

## Postwar European History Review Article

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**Author:**

Hartmut Kaelble

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Mark B. Smith

Whatever the medievalists might say when they think you're not listening, 20th-century European history is hard, and post-1945 history can be the trickiest bit. The decades after 1945 are much less precisely understood, in historical terms, than the decades before. They are more subject to unchallenged platitudes and uninformed controversy: they are surrounded by white noise. Post-1945 historians must deal with the

relative absence of perspective, the patchiness of official sources amid otherwise vast surviving traces, and the vexed question of what to do with the people who want to tell you how it really was. Yet few tasks in the humanities are as urgent as providing clear historical explanations of recent events. The two books under review demonstrate the powers and shortcomings of historical research – and also of research which is not historical – into post-war Europe.

They are grand works of scholarship. Hartmut Kaelble's book is an imposing overview of social trends in European history between 1945 and 2000. The view is from such a height that individual people are invisible: his version of social history is one with the people left out. Kaelble looks for three broad patterns in what he sees: how much European societies changed; how much European societies became similar and how much they differed; and how European societies were distinctively European (and not, for example, American or universally modern). Even when looking down on Europe from this precarious height, Kaelble retains a consistently historical approach. He focuses rigorously on the empirical, takes full account of exceptions and complexities, and does not make use of simplifying models or theories, though he inevitably strikes the occasional wrong note. The author's first question, which leads him precisely to probe periodization and change over time, is profoundly historical, but he also brings a historical sensibility to his other two questions.

These three questions run through every chapter of the book, so the analysis is bracingly consistent. The three questions are asked of three broad issues, which make up the three sections of the book. First are the 'basic social constellations' of which everyday life is composed: family, work, consumption and material standard of living, and moral values and religion. The second part concerns the social groups – the milieus – into which Europeans have divided themselves, and the mobility between them, modulated by inequality and migration. Thirdly, Kaelble addresses the ways that state and society have moulded each other, with chapters on the media, civil society, the welfare state, urban life, and education. The book is a synthesis of secondary sources, with chapter bibliographies containing works in German, French and English; Kaelble also draws extensively on reports from organizations such as the OECD and publicly produced statistical compendia. Easily comprehensible graphs and useful tables are included throughout the text.

Containing 36 chapters by different scholars (and some chapters are co-written), the handsomely produced *Oxford Handbook of Postwar European History* is inevitably a looser book. Its considerable contents are divided into seven imaginatively conceived sections. The first, entitled 'What is post-war Europe' sets the terms of the debate and opens with salvoes by the big guns of Geoff Eley and Richard Overy; part two, on 'People', offers a social history approach, while part three is more explicitly political, and part four concerns economics; part five, on 'Fear', examines violence and anxiety, innovatively bringing together essays on nuclear culture, decolonization, life in the dictatorships, and the Yugoslav wars; part six is about cultural history; and the final section is devoted to memory of the Second World War. Plainly, many of the essays could have been placed in different parts of the book, but the structure tightens rather than loosens the book's coherence. It allows particular arguments to be foregrounded, which in turn ensures that the book is more than the sum of its parts. This is an impressive achievement in itself. The great strength of this *Oxford Handbook* is of course the scope of its coverage, but the quality of the editorship, with its original organization of the material, and the authority of some of the contributions, allows important points about periodization, memory and identity to be emphasized. The *Handbook* is at its best when it is fulfilling its manifesto: when it is most explicitly historical.

Perhaps three major structural issues determine the way that we think about the European past since 1945. First is the significance of 1945 itself. What do we mean by 'post-war'? Was it a zero hour? How much did the Second World War transform Europe? How might this transformation be compared to that wrought by the First World War? Sometimes this discussion is arcane, but it throws light on questions of ongoing political importance. Second, what did the division between East and West that characterized Cold War Europe amount to? How impermeable was the Iron Curtain? How different were the dictatorships and the democracies? How did ideology affect universal processes of modernization? How should we study those parts of Europe that fell outside the East/West blocs? To what extent did the ways of the communist dictatorships persist after 1989? And third, how meaningful is European history – both the *European* and the *history*

– after 1945? What sense does European history make outside of the history of superpower rivalry or American power? Does European history effectively end with the German declaration of war on the United States in December 1941? After that, is the history of Europe just the history of a territorial zone rather than a coherent political, socio-cultural or economic space? And what exactly can historians bring to the study of a period which large numbers of other specialists are still trawling for their raw material?

One of the required ways of imposing an historian's order on the recent past is to focus explicitly on questions of periodization, addressing precisely when things change. *The Oxford Handbook* is about *post-war* European history; the subtitle of Kaelble's book is 'recovery and transformation after two world wars'. Given its multi-author status, the *Handbook* cannot make a single point about what historians mean when they debate the timing of 'post-war', but it can ensure that these debates are clearly articulated and central to the presentation. Dan Stone, who has written about historical memory of the Holocaust and who is therefore particularly attuned to how the war and its aftermath have been remembered and constructed since the fall of the Berlin Wall, argues in his introduction that 'we are only now living through the postwar period' (p. 33). In other words, it is in the last 20 years that proper discussion about the War has been possible in the public sphere across Europe: that people have stopped living the legacy of the war on a day-by-day basis and have started, instead, coming to terms with it. Expressed differently, by a cold warrior, the Second World War effectively continued in new forms until the demise of Communism. Geoff Eley, however, emphasizes the existence of a 'post-1945 settlement' whose most important characteristic was 'the centrality acquired by organized labour' (p. 38). In this way, the impact of the Second World War on European life was fundamentally different from the impact of the First. Only after 1945 was 'it possible for popular consciousness to identify with the state', legitimizing democratic reformism and generating social improvements (p. 40).

Focusing on the welfare state, Ido de Haan's very stimulating chapter makes a similar point about a fundamental shift after 1945. If Stone argues for a great European turning point in 1989, and Eley in 1945, Richard Overy makes the case for 1917-18. He probes the arguments for and against the existence of a zero hour in European history in 1945, showing that '1945' was a 'convenient alibi', and that historians must meticulously study the whole decade between 1939 and 1949 in order to understand precisely what changed and what stayed the same as an immediate consequence of the Second World War. For Overy, however, the zero hour issue is subordinate to the bigger point that 1917-18 was 'the real dividing line of the twentieth century', creating 'upheavals' that determined the course of European history through to 1989 (76-7). Dan Stone effectively extends this point in his discussion about the dynamics of memory. Plainly, the arguments of these three historians overlap and might easily be synthesized, but the different emphases they opt for are revealing.

Yet precisely defined issues of periodization tend not to structure the book as a whole, and its treatment in individual chapters is uneven. Hence Philipp Ther's interesting chapter on ethnic cleansing discusses in detail the situation before 1945 and between 1944 and 1948, but does not adopt the kind of clarifying 1939–49 lens that Overy vouchsafes. Rosemary Wakeman mentions the 1945 watershed in her chapter on consumerism, but only briefly. Vladimir Tismaneanu has, as ever, important things to say about the 'national Stalinism' on which he is the leading authority, but by focusing on this brand of Stalinism, existing primarily as it did in Romania and Albania, he makes a point about the static nature of Stalinism in these countries that does not extend to the more dynamic evolution of Stalinism and post-Stalinism elsewhere in Eastern Europe. For example, he omits 'late Stalinism' (1945–53), which many historians argue was a different type of Stalinism from its pre-war incarnation, from the discussion of the Soviet Union in his introduction. Tismaneanu's chapter is cleverly positioned in the section on 'Fear', allowing Cold War anxieties in Western Europe to be juxtaposed with violence in Ceaușescu's Romania: but this very organization of the material seems to make a point about geographical similarity at the expense of chronological change. The chronology of economic history, however, is precisely probed in two outstanding chapters by the leaders of the field: Nicholas Crafts and Gianni Toniolo sharply delineate the chronological markers of the post-war 'golden age', and Ivan T. Berend charts change over time in the European economy between 1973 and 2009. Similarly, Martin Evans's impressive survey of decolonization precisely interrogates the 1945 disjuncture.

By contrast, controversies about periodization are deeply embedded in the structure of Kaelble's *Social History*. The book is organized thematically, but each thematic chapter asks precise questions about periodization, broadly distinguishing between the immediate post-war period, the 1950s to 1970s, and the period since the 1980s. Kaelble's analysis is therefore predicated on the problem of how to measure and interpret change over time: it evaluates turning points and assesses how widespread particular changes were at particular moments. Thus Kaelble addresses the level of trust in European societies across watersheds such as 1945 and uses this as a basis for explaining changes in moral values. Charting distinct changes in the level of urbanization helps Kaelble to explain the evolution of the welfare state. Even so, Kaelble opens himself up to the dangers of generalization. In his chapter on the family, he suggests that 'Comparisons in surveys from different points in time show that after the 1960s the family home was increasingly opened up to family friends and neighbours or friends of the children and teenagers'. This bold comment offers little hint of variety across region, class and culture. Kaelble is also fixed on the notion that when people came into the family home, they took their place on the 'corner sofa', an item of furniture that crops up repeatedly in the text and is perhaps of greater cultural specificity than he (or his translator) acknowledges.

Kaelble is similarly attuned to the division between Eastern and Western Europe, consistently debating the relative impact of common phenomena on both halves of the continent, probing the significance of variations in economic and sociological data. On the one hand, this was a historic difference, based on the East's apparent lag in political and economic development. On the other, it was the sharp ideological contrast that marked life on either side of the Iron Curtain. Kaelble explores the significance of both layers of difference in most of his chapters, giving the reader an opportunity to reflect on the fundamental question of whether ideological difference or underlying 'modernization' most caused historical change. According to popular prejudice, the difference between East and West was sharp and enduring, but historians of Eastern Europe now emphasize similarities as well as differences across the Iron Curtain, especially in such matters as consumption, domestic life, work habits, and cultural proclivities, while economic historians and early modernists have long shown the futility of positing a narrow East-West interpretations of Europe's development. Integrating the more recent findings of this first group of historians into a single history of Europe would allow readers truly to evaluate what was European about Europe in this period.

Such a question is always close to the surface of Kaelble's analysis. Unlike most authors of general accounts of Europe in this period, his attitude to the East is subtle. 'It is astounding,' he remarks with reference to the East-West divide, 'how weak the differences turned out to be in light of decades-long communist propaganda, education in other non-Western values, and the massive transformation crisis after the collapse of the Soviet empire' (p. 101). Nevertheless, the East is the poor relation in his research. Sometimes it is omitted, as in the discussion of trade unions, or viewed in two dimensions, as in the related discussion of

civil society (ch. 9). At other times its distinctiveness is blurred: in his analysis of East European education, for example, the complexities of social mobility and social exclusion are hardly considered, producing a distorted and partial picture. Kaelble is not entirely consistent with regard to the European status of the Soviet Union, sometimes including the Soviet lands west of the Urals (itself an arbitrary choice), sometimes contrasting life in 'Europe' with life in 'Russia'. The historiography of Central and Eastern Europe (including the Soviet Union) had been transformed by the time of this book's original publication in German in 2007, let alone by its English edition of 2012, though one would not really know it from reading Kaelble.

Nevertheless, in a general sense, the analysis of the East-West divide is integral to Kaelble's book. This is less obvious in *The Oxford Handbook*, whose readers are given little consistent help in reflecting on how and why Eastern and Western Europe developed in similar and different ways after 1945. If Kaelble spends less time on the East, he at least interrogates its significance. In *The Oxford Handbook*, its significance is usually unclear. Only four chapters out of 35 are authored by historians whose primary specialization is in the history of any of the regions that once fell behind the Iron Curtain, though these include the late Mark Pittaway, a most innovative historian of Hungary, and the distinguished pairing of Ivan T. Berend and Vladimir Tismaneanu. Even the useful chapter on 'living under Communism' is written by the editor, whose published research is in other areas. Challenges to popular East-West orthodoxy can sound like oversimplifications, such as this in the introduction: 'communism managed to sustain a standard of living comparable with the West for the first decade and a half after the War' (p. 17). The latest research into the war-ravaged Soviet Union suggests the opposite. Rigorous chapters that make some claim to pan-European significance, such as Geoff Eley's, usually focus overwhelmingly on the West, and it remains mysterious how Stalinist societies could possibly, in Eley's formulation, depend on 'a recognizable social contract' (p. 55), for the Stalin-era dictatorships governed in an arbitrary manner. Meanwhile, Rosemary Wakeman's expertise on the West shines through in her chapter on leisure and consumption: but her moralizing comment that 'Eastern Europeans made a Faustian bargain with repressive regimes' (p. 431) bypasses twenty years of cool-headed empirical scholarship.

True, Martin Klimke's chapter on 1968 is brilliantly transnational and emphatically European, but it is more often the less historically engaged chapters, such as that written by Catherine Lee and Robert Bideleux, that are more self-consciously concerned about questions of regional difference. The place of the Soviet Union / Russia is uncertain. Only one chapter is written by a Soviet specialist: a low yield for the biggest country in the world (and one with such a highly developed historiography). Writing about ethnic diversity and nationhood before 1945 (in a chapter on immigration), Stephen Castles omits Russia, that most diverse of countries, whose policies concerning ethnic and national identity throw much light on Europe more generally. In his excellent essay on decolonization, Martin Evans deliberately but regrettably sidesteps the question of whether the Soviet Union was an empire. Meanwhile, those areas that fall outside the East-West paradigm receive inconsistent treatment: a good chapter on Spain, Greece and Portugal is matched by more scattered references to Scandinavia and the neutral Alpine enclaves.

That is not to suggest that each region or group of similar countries should have its own chapter. The art of writing a successful history of post-war Europe surely lies in the capacity to integrate the different regions of Europe, especially the fraught categories of East and West, into a single analysis. But what exactly is the *Europe* that is the target of this analysis? And in what does its history consist? European history after 1945 (perhaps after 1941) seems to be a much less stable concept than the European history of preceding periods. The authors of both books reflect on what was particularly European about Europe during this period. Their concern is to show whether modern life brought similar changes in all societies, European and non-European alike, or whether it produced particular effects in Europe. Kaelble is typically the most methodical, drawing out precise measurements about how, for example, Europeans' experience of leisure differed from that of Americans. In the *Handbook*, however, the European content of European experience, in fields such as leisure as well as in the abstract, tend to be interpreted in present-day terms. An example is Uli Linke's wonderful chapter on gender, where she develops the controversial notion of a contemporary 'European racial state'. Her analysis has no historical content and is entirely presentist, yet one cannot argue with its inclusion in this volume: it offers a stimulating framework with which historians might engage.

In other hands, however, an unrelenting grip on the present strangles any historical discussion. Robert Bideleux's idiosyncratic chapter on European integration, full of italics and angry asides ('England's Europhobes' are one of his targets) is stylistically and temperamentally quite different from the rest of *The Oxford Handbook*. His judgements are aimed directly at the present and future (he includes an urgent postscript, dated April 2012, as if this were an article in the *London Review of Books* rather than in a history book of record). Some of the other chapters are also emphatically presentist, avoiding historical explication (or providing two-dimensional, descriptive historical backdrops to their analysis of the present). While such chapters do not in themselves offer historical explanations, some of them do provide analytical frameworks from which historians might learn (though others do not). Is this multidisciplinary, or is it uncomfortable reading? *The Oxford Handbook* promises to be a history, and it is difficult to see what some of the present-minded essays add to historical understanding, though they can teach us plenty about the present, and the expertise and talents of their authors are not in doubt. In the *Handbook*, multidisciplinary risks undermining the historical enterprise, reducing the potency of historical explanation by increasing the distracting level of white noise, whereas in histories of earlier periods, multidisciplinary can so often strengthen the power of historical explanations.

Is that a typical aspect of the historical study of the recent past? What do these books tell us about the *historical* character of post-1945 history? Kaelble introduces structures into his analysis which seem sociological: in his chapter on the family, he claims that 'eight marriage models gradually came into being' after the Second World War (p. 21). This approach is not so different from that which a historian of any period could follow. And in any case, he is profoundly concerned with historicizing the recent past rather than in constructing theoretical visions about it. His rigorous focus on periodization demonstrates this: a whole plank of his analysis is a subtle discussion of change over time. But when it comes to the extremely recent past (yesterday rather than the day before) any writer's judgements date quickly and can scarcely be said to be historical. Can anyone really make an historical judgement about the relative optimism of European societies around the time of the Millennium? We have plentiful evidence from opinion surveys from a decade ago, but does it need a historian to examine it? Here it seems that Kaelble's powerful historical analysis machine runs out of gas. Perhaps historians of the recent past need to be as aware of what they need not do as of what they can achieve.

Dan Stone is right to point out that many of the methodological approaches to the past that his *Handbook* contains are themselves innovations of the post-war period. Unlike Kaelble, with his particular (and often brilliantly realized) approach to social history, which focuses on social trends rather than on personal actions and thoughts, the *Handbook* is a celebration of different types of history writing. Despite all the issues of debate that they raise, despite the flaws one might detect – and precisely because of these issues and flaws, too – these books are essential reading for specialists and their students. We should salute Hartmut Kaelble and Dan Stone (and Stone's contributors) for their scholarship and industry.

Dan Stone is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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