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Europe's Unique Experiment

The Bottom-up Creation of a Large Polity

Abstract

Thirty years after the launch of the French, then European research programme on *The Origins of the Modern State in Europe, 13th to 18th Centuries*, new challenges are to be addressed, such as

- Europe's specificity on a global scale
- The position of Empires
- State-building from bottom-up
- The legacy of states in the present.

The lecture starts with a discussion of the various forms European states have taken in the course of centuries. Two extreme cases should clarify the issue: the Swiss Confederation and its main antagonist, the Habsburg Empire. The first is still thriving, the second disappeared with the other Empires at the end of the First World War. In between, a great variety of more or less extended and centralized polities existed, and even multiplied during the 20th century. From where does this diversity stem, and in how far is that an obstacle to Europe's role in a globalizing world?

In the course of the 19th and 20th centuries, national states became the predominant form of statehood, especially by the formation of social security systems after 1945. However, since the 1950s, and even more incisively since the 1980s, national states lost much of their sovereignty to a variety of other powers. Paradoxically, an increasing number of EU citizens adhere to nationalistic rhetoric and wish to refrain from further European integration.

A long-term historical analysis can shed light on the tension between old feelings of belonging and the ongoing world-wide expansion.