

Gijs Versteegen, *Corte y Estado en la historiografía liberal. Un cambio de paradigma*. Madrid: Ediciones Polifemo, 2015, 490 págs.

Making History of the Idea of Court: From *Æconomica* to Historiography

Nowadays the enquiry into the Courts of modern times, with their manners and customs, Court parties and influence on politics, represents a fresh line in the field of so-called Modern History.¹ By affirming that the Court was a moral community and a space of power specific to and of pivotal importance in the monarchies of the Modern Age, research groups such as the Italian “Europa delle Corti” and the Spanish Instituto Universitario “La Corte en Europa” (Universidad Autónoma of Madrid) have helped lead the traditional political history of these periods to the complex land of cultural history. A piece drawing its inspiration from a topic such as this deserves its own space beyond the area reserved for studies in Modern History, since it examines the vicissitudes of the idea of Court from its origins to current times and suggests interesting reflections to understand aspects of both 19th-century historiography and recent changes in historical writing.

Corte y Estado en la historiografía liberal. Un cambio de paradigma by Gijs Versteegen, Dutch hispanist and visiting professor of English Philology at the University Rey Juan Carlos (Spain), is a recent study spawned by a doctoral thesis at the Universidad Autónoma of Madrid in 2013, supervised by Professors Manuel Rivero Rodríguez and José Martínez Millán.² Both professors are experts on the history of modern Courts, with the latter also being the author of an interesting overview on the issue³ and director of the Collection “La Corte en Europa” of Ediciones Polifemo, responsible for publishing this volume of nearly 500 pages. We cannot but applaud the tenacity of this veteran Madrid publishing house and bookshop, which, after several decades in the book market, has not ceased to release sources and monographic works on Spanish modern history. The sole objection we might raise to this edition is the lack of an index to guide the reader.

It is also apposite to emphasise that this work is not a translation. It is a well-documented study written in an articulate and clear Spanish that maintains the details from the original text. This commitment to the Spanish language, not frequent in other Hispanisms which, such as the Anglo North-American one prefer to express themselves in the language of Shakespeare, is an added value in a study of this nature, which hinges

¹ Despite the English term used here, in Spanish academia the expression “Historia moderna” does not have the same meaning as “Modern history” in the English-speaking Anglo North American world. In Spain the term generally refers to the field of studies devoted to the period from the 16th to 18th century. This is a strict delimitation – and, in our opinion, obsolete – which has sometimes obstructed or discouraged those specialists who, intending to examine the history of historiography or historical thought, have needed a much broader chronology and interdisciplinary studies to reach 19th and 20th century thinking.

² The title of the doctoral thesis was *La sustitución del paradigma cortesano por el estatal en la historiografía liberal*, <http://tesisenred.net/handle/10803/283001> (accessed 29 July 2015).

³ José Martínez Millán, “La sustitución del ‘sistema cortesano’ por el paradigma ‘Estado nacional’ en las investigaciones históricas”, *Libros de la Corte.es*, 1 (2010): 4-26, https://repositorio.uam.es/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10486/4317/29005_1artMARTINEZ.pdf?sequence=1 (accessed 1 June 2015).

on intellectual history and expounds complex philosophical and historiographic reflections. This is enhanced by the fact that the author, who introduces excerpts from German sources, always accompanies their translation into Spanish with the corresponding original version in the footnotes.

As for the content of *Corte y Estado en la historiografía liberal*, the reader will find a text very influenced by German *Begriffsgeschichte* (conceptual history). Apart from references in the footnotes and the importance given to Austrian historian Otto Brunner (see below), this is apparent when the author states his intention “of understanding the Court world from its own conceptual language instead of reconstructing history from a viewpoint that frequently attempts to reduce and grasp historical reality through the categories of current historical thought” (p. 52).

The book is structured around four interconnected components which, together, provide cohesion and make it of unquestionable interest to the reader both theoretically and historiographically. The first component is an in-depth analysis of the history of the idea of Court, an essential element for political thought from medieval times to the 18th century, from its primary philosophical sources (the so-called *æconomica*) and treatises, to the essays of 18th and early 19th-century philosophers. This array of favourable authors and critics occupies the bulk of the chapters.

The second component is an examination of the narrative on the Court, particularly that of the first three Spanish Hapsburgs, from three outstanding historians belonging to different moments: the Scot, William Robertson; the German, Leopold Ranke; and the Spaniard, Antonio Cánovas del Castillo. This component has a somewhat illustrative value and serves to demonstrate in what way the topic of the Court entered the field of 18th and 19th-century historiography.

The third component is a hypothesis which works as a bond between the first two factors. This hypothesis states briefly that the world of the Court, once it became the object of sustained attention on the part of 19th-century historians, also paradoxically came to occupy a marginal place in the writing of history itself, because of its tendency to focus upon the State (the State-Nation). In other words, it used the category of State, and hence the history of institutions, as an essential factor of historical teleology and modernisation. (This third element has, indeed, noteworthy theoretical and historiographic implications.)

The fourth and final component (included in the long introduction of the book) is a brief overview of the way historiography has gradually criticised the aforementioned reductionist view of the Court and promoted a “new paradigm” on the topic during the 20th century. This would have taken place first and foremost on account of the importance of pioneering authors who either unravelled the cultural roots of the Modern State (Max Weber), or situated the Court customs within a theory of civilisation (Norbert Elias), or else examined some of the foundations of the Court model, mainly the ideas of *æconomica* (Otto Brunner); and secondly, as a result of recent historical enquiry into this topic.

The author seems to be content with examining the substitution of the “Court model” with that of the “State-Nation”, as he asserts in the introduction (p. 53).

However, in light of the aforementioned components, the book might to a certain extent be considered a test of the auto-reflexive capacity of the current paradigm: how and why the idea of Court has evolved from its Aristotelian and scholastic foundations, rooted in *œconomica*, to current historiography. The title of the piece, which to our mind is somewhat ambiguous, is therefore not the best choice to highlight the suggestive reflections contained within.

As mentioned above, most of the book is devoted to the history of the concept of Court, which the author examines closely in Chapters 1 to 6 – in so doing, he still sees fit to review a defender of the Court philosophy like the German intellectual Christian Garve, who wrote at the end of the 18th century. Nevertheless, what will capture the reader's attention most will surely be the pivotal place the idea of Court occupied among intellectual trends from the 16th to 18th century (the facets of what the author calls "Court worldview" are stated in pp. 52-53). These chapters portray a multi-coloured parade of intellectuals from various epochs. Some of them were Aristotelian and scholastic, others proposed the reform of Court philosophy, others criticised it from a pietistic viewpoint during the 16th and 17th centuries, and others began to "historicise" it thanks to Enlightenment ideals. However, they all took part in a never-ending discussion where religion, images of man and society, considerations concerning economic behaviour, essays on customs and manners, and political reflections were inextricably intertwined.

In Chapter 1, the reader will observe a penetrating examination of the Court worldview through two renowned pieces – *Il libro del Cortegiano* (1528), by Baldasare Castiglione and the novel *El Criticón* (1651-1657) by Baltasar Gracián – separated by 150 years (marking the differences between the Renaissance ideal of the Court and the far more pessimistic view of this institution from the perspective of "Spanish tacitism" in the 17th century). But perhaps what arouses most interest is the previous analysis of the Aristotelian and scholastic roots of Court philosophy seen through St Thomas Aquinas and his disciple, Egidio Romano, who wrote a treatise on the topic at the end of the 13th century (pp. 73-82).

It is in this classicist and scholastic substratum that the inheritance bequeathed for centuries to the Court worldview by *œconomica* (also known as the theory of the *ganze Haus* or "Big House") is to be found. Here, it is also easy to appreciate the importance for this topic of the contributions of Otto Brunner, who is reputed to be the first modern historian to draw attention to *œconomica*'s significance. This medievalist is also the man who introduced *Begriffsgeschichte* in historiography. His significance in fact extends far beyond the field of medieval studies. Long before he signed the world-renowned *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland* (1972-1997, 8 vols.), with Werner Conze and Reinhardt Koselleck, Brunner, who passed away in 1982, had already built a solid career as an expert in the history of political concepts.⁴ Brunner had started it during the Nazi period (and became firmly ensconced in the academia of that time) through criticism to

⁴ See Pierangelo Schiera, "Otto Brunner, uno storico della crisi", *Annali dell'Istituto storico italo-germanico in Trento*, 13 (1987): 19-38, and James Van Horn Melton, "Otto Brunner and the Ideological Origins of *Begriffsgeschichte*", in Hartmut Lehmann and Melvin Richter (eds.), *The Meaning of Historical Terms and Concepts. New Studies on Begriffsgeschichte* (Washington D.C.: German Historical Institute, 1996), 21-33.

German history of law, which he accused of casting the contraposition between State and civil society in his studies on the Middle Ages – a difference of categories not truly invented by Western thought until well into the 18th and early 19th century. Not surprisingly, it would be his disciple, Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, the author, in 1961, of an interesting monograph on the topic.⁵ There, Böckenförde offered a survey of the historiography of German law in the second half of the 19th and the early 20th century, and showed to what extent this had inherited the contraposition between State and civil society from the former German constitutional historiography from the late 18th and mid-19th centuries (Justus Möser, Karl Friedrich Eichhorn, the “Germanists”, etc.), which also formed part of the aforesaid study. It is a pity that the book reviewed here had ignored such an interesting work like Böckenförde’s, which was re-edited in 1995 and still maintains its full interest today. It may well have helped the author approach historiographic topics in a more articulate fashion.

But to return to the comments on Brunner’s significance, mirrored in the book under review, it is essential to remember that this author also played a prominent role in the renewal of historiography in the Federal Republic of Germany with his *Neue Wege der Verfassungs- und Sozialgeschichte* (1968), in which the reader will discover interesting samples of Brunner’s concern with *Begriffsgeschichte*. In this book, there is a chapter entitled *Das ‘ganze Haus’ und die alteuropäische ‘Ökonomik’* (The “Big House” and the “Economica” in Old Europe) where Brunner recognizes the tremendous importance that *œconomica* achieved in Western thought, and its sources:

Until the 18th century what man understood by ‘economics’ was something different from what it has done ever since. The *œconomica* of Old Europe appears to be, from a modern viewpoint, a complex of doctrines that belong to ethics, sociology, pedagogy, medicine and different techniques of agrarian and domestic economy [...]. Today we are barely in a position of seeing that behind it is found the internal unity of the ‘house’ in its entire existence.⁶

Once the Court model has been examined, the reader will find several chapters – in *Corte y Estado en la historiografía liberal* – where different trends criticising the Court philosophy from the 16th to the 18th century are studied. Chapter 2 will take him from the anti-Aristotelian and anti-scholastic view of the Reformation fathers to three figures of 17th-century philosophy from the Protestant world: Hugo Grotius, Thomas Hobbes, and Samuel Pufendorf, who wrote in different moments. What links them altogether, the author asserts, is their attempt to reconsider the philosophic foundations of human sociability – and thus Court sociability – maintaining the Lutheran-Calvinist principle of predestination, namely the idea that man is a naturally deviant being

⁵ Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, *Die deutsche verfassungsgeschichtliche Forschung im 19. Jahrhundert. Zeitgebundene Fragestellungen und Leitbilder* (Berlin: Duncker und Humblot, 1961; reed. 1995). There is an Italian version of this book published by Pierangelo Schiera: *La storiografia costituzionale tedesca nel secolo decimonono: problematica e modelli dell’epoca* (Milan: Antonino Guiffré, 1970).

⁶ “Man hat eben bis ins 18. Jahrhundert unter ‘Wirtschaft’ etwas anderes verstanden, als dies seither der Fall ist. Die altereuropäische Ökonomik erscheint unter modernen Gesichtspunkten als ein Komplex von Lehren, die der Ethik, der Soziologie, der Pädagogik, der Medizin, den verschiedenen Techniken der Haus- und Landwirtschaft angehören (...). Dass hinter ihr die innere Einheit des ‘Hauses’ in der Gesamtheit seines Dasein steht, vermögen wir kaum mehr zu sehen” (*Neue Wege der Verfassungs- und Sozialgeschichte* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1980], 105-6). The Spanish reader can find a selection of some of its chapters under the title *Nuevos caminos de historia social y constitucional* (Buenos Aires: Alfa, 1976). The translation is not fully reliable.

because of the original sin. Pufendorf, who published once the Wars of Religion had come to an end, already sets out the “enlightenment” idea that trade – and not family – is the basis of human sociability, thereby shifting interest in the erstwhile *œconomica*. On the other hand, Chapter 3 focuses on two other well-known 17th-century figures: Christian Thomasius and Gottfried Leibniz. The contact point between them is the wish to harmonise pietism or a return to the gospels – a reformist movement within the Reformation which spread throughout German Courts during the late 17th and early 18th centuries – with new rational assumptions. In Thomasius’s case, this rational assumption revolves around the proposal of a philosophy based upon the importance of natural law, which would help reform Court customs; in Leibniz’s case, it was more about an integral reform of philosophy, science and religion, to accomplish the reform of the Court ideal.

Chapters 4 to 6 are devoted to the Enlightenment movement, to how the Philosophy of the Lights gave way to an anti-Court criticism other than the traditional one – which had emerged during the 16th and 17th centuries. This new criticism, based upon an interest in history and the new ideals of sociability, should be interpreted, the author says, as forming part of an alternative worldview of enlightened bourgeoisie (p. 233). *œconomica* would be one of main victims of the shift caused by the Age of Enlightenment. In Chapter 4 that new ideal, which superseded the idea of Court, is the concept of “civil society”, whose main guardians were the Scottish philosophers. To them, civil society worked as “an intellectual construction created to put into practise a new moral, stemming from a new anthropological view” (p. 238). Chapter 5 deals with Rousseau’s criticism of the Court ideal and *œconomica*, and how this criticism depended on his image of society hinging on “general will”. And most of Chapter 6 describes, in a highly contextualized manner, how Immanuel Kant looked at the Court ideal and its values in light of his idea of metaphysical morals as being independent from empirical reality.

It is in these pages devoted to Enlightenment writers that the author introduces historiography through the examination of two historical pieces by the Scot William Robertson, *The History of Scotland* (1759) and *History of the Reign of the Emperor Charles V* (1769, 2 vols.) (pp. 238-260), though one misses references to the writer who best knew perhaps how to represent the theoretical implications of outlining a history of the concept of civil society i.e. Adam Ferguson, also from Scotland, and his well-known *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767).

In any case, Robertson’s interest in the process of civilisation, his view of Court as something opposed to “civilisation” during certain moments of European history or as its vehicle at other times, proves to be very suggestive. His historical narrative is not indifferent to one of the main characteristics of *Begriffsgeschichte*, which was particularly emphasised by Reinhardt Koselleck. By this Koselleck meant the feature of political language introduced during the so-called *Sattelzeit*, or “saddle period”, from the mid-18th to mid-19th century, which operated as a “temporalisation” process (*Verzeitlichung*).⁷ Or in Melvin Richter’s words: “the disposition to insert modern

⁷ See Reinhardt Koselleck, *Futures Past. On the Semantics of Historical Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 40 ff. and “The Temporalisation of Concepts” (1975, 1995 Transl. by Klaus Sonderrmann, <http://redescriptions.anders.fi/media/uploads/yearbooks/1997/Koselleck%201997.pdf> (accessed 29 July 2015).

political and social concepts into one or another philosophy or horizon of history set out teleologically in terms of periods, phases, or stages of development”.⁸

In this way, *Verzeitlichung*'s importance is patently obvious: while *œconomica* and other long-standing concepts were indifferent to historical change, civil society and other terms emerging during the *Sattelzeit*, really gained traction because of the exact opposite, that is, the possibility to adopt a historical perspective or to act as modernising ideas capable of being guided by a philosophy of history. If this property of concepts, or *Verzeitlichung*, is ignored, then it is hard to understand why the concept of Court came to occupy a minor or irrelevant place during the *Sattelzeit*. However, it would also be a mistake to conclude that Courts were devoid of historical narrative to legitimise themselves before the 18th century. Quite the opposite: a good deal of Renaissance and Baroque historiography – which was seen as a competitor to philosophy – can be considered a “Court historiography” concerned with the genealogies of kings, dynastic political interests, Court factions, and European and civil wars. Their main singularity, as far as the representation of historical time is concerned, was their admiration for the Ancients, which, along with their edifying and exemplary determination, was the cause of their narrow capacity, compared to subsequent cultural paradigms, to apprehend historical change.

The last chapter enables the author to bring his thesis (discussed in the introduction) to a close: the idea that Court was definitively consigned to remaining in the background or to insignificance when the concept of State-Nation started to make inroads during the 19th century. This step was first taken by some German idealist philosophers in the early 19th century (particularly Fichte and Hegel), who cast the State as an ethical community opposed to civil society, in the sociability or civilizational sense conceived by Scottish and French philosophers. The rest of the chapter (pp. 398-452) is devoted to describing how historiography represented the idea of State. It is obvious that Ranke and Cánovas del Castillo's study is regarded as an example here, though in no case should the expression “liberal historiography” from the title confuse the reader.

Leopold Ranke is presented as a “State-oriented” writer who recounted the politics of monarchs, particularly the first three Hapsburgs, and the Popes in light of that idea. He saw State – or rather, the “Primacy of foreign affairs” or *Primat der Außenpolitik* – like a German idealist, as a mirror of the existence of a realm of spiritual values or of a reflection of God. Hence Ranke's interpretation of politics in the 16th and 17th centuries concluded that the Spanish Hapsburgs and Popes, insofar as they surrendered to Court values (pretence, deception, appearances, ostentation, etc.), would have fallen prey to egoism and turned away from the true *raison d'état* (pp. 428-38). More questionable is the attempt to present Ranke as though he were a writer influenced by German nationalism (p. 395). As some experts have said (the author cites studies by Georg G. Iggers and Juan José Carreras),⁹ the Germany with which Ranke identified

⁸ Melvin Richter, “*Begriffsgeschichte* and the History of Ideas”, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 48 (1985): 252.

⁹ Respectively, Georg G. Iggers, *The German Conception of History. The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present* (Middletown Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1883), 71-5, and Juan José Carreras Ares, “El historicismo alemán”, in Carlos Forcadell (ed.), *Razón de historia. Estudios de historiografía* (Madrid: Marcial Pons, 2000), 48-9.

was neither the small German solution under Prussia's command, nor was it the Bismarck German Empire founded in 1871 (Ranke died in 1886). As far as we know what Ranke thought about his own time, his ideal was rather close to the German traditional federative system – with some reforms in Prussian government – which had already suffered adjustments from the Napoleonic wars and the Congress of Vienna. At least Ranke never questioned it. Nor is it possible to see Ranke as a liberal; or at least not in the same vein as his disciples, Enrich Sybel and Georg Waitz, who took part in the Frankfurt Parliament of 1848.

Antonio Cánovas del Castillo, the second author analysed, is also an appropriate example, as a historian who examined the modern political history of Spain in light of his role as a statesman – though one misses here some books that have been recently published on Spanish historiography.¹⁰ Cánovas was considered to be one of the foremost specialists on the history of Spanish Decadence. According to the author, with his image of Philip II as a “prudent” king and statesman, Cánovas side-stepped the importance of Court interests and their continuity, thereby contributing to circumscribing Decadence to the 17th century – very unlike his predecessors, “romantic historians”, who considered it began with the accession of Emperor Charles V to the throne.

But, apart from illustrating historiographic change with two outstanding examples, the question is whether there is another way of examining 19th-century historiography in order to explain the aftermath of the predominance of State in the study of the Court. We think that it is necessary to emphasise, to contextualise examples, the tremendous importance which the genre of constitutional history gained from the 18th century onwards. With roots in some Enlightenment debates (e.g. the French controversy over the German or Roman origins of nobility and monarchy), constitutional history was the way European liberal political culture found to represent the importance of State and other social institutions. Rooted in the saying encoded by Madame de Staël, “freedom is ancient”,¹¹ it was a historical speciality present in all European countries, leaving a deep trace on national histories. As a “special history” it was represented in Spain, in the first half of the 19th century, by Francisco Martínez Marina and Tomás Muñoz y Romero, in England by the contemporary Whig historian Henri Hallam; in France, François Guizot wrote important books on the history of French institutions and translated into French Hallam's *Constitutional History of England* (1827). In the German-speaking world, it was named *Verfassungsgeschichte*, etc.¹² An approach to this field would have enriched the historiographic analysis of the author.

¹⁰ For instance, José Álvarez Junco y otros (eds.), *Las historias de España. Visiones del pasado y construcción de identidad* (Barcelona, Madrid: Crítica, Marcial Pons, 2013), chaps. 11-14; and Gonzalo Pasamar, *Apologia and Criticism: Historians and the History of Spain, 1500-2000* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010), chaps. 1-2. On the other hand, the use of the *Diccionario de historiadores españoles contemporáneos, 1840-1960* (Madrid: Akal, 2002), by Gonzalo Pasamar and Ignacio Peiró, would have avoided the mistake in Note 2 (p. 10) concerning Eduardo Chao's work.

¹¹ The complete sentence was “freedom is ancient and despotism modern” (Gonzalo Pasamar, *La historia contemporánea: aspectos teóricos e historiográficos* [Madrid: Síntesis, 2000], 59).

¹² *Ibid.*, 59-60. See the recent book published by Joaquín Varela Suances-Carpegna, *Historia e historiografía constitucionales* (Madrid: Trotta, 2015).

To bring the review to a close, we would like to strongly recommend reading this book. The specialist in Modern History will appreciate an all-embracing and detailed study of intellectual history on the concept of Court, along with a range of reflections which surrounded it from the Late Middle Ages to the 18th century. The expert in historiography will discover a portrait of a key problem of 18th and 19th century Western cultures: namely, how modern historical perspective emerged from the ideas of civil society and State, and how some relevant authors represent them. And the Hispanist will find, in short, a well-constructed book written in Spanish with many references to the Spanish Court in the 16th and 17th centuries.

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