The Claim 1

The Medieval Rubbish

Karl Marx famously referred to the French Revolution as a 'gigantic broom' that swept away 'all manner of medieval rubbish'.[2] Marx here echoed the negative image of the Middle Ages that dominated the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. The very word "Renaissance" signifies an ambition to orchestrate a rebirth or revival of the knowledge of Antiquity whereas the "Middle Ages" refers to the stagnant period between Antiquity and its rebirth. In the fourteenth century, Italian humanist Francesco Petrarca, commonly known as Petrarch in English, had seen himself as placed at the end of a dark and obscure era that would finish when the beacon of Antiquity was set ablaze again. In the ensuing centuries, "medieval" became a byword for misery, superstition, and brutality; an image that has survived in the notion of the *Dark Ages*, popular even today though historians have long since abandoned it.

The premise of this book is that the "medieval rubbish" nurtured the seeds of modern Europe. It did so by creating power pluralism between and within political units. International competition has been identified as the crucial fact of European state formation. Almost a hundred years ago, German historian Otto Hintze emphasised how Europe was

created in a context of *Schieben und Drängen* – push and pull.[3] The English idiom about how push comes to shove conveys Hintze's central insight: that international competition constantly incentivised European rulers to augment their administrative, military, and economic capacity. This idea was later picked up by scholars of international relations who described how the balance of power in the international system pressured states to upgrade their capabilities for warfare.[4]

But European state formation also saw a second balancing act: between rulers and elite groups. Monarchs confronted a society of orders[5] in the form of nobles, clergy, and townsmen. The British philosopher Ernest Gellner saw these groups as the harbingers of the civil societies that came to characterise Western and Central Europe and which at one and the same time balance state power and undergird it.[6] Long before that, French philosopher Montesquieu had argued that it was the nobility that, by acting as a counterweight against monarchs, had created the Western tradition of liberty – an argument picked up by his compatriot Alexis de Tocqueville, who used it to sketch the path that led to the French Revolution.[7]

This double balancing act has long been seen as a necessary condition for the modernisation process that in recent centuries has culminated in the modern state, the modern market economy, and modern democracy: the trinity that nineteenth- and early twentieth-century sociologists attempted to explain.[8] This enterprise – which sparked modern social science – has been coined as an attempt to answer the question 'Why Europe?'[9]

Why did the breakthrough to the modern world occur in this hitherto remote corner of Eurasia, which by AD 1000 seemed to have such poor prospects?[10] What are the historical roots of the "great divergence"[11] that after the Industrial Revolution and the American and French Revolutions would make European societies and their colonial offshoots leap away from the other great agrarian civilisations of Eurasia?

More than a hundred years ago, German sociologist Max Weber referred to this as the "old question", and it would certainly be pretentious, perhaps even preposterous, to claim that this book provides a final answer. The aim is more modest: to show that this development has deep historical roots and thus cannot be ascribed to the Reformation, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, or Industrialisation. Likewise, it does not – in the main – owe to the legacy from Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome.[12] The crucial juncture occurred in backward medieval Europe, in a society that was strikingly poor and undeveloped compared with the much more prosperous areas in the Middle East, India, and China.

Enter the Catholic Church

More precisely, the claim of this book is that we cannot understand the rise of modern Europe without factoring in the power pluralism sparked by the eleventh-century conflict between the Catholic Church and European lay rulers. This 'Papal Revolution', as American legal scholar Harold J. Berman termed

Max Weber (1864–1920)
The German sociologist Max Weber devoted much of his career to answering the "Why Europe?" question, which he allegedly himself described as the 'old question'. Weber emphasized the importance of the medieval European "free cities", as well as the role played by Christianity in general and the Protestant Reformation in particular. This photograph of Weber was taken in 1918, at 54 years old, two years before his untimely death in Munich in 1920.

it,[13] has been the subject of a flurry of recent books by political scientists.[14] As this literature stresses – and as pointed out by the aforementioned Otto Hintze in an unpublished essay dating to 1931[15] – the eleventh-century rupture meant that European emperors, kings, and princes henceforth had to tread a fine line: caught between the opposition they encountered from strong social groups such as townsmen, nobles, and Catholic clergy and from other European rulers.[16]

These developments, sparked by the Papal Church, were crucial for European state formation. They fatally weakened the authority of what was the strongest political unit a millennium ago, the Holy Roman Empire.[17] Europe was never again to be ruled by a single political entity that claimed a higher authority than all other units. All attempts – from the Salian and Hohenstaufen Emperors in the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries, to the Habsburg Charles V and Philip II in the sixteenth century, to the Bourbon Louis XIV in the seventeenth century, and to Napoleon and Hitler closer to our own time – ultimately failed. Instead, Europe became a conglomerate of competing territorial states, which constantly pressured each other politically as well as economically.

As pointed out by Austrian historian Walter Scheidel in the aptly titled book *Escape From Rome*,[18] this absence of empire made Europe differ from all the other great agrarian civilisations of Eurasia, located in the Middle East, India, and East Asia. In these areas, empire had much more staying power, even if we also find periods of fragmentation. For instance,

the centuries-long Chinese Warring States Period, which has been likened to the later European system of territorial states, was brought to a swift end in 221 BC when the strongest state – Qin, the source of the modern word "China" – conquered all its competitors.[19] A couple of centuries earlier, the area that is today northern China had housed well over a hundred political units. The generalised geopolitical pressure of the Warring States Period reduced these to a mere seven heavily armed fighting machines; when the dominoes fell in 221 BC, only one was left standing. Afterwards, China experienced periods of prolonged imperial stability interspersed with periods where the great realm was divided, but it never saw a fall-back to a genuine multistate system. According to calculations by political scientists Mark Dincecco and Yuhua Wang, in the period 1000–1799, the Chinese area contained an average of 1.5 states; Europe an average of 85 states.[20]

The failure of empire is thus the crucial fact about medieval and early modern Europe. The result was that European monarchs were constrained, internationally and domestically. They not only faced off against each other, they were also balanced internally by strong nobles, a strong clergy, and – after the twelfth-century commercial revolution – vibrant towns. European emperors, kings, and princes constantly had to walk the tightrope, and if they fell off it, they would face dire consequences in the form of external defeat or internal rebellion.