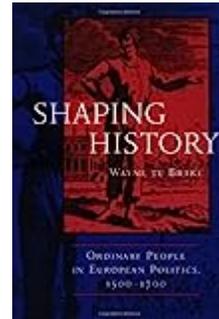


H-Net Reviews

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Wayne Te Brake. *Shaping History: Ordinary People in European Politics, 1500-1700.* Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998. xiii + 221 pp. \$15.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-21318-0; \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-21170-4.



Wayne Te Brake. *Shaping History: Ordinary People in European Politics 1500-1700.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998. Illustrations, references, and index.

Reviewed by Albert Jordan (Concordia University, Montreal)

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This book opens with a long introductory chapter mischievously titled “Breaking and Entering”, which indicates a subversive, if not criminal intent. The pun on his name is surely intended by an author who will insist on pointing out the unintended consequences of the various political activities he is comparing. The object singled out for subversion is a historiography which centres almost exclusively on elite personalities, groups, and institutions in the dynamic process of State-formation in Western Europe (or Latin Christendom), notably when the process is seen as having as its outcome the sovereign Nation-State. The period 1500-1700, which from our Western and variously nationalist viewpoint we call the Early Modern Period, is crucial for the study of this process because it is then that the lineaments of what in fact turned out to be the Nation-State can first be described.

Not that the author has any intention of downplaying the power or frequently decisive role of these elites, rather he seeks to give due weight to the part played by ordinary people. Instead of history viewed just from above, this is history viewed also from below. And in so viewing it, the history he sees being shaped is one that exuberantly overflows the tidy structures traditional

scholarship has built to house our understanding of European political development. The fact that the European Union, not known for its concern with ordinary, has begun to undermine national sovereignties (though not, as yet, national identities) gives this book, at least for this reviewer, a decidedly topical and happily polemical echo.

But then who are these ordinary people (not, it will be noticed, the common people)? The expression, seemingly innocuous by virtue of its well-worn currency in democratic twentieth century life, would appear to be singularly inappropriate for a period when from the highest to the lowest there is a meticulous obsession with defining social status, when the variety of speech, dress, manners, diet, and all the rest introduced into daily social intercourse a host of powerful, instrumental distinctions that are almost inconceivable to us moderns. No ordinary people there, you would think. However, in a manner consistent with breaking and entering, the author robustly disposes of any objection on this score: the basic fact of political life is that the many are always governed by the few (p. 6, fn. 2). The few (emperors, kings, local magnates) exercise formal political power over the many (everybody else) who are thus ordinary political subjects.

Some might stubbornly object that, for the period in question, this gives the concept ordinary people an extraordinary elasticity catering more to the authors convenience than it does to the readers understanding. Be that as it may, the concept does not mean that ordinary people are politically inactive. What it has too often meant is that popular (i.e. ordinary peoples) political activity, because it usually takes place outside historically visible political structures, has disappeared from the purview of many historians except through its more spectacular manifestations in the shape of riot and mayhem.

Another reason for the occultation of popular political activity is that its visibility in violent shape leads us to assume too readily that such activity is always resistance to the rulers. Since overt resistance to rulers usually provoked effective repression, ordinary people appear almost invariably to be frustrated in their intentions (reducing the burden of taxation, opposition to cultural—i.e., religious conformity imposed from above, and so on). One thus arrives at the unavoidable conclusion that ordinary people, however active, are passive elements in the process of State-formation, victims of historical forces not only beyond their control but even beyond their imagining.

Yet actions, whatever their frustrated motives, have consequences whether intended or not. This truism is not as depressingly trite as it may appear in light of our contemporary experience of the unintended consequences of policies stemming from private and public power centres. Applied to early modern Europe and in the service of a competent analyst like Professor te Brake, the truism yields highly interesting results. Instead of trying to find out what motivated the actors in popular political situations, and relying for this purpose on the analysis of decisions made by rulers outside the field of popular political activity, the author has undertaken a comparative analysis of consequential actions as these arose from the routine interactions between rulers and ruled.

The key word is interaction, and in fact, under the conditions prevailing in early modern European states, there was far more leeway for bargaining and compromise between rulers and ruled than is commonly supposed. To begin with, there is the nature of the political space within which interaction occurred. The political landscape of early modern Europe was littered with sovereignties large and small inherited from the feudal structures of earlier times. It is precisely the sub-

ordination of local sovereignties to a centralizing and overarching suzerain power (in this book called, somewhat anachronistically, the national claimant to power) that constitutes the classic example of formation into the modern and unitary state. Classic, certainly, but misleading nonetheless. It obscures the extent to which, during this period, states were composite entities characterized by an unstable trio: national claimants to power/local rulers/ordinary people. The permutation of power relations between these three elements produced an evolving series of complex political situations which, seen from a comparative European viewpoint, but the process of State-formation in a novel perspective.

How novel will be for readers to decide, probably on the basis of how convincing the authors remarks are when applied to the history of the country they are most familiar with. They may be assured of reading a historian in control of his wide-ranging interdisciplinary sources and blessed with a lucid – and, why not say so? – exciting manner of writing. They may take exception to instances of over-eagerness such as when the author refers to the disintegration of the Roman Catholic church to signify the changing of gears which that basic engine of Latin Christendom was obliged to carry out. They will certainly be required to match the authors narrative verve with their concentrated attention. They will appreciate the simple diagrams that effectively evoke the dynamics of process (and lend themselves easily for use with blackboard and chalk or overhead projectors). As suggested earlier, some readers may find the concept ordinary people unsatisfying since it so conveniently blurs the class antagonisms to which several generations of Marxist historians have accustomed us. Others may find that the author, in his strenuous efforts to show that the Nation-State is not the historically preordained outcome of political activity in the period under study, has merely shown that history is one damned thing after another. It will be clear that the author is exploiting a relatively new and rich vein of historical research informed by interdisciplinary cooperation (plus controversy, of course) and a welcome lack of inhibition in the face of elite and nation-centred histories. In the capable hands of practitioners such as Professor te Brake, this line of research with its breaking and entering should reduce a rich haul of loot.

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