

BOOK REVIEWS

## Das Zeitalter der Ambiguität. Vom Umgang mit Werten und Normen in der Frühen Neuzeit

By Hillard von Thiessen. Cologne and Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 2021. Pp. 447. Cloth €60.00. ISBN: 978-3412521202.

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What was “modern” about early modern Europe? The term is relatively new, dating from the mid-twentieth century, before which these centuries were simply included under the heading “modern history.” The neologism implies a dividing line somewhere between the mid-eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century and was often simply abbreviated as “1789.” Some viewed the early modern period as a transitional era. Others agreed with Winfried Schulze’s view, articulated in 1983, that it was a “pattern book of modernity,” an age in which Europeans experimented with solutions to problems, thrown up largely by the Reformation, in ways which prefigured the pluralistic society that emerged in modern Europe. Increasingly, however, and partly reflecting wider growing anxieties about modernity and progress in the West, scholars have questioned these assumptions. Some point to continuities between the Middle Ages and the early modern period, even across the Reformation and all the confessional and secular changes associated with it. Others emphasise the differentness of early modern society and culture, the distinctively unmodern character of its culture, thought, and practice.

Hillard von Thiessen believes that the debate has become rather sterile. He favours the new approaches of cultural historians but suggests that their suspicion of master narratives prevents them from using their research to see the bigger picture. His new book suggests an approach which takes account of all recent “turns” and offers an overall view of the period. It is, he emphasises, not a new comprehensive account of early modern European history but a possible way of approaching that history which captures its distinctive character.

Instead of starting with the realm of political and military decision-making or with the overarching structures which conditioned the lives of individuals, von Thiessen wants to view history from the perspective of those individuals themselves. Their lives were hedged about with norms (rules) and values (ideals). How did they deal with them and how did their perceptions and reactions contribute to the process of historical change? Variations of social status, gender, age, or profession, among other factors, ensured a huge variety of responses and modes of behaviour, some conformist, others antagonistic. Norms often conflicted with values. This generated uncertainty, which individuals had to negotiate. According to von Thiessen, the willingness and ability of individuals to engage with the contradictions of their time, the ability to live with and accept ambiguity, is the true characteristic of early modern society.

This bold thesis is elaborated in two stages, starting with an outline of the development of three kinds of norms in Western society after the fifteenth century. Firstly, the various late medieval church reform movements aimed to establish norms of belief and Christian behaviour. The Reformation resulted in the failure to reform the universal church. Instead, the aspiration to create such norms fuelled the development of discrete confessions, each of which ultimately sought to impose its own version of Christian discipline on its members. At the same time,

however, the competition of religious norms and the emphasis placed on the fundamental significance of the individual's conscience created scope for ambiguity, dissembling, and dissent.

Political authority was still legitimised by divine writ and remained so throughout the early modern period. Yet the evolution of norms defined by the needs of the community and the common good made claims that lay at the core of conflicts between communal organisations and monarchical authority. Over the long term, monarchs gained the advantage because of their ability to organise and consolidate their administrations. Especially their ability to style themselves as ultimate judicial authorities immeasurably enhanced their power in the eyes of their subjects. Yet rulers constantly struggled with law enforcement and were in constant negotiation with those whom they ruled.

Thirdly, parallel to religious and political norms, social norms also developed in response to the growing complexity and internal differentiation of society. The key value of honour was fundamental in the early modern period and crucially important to the networks of family, patronage, and friendship, which held society together. Throughout their lives, individuals had to negotiate a path through a variety of social roles and associated social norms, through phases in which their honour was at stake. While these norms were informal, the price of failing to respect them at any stage could be life-changing.

The three categories of norms were not discrete, and they intersected at many points. In the second part of his book, von Thiessen shows how each operated and interacted with the others. Everywhere, he suggests, there were areas of ambiguity. The gulf between ideal and reality was both recognised and tolerated, or at least regarded as the inevitable result of human imperfection.

After the mid-eighteenth century, however, von Thiessen argues, a fundamental change occurred. The Enlightenment represented a new way of thinking, which aspired to clarity and certainty. The old norms and values prevailed well into the nineteenth century but, progressively, the modern state ceased to tolerate ambiguity and strove instead for transparent rules that applied uniformly, were defined in legislation and enforced by the state. In a final twist, von Thiessen suggests that postmodernity has exposed the achievement of certainty as but a self-delusion of modernity. Perhaps, he concludes, the modern system of norms was but a short-lived *Sonderweg* of the West. Early modern ambiguity is perhaps closer to the reality experienced by most human societies.

The spirits of Foucault and Bauman pervade this book. Von Thiessen's range of reference and engagement with the historiography of early modern Europe is, however, much broader and more penetrating. That makes his book valuable for scholars, even if they end up remaining sceptical about the new master narrative of the West which it proposes.

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## **Rescue the Surviving Souls: The Great Jewish Refugee Crisis of the Seventeenth Century**

**By Adam Teller. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020.  
Pp. 377. Hardback \$35.00. ISBN: 978-0691161747.**

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Given the devastating demographic consequences of the Thirty Years' War for Central European populations, 1648 is often considered a major turning point towards intense