

Perception of Poland and its role in Europe's history. Pieter Rietbergen, *Europe, a Cultural History*, London 2014, 3rd ed., SS 584; ISBN 978-04-1532-359-8.

It is a common complain among Polish historians, but also among some parts of the general public, that Polish history and the role of Poland in Europe's history is somewhat overlooked in the eyes of western European historians. They argue that Poland and its history should be given much more prominent role in the books treating of European history. There is a question whether such claims are based on reality or are a symptom of an over-sensitivity on the part of Polish public and historians. The matter is interesting as the answer reflects on the self-perception of Polish society and its place in contemporary world, and in contemporary Europe in particular.

Peter Rietberge's book "Europe, A Cultural History", written by a historian from Netherlands and published by Routledge is a perfect example of an popular history work that sheds light on the thinking of the historians coming from western European tradition. Their vision of the rest of the European continent and its role in European and world history is a subject of great interest for Polish historians.

Published in English by Routledge relatively recently, in December 2014, "Europe, A Cultural History" is a third edition of Peter Rietbergen's work focused on the cultural history of Europe, in fact mostly its western part. Previous editions of the book resulted in a lively discussion on the part of some reviewers. The focus of those discussions had more to do with contemporary society and political problems faced by Europe than considerations about the history of the continent.¹ The book, despite the protestations of Peter Rietbergen, should be seen more as a work destined for general public than strictly scientific piece of writing.

Book was published by Routledge imprint of the Taylor & Francis publishing group. Taylor & Francis specialises in publishing both scientific and more popular works, covering such areas as history, social sciences to maths or physics. Books published by the imprint are usually a reliable source of information and are very popular among readers. They are also widely available in book stores and libraries in countries such as United Kingdom.

Peter Rietbergen studied history on the University in Nijmegen, in Netherlands, where he stayed to continue his studies and later to become lecturer. Rietbergen has also spent some time in Rome and Paris in the course of his historical studies. His main areas of interest include history of papacy, colonial conquests of European powers and cultural history. His PHD thesis treated of the papal state in the seventeenth century.² Since year 2000 he is a lecturer in post medieval cultural history on the university of Nijemegn. He publishes, both in English language as well as Dutch, works about cultural history, European history and the history of Netherlands. Among his works is the biography of the first Dutch governor of the Dutch East India, Pieter Both. He also does research into European history with books such as "Power and religion in baroque Rome. Barberini cultural policies".³ To this day, however, the most widely known of his works is "Europe, A Cultural History" published in English by Routledge and which has had its third edition in December 2014.

The history of Europe, even restricted to its cultural aspects is a vast area of studies. What is more, the cultural aspects of history cannot be entirely divorced from other elements of history and material and social context in which they occur. Thus it was an ambitious undertaking on the part of Peter Rietbergen to present the vast and complex matter of cultural history of Europe in one, all-encompassing book. The task seems so much more daunting when we realize that the work describes

¹ RIETBERGEN (2014) XL.

² Pausen. prelaten. bureaucraten. Geschiedenis van het pausschap en de Pauselijke Staat in de zeventiende eeuw (Popes, prelates bureaucrats. History of the papacy and the Papal States in the seventeenth century, Nijmegen, 1983).

³ Peter RIETBERGEN, *Power and religion in baroque Rome. Barberini cultural policies*, Leiden 2006.

the subject from the very beginning of the human presence on the European continent till the modern times. The immense task resulted in researcher having to make hard choices in terms of what to include in his book and what to exclude. As he notes himself: “One not only must determine the chronological scope of such a tale, more importantly one must decide where, both geographically and culturally, Europe begins and ends.[...] Must everything be described which has happened from the North Cape to Gibraltar, from the west coast of Ireland to the Urals, the accepted geographical definition of Europe as a continent? Or should only those developments be emphasised that can help us understand Europe's culture as it is seen today?”⁴ While it is difficult to fault Peter Rietbergen on the principle of choosing the geographical and topical scope of his work, it is possible to argue with particular choices made by him.

The “Europe, A Cultural History” begins with the description of the oldest human cultures in Europe as well as presentation of key ancient cultures which influenced the continent and its culture. Starting with Mesopotamia and following with the analysis of Greek and Roman civilisations he lays the theoretical foundation for discussing the shape of contemporary European culture. Much attention is given to the religions and their relationship with culture and society. Islam, Christianity in its many denominations and Judaism are analysed throughout centuries as an important influence on European culture and society. Throughout the observation and analysis of interactions between various elements of culture Rietbergen retrieves what he believes is the source of modern Europe as we know it. Such analysis includes, however, only limited number of factors, trends and developments.

Very telling is the absence in the Peter Rietberge's work of any mention of the eastern European countries and their contribution to the creation and development of the idea of Europe as a cultural, political and social entity that is distinctly different from other civilisations. Crucial in this context is the division between eastern and western Europe. In the eyes of many historians the history of Europe as an distinct entity is closely associated with its western part. In short, what happened in the eastern part of the continent was irrelevant to the construction of what we now consider European idea and European community, in their cultural and social dimensions. This omission has two sources. First and foremost, many historians from western Europe do not consider the contribution of the countries to the east and south of Germany as important in creation of the idea of Europe and its basic and most characteristic features. The second reason is the lack of knowledge and tools necessary to appreciate fully the history of eastern European countries and their participation in the creation of European cultural heritage.

Peter Rietbergen notes “This book mainly, though not exclusively, records events that occurred in the western zone, dwelling somewhat less upon the central European countries and their cultures, and giving but scant attention to Russia and the Balkans. Although there are sound scholarly reasons, besides considerations of a politically correct nature, to induce an author to fully include the culture of eastern Europe, I have chosen not to do so. First of all, I lack the language skills necessary to delve into the relevant literature. More important, however, I believe that this non-inclusion can be defended on the basis of past developments themselves”.⁵ When Rietbergen decides that he is not interested in the history of eastern Europe he follows it through in his work with virtually no mention of that part of Europe in his work.

Religion and its impact on the culture are also important part of Rietbergen's work. He notes the importance of religion in creating and perpetuating the divisions in Europe. Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant Churches as well as Islam are, according to him, an important elements of cultural but also social and economic developments. What is most important, however, is the fact that the western Europe had developed a political and social system that is distinctly different from that of the eastern Europe. And that is the core of his argument. He seems to assume that the idea of Europe equals western Europe exclusively. As a consequence, Peter Rietbergen's work includes only scant information about Poland, but also other central and eastern Europe countries and their history. What is more, when those countries are mentioned, the information concerning them is not only scant but often imprecise or misleading. For instance, the whole of the history of Lithuania is reduced to

⁴ RIETBERGEN (2014 XL –XLI.

⁵ RIETBERGEN (2014) XLI.

an assertion that this country's history could be reduced to being a bone of contention between Poland and Russia. Other countries of the region do not fare better. They only appear in "Europe, A Cultural History" as a background for western European countries policies. Furthermore, when literature is analysed, only works from the western part of the continent, such as those by Boccaccio or Chaucer are included. Eastern Europe is the background for the crusades by western knights, for example the ones organized by the Teutonic Order into Lithuania and Baltic coast. Hanza is only mentioned in passing, mainly because its involvement in the trade with western Europe. Interesting is the fact that Czech Republic has also been neglected in Peter Rietbergen's work. As a part of the Holy Roman Empire the country receives some attention, but it is a limited one. Russia and its self-appointed role of heritor of Constantinople are also neglected.

The role of the Orthodox Church in shaping the continent is also neglected, which seems reasonable, when one takes into account the assumptions of Peter Rietbergen concerning the role of eastern Europe in creating European culture. More importance is accorded to other religions, in particular Islam in the early stages of the Europe's evolution and later on to the Protestant Churches of western part of the continent. Rietbergen notes that the role of Islam, in particular, was significant at the early stages of European idea evolution. According to him, scientific research and the creation of universities in late Medieval Europe was due to Islamic influence.⁶ In fact, more attention is given to the Islamic influences than to central and eastern European ones.

Peter Rietbergen does not use in his work any sources relating to central and eastern Europe. It is hardly surprising taking into account his self-professed lack of linguistic ability in this area. As a result, the work is based on the English language sources mostly. Considering the theoretical assumptions of the historian, who sees history of Europe as a western Europe history exclusively such lack seems justified. However, such assumption would hold the water only if the historian was able to demonstrate decisively that his assumption is valid. When one considers that central and eastern Europe hardly figure in the Rietbergen's analysis it is difficult to adhere to his point of view. His assumptions are reductive and do not give justice to the contribution of many of the countries omitted in "Europe, A Cultural History". One can consider such stance unjustified but there is little that can be done. The main problem lies in the fact that the experiences of the western and eastern parts of Europe were distinctly different over the course of history, starting as far as the times of the Roman Empire. As a consequence, they also differ in modern times. Thus the assumptions of western historians, but also economists or social sciences researchers are based on facts. Peter Rietbergen argues that what we call European culture, in its broad sense as not only cultural but also economic and social phenomenon has developed between years 1750 and 1950.⁷ It has to be noted that for the significant part of that period Poland did not even exist as a separate political entity and was unable to participate fully and equally in the continent's development. The same can be said about many other countries of the central and eastern Europe such as Czech Republic, Hungary or most of the Balkans. Nevertheless, Scandinavian countries for example are also absent from Rietbergen's considerations.

Peter Rietbergen in "Europe, A Cultural History" divides Europe into two parts, the real Europe whose development he observes throughout the history and which has created a set of beliefs and stances that he defines as European, and the rest. The rest which had a distinct and different experience and, as a result, has developed different set of beliefs and convictions. Thus the unification of Europe as he sees it would come not from merging of those experiences or an acknowledgement of the eastern part's contribution to common heritage. Rietbergen sees eastern Europe as a part that has to surrender its traditions to the western narrative and values. Only in that light the approach taken by Rietbergen, and many other historians of the western part of the continent, can be understood properly.

Rietbergen is persuaded, and expresses that conviction at the end of his work, that both sides of the continent will merge to create one bloc in terms of cultural, social and economic values. It is an approach that seems overly optimistic, because it would require one or both sides of the divide to surrender their values. And at the moment it seems that they are not ready to do that. Thus the work of Dutch historian hints at a more complex and serious problem, a problem of the divide between

⁶ RIETBERGEN (2014) 179.

⁷ RIETBERGEN (2014) 179.

western and eastern parts of the continent which seem much deeper than he is willing to acknowledge. However advantageous it seems for the eastern part to surrender to the western narrative there are many obstacles on that path and the goal is further than it seems to the eye of any historian. That chasm has to be noted and acknowledged by both sides. Western historians must realize that their narrative does not have to be the only valid interpretation of continent's history, and its future. The importance of "Europe, A Cultural History" lies not exclusively in its definition of what is Europe and its values but also in pointing out the divide on the continent and the divide in the thinking of Europeans. In all those considerations the role of Poland and its contribution to the European idea is of lesser importance. The most important is the divide on the continent and the barriers that exist on the both sides of the discussion.

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