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Europe in Crisis 1598-1648

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Among those scholars who write on early modern Europe, Geoffrey Parker occupies a position of well-merited prominence. His books, essays, articles and other publications have greatly extended the understanding of early modern Europe among practising historians, their students and the wider public alike. As their titles indicate - *The Army of Flanders and the Spanish Road* (Cambridge University Press; Cambridge, 1972), *The Dutch Revolt* (Allen Lane; London, 1977) and *Philip II* (Hutchinson; London, 1978) ? some of his early books dealt with the Spanish Habsburgs and their European possessions during those crucial decades from the 1560s to the turn of the century, and this is a theme to which Professor Parker has often returned (recently, for example, in *The Grand Strategy of Philip II* [Yale University Press; New Haven and London, 1998]). Meanwhile, his expanding historical interests went on to incorporate, among others, such topics as Spain's overseas possessions, the military history of early modern Europe (especially the so-called 'military revolution' of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries), the Thirty Years War, the economic history of early modern Europe, and the debates which began in the 1950s on ?the general crisis' of the seventeenth century.

That Professor Parker developed such capacious interests doubtless was encouraged by an invitation to

contribute to the Fontana History of Europe edited by the late J. H. Plumb. Those Fontana volumes that dealt with post-medieval Europe usually covered about fifty years each, and Professor Parker was allotted the first half of the seventeenth century. The task of writing a general history presents formidable challenges, for even the most omnicompetent scholar cannot be expected to know every facet of the potential subject matter in detail, and he or she must read up on a wide range of material. The author has to think of the readership at which the text is aimed and must shape the content and style accordingly. Can he assume that readers already have some knowledge of the period in question, or will the book aim to cater for people new to the period? If so, the author will have to devote valuable space to describing, for example, institutional structures (perhaps of the Holy Roman Empire or some other state or body), processes of government, legal systems and so on. This latter consideration can be all the more taxing in that the publisher, conscious of production costs and sales, imposes a word limit which forces the author to be highly selective as regards content; passages, the function of which are to describe and explain institutions and processes, can occupy space which the author might have preferred to devote to other topics. Yet more questions arise. How shall a balance be struck between the demands of narrative, analysis and recent historiographical debate? To what extent should the author seek to thematise history? This is a process which can assist the reader who is a novice, but which can leave the author open to the charge of over-simplification; on the other hand, the alternative might lose the reader in a mass of seemingly unconnected detail. What role should be afforded to personalities? If that role is overdone, the author risks slipping into a ?great-men-and-women? version of history, but if it is underplayed, the people of former generations can appear as no more than helpless flotsam borne on mighty tides of history. The writing of general history is one of the most demanding branches of historical literature; nevertheless, one observation can be made with utter confidence: whatever the effects on the reader of the final text, the exercise is highly educational for the author himself or herself!

Professor Parker?s *Europe in Crisis, 1598-1648* was published in 1979, and it is testimony to the success with which he confronted the problems inherent in writing general history that the book soon went through several impressions and revisions. A further tribute is paid in that it is now reissued in a second edition, having been selected by Blackwell as one of their Classic Histories of Europe, a series comprising revised volumes of the older Fontana Histories. The appearance of this second edition is to be welcomed by all students of the period, and this is an appropriate occasion on which to assess the changes that Professor Parker has introduced and to reflect anew on his interpretation of European history from 1598 to 1648.

Firstly, what about the content of the book? The 2001 edition contains extensive modifications to that of 1979. The 1979 version consisted of a Prelude and eight chapters: 1) 'European Society and the Economy', 2) 'European Society and the State', 3) 'The Time of Troubles in the East, 1593-1618', 4) 'Armed Neutrality in the West, 1598-1618', 5) 'The Apogee of Habsburg Imperialism', 6) 'The Defeat of the Habsburgs, 1629-35', 7) 'War and Revolution', and 8) 'The Culture of Post-Renaissance Europe'. The chapters were divided into sections, each of which had its own sub-heading. The new edition retains the same structure and chapter headings (although chapter 5 now has the dates 1618-29 appended), but there are significant changes to the sections. Thus, in Chapter 1, 'The Little Ice Age' (1979 edition) becomes 'Climate and Crisis' and a new section entitled 'An Economy on the Edge of Crisis' is added. Chapter 2 includes a new section on 'The Theory of Absolutism'. Chapter 7 adds a new section on 'The Crisis of the Spanish Monarchy' and replaces the former section entitled 'The End of the Thirty Years' War' with two new ones: 'The End of the Eighty Years' War' and 'The End of the Thirty Years' War' (this latter being very different from the 1979 version). Chapter 8 is extensively recast and bears only marginal relation to the text of 1979. Even within those chapters and sections where the list of Contents would indicate little change between 1979 and 2001, there is in fact much rewriting. Professor Parker has gone through the entire text, shortened many sections (digressions that enlivened ?1979? have mostly gone, presumably under the pressure of a word limit), reworded others, revised yet more in the light of recent research and updated the bibliography. Various stylistic and presentational changes are evident: miles are now converted into kilometres, quotations from seventeenth-century English are put into modern spelling, long paragraphs from 1979 are broken into several shorter ones (does this imply that modern readers are deemed less able than their predecessors to cope with solid blocks of text?), and the format of graphs and other supporting visual material is modernised. In short, the 2001 version of *Europe in Crisis* is much more than the 1979 edition with a few additions or

amendments: the text has been revised thoroughly and comprehensively, many passages in the 2001 version bear little resemblance to their predecessors, and the presentation and style of the book are emphatically ?new millennium? rather than ?1970s?.

Some of the new material revises information presented in 1979. Thus, the European population statistics given in 2001 (p. 6) differ somewhat from those given in 1979 (p. 23); the figure for that of Magdeburg at the time of the siege of 1631 is changed from 40,000 (1979, p. 221) to 30,000 (2001, p. 161). On some topics, Professor Parker shows a change of mind, or at least of emphasis. When discussing Russia during the Time of Troubles, he stated in 1979 (p. 108) that ?the story that he [the ?false Dimitri?] was a renegade monk ? is almost certainly false?; now (2001, p. 77) ?much evidence suggests that he was Grishka Otrepev, a renegade monk?. In his 1979 discussion of Richelieu?s financial policies, Professor Parker was of the view that ?he [Richelieu] did not understand the machinery of finance?, and quoted Richelieu himself to that effect: ?I confess fully my ignorance on financial matters? (1979, p. 248). In 2001 the quotation from Richelieu is repeated, but Parker now contends that ?such statements seem to have been camouflage? (p. 180). He goes on to demonstrate that, for all the expressions of ?ignorance?, the cardinal not only took a close interest in financial matters, but also ?drew up an ambitious plan for reform? (ibid). In Chapter 7 of the 2001 version, the section entitled ?France Resurgent?, which covers the 1640s, replaces long passages from the 1979 version with more concise paragraphs on the financial condition of the French and Spanish governments, and does so by presenting statistics which have emerged in the light of more recent research.

Nevertheless, as Professor Parker himself states in the 'Preface' to the 2001 edition, although much new material and many revisions have been introduced, especially concerning the social, economic and cultural history of the period, the major theses and arguments remain intact. As he puts it: 'The Thirty Years' War remains the central event, and the Habsburgs still lose it ? Spain and Poland still end the period far weaker than they began it. Sweden and the Dutch ? still achieve Great Power status while France struggles on the edge of an abyss' (p. xiii). In short, the main contours of Professor Parker's Europe have not undergone serious revision between 1979 and 2001. On the other hand, Europe as depicted in 2001 is shaped even more by warfare than it was in 1979. As an advocate of the 'military revolution' thesis (outlined pp. 48-52), Parker emphasises not only changes in the organisation and conduct of warfare, but explores some the financial consequences with which governments had to contend, and, in a new section, assesses the relationship between war and culture (pp. 210-17). Therein he discusses pamphlets, broadsheets, newspapers and popular songs which emerged from the wars of the period; he considers some of the effects of warfare on 'high' art (Velázquez's 'Surrender of Breda' is an obvious example), and points to the depiction of military themes in architecture, the decorative arts, literature and music, both religious and secular.

It is, of course, inconceivable that Professor Parker would not have devoted so many chapters of his book to warfare, but a few reflections on his interpretation are in order. The thesis that a 'military revolution' occurred has been current since Michael Roberts first advanced it in the mid-1950s, and it is one which Geoffrey Parker himself has further developed, most notably in *The Military Revolution* (Cambridge University Press; Cambridge, 1988). Of course, *Europe in Crisis* ends at 1648, and in view of that terminating date the thesis of a ?military revolution? serves Parker well. However, two reservations may be expressed. Firstly, if one looks forward to the military history of the second half of the century and then continues into the eighteenth, one encounters even more changes relating to weaponry, tactics, the conduct of sieges, the organisation of military administration and so on, to the point that the notion of a 'military revolution' (a phrase which implies the replacement of one ?system? by another) begins to be transformed into one of ?military evolution?. The alternative is to posit a theory of 'permanent revolution', but this is just as problematic in the history of warfare as it was in Maoist political philosophy. Secondly, the more we learn about warfare even during the 1620s and 1630s, the less 'modern' it often looks. David Parrott's recent study of the French army during Richelieu's ministry [see review 277] shows that age-old problems of recruitment, organisation, provision of equipment and the exercise of military command continued to undermine the effectiveness of the army. It was not until the reforms of Le Tellier and Louvois later in the century that a fully-fledged 'military revolution' occurred in the French army. The phrase ?military revolution?, rather like that of ?scientific revolution? which was also in vogue in the mid-1950s and later, is surrounded by

numerous problems, some of definition and others relating to the distribution and duration of the phenomenon which it purports to define. Perhaps it, like ?scientific revolution?, should be regarded as a term of convenience rather than a historical reality, and should be employed only in a rough and ready sense.

That the warfare of this period inflicted appalling socio-economic consequences on many parts of Europe needs no emphasis here; it is a theme which is prominent in many parts of *Europe in Crisis*. Yet, by the social values of the time, warfare also had desirable social effects. Warfare enabled the nobility to fulfil its ?natural? social function of military activity. The conventional medieval division of society into those who pray (clergy), those who fight (nobility), and those who labour (commoners or Third Estate) was never other than an ideal typology, but the wars of the seventeenth century gave it new vigour, as the nobility of Europe had ample opportunity to exercise its military calling. Commoners did occasionally rise to positions of military command, but the officers and generals of European armies came overwhelmingly from the ranks of the nobility and aristocracy. To this extent, warfare reinforced bonds between crown and nobility. European monarchs looked chiefly to the nobility for their commanders, while the latter accepted that their military eminence depended in the last resort on royal favour. Warfare confirmed the mutual dependence of crown and nobility and helped to ensure that, even though crown and nobility sometimes might be in conflict over domestic issues, they would abandon that mutual dependence only under the most exceptional circumstances, as happened, for example, in Portugal in the 1640s. Normally, whatever the seriousness of the disputes between them, crown and nobility accepted that the social system within which they lived required them to establish a *modus vivendi*.

The reality of the ?military revolution? is taken for granted in *Europe in Crisis*, and so is that of the ?general crisis? of the seventeenth century. Indeed, the very title of the book reflects Professor Parker?s conviction that the history of this period is qualitatively different from that which preceded or followed it. Those among us who, in our training as (then) young historians, observed the debates occasioned by the ?general crisis? theory, recall the passion with which they were conducted and the fierce ideological confrontations which they engendered as Marxists and non- (or anti-) Marxists locked in combats that at times became personal as much as scholarly. The debates ran from the later 1950s to the early 1980s and generated an enormous historical literature; then as sometimes happens in historical debate, they petered out somewhat inconclusively as a new generation of scholars turned to other topics. Those who championed the ?general crisis? theory argued that the momentous economic, social, political and cultural conjunctures of which it was composed were more than a European experience; they extended to Asia and, to a certain extent, the Americas. Professor Parker aligns himself with advocates of the theory, and although in *Europe in Crisis* he does not have the space to explain at length why he does so, the bibliography draws the attention of the reader to some of the key literature on this subject.

In a sense, his explanation is implicit in the text of the book, the very structure of which conforms to a ?general crisis? analysis. His opening chapters deal with the harsh socio-economic conditions under which most Europeans lived; he moves on to the question of 'absolutism' as a political response to those conditions; he discusses the international wars of the period, the civil wars and rebellions which proliferated across the continent and, as stated earlier, concludes by examining what might be termed the 'cultural superstructure' which was produced by these decades of crisis. In his discussion of 'absolutism', Professor Parker contrasts the inflated theoretical claims made on behalf of 'absolute monarchy' in the seventeenth century (and propagated through the printed word, sermons, paintings, music and other means) with the hard realities of government and administration, wherein a host of practical factors, such as geographical distance, provincial rights, the ability of central and provincial administrators to undermine unpopular policies, severely curtailed the exercise of monarchic power.

In one of the most stimulating of the new sections, however, Parker argues that if one wishes to observe 'absolutism' at work in this period, one should look at the churches, Catholic and Protestant alike (how far the same may be said of Orthodoxy is a different matter). The Council of Trent and the various doctrinal agreements within Protestant churches afforded religious leaders a degree of ecclesiastical authority which secular monarchs could but envy. The Tridentine Catholic Church, for instance, possessed a well-defined doctrine which was steadily imposed throughout the Catholic world, a precisely-structured ecclesiastical

hierarchy, efficient (by the standards of the day) administrative support, an obedient membership (heterodox tendencies did emerge, as with Jansenism, but they were handled without another Reformation crisis occurring), and although the precise nature of papal authority remained in question, the Pope exercised a leadership whose ?princely? attributes and powers outshone those of many secular monarchs. As regards the various Protestant churches, they might have rested on doctrinal foundations which differed from each other as well as from those of Catholicism, but even so they managed to secure from their members a commitment, enthusiasm and obedience which contrasted with the resistance which monarchs frequently encountered among their subjects. The character, purposes and limitations of ?absolute monarchy? remain a subject of investigation among historians, but one approach is to perceive it as an attempt by secular rulers to adapt to their own purposes the techniques of indoctrination (in the neutral, non-pejorative sense of that word) and control achieved by the churches. It is no accident that much monarchic propaganda appealed to the divine right of kings, thereby making a direct connection between obedience to God via the churches and to the monarch. This was a strategy not without considerable risks. In so far as rulers legitimated themselves through religious criteria, in like measure did they expose themselves to criticism on doctrinal grounds. Thus, the denunciation of Charles I of England by his enemies that he was, in Biblical terms, a ?man of blood?, who therefore could no longer command obedience from his subjects, proved fatal to his cause. And although Charles is an extreme case, he does illustrate the general point: that the appeal to divine approbation in support of monarchic authority might have closed down certain avenues of criticism, but it opened up others. To take this comment a stage further (and beyond the chronological scope of *Europe in Crisis*), it is possible that the resurgence of state-sponsored religious persecution that characterised several parts of Europe from about the 1670s to the turn of the century, was in part an attempt by rulers to suppress the ?religious? criticism of their regimes which was a consequence of monarchic insistence on the divine right of kings.

Students and other readers who came to the period 1598-1648 through the first edition of *Europe in Crisis* will find the new edition equally instructive, enjoyable, enlightening and essential; it thoroughly deserves the appellation of ?modern classic? and will long remain a standard text. In its geographical spread, it still has a 1970's flavour, a reflection of the original publisher's remit to its authors. Although it incorporates eastern and northern Europe, the book makes only passing reference to Britain and Ireland. While the revised final chapter now contains a discussion of science in England [pp. 252-4], the internal history of Britain and Ireland is not treated in any detail, a limitation that Parker himself notes from the outset (p. xvi). 'Europe' is taken to mean the mainland continent. The front cover of the 1979 edition showed a profile of Richelieu?s head taken from Philippe de Champaigne?s famous triple portrait; the cover of the new edition retains the same source but uses the central portrait wherein Richelieu faces the reader. To finish these comments on a note of pedantry, however, the process of reproduction has reversed the cardinal?s posture: he gazes over his right instead of his left shoulder.

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