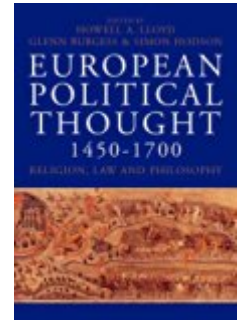


Howell A. Lloyd, Glenn Burgess, Simon Hodson, eds.. *European Political Thought, 1450-1700: Religion, Law and Philosophy*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007. 672 pp. \$85.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-300-11266-5.



Reviewed by Kelly J. Whitmer

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This collection of essays marks the culmination of a three-year long series of workshops that explored the existence of anything that might be called "European political thought." More specifically, volume editors Howell Lloyd, Glenn Burgess and Simon Hodson insist that the essays are not oriented around a single, unifying thesis but mark "an exploration of the extent to which European political thought may be characterized as 'a dialectic between unity and diversity'" (p. 1).[1] Each essay focuses on a specific part of a Europe that the editors describe as an entity separate from Christendom, citing William Penn and the Catholic editors of the *Dictionnaire de Trevoux* (1704). These regions include Italy, the lands of the Holy Roman Empire, Hungary, Poland-Lithuania, the Ottoman Empire and Morocco, Muscovy, Scandinavia, England and Scotland, the Low Countries, Spain and Portugal, and France. In their respective contributions, the authors examine the intersection of the "three main reservoirs of the languages of political thought: religion, law and philosophy" in the autonomous geo-political

spheres upon which their analytical foci are oriented (pp. 3-4).

The task the producers of this volume have set for themselves is a daunting one, and the editors honestly acknowledge that the terrain they are traversing is well traveled and subject to criticism by readers who might question whether histories of political thought can, and should, be written. They point out that "newcomers to this historiographical arena might be forgiven for wondering whether it (i.e., the history of political thought) can be done at all" and vaguely gesture to some "divisions between rival protagonists" (p. 6). While the substance of these criticisms is not engaged in any detail, the editors appear to have taken some of them to heart. Lloyd notes in his introduction that one "might acknowledge concepts to be intelligible across space and time whilst ascribing their durability less to stability than to adaptability of meaning and flexibility of use" (p. 6). With this in mind, the essays presented in the volume appear to participate in a collective attempt to illustrate how European political thought can and should still be considered something uni-

versal precisely because the concepts that have been selected to define it have been adapted to fit so many different kinds of circumstances. Although they state explicitly at the outset of the volume that they have no thesis, it is clear that this central premise operates throughout the volume.

Perhaps as a consequence of such an underlying claim, each piece privileges its own account of variability over attempts at a more broadly applicable discussion of its meaning. The essays are mostly descriptive, self-contained units that offer little in the way of comparative analysis. They follow roughly the same pattern, including distinct sections offering up an introduction to the special circumstances of the historical actors in the region under discussion juxtaposed with sections more oriented around the ideologies, concepts, -isms, and "discursive traditions" that these actors interacted with. In some chapters, these two poles are more interwoven than others, but their polarity is not questioned. For example, Robert von Friedeburg and Michael J. Seidler's chapter on the Holy Roman Empire opens with an overview of its mixed political system (or "socio-political structures"), which involved ongoing claims to fiefs ("not only in the regnum teutonicum, but also in (for instance) upper Italy, Burgundy, Savoy and Lotharingia"); closely related constitutions, laws, and procedures in the German lands of Franconia, Swabia, or Westphalia; and the resilience of a distinct office or charge to protect Latin Christianity (pp. 107-108). Sections entitled "Imperial reform and humanism," "Luther and Melancthon" and "Zaius and Oldendorp" provide the reader with an introduction to the "reflections on laws and on politics" that emerged in this context (pp. 114-126). In their discussion of post-1555 syntheses of structures and thought, the authors identify three distinguishable starting points: first, the "realisation of the Christian-confessional vision of life in political communities above all through revelation (politica or respublica Christiana)"; second, "the correlation of a good communal exist-

tence with the fulfillment of justice and law (jurisprudence)"; and third, "the equivalent quest for a good and happy life in this world, without reference to revelation or spiritual salvation but through natural reason (political philosophy)" (p. 129). Synopses of Althusius and Alsted's impact on the respublica Christiana via their treatments of concepts like *socialitas* or *consociatio* and the "tradition, schools and forms of philosophy" follow (pp. 134-146). The chapter closes with a brief description of the political order presented by Samuel Pufendorf in *Monzambano* (or *On the State of the German Empire* [1667]) and *On the Law of Nature and of Nations* (1672), but ends abruptly.

For someone seeking a contextualized introduction to intellectual discourse in the regions under consideration, between roughly 1450 and 1700, the detailed descriptions contained in the volume will hold some appeal. At the same time, the volume exudes an air of missed opportunity. Considering it is a product of three years worth of formal, workshop-style conversations in which the various contributors interacted extensively with one another, one would hope to find more traces of this collaborative and comparative venture in the texts themselves. One would also expect to find more discussion of why the collective approach to the problem of defining "European," "political," and "thought" contained here might move us closer to resolving the problem framed at the outset. Characterizing the entire venture as an experiment with no guiding thesis or premise leads one to hold out hope for a synthesis that can somehow tie together the respective pieces. Such a synthesis, however, is not forthcoming in the roughly ten pages of the conclusion. Political writers, whether Ottoman, Orthodox, Catholic, or Protestant, Lloyd concludes, drew upon similar sources (namely Mosaic Law, Aristotle, Plato) for political discourse and concerned themselves with similar topics--especially the relationship between the monarchy and the divine. At the same time, he continues, "the appearance of termino-

logical uniformity furnished no guarantee of conceptual consistency and still less of mutual understanding and agreement.... Europe's political conversation amounted to a clash of discordant constructions exacerbated by the very availability of multiple languages for expressing political thought" (p. 501). Despite the editors' insistence that "European political thought" remained discernable throughout this period, it remains fundamentally unclear how the "clash of discordant constructions" presented in the individual pieces became reconciled to it--and vice versa. A more practice-oriented approach, querying how the ideas discussed in the volume traveled from site to site (or from chapter to chapter in this instance), could offer one solution.

Note

[1]. The editors cite Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) in conjunction with this sentiment.

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