REVIEW ARTICLES

POPULAR POLITICS BEFORE THE ADVENT OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

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In 1618, a pamphlet published by radical ministers in the Swiss rural town of Thusis claimed:

The form of our government is democratic; and the election and deposition of the magistrates, all kinds of officers, judges and commanders... belongs to our common man; he has the power, according to his majorities, to create statutes and to abolish them, to establish alliances with foreign princes and estates, to dispose of questions of war and peace, and to deliberate about all other matters pertaining to the high and lesser magistrates.¹

¹ Head, Early Modern Democracy, 232.
Such a claim, even though in this case it was made in a remote valley in the Grisons in eastern Switzerland, is a striking example of one of the extremes of the broad range of political ideas available to early modern Europeans. At the same time, one feels that these ministers were definitely out of touch with the broad trends of early modern European politics, a fact underscored by Jean Bodin’s comment that the Grisons are “the most popularly governed of any Commonwealth.”

According to a well-established version of the history of the West, modern society, including democracy, was inaugurated by the two great transformations of the late eighteenth century: the Industrial Revolution and the French Revolution. This version of the modernization of Western society has been cast into doubt by economic historians. The new orthodoxy on the Industrial Revolution is basically that it was much less revolutionary than the standard tale would have us believe. The revisionist argument relies partly on a re-evaluation of the modernizing tendencies within early modern European societies. The rise of proto-industry, as well as the growth in agriculture and population, suggest a much greater vitality in early modern societies than the textbooks allowed for.

Compared to the Industrial Revolution, the French Revolution has weathered attempts at this type of revisionism much more successfully. No doubt this is due, among other reasons, to its specific character as an historical event that can be dated much more accurately than the process of industrialization. Most historians still seem to assume that before 1789 European politics was the domain of elites. Their exclusive rule may have been punctuated by riots and rebellions, but these did not affect the basic social facts of political life. Only after the principles of popular sovereignty were established in France, and subsequently on the rest of the European continent, were the great majority of European populations incorporated into the political nation.

A growing body of literature, however, including the works under review here, seems to argue explicitly or implicitly against that orthodoxy

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2 Head, Early Modern Democracy, 248.
3 For example, see R. R. Palmer and Joel Colton, in what is arguably the most influential academic history textbook from the second half of our century, A History of the Modern World, 8th ed. (New York, 1995), 453.
4 This is perhaps less obviously so among German historians; see, for example, the seminal works by Peter Bückle, Deutsche Untertanen: ein Widerspruch (Munich, 1980), and Heinz Schilling, “Civic Republicanism in Late Medieval and Early Modern German Cities,” in Religion, Political Culture and the Emergence of Early Modern Society. Essays in German and Dutch History, ed. Peter Bückle (Leiden, 1992), 3-59.