

The Birth of Europe

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The re-periodisation of European history achieved in the last few decades is now complete in all but name. The idea of the eleventh to thirteenth centuries as a uniquely formative period for the creation of a European identity no longer surprises academic readers. The numerous titles proclaiming the 'origins', 'formation', 'making' or 'birth' of Europe illustrate that all we lack is a convenient term to express the shift from 'Middle' to 'Central' which characterises our age's re-appraisal of this period of its history, to replace the neat encapsulation 'medieval' with one, if no less anachronistic, perhaps more honest. Nor is it easy to say how long it will be before the rigid institutionalised encrustations of university course titles and publishers' catalogues' sub-sections catch up with the new view of a European history turning on the two great transformative eras following on from the Gregorian and the Industrial revolutions. In our new view reformations, rather than The Reformation, or the Italian Renaissance now recognised as one among other renaissances, are seen as deriving their impulses and characteristics from the first of these formative epochs, as part of a longer interrevolutionary period – the 'long medieval period' proposed here by Le Goff. But this new book by a scholar who has for years been an important contributor to our new view of European history is no mere rehearsal of the rehabilitation of the Middle Ages of the sort which has become popular. It is, as the author states in the introduction, neither a continuous nor a comprehensive history, but rather an essay illustrating the thesis 'that it was in the Middle Ages that Europe first appeared and took shape both as a reality and as a representation' (p. 1). This is a thesis which has been advanced in detail in recent academic literature, much of which Le Goff cites generously. But what he presents here is neither another synthesis of the monograph literature nor one of the increasingly frequent popularising texts (indeed this book assumes a greater familiarity with characters and events than most books aimed at more than academic readerships, demanding, and repaying, thoughtful reading). It is rather a reflection, by one of the creators of the historiographical revolution, on this view of European origins.

The series in which it appears, jointly published in five countries (and called in the English imprints 'The

Making of Europe'), seeks to contribute to the European dialogue in the broadest way. As Le Goff, also series editor, says in the preface: 'Commitment to the European endeavour must accommodate a knowledge of the entire past as well as a vision of the future.' (p. ix) The direct relevance to contemporary Europe of many of the themes covered, and to EC policy, is made explicit throughout. Some are uncontentious, or at least technical, such as the observation that the shift to cereal growing in the twelfth century created the basic patterns of agricultural production with which the CAP now has to cope (p. 49). In other places it is provocative: comparing Charlemagne to Hitler (p. 29) may, by shocking French and German sensibilities, demonstrate viscerally the closeness of the past, while identifying sovereignty (and not just nationalism) as one of the long-term European problems (p. 198) may strike English readers as a swipe at their successive governments' stances on EU integration. But this is not an essentially polemical book; it argues from, not with, the history, and the candour of the political observations sits alongside a judicious and nuanced discussion of the political, cultural, legal and economic features of the period. It could better be described as a reasoned, strongly-argued contribution to an intelligent conversation about Europe.

Early on a 'Schema of the medieval genesis of Europe' (p. 13) is proposed. In this, the fourth to eighth centuries are presented as the period in which Europe was conceived, and the eighth to tenth that of the 'abortive', failed Europe of the Carolingians, which was followed by the emergence, around AD 1000, of 'the dream of a potential Europe'. This was then realised in the periods of 'feudal Europe' (eleventh to twelfth centuries) and "'fine" Europe' (the thirteenth century), which are the subjects of the two central chapters. Finally the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries are interpreted not as the end of the Middle Ages, but as a pause in the continuing development of what is later proposed as a 'long medieval period' (p. 197), reaching down to and laying the social, political and cultural foundations of modern Europe. If this overall structure seems at first familiar, even conventional, this reflects the extent to which academic historians have accepted the new periodisation. In its judgements, detailed argument and methodology this book is far from conventional.

The stated aim of this work is to 'draw upon both what are called historical facts and also the imaginary representations that constitute phenomena produced by human mentalities or attitudes' (p. 3). Academic readers will recognise here the trademark concerns of the *Annales*, with the *mentalités* approach, the qualification of 'historical fact', the historical analysis of symbolic representation, all introduced engagingly for a non-specialist readership. But the chronological framework is central to this book, and the progressive developments identified are explored as interactions between cultural trends and specific historical circumstances. 'What are called historical facts' are not marginalised, bobbing around on the surf above deeper imaginary currents, to recall the most famous, and perhaps most misrepresented, of *Annales* metaphors. And this is not surprising when one considers Le Goff's long-term project to develop a new political history, rooted in the understanding of power structures, language and mentalities, but eschewing the ahistorical, anthropological tendencies inherent in some aspects of the *Annales* approach. Thus not only does this book return to some of Le Goff's lifelong interests – time, trade, work, intellectual life, urban culture, religious experience among many others – it also embodies a particular approach to historical method. (English students are still often directed to a contribution from over 30 years ago, translated as 'Is politics still the backbone of history?', *Daedalus*, 100 (1971), pp. 1–19, transl. B. Bray.) While some of the stars of the *Annales* movement will perhaps be remembered more for their early or extreme positions than for their broader contributions – Braudel's *durées*, Duby's micro-total history, Le Roy Ladurie's creative and idiosyncratic *Montaillou* for example – Le Goff's endeavour to reintegrate political history with the advances associated with the *Annales* will probably be among the most enduring of its legacies. Indeed it could be argued that such an integration is central to the *Annales*' wider influence, saving it from what its harshest critics have seen as a series of spectacular but synchronic dead ends.

In his schema of European origins, Le Goff stresses the metaphor of strata of historical or cultural development ('the structure of this book conforms with the movement of history. It is built up by a succession of chronological phases and strata,' p. 13). Thus for each stratum a series of developments are presented – economic, political, cultural, legal, etc. – which have contributed to the growth and harmonisation of a recognisable European culture. The text moves easily from one to another, presenting

various topics without any imposed hierarchy of importance: social and administrative structures, religious ideology, literary genres, manners, portraits of individuals, outlines of political developments, are integrated in each section. At times this creates a kaleidoscopic effect – which is to say, neither random nor accidental, but presenting the themes in different perspectives and relations with one another. The arguments are not linear, driving to a single conclusion; central themes (humanism, attitudes to work, etc.) rise from time to time like crescendi in the text. So, for example, chapter 2, on the Carolingians, is perhaps the most overtly political:

Charlemagne's vision was a "nationalist" one. ... The Europes of Charles V, Napoleon, and Hitler were, in truth, anti-Europes, and Charlemagne's attempt already smacked of a project that was contrary to any true idea of Europe (p. 29).

By contrast, a true idea of Europe must be based on 'a dialectic between unity and diversity, Christendom and nations, which even today is still one of the fundamental characteristics of Europe' (p. 19). This chapter also concludes with one of the most direct and critical reflections on current problems:

The present construction of Europe must face up to the pretensions of the France/Germany axis. It is no doubt a factor necessary for the stability of Europe, but at the same time creates inequalities and jealousies within the European Community (p. 39).

Yet the same chapter, equally clearly, identifies those aspects of the stratum which were of positive and enduring value, including one of the utmost importance, the 'possibility of *European legal unity*' (p. 33, emphasis in original).

But the approach is best exemplified in what is perhaps the most original and effective chapter, that on 'Feudal Europe' (ch. 4). 'Feudal' is, of course, a term which, after years of revisionism and complex debates, many historians would see banished. Le Goff does duly qualify the term, noting its limited and anachronistic nature (p. 51), but does not then embark on a technical discussion of the nature of feudalism, lead us through the transformation/*mutation* debates, or give the standard lengthy disquisition on the anachronism of a term of unfortunate but necessary convenience. Rather the term is allowed to stand for the invocation of a world, its agricultural base, living spaces and power structures, and the texture of its life. The focus of the chapter is on 'the general features that these years bequeathed to Europe' and which constitute 'its feudal stratum' (p. 49). These include forms of agricultural production, village and parish structures, noble mores and courtliness, militarism, religious reform, money, popular religion, humanism, and many more. One may well ask in what precise sense many of these phenomena can be put under the category 'feudal'. When the text returns explicitly to feudalism, and particularly 'Feudal fragmentation and monarchical centralization' (pp. 67–8), it is not to recapitulate technical debates, nor to address the familiar question of whether we can define an entire society as 'feudal', but to propose a pragmatic interpretation of a political situation and its long-term relevance:

Historians have traditionally been inclined above all to stress the apparent incompatibility between a centralized state and a feudal system. The more subtle reality is that compromise political systems were introduced: these may be called feudal monarchies (p. 68).

The consequences of the creation of these compromise entities are then elaborated: their collaborations with the post-Gregorian papacy, with implications for the separation between spiritual and temporal power (p. 68); the characteristics of medieval kingship which 'were transferred to republican and democratic rulers' (p. 69); and ultimately their longest-term legacy: '... feudal monarchy set Christendom on the path leading toward what we today call the law-governed state.' (p. 70) It is not that more detailed questions are ignored

or sophistication brushed out – these considerations are linked to the notion of contractual, as opposed to constitutional or traditionally feudal models of monarchy (p. 70) – but the sort of perspective offered here demonstrates Le Goff's sense of a political history concerned with the realities of power, not just its signs and symbols, nor viewed only from the perspective of idealised political theory. But equally importantly, this is not the teleologically triumphant culmination of the chapter. The text goes on to consider the twelfth-century renaissance, the cult of the Virgin, heresy, persecution and so forth; and other themes, some, like Christian humanism, more central to the book's conclusions (see below), rise again like crescendi.

Indeed it is hard to give a sense of the breadth of a book such as this without resorting to listing topics. The other chapters present the same rich interweaving of events, culture and personalities, the same thought-provoking perspectives. Chapter 5, 'The "fine" Europe of towns and universities (thirteenth century)', revisits some of the areas most central to Le Goff's life work. But the basic question with which this book is concerned is whether we can meaningfully describe this period as the 'birth' of Europe. The conclusion tackles this in the form of two related questions: first, whether the Middle Ages can be said to have ended in the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries, and second, what aspects of the eleventh to thirteenth centuries can be viewed as definitive or characteristic of European origins. The answer to the first question largely determines the relevance of the second, for any argument about the birth of Europe in the earlier period will be harder to sustain if we see this period as having come to a more or less definitive end. Le Goff consequently devotes a substantial part of the book (chapter 6 and much of the conclusion) to arguing that the fifteenth century represents not a break with the past, but a pause in the development of the 'long medieval period'. This was the point at which Europe reached the conclusion of its territorial development, and turned to outward expansion ('Essentially, the fifteenth century put the finishing touches to the medieval creation of a European space', (p. 196)). But this was not an inevitable development: the situation at the end of the fifteenth century is depicted as one of tension in which the potential for the emergence of a distinctive and united Europe on the basis of the 'past achievements of the Middle Ages' (p. 197) was threatened by both external pressures and internal divisions. What saw Europe through, and what constitutes the answer to the second question and the culmination of the book, were two ideals: unity and progress.

The first of these is presented rather cursorily, and suggests a hesitation about the role of national sovereignty. The emergence of nations and the growth of religious dissent are seen someway between unrealised threats and contributory forces:

... notwithstanding those two factors, Europe had begun to take shape in the Middle Ages, fuelled by ideas of unity and "nationhood" and encouraged by real instances of them, even if the development of the concept of sovereignty and its applications did, from the thirteenth century on, introduce a problem for Europe's future (p. 198).

But it is 'progress' which is the real key to the European development, and this emerges from a more fundamental tension. The basic argument is that medieval Christendom, unlike comparable religious, cultural or political entities across the world, while remaining explicitly conservative in its ideology, incorporated a progressive worldview which was ultimately 'to ensure its incomparable expansion' (p. 199). This originated with Christianity's linear view of history, in which 'the quest for salvation was envisaged as a progress' (p. 199, citing Chenu), and found expression in a range of ideals associated with Christian humanism, and ultimately in the attribution of positive moral values to worldly pursuits, deemed meritorious in a world seen as moving forward in the light of divine purpose (all themes developed throughout the book). This process, which led for example to fundamentally new attitudes to work, technology and innovation, and most importantly to a new conception of time (pp. 200–1), is characterised by Le Goff as 'Heavenly values coming down to earth' (p. 150, cf. p. 200 and *passim*), and lies at the heart of the deepest transformation of European values. But there is a coda to this, which links it directly to the secular Europe of today, for

once values came down from heaven to earth, the handicap that this religious throttle inflicted on progress was increasingly replaced by a springboard aimed at progress (p. 200).

In the end the progressive mentality shakes off its religious progenitor.

One of the more striking developments in recent European history has been the emergence of peace within large parts of Europe, the realisation in some sense of older visionary ideals and plans for a peaceful Europe which form part of Le Goff's story (e.g. pp. 181–2, 187). The horrors of the twentieth century confronted previous generations (including of course Le Goff's own) with a struggle for civilisation which can only seem to post-war generations as personally distant. Our own times, at least inside the European fortress, present lesser challenges. And while the murderous totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century sought actively to pervert history, much current governance, driven by the ideological agenda of the global free market and obsessed with modernisation, simply ignores it. Market forces, invoked unreflectively as ahistorical and acultural arbiters of all areas of life, driving, and determining the form of 'modernisation' outside any constraining values, lead to governance which looks to the future in ignorance of the past. This can range from the wilful and aggressive stupidity of the blanket application of market values to everything, making hospitals and universities, for example, act as businesses, to the many complacent stupidities this engenders, casually referring, for example, to patients or students as 'customers'. How different from the view of the origins of markets embedded in broader social contexts and constrained by wider cultural values which form one part of the diverse inheritance described by Le Goff. We may now face lesser challenges, but they are ours, and who knows what our sleep of reason may bring forth for future generations. One of the aphorisms that the struggle for civilisation of the mid-twentieth century brought forth was that all that was required for the triumph of evil was for the good to do nothing. We might say that the motto for our, certainly privileged, times should be: all that it takes for the triumph of bad government is for the stupid not to know that they need to do anything. Intellectuals can do two things: first, argue for a more historically informed politics, and second, contribute historically informed views to the public arena. Le Goff's book not only embodies his long-term project of a new political history but is a politically engaged history in the most valuable sense: it should be on the compulsory reading list of politicians everywhere.

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