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Europe since the Seventies

Jeremy BLACK

Reaktion Books, 2009, ISBN 978-1-86189-4243

£15.95 (pbk), 256 pp.

In his most recent book, Jeremy Black sets out to challenge the conventional periodisation of contemporary European history. Starting in 1970, rather than 1945, he divides the Cold War into two. Instead of finishing off in 1989, or 2000, he takes his narrative well into the year 2008. One of his reasons for this unusual practice is a pragmatic one. Twenty years after the end of the Cold War, the age of nuclear deterrence is as remote to the students of the year 2009 as Napoleon or Julius Caesar. Taking their perspective seriously, he seeks to cater to their need for a historical coverage of a more recent past. A second reason is a historiographical one. The immediate post-war period until 1970 was an era of clean-cut political divisions, of unprecedented growth and optimism at least in Western Europe. A story starting in 1970 would be quite different. It would be characterised by political change – starting with the fall of the authoritarian regimes in Southern Europe –, by recurrent economic crises, and by the dual challenge of globalisation and relative decline.

Despite his emphasis on 1970 as a starting point, Black devotes an entire chapter to the period between 1945 and 1970, in order to provide the necessary backdrop to the subsequent chapters. Accounting for the political situation at the time, Black distinguishes between three zones of Europe: Eastern Europe, an area consisting of Communist one-party states dominated by the Soviet Union, Southern Europe, ruled by aging authoritarian dictators and Western Europe defined by democratic political systems, comprising both members of NATO and neutral countries. These distinctions, Black argues, proved consequential in the long run, and inform the structure of his narrative in later chapters. Indeed Black takes great pains to

cover Southern and Eastern Europe adequately, even if one wonders whether the various examples from Albania (e.g. p. 52, 100) – a poor Muslim country in the Balkans, sealed off and ruled by an idiosyncratic Communist dictator – may really serve as illustrations representative of the situation in Eastern Europe. Such choice of evidence is probably due to the lack of research on the most recent period of Eastern European history available in Western languages. It may also be the result of the necessarily efficient production methods of a prolific writer, who has churned out an awe-inspiring 80 books on a broad range of topics from war in the early modern period to 'America since the Sixties'.

Black organises his account thematically, starting with the environment and demography as structural factors, if not determinants (p. 242) shaping Europe's history. Despite the rise of environmental history in recent years, the issue of the environment has rarely been given such a prominent treatment in a history of Europe. Devoting ample attention to the environment is very appropriate for a history since the 1970s, exactly because at that time the environment became an important political issue. Black notes that "climate change has been an issue for Europe" (p. 38). He describes the consequences of rising temperatures, such as heat waves and droughts. Nevertheless, it remains unclear, since when such phenomena were perceived as a result of climate change. Even though he contends that climate change accelerated, his evidence is biased towards the present, notably the mid- to late 2000s. In terms of demographics, Black addresses declining fertility, greater life-expectancy and aging, as well as the concomitant shrinking of Europe's share of the world population. Migration, even between EU countries, remained a controversial issue, he observes, not least since publics perceived Europe in terms of its national segments, rather than as a cohesive European society (p. 87).

The three chapters that follow focus on structural characteristics of society. Besides 'social developments', Black covers 'ideology and culture' as well as 'economic worlds', in which he

includes a very interesting part on corruption. His positive evaluation of Northern, in particular British political culture vis-à-vis Southern corruption (p. 156) is a familiar pattern of argument in intra-European comparisons.¹ Recent scandals concerning British MPs' second homes may have cast doubts on this. Remarkably, Black devotes about the same space to social history as to the political developments. The first of the two chapters on politics focuses on the democratic transformation on Southern Europe as a prelude to the decline of the Soviet bloc. The economic crisis and terrorism of the 1970s are emphasised as well as the relaunch of the EEC in the 1980s. Respecting the end of the Cold War with the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991 as the usual turning point, the second chapter on politics starts with the Maastricht negotiations as a response to German reunification and as an attempt to European unification. Besides the different paths of transformation in Eastern Europe, Russia and the failure of Yugoslavia, Black discusses the political development in Western European nation states.

In a concluding chapter he considers the difficulty of defining Europe, which became most visible in the discussions about the Turkish bid for membership. Black himself pragmatically understands the EU as an instrument for European states to make their voice(s) heard in the face of globalisation. The Euro for instance, he acknowledges despite his general scepticism, functioned as a 'life-raft' in the current economic crisis (p. 218). The EU does not pose a challenge to national identities and nation states, as the recent rise of economic nationalism demonstrates.

Black presents a well-structured, well-balanced and well-informed overview of the major developments in Europe since the 1970s. He does not hide his personal views, for instance about the EU's Common Agricultural Policy, the European Social Model, or President Mitterrand ('ever-keen on hyperbole', p. 207). Nevertheless, Black is reflexive about his own

preconceptions. As evidence of the resilience of different national perspectives, he notes, his book provides a liberal, anti-*dirigiste* British view.

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¹ Meyer, J.-H. (2010) *The European public sphere. Media and transnational communication in European integration 1969-1991* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner).

In Europe since the Seventies, Jeremy Black offers a succinct and authoritative analysis of the social and economic development of Europe in recent decades. While providing a full treatment of environmental, demographic, and cultural issues in Europe, Black also offers delineations of broader political, economic, and social matters discussing practical, immediate subjects like migration, crime, transportation, and the environment. Europe since the Seventies reveals how European society has changed strikingly—former societal lines drawn on the basis of economics and class have given way to li