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Abstract

This paper examines the particulars of 'early modern' as well as 'European' political history in terms of chronological and spatial divides. Most political historians of early modern Europe and its component states are far removed from classic teleological approaches based on national state formation and modernization. On the whole, however, a pragmatic national orientation of research based on the proximity of sources and the language capabilities of researchers remains strong, even if it is combined with transnational conceptual gestures. Moreover, the demands of specialized historical research lead to concentration on relatively brief periods: only rarely do we find research reaching from the sixteenth into the eighteenth century. In consequence, while well-worn conventional divides in time as well as in space have few staunch advocates, they tenaciously remain in place. The political history of European states, full of untested reputations, needs a comparative perspective. This will work only if it is based on symmetrical comparison and analysis of primary sources: comparison founded on secondary literature threatens to reinforce national clichés. European history, finally, finds its place only in contrast with other variants of global history. A global comparative perspective presents daunting challenges for researchers, but it is an inevitable and necessary component of the reassessment of European history, modernization, and period labels.

Keywords

early modern, national state, modernization, historiography

The *European History Quarterly*'s invitation to reflect on the temporal and regional divides in early modern European history sparked a searching and inconclusive

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monologue intérieur on my part, raising a number of questions that many historians will have asked themselves. What is European history? Can I qualify as a historian of Europe? Is Europe a pertinent and viable category for historical research? What is the specific importance of the European dimension for early modern history? The idea of Europe has been examined in several impressive studies; many overviews cover Europe as a whole, whereas numerous studies concentrate on specific interactions among European regions from cultural, social, or economic perspectives.[1] Lacking a synoptic overview of such works I take my own research on the dynastic court in France, the Austrian Habsburg territories, the Holy Roman Empire, and more recently Asian empires, as a starting point. The following remarks focus on political history, the key domain of the first generations of academic historians, still seen by a considerable number of historians as the discipline's core territory. The political history of the early modern age was traditionally dominated by the paradigm of national state building. Although a revisionist consensus taking distance from classic national and statist views emerged in the second half of the twentieth century, political historians of early modern Europe have experienced greater difficulty in finding viable alternatives to a national approach than their counterparts in cultural or social history.

Early Modern Europe: A Pathway to Modernity?

The term 'early modern', a relatively recent invention, implies a revision of the classic interpretation of the rise of modernity as well as a hushed continuation of that interpretation. This uncomfortable midway station acknowledges fundamental changes at the extremes of the period 1500–1800, without usually defining the characteristics of the intermediate ages with great clarity – a new *medium aevum* between the Middle Ages no longer pictured as irredeemably static and a Modern Age retaining many elements of the *ancien régime*.[2] Things looked far more straightforward in the nineteenth century, when prophets of modernity from Hegel to Marx categorized European history around 1500 as the dawn of a new age. Economic innovation, rising middle classes, expanding geographical horizons, rationality and political liberty, opened the doors of modernity. Many nineteenth-century scholars, moreover, viewed the preceding centuries through the prism of the polarized political contests of their age, idealizing the forces of progress and in the process burdening twentieth-century historians with an anachronistic and teleological legacy.

Leftovers of this tradition can still be found in school textbooks, repeating the curious notion that people 'started thinking' or 'started thinking for themselves' roughly at the time Columbus discovered new coasts and Luther preached his creed.[3] A self-congratulatory stress on progress and improvement is now rare among established academic historians. Yet they can still choose to define early modern history as a special mixture of change and continuity, as an instance of what German historians have called the 'simultaneity of the unsimultaneous' (*Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen*), citing the words of Ernst Bloch in different

contexts.[4] C. B. A. Behrens, in her old but still stimulating study of *ancien régime* France, comes close to this definition for her specific period of study, 1750–1789, underlining the contradictions inherent in dynastic régimes confronted by the need to tap the wealth of their elites, yet still quite dependent on these pillars of monarchy.[5] The antecedents of the label 'early modern' remain inextricably tied to the idea of modernization. Economic expansion and diversification, state building, changes in mentalities and patterns of life characterize early modern history – yet so do the resilience of the hierarchical conception of society and the socially pervasive sense of regionalism or corporatism. Clearly all phases in history experience contradictions, innovations, changing ways and resilient patterns – this is the substance of what we study. Was the age between c. 1500 and 1800 special largely because it prepared the changeovers of the so-called *Sattelzeit* (Reinhard Koselleck's term for the period of transition ca. 1750–1850) and revolutions?[6] Few early modernists would accept this perspective, based as it is on hindsight and being uncomfortably close to teleology.

Recent debates about the 'Rise of the West' add more reasons for doubt, by pointing out, for instance, that developments in China until the later eighteenth century show patterns of economic, cultural and political change reminiscent of European history in the same age.[7] Increasing global interdependence complicates the comparison from the late eighteenth century onwards, with Europe gradually establishing military superiority over even the strongest of Asian powers, imposing priorities that changed the course of developments in Asia. Nevertheless, the comparative perspective poses the question as to when and why levels of change reached a point of no return, starting a 'take off' into the as yet uncharted domain of modernity, rather than inaugurating yet another cyclical turn in history. A major impulse among early modernists in recent decades has been to accept higher levels of continuity both with earlier and later ages, stressing the persistence of *Alteuropa* even after the impact of an early industrializing economy and the violent redefinitions of political organization and interaction.[8]

The declining appeal of linear sociological perspectives based on nineteenth-century theorists of modernity among historians went hand in hand with an increasing influence of anthropology – a discipline which itself in the course of the twentieth century largely exchanged the evolutionary perspectives of its founding fathers for a diametrically opposed position once critically described as 'developmental agnosticism'.[9] For most historians, there is an obvious intermediate position, studying change within a limited period, while refraining from fitting historical data into a standard mould of progress. Anthropology provides frameworks for the analysis of semi-universal human practices, but at the same time stimulates 'micro-historical' approaches. These different aspects are reflected in the work of, respectively, Jack Goody on succession, kinship and marriage, and Clifford Geertz on the 'theatre-state' and 'thick description'.[10] More generally, by focusing on recurring structures, historical anthropology makes room for synchronic as well as diachronic comparative views. For historians of pre-modern ages, the latter will implicitly always be present in two directions. Like all

historians, they take images of their own age as a starting point while looking at earlier history, whether they like it or not. After becoming familiar with the different mentalities and practices of the age studied, however, they necessarily look differently at their contemporary environments. Arguably, historians share in mitigated form the 'reverse culture shock' experienced by anthropologists upon returning to their own culture after a protracted phase of fieldwork – and students of the pre-modern age may do so more evidently than those concentrating on relatively contemporary and familiar settings. Thus, for example, instead of understanding modern political culture largely in self-referential terms such as democracy, civil society, public sphere, rule of law, impersonal bureaucracy, pre-modernists are likely to recognize patterns of representation, ritual, redistribution, patronage, brokerage, and elites as entirely familiar from earlier history. This perception does not obscure or deny fundamental change, but it helps to reduce overstated and value-laden contrasts.

A brief look at the dynastic court can show the advantages of explicit and methodical comparison along synchronic and diachronic lines. In his path-breaking study of the French court Norbert Elias intertwined a perceptive analysis of court life with his broader conception of a 'civilizing process'.[11] Elias, worthy successor to theorists of modernity from Marx to Weber, presented the interaction between Louis XIV and his nobles at court as an empirical demonstration of his model of long-term psychological change (*Langzeitpsychologie*). However, very similar patterns of interaction (deference, ceremony, status competition, factions) can be found at courts throughout history, indicating that they cannot simply be accepted as building blocks in a European process of transformation. Diachronic comparison of dynastic households is necessary to differentiate between elements apparently related to the household's structure and function that recur in various ages, and elements that seem particular for one period only, and therefore require distinct contextual explanations. A thematic history of this institution, therefore, cannot respect classic period divides, even if they seem to separate phases thoroughly distinct in many ways – and it need not respect geographical boundaries either, although language differences complicate matters here.[12] Moments of change and reconstruction generate source material making possible comparison across the ages, allowing us to examine recurring waves of institutional reform from the fifteenth into the nineteenth century. During my archival studies on the courts of Vienna and Versailles, I was struck by the insistent repetition of very similar phrases in reform texts in the course of three centuries and in two realms. Instructions for chamber servants, for example, reiterate rules forbidding them to accept and pass on petitions, clearly a common occurrence based on their proximity to the ruler. In stark contrast to the conspicuous luxury and solemn ceremonial order often underlined in secondary literature, court ordinances throughout these centuries bewail the confusion ruling everyday routines, display grave budgetary concerns, dictate norms approaching frugality, and lay down procedures for carefully monitoring expenditure. Similar concerns and complaints can be found at courts in other places and periods, even where connections and influences were

wholly absent. Apparently, institutional logic caused problems that evoked parallel responses.[13]

In addition, synchronic comparison corrects reputations based on an isolated perception of one 'national' example only. Comparing Vienna and Versailles, I was surprised to find differences in the attitudes of noble courtiers as well as in their terms of office-holding that contrasted markedly with the reputations of these courts.[14] French noble courtiers, usually depicted as docile and impotent after the end of the *Fronde* rebellion, held semi-hereditary positions at court and were able to accumulate numerous lucrative privileges. A small group of families monopolized high office at court, and used this base to secure a dominant position in regional government, army command and diplomacy.[15] The king, successfully drawing grandees to the court after the *Fronde* rebellion, thus helped to create an exclusive elite that would end only with monarchy itself. In Vienna, no single family obtained a hereditary right to high court office, and the pool of families hoping for nomination remained far larger than the closed French circle. Court office usually followed only after long and loyal service in a *cursus honorum* of lesser offices. Wages were unimpressive, and while extras could be very substantial, they remained an exceptional grace in the hands of the emperor. Habsburg courtiers were more deferential and (somewhat) less given to quarrelling than their haughty French compeers. These differences can easily be explained. Venality of office, though never fully accepted at court, determined the hereditary nature of office-holding in France; it remained the exception in Vienna. French courtiers, notably among them the Condé *grand maître*, were relatively close to the king in rank; they were the highest echelon in the state. The emperor's noble servants from the various Habsburg lands were more distant in rank, and eager to serve, as they could use the court to establish and consolidate their position at the level of the empire and Europe.[16] In fact, the emperor's high noble rivals, his nominal 'imperial courtiers', were the electors and princes, who would only incidentally visit Vienna. The emperor, frequently depicted as a weak figure ruled by powerful magnates, at his court was relatively successful in managing the elites from his hereditary domains. National images of Louis reconstituting the French state after the *Fronde* and Leopold as the ineffective post-Westphalian emperor who could neither rule the empire nor modernize his own domains created reputations that were half-truths at best.

In such national trajectories, the 1640s–1660s often serve as a major milestone. This habit has persisted in the organization of historical research, rarely extending from the early Reformation to the later seventeenth century, or from the wars of religion to the French revolutionary wars. Syntheses tend to cover the period from the later middle ages to Westphalia, or alternatively from the post-1650 reconstitution of stability to the phase of reform and turbulence in the later eighteenth century, rarely from one extreme to the other.[17] National histories or textbooks focusing on political history will tell the entire story, but they more than any other approach stick to conventional dates and images underlining the genesis of states and nations. The stress on 1648 derives from the traditional view of the rise of state

power and the construction of sovereignty. It has never been effectively reassessed or newly conceptualized.[18] The 1650s ended a period of particularly intense contestation in Europe – among states, groups, ideas. Concentrating on longer-term processes rather than on the sharp contrast between rebellion and the restoration, we can see trends continuing from the 1550s into the later years of the seventeenth century. While, indisputably, the machinery of the state expanded in these decades, forms of power, patronage, and decision-making retained familiar traits. Was this a new 'administrative monarchy' pointing towards the future, or in fact a restatement of traditional forms, a 'baroque monarchy' with dynastic policies and personal connections occupying pride of place?[19] Recent work tends to support the latter view. From a political point of view it makes sense to stress the consolidation of states and elites after the protracted phase of religious warfare; from a cultural perspective there is reason to point to a change in mentality, once captured by Hazard in the phrase 'crise de la conscience européenne'.[20] There is little reason, however, to accept the boundary of the 1650s, based as much on convenience and on traditional assumptions about change as on actually tested and confirmed patterns of change.

The same holds true for the classic period markers of medieval, early modern, and modern history. Research should overstep and re-examine these divides rather than reverently respect them. Co-operation between specialists of the later Middle Ages and students of the sixteenth century seems relatively easy.[21] The late eighteenth-century divide exerts a far more powerful influence. It is difficult to find books on state formation and political culture which convincingly integrate key questions before and after the great divide of 1789–1815. Specialized studies deal with social continuities at the rural, urban or elite levels[22] – yet general political syntheses more often than not study the changeover emphatically from the perspective of either the eighteenth or the nineteenth century. The French Revolution therefore in practice still acts both as the endpoint of the *ancien régime*, and as the springboard for modern developments. The phase of renewed warfare, fiscal crisis, reform and intense debate starting in the 1740s occupies a kind of middle ground and has its own group of specialists, standing between early modernists and modern historians.

If early modern history cannot be understood as an extended variant of the *Sattelzeit*, what in fact characterized it, in Europe and on a global scale? Do these three centuries share characteristics that set them apart from earlier and later ages? While academic curricula will include introductory courses in early modern history, and history departments have early modern chairs and sections, research in practice tends to be organized not along the lines of early modern history in its entirety, but in smaller segments, often connected to centuries. Titles of academic historical journals underline the surprising importance of centuries, these convenient yet empty vessels of history. Alongside established national historical periodicals, century-based journals predominate in most languages (admittedly often reflecting an interdisciplinary approach, including literary and art-historical perspectives). It is inevitable and entirely justifiable that research

focus on shorter periods and more detailed questions, yet we need studies crossing the habitual borders, such as Keith Thomas's various studies on early modern England or John Elliott's comparative study of the Spanish and the British in the Americas, to remind us of the recurring themes and questions of early modern history as a whole. Elliott shows how reputations of the modern Americas had distorted interpretations of the earlier period. He examines and compares changes in the connections between the central governments in Europe and the American colonies during a very long phase, but also deals with example, imitation, and interaction between the colonies. His book conveys a recognizably 'early modern' flavour of regionalism, the persistent discourse of privilege, and the inconsistencies of ongoing government reform.[23]

A wider comparative horizon including other empires in Eurasia can help to reassess the contours of a specifically early modern phase in global history – neither entirely separated from the questions of change and modernization, nor wholly dictated by the limited premises of the Whig interpretation of history. Jack Goldstone perspicaciously denied the general validity of 'early modern' as a period label in world history, presenting alternatives based on economic development. Craig Clunas depicts a vibrant Ming culture, in many ways close to simultaneous developments in Europe. Conversely, On-Cho Ng's comparison of Europe's intellectual changeover in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to developments in Ming and Qing China, tends to confirm the distinctiveness of the European case. Viktor Lieberman's wide-ranging comparison of processes of state-formation and integration in Eurasia underlines similar tendencies, while at the same time he differentiates between cultures influenced permanently by Central Asian migration and more distant territories. Sanjay Subramahnyam analyses several intriguing connections, interactions, and conjunctures in the early modern world. Among other studies, such works in different and not necessarily compatible ways contribute to the comparative silhouette of early modern Europe.[24]

States, Nations, Empires and Regions

The nation-states of Europe play an overwhelming role in traditional as well as in current historiography. In an age of increasingly global connections, national history has remained remarkably strong – in some ways disturbingly so. The early modern period, traditionally pictured as the phase in which states gradually took shape, forms a marked component in modern national identities. Several European countries locate their finest hours and golden ages in the sixteenth, seventeenth, or eighteenth centuries. The perception of success apparently leaves a strong imprint. The French *grand siècle* offers a case in point,[25] but the Dutch situation is equally remarkable. Dutch commercial supremacy, cultural flourishing, and military power, arising within decades after the uneasy inception of the Dutch Republic, appeal to a wider Dutch public, a privileged position shared only by the Second World War, and possibly by the later Dutch overseas empire in the East Indies. Dutch early modernists, usually reading several languages and concentrating on

European rather than Dutch history in teaching, almost without exception define their research primarily in terms of Dutch sources and Dutch themes, connected more often than not to the Revolt and the Golden Age. The less glamorous eighteenth century long remained *terra incognita*, whereas the history of the Southern Netherlands was often left out of the picture. In fact, the current generation seems more closely focused on Dutch history than were their predecessors a generation ago.[26] This supposition needs a more thorough substantiation; yet if it proves correct, and particularly if it is equally relevant for other countries, it raises thorny questions. How can this reorientation be squared with an increasingly globalized academic world, strongly influenced by interdisciplinary, international and transnational approaches, and partly funded by institutions on the whole supportive of innovative efforts? Can it be connected to a change in the general public, with a renewed interest in the icons of national history? While the public attitude can possibly be understood as a strengthened need for identity and confirmation in an age of global change and insecurity, we would expect different attitudes among professional historians. A long-standing obligation of the post-1945 generations of historians has been to go beyond the predominantly national orientation of the authoritative late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century constructions of national identity. That endeavour has been quite successful in terms of widening the social and thematic scope of history. Thus far it has been less effective in providing a comparative view of the key issues of political history in the early modern age. In addition to general overviews of European history and general interpretations of state building, most monographs dealing with political history take one state as a starting point.

Interestingly, foreign historians have often been instrumental in connecting the national past to wider horizons. Geoffrey Parker's work on the Dutch Revolt and the army of Flanders, for example, introduced a fresh view based on Spanish and Flemish sources.[27] Parker's role among Dutch historians is representative of a wider category of 'outsiders' playing a major role in the rewriting of European continental history. On the whole, British and American early modernists appear to have been more willing to learn the languages and study the archives of other countries than have many of their continental European counterparts. The revision of French 'absolutism', for instance, was initiated by British and American historians, with William Beik and Roger Mettam, among others, opening a discussion in which French participation long remained limited.[28] German and Spanish history, too, were revitalized in part by English-language historians – John Elliott's work has already been mentioned here. Relative outsiders, learning languages and crossing cultural borders while often simultaneously teaching national history, become implicit comparatists, taking distance from standardized national accounts and asking different questions. Nationals concentrating on their own history lack this advantage, particularly when they study the 'finest hours' of their past.

The Holy Roman Empire, a political structure never unambiguously embraced by national historians, has recently attracted lively scholarship and debate. The empire in the early modern age, long seen in terms of the decay of the medieval

empire and the humiliating defeat through Bourbon-induced *Kleinstaaterei*, by both German and Austrian historians, has now been reinterpreted in many more positive ways.[29] Apparently, it is easier for historians to correct the negative images of their forebears than to deflate the icons of the national past by putting them into a wider European perspective. The seventeenth-century Austrian Habsburg 'baroque' monarchy, put on the map mostly through the work of Robert Evans, offers another example where earlier negative associations facilitated the rapid reception of a new and authoritative interpretation.[30] Typically, the discussion on the Holy Roman Empire does follow lines that echo contemporary national preoccupations: the practices of litigation and ritual representation have been seen as 'prefiguring' the post-1945 European experiment rather than as a pitiful case of lagging behind in the process of national state formation. The very question of to what extent the empire could be fitted into more general European developments has engendered debates that rarely arise in states with a more clear-cut trajectory of development. The new historiography of the empire shows a vigour that matches major debates – such as that on the French Revolution.

The Empire, largely German-speaking, arguably one 'communicative space' (*Kommunikationsraum*) sharing an increasingly dense 'public sphere', shifts the issue from national to regional and European history. In Central and Eastern Europe, politically connected to the empire and likewise rarely seen as the 'heartland' of early modern processes of modernization, a lively tradition of historical scholarship combining wider regional perspectives with high levels of language expertise has developed.[31] Can the regions of Europe still usefully serve as points of orientation for research? The regional divisions of European history, notably East versus West of the Elbe, or the 'core lands' of Western Europe along the Atlantic and North Sea coasts, versus areas in the North, South, and East of Europe are intertwined with the modernization paradigm.[32] Economic modernization has usually been linked to the shift from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic Ocean in the long sixteenth century, and to regional specialization and the development of 'second serfdom' in Central and Eastern Europe. Political modernization has most often been connected to standard models in Britain and France, with the Dutch Republic in a subsidiary role. After defining the North-West as the heartland, subsequent modernizing or 'Westernizing' tendencies in terms of culture, economy, state building and warfare could be construed elsewhere: in Brandenburg-Prussia, Austria, or Russia. Alternatively, regions could be seen as missing this opportunity, lacking the potential for change. The classic opposition between the 'old decaying empires' and new rising states comes to mind – a framework that cannot be upheld in its cruder form, as new research both on the Holy Roman Empire and the Ottoman empire shows.[33]

A regional perspective can highlight the importance of lower-level identities and loyalties, which were often more important than those at the distant central political level. Conversely, it can show interactions not limited to one political centre: Scandinavian or Italian-Iberian connections; the Habsburg network of dynastic possessions. Alternatively, it can sidestep the political criterion altogether, defining

regions on the basis of landscape and geography. Fernand Braudel pioneered this approach in his study on the Mediterranean; his example has been followed effectively for other seas, for example the Indian Ocean.[34] Seas, rivers, mountain ranges can form the starting point for studying cultural, social and economic interactions. Regions were meeting points and thoroughfares for persons, groups, objects and ideas. Trade routes, patterns of army and refugee movement, religious conversions and migrations, the spread of pamphlets and books, networks of correspondences or cultural fashions of many kinds rarely conformed neatly to political borders. Nor did political entities themselves fit the principle of nationality. Regions defended vehemently their political privileges and rights; dynastic power itself, even if it necessarily embraced and to a certain extent embodied age-old cultural forms of the realms over which it ruled, was first and foremost a highly international family business. Rulers of dynastic composite states, moreover, tended to address the heterogeneous components of their realms in very different voices. The term 'transnational', coined as a commentary on the omnipresence of national perspectives, seems somewhat out of place in early modern history. Even historians who in practice concentrate their research on national history usually acknowledge 'transnational' patterns in the early modern age as a general and therefore arguably unremarkable phenomenon.

In addition to numerous overviews and syntheses, several types of publications deal with political history at the European level: volumes bringing together specialists from various countries or individual attempts to attain higher levels of abstraction. The publications of Charles Tilly, notably his *Coercion*, *Capital*, *and European States*, ranks among the most influential works of the second category.[35] The problem of such generalizing studies is that they necessarily rely on secondary literature, sometimes using outdated views as the basis for generalized claims. Hence they risk restating and reinvigorating national typologies in the process – Ludovician 'absolutism'; the uncourtly Prussian army-based *Beamtenstaat* and the like. In this respect, multi-authored volumes can be more effective because they bring together specialists. The ESF-sponsored project on the 'Origins of the Modern State in Europe: 13th to 18th Centuries' published in seven volumes by Oxford University Press is perhaps the most ambitious example of this category.[36] While it includes brilliant contributions, it suffers from the customary problem of conference volumes: uneven quality of papers. Moreover, conference volumes often fail to effectively synthesize the various cases described, and therefore remain inconclusive. In the end, individual comparative work, on the basis of language competence and archival research, seems an indispensable supplement to generalist studies based on secondary literature and edited volumes.[37] However, such works remains the exception in early modern political history.

While uniformity or proximity in language facilitated communication in the past, it was never a precondition – as Braudel's Mediterranean shows. In his letters to his friend and ambassador Count Pötting, Emperor Leopold I nimbly jumps from German to Spanish, Italian, to Latin – creating a powerful personal idiom.[38] Leopold's linguistic versatility must have been an exception. Certainly, a critical

discourse existed on the influence of foreign languages: Italian in the French con-
text, French in the German or Dutch contexts. Elites demanded the adaptation of
incoming dynastic rulers and their spouses to cherished local traditions, whereas
the 'foreign' followings accompanying new rulers frequently triggered vehement
arguments.[39] On the whole, however, early modern sources remind us of the
refreshingly unprincipled use of language in the age. Languages structure and
facilitate current academic practice, but they also delineate limitations. English
increasingly serves as the lingua franca of the academic world. This assists fluent
communication during many international conferences, yet it connects only a lim-
ited selection of scholars. Multi-language conferences can be a surprising experi-
ence, with the international audience breaking up into smaller language-based
groups. Even within Europe, languages still represent a major stumbling block.
How many languages do we have to master to qualify as a historian of Europe, as a
comparative historian, or a world historian? It is easier to learn languages in one
family than to turn from Spanish to German or Russian – let alone to Persian,
Arabic or Chinese.

Direct communication among scholars is only the least of the problems con-
nected to language. It is hardly in the commercial interest of publishers to translate
learned monographs, and almost all primary sources will be available only in their
original language. Language capabilities are a necessary condition for European as
well as for wider comparative history. This is a matter of some concern, as language
training in many school systems seems to be becoming less effective[40] or alterna-
tively less attractive for students who can justifiably see English as their only nec-
essary vehicle into the modern world. This, indeed, may be one of the drawbacks of
globalization.

Comparative History and the 'Voices' from the Past

Early modern European history, whenever possible and relevant, needs to include
in its research the entire phase from the fourteenth-century crisis up to the revo-
lutionary wave of the late 1840s. Conventional boundaries with medieval and
modern history, as well as the implicit and pragmatic dividing line of the 1650s,
need to overstepped systematically: these phases of change demand special scru-
tiny. In this open and questioning form, rather than as the classic roadmap towards
modernity, the early modern age remains a vital focus of research and teaching,
with a cluster of phenomena linked to it, ranging from the printing press and
Reformation, to economic expansion, the emergence of an increasingly interdepen-
dent world, and the ongoing redefinition of state–elite–populace relations.

The political history of European states is full of untested reputations. Only
through comparison can we hope to establish standards detached from the trajec-
tories of national history, informed and corrected by synchronic as well as dia-
chronic comparative perspectives. However, comparative research based largely on
secondary literature, or asymmetric comparisons based on unequal levels of knowl-
edge, can repeat or even strengthen narrow national reputations. A symmetric

comparative approach based systematically on roughly equivalent research in primary sources rather than on the study of secondary literature, is indispensable to go beyond national stereotypes. This process, moreover, can no longer stop at the frontiers of Europe, wherever we locate them. European history takes shape only as a specific variant of social, cultural and political patterns seen elsewhere. Europe, in fact, has always been defined in opposition to cultures or forces seen as different.[41] Teaching and research demand a balanced mixture of regional, national, European, and global perspectives. European generalists, primarily those who study cultures and countries outside their national tradition, can play a key role here. There is little reason for a defensive posture against a 'take-over' by world history, as long as it is not understood as a bland mixture of generalized examples, parallels and differences, distant from the experiences of human actors. It needs to be studied at the level of sources, asking specific thematic questions, providing answers at the level of texts and persons rather than producing a catalogue of civilizations or systems. In-depth comparison on a global scope demands extensive knowledge as well as language capabilities that cannot be achieved easily by individual scholars, and therefore requires new forms of research cooperation.[42] This challenge needs to be addressed.

National history as well as the narrowly European modernization perspective, prime movers of an earlier generation, have run out of steam. Their demise has implications for classic definitions of European as well as early modern history. An effort is necessary to relocate and redefine Europe in the early modern world. The contours of European history, itself a conglomerate of disparate cases, are determined partly by the question of what made it different from others. This can be ascertained by studying global connections and perceptions, as well as by a focused comparison of patterns and structures. In the process we can verify whether 'early modern' as a period label has a special quality and connotation both for Europe and for the wider world; whether it is relevant only or mostly for Europe – or indeed whether it needs to be redefined even more thoroughly.

Notes

1. Peter Burke, 'Did Europe Exist before 1700?', *History of European Ideas*, Vol. 1 (1980) 21–9; see also Richard Evans's contribution to this issue.
2. See Randolph Starn, 'Review Article: The Early Modern Muddle', *Journal of Early Modern History*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (2002) 296–307 for the rise of the term early modern and a critical discussion.
3. This phrase recurs in Dutch primary school teaching materials and can be found in popular works (or now even on the internet), usually related to Humanism, Renaissance and Enlightenment. See more nuanced and contextualized variants in academic textbooks, e.g. Marvin Perry, Myrna Chase, Margaret C. Jacob and James R. Jacob (eds), *Western Civilization: Ideas, Politics, and Society*, *Volume 1: To 1789* (Florence / Kentucky 2009), 448, here in the context of *philosophes* taking distance from Christian learning.
4. Ernst Bloch, 'Ungleichzeitigkeit und Berauschung' in *Erbschaft dieser Zeit* (Frankfurt 1962), collected works, Vol. 4; see also Starn, 'Early Modern Muddle', citing Hans Erich

Bodecker and Ernst Hinrichs, 'Einleitung' in *Alteuropa – Ancien Régime – Frühe Neuzeit: Probleme und Methoden der Forschung* (Stuttgart and Bad Cannstatt 1991), 11–50.

5. C. B. A. Behrens. *The Ancien Régime* (London 1967).

6. Reinhart Koselleck, 'Einleitung', in Otto Brunner, Werner Conze and Reinhart Koselleck (ed.), *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (Stuttgart 1979). Vol. 1, xv.

7. Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton 2000); R. Bin Wong, *China Transformed; Historical Change and the Limits of European Experience* (Ithaca 1997); Jack Goldstone, 'The Rise of the West – Or Not? A Revision to Socio-Economic History', *Sociological Theory*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (2000), 175–94. For a general discussion of European epochal labels in world history see Shmuel N. Eisenstadt and Wolfgang Schluchter, 'Introduction: Paths to Early Modernities? A Comparative View', *Daedalus*, Vol. 127, No. 3 (1998), 1–18, in which the authors underline 'multiple modernities' characterized by the rise of a public sphere/civil society and the strengthening of collective identities, categories taken from 'first European modernity'; Björn Wittrock 'Early Modernities: Varieties and Transitions', *Daedalus*, Vol. 127, No. 3 (1998), 19–40 lists numerous transformations, and likewise stresses the rise of the public sphere, the theme of the conference that gave rise to this special *Daedalus* issue.

8. Various versions of *Alteuropa*: Otto Brunner, *Neue Wege der Verfassungs- und Sozialgeschichte* (Göttingen 1980); Dietrich Gerhard, *Old Europe. A Study of Continuity 1000–1800* (New York 1981); Arno J. Mayer, *The Persistence of the Old Regime: Europe to the Great War* (London 1981); also see Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge 1988). See important perspectives on the relevance of dynasty in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: Johannes Paulmann, *Pomp und Politik: Monarchenbegegnungen in Europa zwischen Ancien Régime und Erstem Weltkrieg* (Paderborn 2000); Roderick R. MacLean, *Royalty and Diplomacy in Europe*, 1890–1914 (Cambridge 2001); Laurence Cole and Daniel L. Unowsky (eds), *The Limits of Loyalty: Imperial Symbolism, Popular Allegiances, and State Patriotism in the Late Habsburg Monarchy* (New York 2007).

9. The term 'developmental agnosticism' was coined by Karl A. Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power* (New Haven 1957), 7.

10. Jack Goody, *Succession to High Office* (Cambridge 1966); Jack Goody, *Comparative Studies in Kinship* (Stanford 1969); Jack Goody, *The Oriental, the Ancient and the Primitive: Systems of Marriage and the Family in Pre-Industrial Societies of Eurasia* (Cambridge 1990); Clifford Geertz, *Negara: The Theatre-State in Nineteenth-century Bali* (Princeton 1980); Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York 1983). See Hans Medick, *Weben und Überleben in Laichingen 1650–1900. Lokalgeschichte als allgemeine Geschichte* (Göttingen 1996), an impressive example of micro-history.

11. Norbert Elias, *Die höfische Gesellschaft. Untersuchungen zur Soziologie des Königtums und der höfischen Aristokratie. Mit einer Einleitung: Soziologie und Geschichtswissenschaft* (Darmstadt and Neuwied 1969); Norbert Elias, *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation. Soziogenetische und Psychogenetische Untersuchungen* (Bern 1969), 2 vols; see a critique in Jeroen Duindam, *Myths of Power. Norbert Elias and the Early Modern European Court* (Amsterdam 1995) and Jeroen Duindam, 'Norbert

Elias und der frühneuzeitliche Hof. Versuch einer Kritik und Weiterführung', *Historische Anthropologie*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (1998) 370–87.

12. See the closing statement in Malcolm Vale, *The Princely Court: Medieval Courts and Culture in North-West Europe, 1270–1380* (Oxford 2001), 300: 'The history of European courts can never exclude or ignore change, but it remains essentially a study of continuities'; for a European-Asian perspective, see Jeroen Duindam, 'Dynastic Centres in Europe and Asia: A Layout for Comparison', e-journal *Heidelberg Papers in South Asian and Comparative Studies* (June 2009), URN: urn:nbn:de:bsz:16-opus-96303 URL: http://www.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/archiv/9630

13. See among recent comparative volumes: A. J. S. Spawforth (ed.), *The Court and Court Society in Ancient Monarchies* (Cambridge 2007); Anne Walthall (ed.), *Servants of the Dynasty. Palace Women in World History* (Berkeley CA 2008); Tülay Artan, Jeroen Duindam and Metin Kunt (eds), *Royal Courts in Dynastic States and Empires* (Brill forthcoming 2010); among important monographs: Evelyn Rawski, *The Last Emperors: A Social History of Qing Imperial Institutions* (Berkeley CA 1998); Rhoads Murphey, *Exploring Ottoman Sovereignty: Tradition, Image and Practice in the Ottoman Imperial Household 1400–1800* (London and New York 2008).

14. See Jeroen Duindam, *Vienna and Versailles: The Courts of Europe's Dynastic Rivals, 1550–1780* (Cambridge 2003).

15. Duindam, *Vienna and Versailles*; for greater detail on this point see Leonhard Horowski, *Machtstrukturen und Karrieremechanismen am Hof von Frankreich 1661–1789*, Beihefte der Francia, 72 (Ostfildern forthcoming 2011).

16. See an analysis of the nobles' motivation to attend court in Andreas Pečar, *Die Ökonomie der Ehre. Der höfische Adel am Kaiserhof Karls VI. (1711–1740)* (Darmstadt 2003).

17. Two excellent examples of this tendency: Richard Bonney, *The European Dynastic States, 1494–1660* (Oxford 1991); William Doyle, *The Old European Order, 1660–1800* (Oxford 1992); alternatively, there is the century-based approach, of which a good example would be Thomas Munck, *Seventeenth Century Europe: State, Conflict and the Social Order in Europe, 1598–1700* (New York 1990). In thematic research, the same dividing line can be found, see, e.g., the debate on the military revolution where Geoffrey Parker, *The Military Revolution: Military Innovation and the Rise of the West, 1500–1800 (Cambridge 1997)* implicitly deals primarily with the phase up to 1660, whereas *Jeremy Black, European Warfare: 1660–1815* (London 1994) explicitly deals with the phase following 1660. Both authors, moreover, focus in practice on one part of Europe (as well as, in Parker's case, on Asia). For a regional perspective reaching from the sixteenth into the eighteenth century, see Robert Frost, *The Northern Wars: War, State and Society in Northeastern Europe, 1558–1721* (Harlow 2000).

18. An intelligent and historically well-informed international relations reassessment of the Reformation and Westphalia can be found in Daniel H. Nexon, *The Struggle for Power in Early Modern Europe: Religious Conflict, Dynastic Empires & International Change* (Princeton 2009).

19. Peter R. Campbell, *Power and Politics in Old Regime France, 1720–1745* (London 1996) introduces the term 'baroque monarchy'. For careful discussion of the impact of dynastic policies and noble families, e.g. on the French army, see David Parrott, *Richelieu's Army: War, Government and Society in France, 1624–1642* (Cambridge 2001); Guy Rowlands, *The Dynastic State and the Army under Louis XIV: Royal Service and Private Interest, 1661–1701* (Cambridge 2002).

20. Paul Hazard, *Crise de la conscience européenne, 1680–1715* (Paris 1935); followed by a more recent tendency to push back the frontier of modernity into the seventeenth century, see e.g. Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650–1750* (Oxford 2001).

21. Good examples close to my field of research would be the multi-volume *Residenzenforschung* series, covering the period from the later middle ages into the early seventeenth century, e.g. Holger Kruse and Werner Paravicini (eds), *Höfe und Hofordnungen 1200–1600. 5. Symposium der Residenzen-Kommission der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen* (Sigmaringen 1999), and the volumes edited by Jean-Philippe Genet and Wim Blockmans on the 'Origins of the Modern State in Europe: 13th to 18th Centuries', see the seven titles listed at the Oxford University Press website: http://ukcatalogue.oup.com/category/academic/series/history/omse.do. See also Hillay Zmora, *Monarchy, Aristocracy, and the State in Europe, 1300–1800* (London 2001), more convincing for the earlier phase than for the eighteenth century.

22. See e.g. Peter Jones, *Liberty and Locality in Revolutionary France: Six Villages Compared, 1760–1820* (Cambridge 2003).

23. Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England* (London 1971); idem, *Man and the Natural World. Changing Attitudes in England 1500–1800* (London 1983); John Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America 1492–1830* (New Haven 2007).

24. Jack Goldstone, 'The Problem of the ''Early Modern'' World', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (1998), 249–84; Timothy Brook, 'Medievality and the Chinese Sense of History', *The Medieval History Journal,* Vol. 1, No. 1 (1998), 145–64; On-Cho Ng, 'The Epochal Concept of ''Early Modernity'' and the Intellectual History of Late Imperial China', *Journal of World History*, Vol.14, No. 1 (2003), 37–61; Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'Connected Histories: Notes Towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (1997) 735–62; Craig Clunas, 'Review Essay: Modernity Global and Local: Consumption and the Rise of the West', *American Historical Review*, Vol. 104, No. 5 (1999) 1497–1511. See also the opening of Clunas's *Empire of Great Brightness:. Visual and Material Cultures of Ming China, 1368–1644* (Honolulu 2007), 7–9, offering a description that perfectly seems to match 'bustling' Europe.

25. See recently in the context of a 'débat sur l'identité nationale', Michel Winock: 'L'histoire, instrument d'identification nationale', *L'Express*, 28/12/2009, http://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/politique/michel-winock-l-histoire-instrument-d-identification-nationale_838742.html?p = 3#commentaire

26. This statement is based only on a brief survey of research by current and previous scholars (limited to full professors). It is interesting to note that two prominent earlier scholars wrote dissertations on French history, E. H. Kossmann, *La Fronde* (Leiden 1954); A. Th. van Deursen, *Professions et métiers: un aspect de l'histoire de la revocation de l'édit de Nantes* (Groningen 1960). There is no parallel for this in the current generation, although the early work of Willem Frijhoff, younger than Kossmann and Van Deursen, has a French component; M. E. H. N. Mout in her publications included German–Bohemian connections; P. J. A. N. Rietbergen publishes on a variety of European and global themes. Historians of Dutch overseas expansion necessarily adopt a wider geographical perspective. On the whole, however, Dutch early modernists deal primarily with Dutch history.

27. See a recent discussion of the historiography of the Dutch by Judith Pollman, 'Internationalisering en de Nederlandse Opstand', *Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, Vol. 124, No. 4 (2009), 515–35.

28. William Beik, *Absolutism and Society in Seventeenth-Century France: State Power and Provincial Aristocracy in Languedoc* (Cambridge 1985); Roger Mettam, *Power and Faction in Louis XIV's France* (Oxford and New York 1988). An early French voice: Daniel Dessert, *Argent, pouvoir et société au grand siècle* (Paris 1984); more recently e.g. Katia Béguin, *Les princes de Condé. Rebelles, courtisans et mécènes dans la France du grand siècle* (Paris 1999); the study of Louis XIV by Olivier Chaline, *Le règne de Louis XIV* (Paris 2005) shows the integration of the revisionist perspective in French history – at the same time, several English-language critiques of revisionism appeared, notably John J. Hurt, *Louis XIV and the Parlements: the Assertion of Royal Authority* (Manchester 2002).

29. The debate was intensified by Georg Schmidt's challenging *Geschichte des alten Reiches: Staat und Nation in der Frühen Neuzeit, 1495–1806* (München 1999); Matthias Schnettger (ed.), *Imperium Romanum – irregulare corpus – Teutscher Reichs-Staat. Das Alte Reich im Verständnis der Zeitgenossen und der Historiographie* (Mainz 2002); for accessible overviews see Peter H. Wilson, *The Holy Roman Empire, 1495–1806* (Basingstoke 1999); Stephan Wendehorst and Siegrid Westphal (eds), *Lesebuch Altes Reich* (Oldenbourg 2006); an important recent study is Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger, *Des Kaisers alte Kleider: Verfassungsgeschichte und Symbolsprache des Alten Reiches* (Munich 2008).

30. Robert J. W. Evans *The Making of the Habsburg Monarchy, 1550–1700: An Interpretation* (Oxford 1979).

31. See e.g. Miroslav Hroch or Josef Polišenský; on the latter see e.g. R. J. W. Evans, 'A Czech Historian in Troubled Times: J. V. Polišenský', *Past & Present*, Vol. 176 (2002), 257–74. A recent example of this 'regionalist' approach is Balázs Trencsényi and Márton Zászkaliczky (eds), *Whose Love of Which Country? Composite States, National Histories and Patriotic Discourses in Early Modern East Central Europe* (Leiden and Boston 2010).

32. Peter Burke, 'How to Write a History of Europe: Europe, Europes, Eurasia', *European Review*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (2006), 233–9.

33. On the Ottomans see Karen Barkey, *Empire of Difference: The Ottomans in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge 2008); see works cited in note 29 above on the Holy Roman Empire.

34. Fernand P. Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* (Paris 1949), two vols. See Michael Pearson, *The Indian Ocean* (London 2003); compare the reference to Braudel's Méditerranée in: François Gipouloux, *La Méditerranée asiatique: villes portuaires et réseaux marchands en Chine, au Japon et en Asie du Sud-Est, XVIe-XXIe siècle* (Paris 2009).

35. Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990–1990* (Cambridge MA 1990); see also Thomas Ertman, *Birth of the Leviathan: Building States and Regimes in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge 1997) – a highly intelligent though not altogether convincing model of differentiated state building. There is a close connection here with works on the military revolution (see note 17), e.g. Brian Downing, *The Military Revolution and Political Change in Early Modern Europe* (Princeton 1992). See the impressive study by Jack A. Goldstone, *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World* (Berkeley 1991), including Asia in his comparative perspective.

Goldstone carefully circumvents a narrow modernizing perspective, but insists somewhat rigidly on the dominant role of demography in 'state breakdowns'.

36. For the ESF series see note 21 above. At a more modest level of ambition, numerous volumes can be listed, e.g. the series edited by R. Porter and M. Teich, dealing with Enlightenment, Romanticism and Scientific Revolution 'in national context', see e.g. B. Scribner, R. Porter and M. Teich (eds), *The Reformation in National Context* (Cambridge 1994); among volumes on court-related issues see e.g. John Adamson, *The Princely Courts of Europe 1500–1750: Ritual, Politics and Culture Under the Ancient Regime, 1500–1750* (London 1999), a lavishly illustrated and accessible book with a good introduction by the editor, on the whole repeating the formula of A. G. Dickens (ed.), *The Courts of Europe: Politics, Patronage and Royalty 1400–1800* (London 1977); or the more scholarly work edited and introduced expertly by Ronald Asch (and Adolf Birke), *Princes, Patronage, and the Nobility: The Court at the Beginning of the Modern Age, c.1450–1650* (Oxford 1991); Hamish M. Scott (ed.), *The European Nobilities in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Basingstoke 1995, 2007) edited two versions of a particularly useful work on European nobilities, in two volumes discussing respectively Western and Southern Europe, and Northern, Central and Eastern Europe. Also see the authoritative overview by Wolfgang Reinhard, *Geschichte der Staatsgewalt: eine vergleichende Verfassungsgeschichte Europas von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart* (Munich 1999)

37. Among recent comparative work see Cédric Michon, *La Crosse et le Sceptre. Les prélats d'État sous François Ier et Henri VIII* (Paris 2008).

38. See A. F. Pribram and M. Landwehr von Pragenau (eds), *Privatbriefe Kaiser Leopold I an den Grafen F.E. Pötting 1662–1673*, (Vienna 1903–4) I–II Fontes Rerum Austriacarum, LVI–LVII. More generally on language, see Peter Burke and Roy Porter (eds), *The Social History of Language* (Cambridge 1987).

39. Many examples of such patterns in Duindam, *Vienna and Versailles*. Sixteenth-century court ordinances often mixed offices and hierarchies from various countries, particularly in queens' households. On foreign followings and favourites, see David Onnekink, 'Mynheer Benting Now Rules Over Us': the 1st Earl of Portland and the Re-emergence of the English Favourite (1689–1699), *English Historical Review*, CXXI (2006), 693–713.

40. Similar concerns were voiced by the British Academy, 'Language Matters. A Position Paper', 3 June 2009; this paper, and several earlier statements, can be found at the Academy's website at: http://www.britac.ac.uk/reports/language-matters/press-release. cfm. In the Dutch context, school and curriculum reforms over the last three decades were reviewed in very critical terms by a parliamentary commission, see reports and discussion at: http://web.archive.org/web/20080405202650/http://www.tweedekamer.nl/kamerleden/commissies/TCO/sub/index.jsp

41. Burke, 'Did Europe Exist before 1700'; for a perceptive discussion of comparative strategies, see Jürgen Osterhammel, 'Sozialgeschichte im Zivilisationsvergleich. Zu künftigen Möglichkeiten komparativer Geschichtswissenschaft', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (1996), 143–64.

42. Even impressive examples of global work on elites and governments, such as Michael Mann, *Sources of Social Power: A History of Power from the Beginning to AD 1760* (Cambridge 1986); S. E. Finer's *The History of Government. III. Empires, Monarchies and the Modern State* (Oxford 1997) necessarily fail to include sources; see recent probing comparative work by Asia specialists, Victor Lieberman, *Strange*

Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800–1830, 2 vols (Cambridge 2003–2009), and Sanjay Subramahnyam, *Explorations in Connected History*, 2 vols (Delhi 2005).

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