

SOCIAL HISTORY OF EUROPE

Hartmut Kaelble

Institut fuer Geschichtswissenschaften, Humboldt Universitaet Berlin, Friedrichstr.191-193, D-10099 Berlin, Germany.

Keywords: cities, colonies, consumption, convergences, empire, Europe, democracy, dictatorship, divergences, enlightenment, family, genocide, global interconnections, industrialization, migration, nation state, poverty, secularization, social class milieus, standard of living, values, war, welfare state, work

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Summary

The chapter covers the social history of Europe from the enlightenment until the present. It treats three general aspects of European society: the changing social particularities of Europe in comparison to other parts of the world, the changing inner social diversity of Europe, and the changing social interconnections with other continents. The chapter covers these topics in five eras: the era of the enlightenment and revolutions in the 18th century; the long 19th century, Europe as the Dark Continent 1914-1945; the *trente glorieuses* from the 1950s to the 1970s, and the new role of Europe in the globalization since the 1980s.

1. Introduction

This chapter on the social history of Europe deals with the history of social particularities of Europe when compared to other world regions, while at the same accounting for the dense web of interconnections and exchanges between Europe and other parts of the world. A historical investigation into the distinguishing social features of Europe and its global interweavement must take three basic circumstances into consideration. Firstly, the social particularities of Europe as a whole have changed considerably throughout the course of history – most of what once distinguished Europe from societies elsewhere around 1800 has since dissipated while the present-day points of divergence would have been difficult to fathom back then. Secondly, the inner unity of Europe fundamentally changed over the past two centuries. Europe around 1900 appeared as less of a cohesive unit than is presently the case, and thus references to a

European society tended to be less apparent to contemporaries living around that turn of the century than the present day observer. Indeed, an in-depth look at inner-European divergences and convergences is essential when tracing the social history of Europe. Finally, Europe's ties to and interconnections with other world regions have shifted considerably over time. In his widely received book on Europe's "Roman Way", the French historian Rémy Brague argued that throughout its entire history, Europe possessed a quality it had adopted from the Roman Empire, namely the continual appropriation of political concepts, philosophies, concepts, art, values, and lifestyles from other parts of the world and their integration, after which Europeans came to view them as their own European concepts and lifestyles (Rémy Brague, *Europe, la voie romaine*, Paris 1992). Europe thus possesses few original features that emerged within the continent itself. In actual fact, essential aspects of religion and Christianity in particular, the myth of Europa and the bull or notions of the state, numbers, the alphabet, countless foodstuffs, plants and animals such as the potato and the horse were imported from other parts of the world and pieced together to form what often appears to be a distinctly European society. However even this continual European imitation of others throughout the course of history would come to change. Europe experienced alternating periods of exceptional openness and insularity coupled with autarkic economic policies. There was considerable tension between the cosmopolitan openness among many European merchants, artists, intellectuals and experts, and the European or national bias among many local politicians, industrialists, artisans, peasants and workers in distress.

This chapter sets out to trace the historical transformation of European particularities, Europe's inner diversity and convergences, and the web of interrelations between Europe and other world regions in their ever-changing nature. It will strictly avoid placing the history of Europe on three artificial shelves, i.e. a pre-modern shelf, a modern shelf and, finally, on a rather hazy post-modern one. The period under examination spans the past two and a half centuries, as the specific qualities common to European societies were not yet as pronounced in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern period as they were in the 19th to the 21st century. Moreover, the social history of the medieval period and the Early Modern age reveals Europe to be a continent that was not nearly as exceptional as was the case in the past two and a half centuries. When indeed Europe did set itself apart from other world regions in earlier centuries, it did so in the realm of politics, high culture and religion, but barely in terms of its society. Without a doubt, in many instances the roots of European social particularities in the 19th and 20th century can be traced back to the Middle Ages and the Early Modern period. This notwithstanding, the features that would come to define European society as a whole tended to be developments confined to a limited number of regions or small segments of society in the Medieval period and Early Modern times.

By no means does this chapter intend to suggest that Europe's geographical coordinates remained the same throughout history – its boundaries also changed considerably in the past two and a half centuries, especially in the East and the South. Indeed, one may speak of a relatively continuous European core, which contemporaries and historians alike considered to be composed of France, Great Britain, Spain, Portugal, Italy, the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Scandinavia, East Central Europe. However, even in some of these countries, particularly in Great Britain, Spain and

Portugal, the degree of self-attribution to Europe varied greatly over time. Furthermore, the zones of transition between Europe and other world regions, i.e. the Mediterranean, the Balkans, the Caucasus and Eastern Europe in a stricter sense, have also changed considerably. This also applies to two larger countries, namely Russia and Turkey (formerly the Ottoman Empire), which experienced significant changes regarding their own attribution to Europe and the ascriptions and imputations from others. These constantly shifting external boundaries and border zones were not a uniquely European feature; the outer boundaries in other part of the world were also in perpetual flux.

What then, finally, is social history? There is no universally accepted definition of this scholarly field. Its circumscription has been subject to change ever since it initially came to establish itself at Western universities in the 1960s and 1970s. It is difficult to draw clear boundaries, particularly to the neighbouring field of cultural history. At the present time, there are three main areas of particular interest to social historians. Their investigations into the history of social inequality not only examine the inequalities between social classes, social milieus or social estates, but also gender inequalities, regional inequalities, the inequalities between immigrants and natives, different age groups and generation. Another topic of particular interest to social historians is the history of crises and upheavals in societies, as well as the intermittent periods of social cohesion, order and stability in several areas such as the family, labor, consumption and values. Finally, they deal extensively with the relationship between society and politics, with social transformations of major political significance, such as social movements and protest, conflicts and violence, representations and symbols, the media or the public sphere, civil society and interest groups. By the same token however, they seek to examine the effects of political decisions on particular areas of society, such as the welfare state, education, health and healthcare, urban development or criminality, but also the social implications of repression in dictatorships and the social basis of democracies. Although it will not be possible to address all of these aspects within the constraints of this particular overview, the abovementioned themes roughly outline the field of inquiry. In general social historians are interested in social change and upheavals, in the international comparison of the multiplicity of modernities, and in understanding past societies.

The chapter will proceed chronologically to allow for a better presentation of the continual transformations in European societies while at the same time avoiding an oversimplified classification of history into a traditional and a modern period. Instead, the history of the past two and a half centuries will be divided up into five periods in which Europe differed from and was interwoven with other world regions in a fundamentally different manner: the age of the Enlightenment and revolutions at the end of the 18th century, of which neither occurred in other parts of the world, barring the Americas; the period of the long 19th century up until the First World War (1914-1918), the age of European industrialization and all its social implications, nation building and its impact on societies, but also the rebuilding of European empires; the period of world wars and the interwar period, of societies at war, of terror and genocides, during which Europe became the world's most repugnant continent of dread; the period of prosperity from the 1950s to the 1970s, commonly referred to as the *trente glorieuses*, in which Europe not only became the most dynamic economic world region despite the Cold War, but also the cradle of the modern welfare state; finally, the period since the 1980s,

when the end of the Soviet Empire and groundbreaking upheavals in the East ended the partition of Europe, which subsequently came to develop a new sense of unity and self-responsibility while at the same time forfeiting the economic and demographical dynamism of earlier years, but nevertheless featured as a long underestimated key player in the process of globalization. The political, economic and cultural developments during each of these periods cannot be dealt with exhaustively in this text, which will instead focus on social change of Europe.

2. The Five Eras of the Social History of Europe

2.1. Enlightenment and Revolutions in the 18th Century

All in all, there were no clear lines of distinction between 18th century European societies and those outside Europe. The standard of living in Europe was not higher than in other world regions, such as East Asia, the Middle East and Northern Africa. While Europeans often imported luxury products from other parts of the world with a high level of material culture, Europe itself had little in the way of luxury items to offer the rest of the world in return. Life in Europe was neither healthier, nor was the life expectancy recognizably higher than in other parts of the world, with a great degree of variation even within Europe itself. Neither were the cities larger than elsewhere by any measure. And in Europe too, the pace of urbanization was restrained by the levels of production in agriculture, which could only sustain a limited number of city dwellers alongside the needs of the rural population. Around 1800, only three of the largest cities in the world – London, Paris and Naples – were European (four if one were to include Istanbul), while almost all other major cities were located in East Asia. European agriculture, crafts and trade basically resembled those of other world regions. Manufacturing in the 18th century was not a uniquely European phenomenon, but also did exist in India and East Asia. Social provisions for the poor were not discernibly better or regulated differently in Europe than in other world regions. Even European expansion, which had since been underway for several centuries and included the establishment of global trade networks and companies, trading bases and missions, was not a distinctly European feature. The Arab world in particular had pursued a similar form of global expansion.

While the first contours of European social specificities began to emerge around this time, they were initially confined to four aspects of society and, indeed, not nearly as pronounced in the 19th century nor as widespread within Europe itself. To begin with, the European family, with its establishment of independent households by newlyweds, the late age of marriage, low birth rates, a high degree of intimacy and rare incidences of families spanning over three generations in a household was already emerging, although it remained an upper-class phenomenon and was more prevalent in Central Europe and the North West, but not in Southern or Eastern Europe. While there was no real equivalent to the European university, with its international student body, its particular forms of conduct and the scientific community of scholars and intellectuals in other world regions, the European universities merely catered to a very small minority of the overall population during this period. Furthermore, many European cities saw the emergence of political measures and provisions to deal with poverty that were not only braced by religious institutions, private charity, guilds, and large families, but also lay in

the realm of key responsibilities assumed by local municipalities. Such communal policies to reduce poverty appear to have been less common in other parts of the world. That being said, it is worth pointing out that on the whole, only around one quarter of Europeans lived in cities during this particular period. Thus the broad masses were not aware of these urban policies against poverty and did not directly profit from them. Finally, while the scope of European emigration to the Americas during this period paled in comparison to the subsequent wave of mass emigration in the 19th century, it was already beginning to alter expectations in England, Scotland, Spain, Portugal, France and Germany.

The notable European particularities during this period had predominantly emerged beyond society, in the realm of politics and the churches: the early separation of state and church organizations; the territorial nation-state and the competitive rivalries between the European nation-states with their spectacular aristocratic court culture and residences, wars and supra-regional monarchical marriage circles, administrations and armies; the system of estates and the estate council as a precursory form of parliamentary rule; finally, the Enlightenment with its fundamental critique of the values espoused by the monarchies and the churches, with its own new set of values including education, tolerance, a critical public sphere, with its non-pessimistic, emphatic conception of human nature, its societies and clubs to promote these ideals, with its international networks maintained by letter exchanges and travel, as well as magazines and encyclopedias with Europe-wide circulation. While these European particularities surely also had a profound impact on societies, they were primarily political and religious specificities.

Finally, at the end of the 18th century, political revolution, with the powerful international radiance emanating from the French Revolution (1789-1799), finally became a European particularity, not so much because of the overthrow of the monarch, which also occurred in other world regions, but rather in terms of its aims, the constitution, human rights, popular sovereignty, the separation of powers, and the aftershocks that reached beyond its epicenter and across the continents. There were also important aspects and consequences inherent to the revolution in social-historical terms, such as the social background and motives of the uprisings, the social utopias, the rites of the revolution, the dissemination of its ideas, but also revolutionary repression, which was also primarily political in nature. Indeed, one cannot simply view this political revolution as particularly European without further ado – by no means did it define the course of historical events everywhere in Europe, and it failed to prove itself particularly popular in many regions, including Great Britain, Northern Europe, the Tsarist Empire or the European part of the Ottoman Empire. More importantly, it had been preceded by a revolution with similar aims in the United States of America. The age of revolutions was thus more of an Atlantic rather than a European particularity.

The 18th century was a period of deep and profound differences and divisions within European societies. Europe was religiously divided into Catholic, Protestant or Orthodox regions, and in addition Jewish minorities. These religious fault lines had a profound impact on European society, especially in England, France and Germany, where memories of the religious wars were still very much alive. Moreover, Europe was economically divided into regions with predominantly peasant economies or regions

with large estate ownership. Europe was composed of countries with strong ties to the world economy and countries with decidedly local or regional economies. Within Europe itself, there were fundamental differences regarding prevalent family forms. Internal European differences garnered considerable public attention, and travel writing about other countries in Europe began its career as a literary genre. The visual axis of these European lines of separation began to rotate at the end of the 18th century. One gradually ceased to separate between Northern and Southern Europe, with the latter as the cultivated part that was often the wellspring for many important developments, including the Renaissance, humanism, music and paintings that were considered modern by contemporaries, banks as a central institution of capitalism, the Inquisition as a dreaded religious institution, and the early beginnings of European expansion. While the North was far less radiant in cultural terms, it had simultaneously begun to pursue its own claims to power of Europe and gained importance as a centre of European expansion in the meantime. Europe increasingly came to be viewed in terms of an East/West divide instead; from this new perspective, the West was considered to be in the ascendancy, not only economically, but also culturally and politically.

Although relations between Europe and other parts of the world had expanded considerably in comparison to the Middle Ages, they were nonetheless significantly weaker and less pronounced than in the subsequent period. While the significance of emigration to other world regions for future developments should not be underestimated, its scope and extent was still far removed from that of the mass emigrations in the 19th century. In England, a particularly important country of emigration, the number of émigrés going to America in the 18th century was merely one tenth of the figure recorded at the peak of emigration in the late 19th century. The exchange of goods with other world regions, particularly with Northern Africa, the Middle East and India, was of great importance to the European economies. Trading with luxury goods and the emerging market for imported textile commodities linked Europe to other world regions. Europe also began to introduce important crops from overseas during this period that would prove to be of great value to the European economy. Even so, the extent and scope of trade between Europe and other world regions was nowhere near the levels or the magnitude experienced in the 19th or even the 20th century. While there were indeed considerable scientific and artistic exchanges, particularly with its Arab neighbor in the Middle East, their importance for Europe had begun to wane. Moreover, this exchange was eventually imbued with a new quality from the vantage point of the Europeans, who in the wake of the Enlightenment increasingly developed a sense of superiority towards all other world regions. Writing in 1750, the English publicist and historian John Campbell echoed the sentiments of numerous other European authors: “Europe is indeed the most happiest, the most powerful, and in respect of arms, arts, and trade, by very far the most considerable portion of the globe.” (J. Campbell, *The Present State of Europe*, London 1750, pp. 13-14) Thus public debates concerning other world regions gradually subsided.

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Biographical Sketch

Hartmut Kaelble - Born 1940, professor for social history at the Free University Berlin 1971-1991, at the Humboldt University 1991-2008, professor at the College of Europe 2005-2010; senior professor at Humboldt University since 2009. Guest professor or researcher at Harvard University, St Antony's College Oxford, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Sorbonne Paris I, Maison des Sciences de l'Homme (Paris). Research interests: Comparative social history of Europe in the global setting during the 19th and 20th centuries; history of the welfare state; history of social inequality; history of European integration and European identity.

Recent publications: *Der historische Vergleich. Eine Einführung zum 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, Frankfurt: Campus 1999 (The historical comparison. An introduction) (also Chinese 2009), *Wege zur Demokratie. Von der Französischen Revolution zur Europäischen Union*, DVA: Stuttgart München 2001 (Paths of democracy. From the French revolution to the European Union (also Spanish and French 2005); *Social History of Europe, 1945-2000*, Berghahn Publishers Oxford New York 2013, (also German 2007, Japanese 2010; Polish 2011; English 2013); *Kalter Krieg und Wohlfahrtsstaat. Europa 1945-1989*, Beck München 2011 (cold war and welfare state: history of Europe 1945-1989) (also Japanese 2014); recent editorial publications in English: *European public sphere and European identity in 20th century history*, special issue of the *Journal of European Integration History*, No.2, 8. 2002; *The European Way. European societies in the 19th and 20th centuries*, Berghahn Books New York Oxford 2004; with Robert Frank/ Marie-Francoise Lévy/ Luisa Passerini, *Building a European Public Sphere, From the 1950s to the present/ Un espace public européen. Des années 1950 à nos jours*, Lang Brussels/ Bruxelles 2010; *Representations of Europe as a political resource in the early and late 20th century*, Special issue of *Comparativ*, 22.2012, no.6