, and universal (male) suffrage did not necessarily imply strong parliamentary power. With the exception of Finland and Norway there was no European democracy that included female participation until 1918.

Steinmetz asks whether the increasing interconnectedness of the world in the nineteenth century doesn't represent a fifth trend that culminated during the decades before 1914 and represented a first era of globalisation. His evidence includes international congresses between governments and non-governmental associations, growing networks of experts, international movements (for example, female suffrage, sport – especially the Olympic Games – and peace), economic exchange, standardisation, statistics and organisation of time zones. However, after consideration he refers to these features as new modes of action, rather than a trend. The distinction is not quite clear. Cannot the emergence of international action modes represent a trend?

Willibald Steinmetz has written an excellent, erudite book on Europe in the nineteenth century, its contradictions and ambiguities. He demonstrates the overlapping oppositions and transitions between the nationally specific and overall development European patterns. He sheds light on entanglements between political and economic processes and the cultural construction of community in art and science, and this is a new perspective on Europe in its interconnectedness as a historical construction.

There is one flaw, however, beyond the text that Steinmetz has written, but to do with the preconditions of his writing it: the conceptualisation of the series. I refer back to the first paragraph of this review. The point of departure for the new Fischer world history was that the term 'world history' connotes a totality in space and time and therefore the notion of a whole that does not exist. On the other hand, the publisher's ambition wanted to go beyond writing world history as the summary of the histories of its nations and states. Instead, the ambition of the series at the outset was to see the world in terms of its regions and the dynamics within and between them as networks and differences. However, the entanglements, the *histoires croisées*, the ambiguities, the contradictions, the overlapping and the oppositions are in Steinmetz' volume all *within* Europe. There is little on its external dimension. Some 10 pages on imperialism out of 762 do not say much about the nineteenth-century entanglements between Europe, Africa, Asia and the Americas, and do not contribute to a world history of the kind the publisher and its editors advertised. It becomes a world history as the sum of its regions, instead of its nations, but what is the difference? Isn't world history something more than the aggregate of its regions and nations? Isn't a world history in the proper understanding of the term 'the entanglements' between the regions as much as within them? Isn't there a planetary dimension to world history? An often-repeated criticism of international relations studies is that the discipline treats the states as black boxes. Fischer's new world history (*Neue Fischer Weltgeschichte*) treats the externality of the respective regions as black boxes. The first seven monographs in the series deal with Europe from its earliest time. The rest investigate one world region each in longitudinal approaches covering centuries and even millennia. There seems to be little of global entanglement, which no doubt existed, at least from Europe's Middle Ages onwards.

Steinmetz certainly mentions that other volumes in the series will discuss imperialism, but it is not clear which. His very last lines argue that the dynamics he has laid bare for the European nineteenth century determined and also continue to determine global history. Despite the vast internal diversity, it seems justified to talk about one uniform global modernity for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, though modernity cannot yet be said to be over. This is a highly interesting statement, not least when connected to Dipesh Chakrabarty's thesis on provincializing Europe. Not only is global modernity not over and done. The same goes for the research on it.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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