

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Olwen Hufton. *Europe: Privilege and Protest, 1730-1789.* Blackwell Classic Histories of Europe. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000. vii + 288 pp. \$64.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-631-21381-9.

Reviewed by Anja Victorine Hartmann (Institute of European History, Mainz, Germany)

Published on H-W-Civ (September, 2001)

First published in 1980, Olwen Hufton's book on Europe between 1730 and 1789 has been reedited. As Hufton herself points out in a preliminary "Author's Note", a "new edition of a twenty-year old book demands some re-thinking about the ways in which history has moved on" (p. vi). Still, much of the book has remained unchanged, and new historical interpretations concerning the impact of culture, mentality, identity, gender, the "public sphere", and other aspects on the course of eighteenth century history have scarcely been integrated into the original text. On the contrary: "The original text has been allowed to stand since its main contentions have not been radically revised" (p. vii). The bibliography has, however, undergone a thorough revision and contains more than 50 percent of titles published after 1980.

Despite this revision and despite some changes especially in the first chapters, the book remains what it was intended to be in 1980, a story of "privilege, social and political, ... monarchy, its struggle for survival and its relationship with society, ... power politics on a new scale and ... the social and economic changes which are the hallmarks of the eighteenth century" (p. 3). This perspective excludes the world of ideas in almost all dimensions beyond the implementation of political programs as well as the world of people's daily life beyond the social and economic changes reflected in politics. Europe, as presented in Hufton's book, is a Europe of states and statesmen, reacting to all kinds of challenges from famine and poverty to the demands of nobilities, estates, and warfare. The eighteenth century is consequently seen as a century of state-building which resulted in an important extension of the state's power: "Government gained greater control not less" (p. 264). The book is thus less a comprehensive history of Europe as a whole than a brilliant his-

tory of the European state(s) in the eighteenth century, a focus which has to be stressed in contrast with recent historiographic developments, but which nonetheless remains perfectly legitimate and extremely important.

Within this clearly circumscribed framework, Hufton's book is a very readable overview crammed with detailed interpretations of specific phenomena and resulting in a very coherent picture of the European state(s) at the eve of the French Revolution. The first part of the book (pp. 5-99) gives some information on general structures, like demographic, social and economic developments, the society of orders ("privilege"), the ideas of Enlightenment thinkers, and international relations. These factors constitute a common background against which the differences of specific European states can be traced more accurately. The second and third part of the book concentrate on single states, divided into "Central and Eastern Europe" (pp. 101-178)—the Holy Roman Empire, the Habsburg Lands, Prussia, and Russia—and "The Western World" (pp. 179-256)—Spain, Portugal, the United Provinces, and France. Strangely enough, Britain is conspicuously absent from the list, as are the smaller Italian states, the remaining German states, Switzerland, and all of Northern Europe. While this omission might be explained by restricted space in the latter cases, a chapter on Britain, which was a leading European power at the time but differed remarkably in political institutions, would have been a valuable addition. Apart from the (short) chapter on the Holy Roman Empire and the chapter on the Netherlands, the book thus focuses mainly on monarchies and leaves aside other forms of political order.

The history of state-building in eighteenth-century

Europe emerges as a history of the struggle between the monarch, striving for a centralised state with a bureaucratic administration allowing effective control, financial exploitation, and all kinds of intermediate powers (be they nobility, clergy, or estates) aiming at a defence of privileges and traditional order. Both were attacked by the bourgeois movements at the end of the century, but the result was not a destruction of central state-power but rather its re-legitimation through constitutions and parliamentary assemblies. The conflict between the monarch and the intermediate powers is Hufton's main theme, explained in great detail for each of the states in question. Taking into account the diverging social and economic conditions as well as the states' different positions in the European state-system (and its colonial extensions), Hufton analyses the varieties and similarities of this conflict. This analysis is the centre-piece of the book, and it contributes greatly to making the book somewhat more than a mere textbook. In applying a strictly comparative approach of asking similar questions in different contexts, Hufton follows a historiographic paradigm which results in her writing a truly European history, rather than a mere addition of national histories. Similarly, the complex interpretation of the interactions between political, social, and economic factors in each of the chapters creates a panoramic view on the European state(s) of the eighteenth century which is—despite its shortcomings in the field of cultural history—an intellectual pleasure to explore for students and experienced scholars alike.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-w-civ>

Citation: Anja Victorine Hartmann. Review of Hufton, Olwen, *Europe: Privilege and Protest, 1730-1789*. H-W-Civ, H-Net Reviews. September, 2001.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5477>

Copyright © 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.