

Book Review

North/South: The Great European Divide

Ricardo J. QUINONES

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Ricardo J. Quinones' latest book, *North/South: The Great European Divide*, is small in size yet vast in magnitude. A splendid example of comparative literature to complement his earlier volumes, *Dualisms: The Agons of the Modern World* (2007) and *Erasmus and Voltaire: Why They Still Matter* (2010), Quinones' uses the purposefully-slender *North/South* to examine one of the most significant events in the early modern period – “the division of European society and culture along a North/South axis” (p.vii) – through the writings of leading intellectuals and public figures. Significantly, he is adamant that this shift commenced not with the physical influence of the industrial revolution, but in an earlier age “with its own intellectual tools and perspectives” (p.viii). These perspectives are explored through the author's convincing analysis of several key texts that, “in all their full and comprehensive complexities, their eloquent and passionate formulations... clarify and contribute to the ascendancy of the North” (p.ix).

Broad is indeed the keyword here, as by Quinones' own admission the work “does not pretend to offer all that is known in so a massive subject, nor to fill in detailed background material of dates and events...” (p. ix). Instead, he focuses attention on how four key critical concepts – “*Christian liberty, scepticism, tolerance* and [understandings of] *time*” (p.vii) – grew in response to the decline of old southern empires and the rise of Protestantism. To Quinones, it was the heated exploration, reassessment and redefinition of these concepts that would eventually catalyse “that great transformation from the religious principles of the sixteenth century to the secular rights of the eighteenth” (p. 9) and conspire to cement an enduring

political, ideological and economic division between North and South over the next four centuries.

Initially, the structure of *North/South* seems odd, particularly as it does not follow a linear historical narrative, but instead swoops and loops back on itself chronologically. Over 11 brief chapters, Quinones moves thematically, focusing on the four concepts and their relationship to key figures and events within the early modern period, in both northern and southern locales. From Erasmus to Voltaire, the author weaves a discussion of various important ideas that are intrinsically related to the separation of a growing Protestant North and a crumbling Catholic South. Chapter 3, 'The Challenge of Ideas', initiates the reader to the foundations of Christian liberty, before the next seven chapters analyse early ideas of tolerance and scepticism, as well as changing understandings of time itself. He examines how the North/South divergence entered consciousness through the early characterisation of people, traits, and emotions, before turning to the robust Northern European intellectual movement championed by later writers such as Hegel, Weber, Milton, Locke and Mill. Returning to 'The Edict of Nantes, Toleration and Voltaire', Quinones then seeks to return to philosophical tenets of open-mindedness and reason exemplified by the work of Voltaire, who in Quinones' mind personally "observe[d] the culmination of the division" (p.15). Quinones ends with a return to the South and later ideas of revival, before eloquently drawing the work to a close. Notably, Quinones leaves this topic open for further discussion does not choose to neatly end the study here, as "its issues are ever ongoing" (p.146); they will continue to be expressed into later periods with even stronger ramifications.

Quinones' masterful treatment of his sources and the poetic flow of his discussion are definitely his strengths. A lifetime of scholarship is on display here; it is clear that he is knowledgeable and intimate with his material, and he is able to forge a strong relationship with the reader through an academic yet personable tone. Indeed, as this is a "book of reflections" (p.139), the

personal musings that creep into the work in places can be forgiven, especially as they are reinforced by the arabesque structure. While this approach helps to soften the ideas as they are imparted to the reader, it can also cause one to re-read sections often – in some ways, the work requires strong concentration to absorb the ever-changing content. The lack of a strict chronology, especially in the centre of the work, does make it difficult to see a firm historical evolution of the divide, but this, as the author contends, is necessary due to the fact that the explored concepts “will have different roles in different cycles and among national traditions” (p. ix). The relationships he evokes are much more complex than temporal evaluation alone can explain, so there is merit in this web-like approach that still tries to follow chronological convention where possible. His overarching triumph is his handling of his most trusted sources *in situ*, linking them to his concepts and providing evidence from the minds of the time to fulfil a very compelling argument. The majority of the work was enjoyable to read and satisfying in the revelations it uncovered.

Overall, *North/South* provides insightful explanations concerning a most significant topic. Furthermore, these concepts as promoted by Quinones seem to resonate heavily with modern developments and it would be interesting to see how they may be applied to a Europe – and wider world – often faced with shifting power balances, strongly debated political issues and possibly irrevocable schisms. The work would be best suited to those with a keen interest early modern Europe’s development, but it is a book that definitely requires previous reading on the subject to gain full appreciation of the author’s argument. Without an especially strong knowledge of the works that are weaved into the discussion, the book may seem poorly structured or indulgent. Yet it is not so, and the author should be congratulated for his approach. By taking such a wide stance and reducing such relationships to their most fundamental, Quinones’ “work of humanistic synthesis” (p.ix) does indeed achieve its aim of traversing the Great Divide.

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