



**Constantin Fasolt.** *The Limits of History.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004. xxii + 326 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-23910-1.



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### History for the Sake of Politics?

In this volume Constantin Fasolt attempts to explain how and why history and politics have become so closely joined. The fact that historiography can be influenced by politics, evidence of which can be found in histories written during the nineteenth century and under totalitarian regimes, is not a foregone conclusion, but due to changes in academic culture this connection has slowly slipped into the practice of history. To understand the place of Fasolt's argument, one must consider the differences between two views of the way politics has influenced history. One view focuses upon a work's perspective, the value judgments it makes and sometimes even the content of historiography that comes across in contract works or historical eulogies. The second, the focus of this book, concerns the principles of historical thought. Here, human actions are no longer considered to be governed by divine providence, and the study or writing of history is thus considered a form of political activity. This volume places the "triumph," as the blurb says, of this kind of epistemology in the seventeenth century and attaches it to the person of Hermann Conring, a Helmstedt professor, political theorist, physician and polymath.

The author analyzes the development of historical method by examining examples of both late medieval and early modern works of history in order to illustrate the field's limitations. The author chooses to deal specifically with juridical-political treatises, which enjoyed a considerable impact on the question of how the Holy Roman Empire, an "agglomeration" of territorial states, cities, enclaves and exclaves, could be conceived of as unified. These treatises exercised a significant influence on the writing of political history during this period, in which many have located the origins of modern historical thinking. The medieval sources Fasolt discusses are works by Bartolus of Sassoferrato, an authoritative commentator on Roman law and defender of the opinion that the Roman-German emperor was lord of the world. According to Bartolus, no reasons could be found to support the idea that the Roman Empire ceased to exist when Charlemagne took control of it in A.D. 800. This opinion was rooted in the Bible and Roman law, and was, therefore, not merely that of Bartolus. Three hundred years later, Conring attacked Bartolus as the main source of theories that claimed the emperor's universal rights. Fasolt shows that Conring left the emperor's dignity intact by accord-

ing him precedence over other German sovereigns, while disputing his universal rights. What was Conring's interest in promoting this new argument? Conring, the (re)discoverer of German law, which he wished to emancipate from Roman law, wanted to establish a modern understanding of German politics. In order to establish a modern definition of the German state(s), a component of his special political construction, one had to question the principles and the tradition that had helped to maintain universalistic thought through the ages.

Fasolt's book is comprised of five thematically organized chapters. It starts with an explanation of history as a form of knowledge that relies on the distinction between past and present and consists of a technique by which this distinction is exposed and explained. Chapter 2 is devoted to the central subject of the book, the person of Hermann Conring and his works, and provides the reader with a brief introduction to early modern political thought. Chapter 3 presents a deeper analysis of Conring's *New Discourse* (1642) and the circumstances of its genesis in comparison to other closely related writings, especially *The Roman Empire of the Germans* (1644). The following chapter, central to the same degree, consists of an analysis of Conring's medieval source, Bartolus of Sassoferrato. Here Fasolt includes a sophisticated examination of Conring's arguments and methods, and focuses upon the way he refutes Bartolus's claim that the emperor had the authority to rule the world. In this section Fasolt also exposes the reason for Conring's turn to history during this virtual argument. In the last chapter, the author not only gives a summary of the book but attempts to generalize his findings. According to Fasolt, Conring's work serves as an example that illustrates the invention of history as a discipline, but one must also recognize that Conring's invention and its consequences are irreversible. According to the author, the modern concept of history since the time of Conring has been bound up in the belief of the autonomy and sovereignty of individuals and states. These presuppositions represent the limits of history or, better, the limits of modern historical epistemology, as Fasolt sadly concludes.

Fasolt's work will be valuable for wider professional historical audiences in its introduction of a thinker whose works are often ignored. Nonetheless, I see two problems with the book and its argument: First, placing Conring at an epistemological turning point is highly audacious because it means ignoring the already well-developed hu-

manistic treatises of history and the practice of writing history in several other fields despite evidence for this position, found particularly in the emergence of historical writing in confessional contexts. Furthermore, Fasolt's hypothesis suggests the end of providential thinking, which is definitely not the case. One must look no further than the debate and wide-ranging reception of the works of Bossuet on French (Christian) universal history to refute Fasolt's claims. Thinking in terms of historical revolts or revolutions presupposes a highly structured and well-defined, if not a closed field of knowledge, that was not yet in place with regards to historiography and historical thought in the early modern period. Second, there is no reason to be satisfied with the "limits" of history that Fasolt has outlined for readers. The study of history is inevitably limited because it always depends on the writer's perspective, whether it be political, religious or generally subjective, but this dilemma does not mean that history as a discipline should be abandoned. The chance one takes with historical writing (or reading) is that one becomes aware of the limits of a special point of view and only this awareness enables us to transgress it and to look at things and events from another point of view. This opinion is a personal one that readers may or may not follow, but it is worth noting that at the beginning of the German Enlightenment this idea had already been espoused by Johann Martin Chladenius, a Lutheran theologian and historian. What he called "Sehepunkt" is what we call point of view or perspective.

Readers will like this book if they are interested in the development of historical thinking in the field of political thought. It will also prove useful for students in advanced graduate seminars. Fasolt's book is very engaging and reflects his vast knowledge, but unfortunately the book has its limits, especially with regards to Fasolt's claims that Conring's way was the only and irreversible path to modernity. Fasolt neglects the opportunity to question the value of this concept for the societies of today as well as for historical methodology. The book has received a great deal of praise from Michael Stolleis, the editor of the German translation (1994) of Conring's *De origine iuris germanici commentarius*, H.C. Erik Midelfort and Dipesh Chakrabarty. That these scholars would praise the book is striking, especially given Chakrabarty's propensity to argue that European thought, which so often claims to be "universal," is in fact too "provincial" to be capable of understanding the world. It is time to go beyond these limits.

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