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R. I. Moore. *The First European Revolution, c. 970-1215.* Oxford and New York: Blackwell Publishers, 2000. xii + 237. $62.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-631-22277-4.

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The Birthpangs of the Ancien Regime or: The Creation of (Western) Europe

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A venerable tradition among historians and social scientists finds the origins of European vitality in the early modern period, somewhere between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries. Most American undergraduates have absorbed a version of this thesis before they ever take a college history course, usually a caricature of Burckhardt's idea of Renaissance.[1] Students are all too likely to "know" that in the fifteenth century or so a crowd of clever people in Italy began the process of leading civilization out of a long era of thoughtless fear and awe, a general stupor of length and intensity unprecedented in history of the West. These Italian intellectuals, it follows, facilitated progress interrupted since the days of Mediterranean Greco-Roman culture. (Protestant students further understand the Reformation as part of the renewal of progress.) Those who study the intervening millennium have been trying for nearly a century to dislodge this fantasy of torpor. The "revolt of the medievalists" against the notion of recovery from an extended cultural coma had as one of its most famous exponents the Harvard historian Charles Homer Haskins, whose contentiously entitled *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century* was published the year my grandparents married.[2] Haskins' book remains in print three-quarters of a century after its first appearance, in part because it is still necessary to remind students and their teachers that the early modern period's claim to the origins of European power and dynamism is fraudulent.

Professor R. I. Moore, a distinguished English historian, carries on the revolt of the medievalists. Here he tells an extraordinary version of an extraordinary story: the birth of a society that is the dimly recognizable ancestor of the modern West, and very much the society that prevailed in Europe until the eighteenth century. Between the late tenth century and the early thirteenth, Moore argues, people at the western end of Eurasia wrought "profound changes in the economic and political organization of the countryside, amounting to a permanent transformation in the division of labor, social relations, and the distribution of power and wealth" (pp 2-3) in which elites "found it necessary to reorganize themselves into a new social order, and to distribute power and authority among its branches by means of new techniques, and according to new definitions" (p. 6). In short, "these centuries witness the foundation of Europe's ancien regime" (p. 64). Such an assortment of changes comprise, in Moore's mind, a revolution, and since it was the result of that revolution bring forth Europe, it was the first European revolution.

What Moore manages, in just 200 pages of elegant and even lapidary prose, is to explain the creation of European society in a fashion that links a variety of topics ranging from agricultural organization to strategies of marriage and distribution of patrimony to educational curricula and arenas. At the literal and figurative root of the birth of Europe is the formation of a new and undifferentiated mass of agricultural laborers. Diverse methods of food gathering and even semi-nomadic ways that had been characteristic of early medieval Europe, Moore argues, were focused into a regime of cerealization and serfdom. Two charts (p. 189) illustrate the result. Early medieval society was divided into two groups: the powerful (*potentes*) and the powerless (*pauperes*). The former group included independent agricultural laborers on what we'd call family farms, the latter as monks; in other words, the most important social cleavage was not based solely on membership in the class of food producers. By the thirteenth century, in contrast, those who produced food were all (or nearly all) of dependent social status, and it was relation to agricultural function participation in its production or freedom from that obligation that marked the most important social boundaries. Predictable and regular cycle of grain-growing, accomplished by a socially and legally undifferentiated mass of

unfree peasants, were the economic foundation of other changes.

Above the peasantry, the elite groups in the newly constituted regime were the classic medieval three orders, an old notion refurbished vigorously after 1150 or so: *oratores*, *bellatores*, and *laboratores*, those who prayed, fought, and worked. Those who prayed, Europe's professional clergy, were for a long time the vigorous advocates and defenders of the newly defined laboring poor. From the late tenth century, monks, nuns, bishops and popes allied with local communities of faithful people and shared their concerns not only for their physical well-being but their spiritual interests, as expressed in relics, shrines, and an organized system of parishes that provided autonomy and a focus for community identity and, in its priest, an arbiter of social peace. The clergy defended the "little community" against the excesses of the mounted warrior class that came to dominate much of the old lands of Charlemagne's ephemeral empire just as the little community supported religious reformers' attempts to remove religious functions from the hands of knights and princes, a central theme of ecclesiastical history in this era.

It was those warriors who, often by force, exacted taxes and service from the peasantry more easily managed if they were indistinguishable from one another, more subservient economically and legally. But the warrior elite had to redefine itself in order to survive. In order to make use of the surplus peasants produced, aristocrats established principles of patrilineage, monogamy, and male primogeniture (in many but not all places, as Moore rightly notes). Families became less collections of relations by blood and marriage than the succession of fathers to legitimate sons, in particular eldest sons, who usually inherited their father's estates. This system, the source of great distress to all those left outside its small circle of beneficiaries, was supported by the Church, which got for its trouble the essential agreement that property granted to any institution of the church a monastery, a bishop, or other religious corporations would remain Church property in perpetuity. Thus, Moore finds, the very Christian clergy who had defended the poor from the excesses of the rough social and economic elite increasingly found necessary alliance with this master class, and in the twelfth century made once localized spiritual practices and ideas increasingly subject to central control. This was no easy task Moore calls it "forcing back into the bottle the genie of popular power" (p. 168) that had helped the Church attain independence from powerful lay lords. But in the end, the Roman Church, still a fairly loosely organized body in the tenth century, had become in a few centuries the hierarchically structured religious authority it remains eight hundred years.

The third of the three orders, the *laboratores*, were not by 1200 the peasantry but a new group, the merchants and artisans of the "citied civilization" that peasants, warriors, and clergy produced. By the early thirteenth century, business was the real labor of the privileged. The new laborers, or better *negotiatores* ("businessmen," indeed almost all males), appeared in contemporary sociological descriptions and classifications. But that omits another group, one not visible in the triple schema yet, as Moore sees it, the one that ultimately made possible the first European revolution. Younger sons deprived of landed inheritances, sons of the new urban elites (who often had noble backgrounds themselves) and even some fortunate sons of the peasantry got their educations together in the schools and nascent universities of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. It was these university graduates, literate, numerate, and well trained in logic and analytical thinking, who served new powerful lords, lay and ecclesiastical. >From the twelfth century forward they also served increasingly powerful and effective kings in France and England, as well as an international cadre of bishops, including the bishop of Rome, the pope. This group of literate servants were essential to "the capacity developed by both secular and ecclesiastical powers to penetrate communities of every kind vigorously and ruthlessly, overriding the restraint of custom, and enlisting, or destroying men of local standing and influence in the name of order, orthodoxy, and reform" (p. 172). And so it was that European society, one that in many ways endured for centuries and in some ways endures still, was born.

A summary blunts the sharp complexity of Moore's presentation, slights the force of its explanatory power, and worst of all, removes examples and anecdotes that make its arguments viable and vivid. Moore's notes reveal his technique: he knows recent scholarly literature on a great variety of subjects, and he has also read intensively in certain medieval sources, in particular saints' lives and the discussions of popular heresy which he first studied thirty years ago.[3] He weaves together scholarly debates and close readings of sources, often managing striking juxtapositions and ingenious uses of the conclusions of scholars some of whom, he knows, will not be entirely pleased at the purposes to which he has put their work. Moore is adept and often brilliant at linking social and economic relations and realities, the nature and distribution of judicial and fiscal power, and mentalities. In the face of the greatest hindrance to writing medieval

social history, the almost complete absence of direct evidence about the lives and beliefs of the illiterate majority of his period, he weaves together a rich narrative of the fate of the voiceless majority in this changing society. His remarks on a few basic facts of history-making are also refreshing. Moore begins by pointing out that since the twelfth century, historians have been writing that Europe emerged from the fusion of the Mediterranean inheritances of Greek and Roman cultures and Judeo-Christian religiosity. These legacies mattered deeply, of course, but "from that stock…the men and women of the twelfth centuries took what they wanted for their own intricate and highly idiosyncratic construction, and discarded what they did not want" (p. 2) Not from the past did Europeans get their ideas on how to farm more efficiently or how to distribute landed property in families. Moore also insists that the distribution of economic, legal, and religious power that emerged in this era was, if not planned, then not accidental either: it came about through conscious human actions. That is to give medieval people agency that our Burckhardt-influenced students might deny them, but also to attribute to them responsibility for what they did.

It is around accountability for accomplishment that Moore finds himself in a different position than most medievalists in revolt against modernists. His view of the most significant developments that constitute the first unique European society (unique among other Eurasian societies and cultures, with which he fruitfully compares it in the last pages of the book) is decidedly dim. Moore's thirteenth century is a time of the powerful few and the powerless many when matters both mundane and supernal were carefully directed by centralized governments whose educated and ambitious agents pledged loyalty only to their centralizing patrons. This is not the image of medieval Europe Charles Homer Haskins had hoped to promote. And it is also in strong contrast to the tone of the book it most resembles, R. W. Southern's *The Making of the Middle Ages.*[4] Southern, too, read widely and then used a select series of examples, performing a kind of core sampling of medieval society in the eleventh and twelfth centuries; he covered many of the same themes – politics, families, the economy, the church, education –and his bracketing dates were virtually the same as Moore's. Still widely used in university classrooms, Southern's account, now nearly fifty years old, gives a far sunnier view of the formation of medieval society. ("It's the rah-rah Middle Ages," as a cynical but not unperceptive student of mine once put it.) Perhaps it was easier in the early 1950s, in the wake of Allied victory at the end of what has been termed Europe's second Thirty Years' War, to look with pride on the formation of the society that had just beaten back Teutonic brutality and despotism. But Moore, here as in his earlier *The Formation of a Persecuting Society* [5], sees also (instead?) the lineage of twentieth-century genocide in anti-Semitism that was at least a side effect, if not an essential characteristic, of the society that the first European revolution fashioned. The most impassioned pages of this new book (especially pp. 149-159) are those on the sorry evolution of Jewish-Christian relations in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and their results, difficult for some Christians and disastrous for most Jews. Just because the origins of the modern West are in the activities and habits of the people of the central Middle Ages, Moore reminds us, does not mean we should regard them uncritically.

Any book that subtly describes the formation of a complex society in a few hundred pages is bound to have some limits. Although he says he expects that a gender revolution will soon join other discussions of medieval commercial, legal, scientific, military, and cognitive revolutions, there is very little here on the activities of women or matters of gender identity and formation. It would have been very easy to remark here, for example, on the structure of urban school and university education in that regard. Women did not go to universities at all, and men in them, if they formed the coherent cadre that Moore says they did, likely manufactured their own novel identities in part along lines of gender and sexual ideologies and behaviors. So women were excluded from, and men had to makes themselves fresh sorts of men in, the new class of officials. I am not persuaded that the new legal regime Moore sees at as the service of the elites was totally to the disadvantage of the peasant majority. In the beginnings of English common law Moore finds an example of a royal centralization and a removal of authority from locales. First, that's not entirely true: common law made common cause with the "little community" and may often have been less arbitrary and oppressive than the local justice with which it competed in the twelfth century. (The same applies outside England, too.) And English barons made something of a comeback when, in the early thirteenth century, they forced their lord, King John, to agree that he was not above the law his father and others had so vigorously promoted. There is no mention of Magna Carta in *The First European Revolution*, even though it was written down only a few months before the Fourth Lateran Council in November 1215, the symbolic denouement of Moore's story.[6] Motivations are sometimes obscure. Lords wanted a more servile and pliable peasantry because they were imposing new taxes. All lords? For what did they need more

money, and did they want it at the same time and for the same reasons? These last questions point toward a final shortcoming. The book's scope is almost entirely in "the lands between the Rhine and the Gironde, or…those like England and Sicily which were colonized from them" (p. 5) that is, the Carolingian Empire plus some regions not far from its borders. That is one part of Europe, but not all of it.[7] To assert that societies as far away as the Vistula and Dnieper were essentially like those of Western Europe by 1215 (p. 181) seems a very dubious generalization, given the absence of undifferentiated peasantry, patrilineal primogeniture, legally minded and bureaucratic central governments, or universities in regions east and south of the Oder (and perhaps even the Elbe). How far east did the ancien regime go? Did it simply arrive in Poland and Muscovy far later than in Western Europe? And if so, what is "Europe" in 1215?[8]

Such observations and questions, perhaps ungrateful in light of how much Moore has given us to think about, may be a way of pointing out that in the best sense, this is not a book for beginners. Like *The Formation of a Persecuting Society*, *The First European Revolution* presents an argument that is easy to criticize but hard to ignore. Indeed, most medievalists will find it quite impossible to ignore and mine of inspiration and ideas. And any reader prepared with some familiarity with premodern history will certainly realize that renaissances are *not* the whole story.

Notes:

[1]. Jacob Burckhardt published what he called *Die Cultur der Renaissance in Italien : ein Versuch* [The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy: An Essay] in 1860; it was translated into several other languages, including English, before the author's death in 1897.

[2]. Charles Homer Haskins, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge, Mass, 1927)

[3]. Moore compiled these sources as *The Birth of Popular Heresy* (London, 1975); his conclusions about them are in *The Origins of European Dissent* (New York, 1977).

[4]. R. W. Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages* (New Haven, Conn, 1953).

[5]. *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Power and Deviance in Western Europe, 950-1250* (New York, 1987).

[6]. There are also mistakes of fact: there is no evidence that Robert of Arbrissel was commissioned to preach the crusade (p. 16) and not enough to state with assurance that Robert was a close friend of Hildebert of Lavardin (p. 109).

[7]. Far greater geographical range is a feature of two earlier books in the Making of Europe series which bracket this one. Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, AD 200-1000* (Cambridge, Mass., 1996) moves from Armenia to Ireland. Peter Burke, *The European Renaissance : Centres and Peripheries* (Malden, Mass., 1998) includes northern and especially eastern Europe in his survey.

[8]. Piotr Gorecki, *Economy, Society, and Lordship in Medieval Poland, 1100-1250* (New York, 1992) is a monograph based on careful reading of difficult sources. Simon Franklin and Jonathan Shepard, *The Emergence of Rus, 750-1200* (New York, 1996) synthesize archeological and written evidence. The fifth volume of the *New Cambridge Medieval History* contains several essays on eastern Europe in the thirteenth century.

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