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Education and Absolutism in Eighteenth-Century Germany

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EDUCATION AND ABSOLUTISM IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY GERMANY

Absolutism and the Eighteenth-Century Origins of Compulsory Schooling in Prussia and Austria. By James Van Horn Melton. Cambridge University Press, 1988. Pp. xxiii + 260. £25.

Grace, Talent and Merit. Poor Students, Clerical Careers, and Professional Ideology in Eighteenth-Century Germany. By Anthony J. La Vopa. Cambridge University Press, 1988. Pp. viii + 412. £30.

In the course of the eighteenth century, fundamental changes occurred in the education systems of German states. These had to do both with the extent and structure of education, and with associated ideologies. In different ways, the studies by Van Horn Melton and La Vopa shed new light on these shifts. They also, by focusing in depth on particular issues, contribute to broader debates about the impact of religion on cultural transformation in early modern Europe.

Much used to be claimed for the impact of the Reformation in sponsoring popular literacy; yet studies by Gerald Strauss and others began to show that the effects were not as great as formerly supposed. It was not so much in the sixteenth century as in the eighteenth that the emphasis in schooling began to be placed on mastering the written word. Was this, then a product of the emerging Enlightenment – and thus not of ‘religion’ after all? But the Enlightenment, too, was a protean phenomenon: there were considerable variations in the relations between different religious traditions and Enlightenment impulses in different areas. Generalizations must now be much more sophisticated.

In an interesting and well-structured account, Melton makes a valuable contribution to these wider debates. His study explores the importance of two sets of *religious* impulses, in combination with certain socioeconomic changes, in the origins of compulsory schooling in Austria and Prussia. The choice of cases is itself significant: the catholicism of Austria was in marked contrast to the ascetic form of Pietist protestantism which became, effectively, the state religion of eighteenth-century Prussia. Notwithstanding this key overt confessional difference, policies of educational reform had much in common – and this not only because of similarities in socioeconomic context, but also because of certain common elements in the apparently very different religious traditions.

Melton’s analysis reveals that it was not the confession as such – protestantism or catholicism – but rather particular, comparable, strands within each confession which proved to be important. Three elements in particular are identified: the pedagogic impulses of Pietism, as expounded most notably by August Hermann Francke in Halle; of reform catholicism, which developed in Austria in reaction against the baroque indulgences of visual and dramatic imagery; and of the catholic appropriation of Pietist pedagogy as initially mediated through the work of Johann Ignaz Felbiger in the uniquely mixed religious circumstances of Silesia. Melton convincingly outlines the ways in which each of these three traditions led to similar forms of pedagogic emphasis.

But cultural and religious forces alone would not have been enough to convince rulers that educational reform was needed. These new pedagogic impulses coincided with a period of fundamental socioeconomic change. In the towns, there was a

weakening of guild authority. On the land, important agrarian changes meant the development of a 'masterless' class of land labourers, a 'land-poor, subpeasant stratum'. A set of changes, including estate speculation, rapid turnover in ownership, leaseholding and absent management, all combined with changes in the nature of the peasantry to produce what was seen as a 'crisis of seigneurial authority'. The answer, according to Melton, was to put the two elements together: the perceived need to instil a new form of internalized labour discipline when the old paternalistic bonds were weakening supposedly combined with religious motives to provide a powerful argument for school reform. On this view, children would, through appropriate schooling, learn a self-discipline which would take the place of extraneous coercion.

This neat, attractive argument raises at first glance a problem of functionalism. Were the rulers in Prussia and Austria really so far-sighted as to perceive the ways in which the 'needs' of the state could be fulfilled through a religiously informed education system? And were they right? But before such thoughts have progressed very far, Melton begins to examine what actually happened on the ground. He explores the limits of reform in the two states, recounting intriguing details as to how attempts at reform were frustrated on all sides. There are wonderful insights into the problems of conflicting aims of Prussian bureaucrats, who sought, for example, to conscript particularly tall schoolmasters into the Prussian army (with its famous regiment of tall soldiers), and into the nightmares unleashed by attempts to introduce a questionnaire (the teachers' responses to which bear certain resemblance to responses to the introduction of the National Curriculum). The difficulties of implementation of the 1774 Theresian school reform in Austria are revealed, together with the ironies of some of its unintended effects and longer-term consequences.

Despite this exploration of the difficulties of implementation, a few doubts remain about the general thrust of the argument. It is certainly attractive, but there is probably at the end still insufficient evidence both on motives and on social circumstances in different areas to bear it out fully. Some of the evidence cited by Melton is itself contradictory. Why, for example, were noble lords against schooling on pp. 195–6, when earlier it was allegedly in their economic interests? Nevertheless, Melton's account is interesting and clearly argued, and the argument will no doubt be taken further.

A rather different experience awaits the reader of the *La Vopa* volume. Rather than presenting a single, coherently developed argument, *La Vopa* unrolls a series of interrelated studies on different angles of his chosen topic – or rather, set of topics.

In the first part, *La Vopa* describes in great detail both the stereotypes and the realities of life for poor students (often sons of clergymen) in the eighteenth century. Chilling details are given of their perpetual hunger, and their reliance on sponsorship, stipends, tutoring and 'free tables' for survival. The 'patronage chain' is explored in detail through (often fictional) autobiographies – with a detour on literary theories of autobiography – drawing particularly on Semler's autobiography and on Moritz' subversive, or anti-, *Bildungsroman*, *Anton Reiser*. This is followed by an account of the *Hofmeister*, focusing on Fichte. A second part revolves around the notions of calling, vocation and service, discussing the ideas of August Hermann Francke, Jung-Stilling, Büsching, Gottlob David Hartmann, Gedike and others. In the third part, *La Vopa* turns to 'new departures' towards the end of the eighteenth century, starting with an account of the revolution constituted by the Sturm and Drang movement and the new focus on 'genius', and proceeding through an analysis of the making of a professional teaching ideology, the clerical identity, and finally the 'radical visions' of Johann Gottlieb Fichte.

The author makes no attempt to hide his learning, whether it be in literary theory and history, philosophy, or social history. Nor does he make any attempt to repress or constrain, in the interests of space, the wealth of historical detail he has amassed. But the reader who pursues *La Vopa* through this series of studies may at times wonder where it is all leading, and whether it might not have been more tightly controlled.

La Vopa begins, for example, with a wide-ranging introduction raising promising questions about the distinctiveness of German culture, and discussing 'new' approaches to the sociology and history of education. But as one proceeds through the wealth of detail, one has the impression that expectations are raised which have not entirely been fulfilled. Allusions made to theories from twentieth-century sociology of education are not systematically evaluated, either in their own terms or in relation to the historical evidence presented. For example, *La Vopa* discusses the importance of home background in pressurizing and helping certain schoolboys to benefit from their education and become socially mobile, in contrast to their non-academic peers whose parents allowed them to participate in 'street culture'. Here, *La Vopa* appeals to Basil Bernstein's concepts of 'restricted' and 'elaborated' codes. But he makes no reference to current criticisms of these concepts within the sociology of education, where they have been the object of considerable debate; nor does he make a genuinely revealing link with his own historical material. Similarly, the reader may sometimes wonder where the lengthy discussions of texts, literary works or autobiographies are really leading.

In all, *La Vopa's* book seems to promise more than it actually delivers – and the style is often less than helpful in sustaining the stamina necessary to pursue it to the end. It may well be that there is a very good book – or indeed quite a few good books, given the wealth of material and ideas – lurking in here, waiting to get out; but it – or they – would need to be considerably slimmer, more tightly argued, to make any effective point. Nevertheless, as with Melton's work, the opening of important issues for further and more systematic exploration can only be welcomed.