



Willibald Steinmetz, Ingrid Gilcher-Holtey, Heinz-Gerhard Haupt. *Writing Political History Today*. Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 2013. 413 S. ISBN 978-3-593-39806-8.



Reviewed by Timo Luks

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W. Steinmetz u.a. (Hrsg.): Writing Political History Today

The volume *Writing Political History Today* summarises long-standing research led by the Bielefeld-based Collaborative Research Centre *The Political as Communicative Space in History*. Its contributions are either concerned with evaluating the theoretical and methodological approach to political history or present important findings of several studies in this field.

In their introduction, Willibald Steinmetz and Heinz-Gerhard Haupt outline the approach most contributions are committed to. This approach is marked by linking political and cultural history, by a prominent role of conceptual history and an understanding of politics as communicative action. Steinmetz and Haupt point to processes of *âpoliticisation* and *âdepoliticisation* as a main field of interest. The aim of the volume and related studies, they argue, is *âto historicise the political itself* and make it visible as a distinctive *âform of human communicative action* (p. 21). Therefore, the volume consists of three main parts (each of them introduced by one of the editors): first, there are four articles on the concept of *âPolitics* and *âthe Political*; followed, second, by five articles on what the editors aptly call *âBoundary Disputes: The*

Political and Other Spheres. The third part explores the significance of *âViolence: Means, Object or End of Political Communication?*

In early modern Europe, Martin Papenheim argues, *âpolicy* slowly became the successor of *âreason* and *âinterest* as basic concept to mark a discourse as a political one. During the sixteenth century *âreason* was the term of choice to signify the world's intelligibility and to emphasise the world's character as man-made but, nevertheless, embedded into an indubitable moral world order. *âInterest*, starting its career around the 1550s, shook off earlier philosophical and theological connotations. From the beginning, interest was a relational concept *âused to highlight the existence of conflicting powers*. These conceptual developments gave way to the concept of the *âpolitical* from the middle of the eighteenth century onward.

The articles of Pasi Ihalainen, Javier Fernández Sebastián and Michael Freeden analyse the genesis and meaning of *âpolitics* in different European countries, notably Sweden and Finland, Spain and Britain. Without going into details, one can summarise that the con-

cept of politics had a rather bumpy career in every language. It was usually denounced as a foreign import not only as a loanword, but also as an activity supposedly alien to the home-grown habits. During the nineteenth century one can witness a slow transformation of the concept along the lines of an increasingly popular democratic ideal. During this process politics turned into a positive field of domestic activity in which the representative institutions would be involved (Ihalainen, p. 73). Politics became associated with often liberal and soon progressive and social democratic reformism, that is: the firm belief in the possibility to design and improve social order. In this respect, politics, Javier Fernández Sebastián states for Spain, was unrivalled at least until the 1860s, when technocratic discourses started to rise and a little later social engineering was offered as a supplement for politics.

The volume's chapters on boundary disputes are concerned with different topics like early modern discussions about the relation of politics and religion (Matthias Pohlig), political economy and statistics (Lars Behrisch), the status of laws in and for political communication (Christoph Gusy), the depoliticalisation of private life in the late Soviet Union (Kirsten Bänker) or the identity politics of Rudolf Virchow (Tobias Weidner). At first sight, these topics may look quite disparate, but it is exactly this thematic width that guarantees the reader an adequate understanding of boundary disputes. The articles as a whole make perfectly clear on how many different levels these disputes occur and, therefore, that the concept of politics obtains its full meaning due to a multi-layered discourse ranging from social differentiation over the consolidation of scientific disciplines to the framing and appropriation of private practices and the autobiographical task to reconcile different roles.

The studies on violence by Eveline G. Bouwers, Freia Anders / Alexander Sedlmaier and Marcel Streng discuss boundary disputes on a different level. By linking political communication and protest movements, the three articles identify violence as a key to answer the question how the topos of legitimate political action was constructed during the twentieth century. The limits of the legitimate (Anders / Sedlmaier), these articles clearly show, have never been uncontested. Many quarrels over violence during the twentieth century, especially when protest movements were involved, can be read as exercises in (de-)politicisation. Attempts to condemn violence as a means of (political) protest usually by those who have many other options to make their voices heard serve the purpose to de-legitimize protest as much as

they outlaw violence.

The closing section of the volume brings together five (shorter) essays trying to move beyond the Bielefeld approach of a new political history. These essays discuss, for example, the significance of visual history (Bettina Brandt), consumption history (Frank Trentmann) or historical politics research (Luise Schorn-Schütte). Although they are well written and interesting, these essays do not add completely new arguments or topics to the volume. There is no heavy criticism or controversy, but careful advice to watch some possible blind spots. The essays, written by outsiders to the Bielefeld approach, have been intended to evaluate the approach. They serve this purpose well and provide the reader with guidelines for a re-reading of studies in political history.

The volume shares some of the well-known strengths and weaknesses of conceptual history. It is convincing and inspiring in providing a framework that can be used to situate different sources within. In terms of a historical critique of sources, conceptual history, once more, proves to be an essential tool for every historian. If one seeks to make sense of past actions and arguments in a more than mere factual way, conceptual history is always a good advisor. The volume *Writing Political History Today* is no exception from this rule. But, on the other hand, it does not avoid some pitfalls of conceptual history, either: first, its tendency to privilege a limited corpus of evidence. Many articles within the volume concentrate on the high literature of political theory or the reflections of public intellectuals. Sometimes this approach is in danger of running into a sheer name-dropping. Second, it proves still extraordinarily difficult to integrate conceptual and social history. Juxtaposing quotes from political pamphlets and political events does not solve this problem.

The reviewed volume, especially its introduction by Steinmetz and Haupt, provokes some reflections on the up and downs of political history and, maybe, points to an interesting gap in the perception of different generations. Whereas Steinmetz (born in 1957) and Haupt (born in 1943) both professionally socialized during the rise and hegemony of social history still feel the need to legitimate an interest in (renewed) political history, recent trends in German historiography, in my view, point in a contrary direction and, therefore, require a different answer. There is a significant rollback towards political history that is much more traditional than the version the present volume offers. Current studies in political history seem to be mainly interested in decision making,

governmental and administrative actions, again. Sometimes, one could think that the theoretical and methodological innovations of social and cultural history never happened. Instead of criticising social history's assault on political history (Steinmetz / Haupt, p. 11), the approach presented here should be used much more to criticise an only rhetorical updated neo-neo-Rankean political history.

Last but not least, the reviewer is a little concerned about the state of Campus Publishers. The random occurrence of changing contrasts and fading letters in the print image raises the question if a well-respected publishing house is running out of ink. It is to be hoped that peak ink will not be reached too soon.

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