



Hartmut Kaelble. *Sozialgeschichte Europas: 1945 bis zur Gegenwart.* Munich: C.H. Beck Verlag, 2007. 437 pp. EUR 34.90 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-406-54984-7.

HARTMUT KAEUBLE
SOZIALGESCHICHTE
EUROPAS 1945 BIS
ZUR GEGENWART



C.H. BECK

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A Truly European Social History

Hartmut Kaelble's most recent work is truly European and more than "just" a social history of the continent since 1945. It offers the reader a comprehensive overview of the social, economic, cultural, and societal developments within the various European countries since World War II. It also provides a transnational and comparative perspective, since the main questions Kaelble pursues throughout the thirteen chapters of his volume deal with "divergences" and "convergences" between the various European countries and regions, as well as with "European peculiarities" in comparison with other parts of the world. It is particularly noteworthy that Kaelble manages to include the countries of the former Soviet sphere of influence in his analysis even if—as he points out several times—much research remains to be done on the social history of eastern and southeastern Europe during the Cold War years. While the internal structure of each chapter is chronological, following roughly four time periods (the postwar years, the 1950s-60s, the 1970s-80s, and the post-1989/90 era), the overall organization of the book is thematic.

After a short but succinct introduction, Kaelble divides his material into three sections: the first section on "Basic Social Constellations" has chapters on "Family," "Work," "Consumption and Standard of Living," and "Changes of Values and Secularization"; a second section entitled "Social Hierarchies and Inequalities" addresses "Elites, Intellectuals, and Social Milieus," "Social Inequalities and Opportunities of Mobility," and "Migration"; the third and last section, with the title "Society and State," deals with "Media and the European Public," "Social Movements, Social Conflicts, Civil Society," "Welfare State," "Urban Growth, Urban Life, and Planning," and "Education." This thematic panorama both challenges and invites the reader to think beyond familiar categories of analysis, but also makes it more difficult to use this book like an encyclopedia of basic social historical facts and developments—which, in fact, it is as well. It has a very helpful index of names and terms, but, unfortunately, the references gathered at the end of each chapter are not assembled into a comprehensive bibliog-

raphy.

At the outset, Kaelble explains that he is not telling a story of either decline or resurrection. Rather, he conceptualizes the history of Europe as that of many civilizations. Over the last two hundred years, Europe has lost its global position, but since the end of World War II, it has gained both internal differentiation and harmonization (p. 11). Thus, the questions directing his account focus on historical change (and continuity), on the degree to which Europe's many national stories diverge and converge, and on attempts to identify "European societal peculiarities" (p. 13) that can be contrasted and compared to the societies of other world civilizations (such as those of the United States, Japan, China, and India).

The "character" of Europe is one of Kaelble's main concerns, and he explores how it evolved unevenly over periods of prosperity and crisis, how European elite and popular culture perceive it, and, above all, how it can be described without falling back or feeding into the traditional Eurocentric rhetoric of superiority. Ultimately, Kaelble argues, only a comparative global view enables us to identify and appreciate European peculiarities. This set of themes structures each chapter; every chapter then ends with a succinct and helpful overview of the research on its particular subject. With a few exceptions (such as consumption and migration),^[1] Kaelble shows the extent to which most subjects still await analysis from a truly European perspective. From Kaelble's perspective, gender history is an area with some excellent coverage but some significant omissions (especially as regards elite culture or social movements).

One of the striking "convergences" in post-1945 Europe that Kaelble notes is the general development towards more prosperous societies that are healthier, more mobile, and less divided by class. After the destruction and misery experienced as a result of World War II, the overwhelming majority of European countries witnessed a period of prosperity brought about by state-sponsored welfare and the expansion of public investment. While Kaelble refers occasionally to the Cold War and the concurrent competition between two political ideologies and economic models, the concrete consequences of the planned economy in the Soviet sphere of influence as well as the political culture and daily life in these authoritarian societies are not discussed in great detail. In this regard, he might have drawn more upon the existing body of scholarship to treat eastern and southeastern Europe with as much care as he does the West. For, as Kaelble shows in his early chapters on family and work, such

contrasts and comparisons are fruitful. Thus, despite the fact that people married younger, more often, and were more likely to file for divorce in eastern Europe, where women were recruited more aggressively as workers and the state provided a more far-reaching net of child-care and social services, family patterns (one-child marriage; larger, multigenerational families; and so on) varied not along the East-West divide but rather—rooted in historical and regional peculiarities—along boundaries between northern, central western, and southern or southeastern Europe. This example also underlines the advantages of a transnational European perspective, as it breaks up conventional categories of historical analysis.

Kaelble's book includes substantial chapters on themes not conventionally subsumed under "social history," such as the media, values, and social movements. As he notes in his introduction, social historians are increasingly concerned with the "effect of permanent, slowly changing, established social structures on politics and culture" (p. 14). The intersection of social and economic conditions, societal structures and institutions, and the role of debates, symbols, rituals, myths, and collective memories and meanings challenge social historians nowadays to bridge the gap to cultural and political history in a constructive way. One might question whether Kaelble's approach fulfills this promise, as the three sections are not really intertwined thematically, but Kaelble's panorama certainly offers a thoughtful attempt to approach such a "broad understanding of social history" (p. 15).

In retrospect, the second half of the twentieth century appears as a period of modest change rather than of rapid transformation. After the rupture of the world wars, the continent's societies nonetheless changed fundamentally, as evidenced by transformations in family values or consumption habits, but at a slower pace and firmly secured under what John Lewis Gaddis has described as the "long peace" guaranteed by the Cold War. Yet, in contrast to Tony Judt, who has recently stressed that post-war Europe was a continent marked by war for decades to come, Kaelble's account de-emphasizes the ruptures of 1945, and spends little time assessing the impact of war, the Holocaust, mass migrations, and massive destruction on Europe as a whole. Other works that cross over the lines between social and political-cultural history, such as Pieter Lagrou's *The Legacy of Nazi Occupation* (2000), or Istvan Deak's edited collection, *The Politics of Retribution in Europe* (2000), stress the catastrophic social, psychological, and moral consequences of the war with a

vividness Kaelble's account certainly lacks. Yet, it might just be Kaelble's reluctance to dwell on the concept of a "zero hour" that enables him to reflect successfully on the longer history of Europe that precedes the crises at the heart of the twentieth century. The truly revolutionary character of many developments, such as the creation of the welfare state; the emergence of mass culture, media, and consumption; the extension of educational systems; and the overall improvement of the daily life of millions of Europeans in the second half of the twentieth century can only be appreciated from a longer perspective. This is certainly one of the strengths of this book.

Among the book's recurring themes is Kaelble's attempt to name and describe an emerging generation of intellectuals, whose thinking is fully European in scope, and the issues and debates they engaged in over the course of a half century; Kaelble himself has become a prominent participant in this increasingly European discourse—if not as a result of his multifaceted work as so-

cial historian thus far, then certainly with this cautiously optimistic, at times sober, at times passionate plea for a European perspective on Europe's more recent past and present.[2]

Notes

[1]. Heinz-Gerhard Haupt, *Konsum und Handel: Europa im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003); Klaus J. Bade, *Europa in Bewegung: Migration vom späten 18. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart* (Munich: Beck, 2002); and Heinz Fassmann and Werner Münz, eds., *Migration in Europa 1945-2000* (Frankfurt: Campus, 1996).

[2]. Kaelble has also recently published an overview of European idea(s) and reflections of Europeans on Europe as an idea and concept: *Europa über Europa: Die Entstehung des europäischen Selbstverständnisses im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt: Campus, 2001).

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