

Introduction

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Approaching the early modern period

Upon awakening on 1 January 1500, Flemish merchants, French ladies-in-waiting, Neapolitan fishermen, Muscovite PEASANTS and Castilian nuns would have had little grounds to suspect the dawning of a new era. It was not necessarily the beginning of a new year either, given that 25 March served as the starting date in many regions. On that day, as from time immemorial, nobles prided themselves on their lineage and lordship, while commoners cherished bonds of kinship and neighbourhood. Women found themselves subordinate to men, poor people depended on acts of charity, and peasants struggled to make ends meet. The Church occupied a towering position in everybody's lives, even though reformers and heretics had started to shake its foundations. Few Europeans could read or write and only a select number had ever ventured beyond the boundaries of their principality or diocese.

From a historical perspective, however, these people lived in exciting times. Mediterranean sailors explored waters well beyond familiar coastlines, while scholars rediscovered works from ANTIQUITY which challenged the medieval worldview in fundamental respects. Benefiting from population losses caused by plague, most dramatically the BLACK DEATH in the late 1340s, labourers and smallholders found opportunities to earn better wages and to cultivate larger holdings. The recent invention of the printing press, furthermore, offered Europe its first instrument of mass communication.

A complex blend of continuity and change, of course, characterizes any point of the historical process, and periodization – a useful tool to structure information from the past – is a notoriously difficult task (Eisenstadt and Schluchter 1998; Starn 2002). Common criteria are changes in ruling dynasties, technological breakthroughs, demographic crises and the emergence of new cultural movements. These, however, rarely coincide and the identification of actual transition dates depends very much on regional context, socio-economic variables and the observer's perspective. The Italian scholar Petrarch distinguished between the 'old' age of Antiquity, the 'dark' Middle Ages and his own 'new' age already in the fourteenth century, but the notion of a distinct *early modern* period is relatively recent. It gained wider currency (and institutionalization in specialized journals, organizations and curricula) only from the mid-twentieth century, albeit with significant chronological variations: the accession of the Tudors in 1485 and the late seventeenth century serve as period boundaries

2 Introduction

in English historiography, the Reformation from the early 1500s and the end of the Holy Roman Empire in 1806 in the German-speaking world. Other interpretations locate its beginnings in the RENAISSANCE (starting in late medieval Italian CITY-STATES) or Columbus's first transatlantic voyage in 1492. In recognition of the multiplicity of transformations and the gradual nature of many processes, many historians now perceive a broad transitional phase between the medieval and early modern periods, spanning the century from c. 1450 to c. 1550. This book operates with a similarly flexible starting date.

The following two hundred years offer a number of further notable landmarks, especially the Scientific Revolution from around 1600, the new system of international relations created by the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 or the beginning of the Enlightenment c. 1700, but the next major cluster of transformations appears in the decades around 1800, the approximate date chosen as the end point for this survey: economists highlight the agricultural and early INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTIONS in pioneering regions like England, political scientists the proclamation of principles of 'liberty, equality and fraternity' in the French Revolution of 1789 and communication historians the advent of the railway in the nineteenth century. What had been an 'early' form of modernity – i.e. a period with 'advanced' features such as rival confessions, print media, growing mobility (Box 1) and expanding state power, but persisting elements of medieval culture like political inequality, religious intolerance and the predominance of agricultural production – gave way, very gradually and incompletely it has to be said, to an era shaped by individual rights, mechanization and the expansion of mass communication.

Box 1

'[My heart] delights in pure joy, because ... our coachman is such a gallant fellow, who speeds up as soon as the road affords the slightest opportunity.'

(Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, 1769)

'The speed of the postilions stunned everyone, and as reluctant as I was to pass through these splendid areas in such terrible haste and during the hours of darkness as if in flight, I still rejoiced at having such a favourable wind to accelerate my journey to where I desired to be.'

(Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, 1786)

Pre-modern life did not need to be slow and static. Apart from introducing us to two cultural icons of the period, these two brief extracts from a letter and travel report highlight the dynamic and increasingly mobile character of European society in the late eighteenth century. Stagecoaches were typically early modern in the sense that they formed part of a 'communication revolution' based on the availability of regular and reliable transport through space, while relying on purely natural (horse) power and the legal protection of territorial princes (Behringer 2003, 546, 644).

Over the last century, scholars have offered a variety of conceptual frameworks to explain the major developments between c. 1500 and c. 1800. These usually take the

form of modernization theories, i.e. attempts to trace the origins and developments of fundamental characteristics of present-day European society. Examples include perceived early modern tendencies towards centralization (of political power), bureaucratization (of rule), codification (of laws), CONFessionalization (of religious beliefs) and disciplining (of human behaviour). German sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920), one of the most influential voices in these debates, related long-term processes of rationalization and disenchantment to the relatively ascetic and ‘this-worldly’ character of Protestantism, i.e. ultimately religious causes, while MARXIST historians interpreted the early modern period as a transitional stage between FEUDALISM and CAPITALISM, thus placing the main emphasis on material and socio-economic factors (Morrison 1995). However, such linear and uniform models are now viewed with considerable scepticism, partly because of the experience of multiple pathways to modernity pursued in different areas of the globe, but also due to contrasting evidence within Europe itself. Mediterranean societies in the age of BAROQUE, to cite one stimulating recent thesis, valued leisure pursuits and ostentation over and above social discipline and the accumulation of capital, providing an example of ‘intended backwardness’ and the existence of an element of choice in the period (Hersche 2006). One early insight, therefore, is the danger of hasty generalizations.

The spatial setting

The sheer number of divisions, disagreements and open conflicts afflicting the Continent in the early modern period raises the legitimate question whether there was such a thing as ‘Europe’ at all. In contrast to more recent times, we find its peoples and protagonists preoccupied with local concerns and regional power struggles rather than attempts to promote shared values and forge closer integration. And yet, a number of cultural bonds existed: the religious framework of Christianity, the enduring legacy of the Roman Empire (and, with renewed vigour from the 1500s, ROMAN LAW), Latin as the *lingua franca* of learned people throughout the Continent and a much higher number and autonomy of cities than in other parts of the globe (Anthony Pagden in Cameron 1999). Closer contact with other cultures in the wake of voyages of discovery, furthermore, sharpened the awareness of Europe as a meaningful entity, even though the readiness to engage with these societies remained limited and overshadowed by almost universal notions of European superiority (Figure 0.1).

Europe was thus (increasingly) embedded in a wider intercontinental framework and it did have representatives of ‘the other’ within its own boundaries: Jews had lived in many towns from the High Middle Ages, carving out livelihoods in a generally hostile climate, with periodic bouts of prosecution and (sometimes repeated) expulsions, most famously from Spain in 1492. In the south-east of the Continent, the Ottoman Empire expanded ever further and its armies besieged the Habsburg capital of Vienna on two occasions, in 1529 and 1683. Trade links and diplomatic contacts notwithstanding, ‘fear of the Turk’ was another, recurring reason for reflection on European identity.



Figure 0.1. Strong interest in the natural world, through voyages of discovery and scholarly enquiry, fostered remarkable advances in cartography. This map appeared in *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum*, the ‘first modern atlas’ published by an Antwerp engraver and geographer, Ortelius, ‘Map of Europe’ (1570).



The title *European World* reflects the book’s focus on a specific Continent (indeed predominantly its Central and Western parts) rather than an ‘isolationist’ perspective or a claim of its global pre-eminence. Specialized chapters on the world ‘Beyond Europe’ discuss wider geographical and cultural connections at the beginning and end of our period, while several of the thematic essays – in particular ‘Expanding Horizons’ – address broader aspects during the centuries in between.

Objectives of *The European World*

Most early modern textbooks take the form of monographs (Koenigsberger 1987; Merriman 2004; Wiesner-Hanks 2006), essay collections (Cameron 1999), readers (Collins and Taylor 2006) and companions (Cook and Broadhead 2006). As a collaborative introduction based on an existing survey course, this book adopts a different approach. It pursues four principal objectives:

- First and foremost, to *portray the early modern period in its own right*. Rather than as a precursor to the society of today, it appears as an era with distinctive and contrasting features. Contributions thus acknowledge the coexistence of, say,

subsistence agriculture and market gardening; Enlightenment and ‘superstition’; monarchies and republics; custom and innovation; stagnation and expansion.

- Second, *to examine the entire breadth of the social spectrum* (Part II below). Individuals and groups experienced, and in turn influenced, early modern processes in specific ways. A general account thus needs to look beyond traditional elites, not just in terms of economic and cultural contributions, but also fields like religious and political thought (Box 2).

Box 2

‘I ... the Supreme Authority of England ... shall be and reside henceforward in a Representative of the People consisting of four hundred persons ... in the choice of whom (according to natural right) all men of the age of one and twenty years and upwards ... shall have their voices.

‘X ... we do not impower or entrust our said representatives ... to make any Lawes, Oaths, or Covenants, whereby to compel by penalties or otherwise any person to any thing in or about matters of faith, Religion or Gods worship or to restrain any person from the profession of his faith.’

(*An Agreement of the Free People of England*, 1649;
Haller and Davies 1964, 326–7)

In the late 1640s, when Parliament’s defeat of King Charles I prompted fundamental reflection on the English constitution, the LEVELLER movement developed a radical vision of political and religious change: in numerous petitions and pamphlets, artisans and tradesmen called for a government based on elected representatives of the people and for the peaceful coexistence of different beliefs. This precociously ‘modern’ programme proved unacceptable for England’s ruling elite (‘Riot and Rebellion’ in Part V).

- Third, *to convey an impression of the richness and diversity of the sources*. Throughout the book, authors will highlight ‘voices from the past’. Early modernists find themselves in the comparatively fortunate position of having neither a dearth nor a deluge of information (as do medievalists and modernists respectively). Methodical problems like fragmentary survival, uneven regional coverage and bias towards male social elites pose great challenges, of course, but the empirical base is substantial and varied. It includes above all written materials – books, pamphlets, diaries, travel reports, law codes, court proceedings, tax registers, sermons, petitions (many now easily accessible through web resources like ‘Early English Books Online’ (EBO)) – but also visual evidence – paintings, woodcuts, maps – and material objects – palaces, muskets and drinking vessels, to name but a few. The records allow quantitative as well as qualitative approaches and illuminate a vast range of themes.
- Fourth, *to highlight the plurality of scholarly approaches*. The collaboration of authors specializing in different themes, regions and centuries affords the chance to illustrate the diversity of research in the field. Over recent decades, early modern history has absorbed fruitful impulses from neighbouring disciplines and other

6 Introduction

periods (Walker 2005; web resources). Historical anthropology has attuned us to the significance of kinship bonds, mentalities and rituals; postmodernists have warned against a naïve trust in the ‘objectivity’ of textual sources; and gender studies have readjusted perspectives towards a fuller recognition of the contribution and experience of both sexes. In general, early modern studies have undergone a ‘cultural turn’, in the sense that the traditional concentration on reigns and events has been complemented by growing interest in communication processes, identities, perceptions and representations (Part IV). There are also passionate debates, e.g. about the pros and cons of innovative genres like MICROHISTORY (Ginzburg 1980) or seminal concepts such as the civilizing process and the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere (‘Courts and Centres’ in Part V; ‘Enlightenment’ in Part IV). As a result, early modern studies constitute a lively and rewarding field of study.

Thematic structure

Having sketched vast geographical connections, several centuries of change and the need to cover a multitude of aspects, a note of caution needs to be sounded. No one work of synthesis, let alone an introductory survey like *The European World*, can aim for comprehensive coverage. In pragmatic recognition of what can be done (and what most students are likely to need), this book adopts a primarily thematic structure. Readers find the materials arranged in four parts dedicated to ‘Society and Economy’, ‘Religion’, ‘Culture’ and ‘Politics’, bracketed as it were by two stock-taking exercises, namely ‘Starting Points’ (dealing with the situation around 1500) and ‘Transition Points’ (sketching the state of play at the dawn of the modern era). It goes without saying that this neither implies firm boundaries between spheres (all of which were inextricably intertwined in actual practice) nor a static view of the centuries between 1500 and 1800 (far from it, as each author will be at pains to emphasize). For practical purposes, however, this seems a viable compromise between the complexities of early modern experience and the need to divide the learning process into manageable portions.

While attuned to developments in recent research, the following contributions also engage with ‘classic’ themes like Renaissance and Reformation, state building and ABSOLUTISM, international relations, the rise of trade and European expansion. ‘Great men’ (and women; Figure 0.2) are not written out of the story, but the emphasis lies on their impact on wider society and the ways in which their case studies illuminate more general trends in their respective environments.

Collectively, the authors aim to provide a concise outline of three hundred years of European history. To facilitate understanding of often complex processes and issues, each chapter offers a timeline, suggestions for seminar discussion and guidance to further reading, while appendices contain maps from different periods and a glossary of technical terms. In addition, our companion website provides access to further reading, digital versions of primary sources, colour illustrations, maps, suggested



Figure 0.2. Early modern Europe was a patriarchal society, but it featured a number of powerful queens. Like Elizabeth I of England in the late sixteenth century, Catherine the Great (Tsarina 1762–96) personified the fortunes of an entire realm. Her reform initiatives, like those of many fellow ENLIGHTENED MONARCHS, met with only patchy success. Fedor Rokotov, 'Portrait of Catherine II' (1770): State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg.



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teaching outlines and chronologies of key events (Web resources). Many aspects can only be touched upon, but if *The European World* manages to whet readers' appetite for closer engagement with some of the topics raised here, then it will have served its purpose.

Assessment - early modern Europe

If, in conclusion, we attempt to gain a bird's-eye perspective, *The European World* paints a highly differentiated picture of the centuries between 1500 and 1800. Some chapters emphasize kinship bonds and religious fervour as legacies from the Middle Ages, others detect peculiar features like the full-blown witch-hunt or the golden age of the Dutch Republic, others yet point to innovative forces like PROTO-INDUSTRIAL forms of production and the clash of rival ideologies.

Faced with such a complex blend of transformations and traditions, what are the structures and processes that, in combination, we can identify as defining this particularly European form of early modernity? Regional, social and gender variables inevitably complicate the analysis, but the following elements seem to characterize the period examined here:

- *socially*, a hierarchical and PATRIARCHAL structure built on households, ESTATES and corporations, in which a growing emphasis on merit enhanced the standing of middling groups in general and the professions in particular;

8 Introduction

- *economically*, within a still largely agricultural system, the existence of early forms of industrial production and the increasing importance of global trading networks catering for an emerging consumer society;
- *religiously*, the differentiation of Christianity into ‘confessions’ and, in the longer term, a reluctant acceptance of pragmatic coexistence;
- *culturally*, a widening of spatial horizons; a move from received knowledge towards experimentation; frictions between social disciplining and popular customs; and a gradual supplementation of face-to-face exchange with various forms of written and long-distance communication;
- *politically*, ever larger-scale warfare, state formation and a power shift towards the centre, albeit in practice through processes of negotiation rather than unilateral commands.

The early modern centuries were highly dynamic, allowing individuals and communities to combine elements from this list into peculiar mixtures which were neither unambiguously ‘medieval’ nor ‘modern’. Europeans had options within strong environmental and cultural constraints. Increasing evidence for informed reasoning, profit orientation and religious toleration did not force the Continent on the road to democracy, industrial capitalism and secularization, just as absolutism and growing armies did not predispose it to totalitarianism and successive world wars. Much rather, as indeed in any period, we see societies engaging with the specific challenges and opportunities of their time.

The (often scarcely documented) interplay of agents, time and space in ever-changing constellations explains why history is not an exact science, but an ongoing evaluation of motives, causes and outcomes. New sources, approaches and periodic reassessments of the field can help us to advance our knowledge of the past – a process which this book hopes to encourage and contribute to.

Discussion themes

1. Why is historical periodization a difficult task?
2. Where can historians find information on the early modern period?
3. Did contemporaries have an awareness of being ‘European’?

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