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Juergen Kocka, "Geschichte des Kapitalismus".
Muenchen: BECK, 2014, 144 pp.

(doi: 10.2383/78831)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 2, maggio-agosto 2014

Ente di afferenza:

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Book Review

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This volume deals with its large and controversial topic in a masterful manner, as one would expect given its author's outstanding reputation. Juergen Kocka (b. 1941) was, with Hans-Ulrich Wehler (1931-2014), the founder and leader of the "Bielefeld historical school." The University of Bielefeld itself was of very recent foundation (1969) and saw as its mission to promote innovations with respect to research themes and approaches prevalent in other West German Universities. One aspect of this commitment was the place the University found for contemporary social sciences, sociology in particular. In keeping with this, the Bielefeld school challenged the understandings and practices still prevailing in the historical discipline, although of course modified to an extent by the experience of Nazism and its defeat. In their teaching and research Wehler and Kocka emphasized the potential relevance of the re-nascent social sciences and addressed themes unusual for their chronological and comparative scope.

Kocka distinguished himself both for the scholarly significance of his own large monographic production and for the key role he played as the initiator and editor of numerous, weighty collective volumes. Some of these thoroughly exploited, after the fall of the Berlin wall, the spectacularly large and varied documentation assembled in Potsdam under Kocka's own direction and dealing with the social history of the DDR.

The range of his professional interests and competences is further displayed in this *History of Capitalism*. It exhibits what seems to me an unequalled awareness, grounded in the appropriate sources, of the diversity displayed over time and space by the phenomenon of capitalism, and of the complexity of related themes.

This is all the more remarkable given the small size and format of the volume. It has only 144 pages (13 of these dealing with footnotes and bibliography) and it views itself as constituting an introductory treatment. Kocka had already successfully attempted this kind of scholarly feat in his *Sozialgeschichte: Begriff, Entwicklung, Problem* [1986] which however had 246 pages. The title of one chapter from this work, "*Controversial questions and why they deserve to be discussed*" conveys another significant scholarly commitment of Kocka's, fully displayed in the book under review. It deals the phenomenon of capitalism from its earliest beginnings in history to the contemporary ones, and addresses its manifestations from all parts of the world. This bold thematic scope – an achievement in itself – is matched by the authoritative but sometimes provocative way in which the book confronts (and seeks to settle) significant scholarly controversies.

The title of the first volume of a previous book of Kocka's, *Geschichte der Arbeiter und der Arbeiterbewegung in Deutschland seit dem Ende des 18. Jahrhundert* [1990], conveys this persistent feature of his production. It is: "Weder Stand noch Klasse: Unterschichten um 1800" – that is, "Neither estate nor class: Lower strata around 1800." In Germany, the coupling and contrasting of "Stand" with "Klass" had long inspired much conceptual and empirical work. But Kocka, without in the least denying the coherence or significance of their association, suggests that within many historical situations such

concepts and others of the same nature cease to be enlightening if one ignores their ideal-typical nature. The awareness of this should encourage historical research to address not only the few situations representing close approximations to one concept OR its opposite – but chiefly (to quote from the present work) the “innumerable transitions and admixtures” between those very concepts.

This does not in the least mean that Kocka is intent upon debunking sociological approaches to historical realities – after all, in 2000 he edited, together with an eminent German sociologist, Claus Offe, the volume *Geschichte und Zukunft der Arbeit*. His own approach, at any rate in the volume under review, is to an extent inspired by social theory: its opening chapter, “*What does capitalism mean?*” insightfully reviews “three classics: Marx, Weber, Schumpeter.” It ends with a “working definition” of the capitalist phenomenon:

a) The economic process is decentralized, involving a plurality of units (individual or collective) in exclusive possession of significant resources. Their interactions may lead each unit to either gains or losses.

b) The coordination of the units’ economic activities takes place via the respective commodities, on markets and in the light of prices.

c) The central role is played by capital, requiring investments and reinvestments of savings and proceeds, made in the present but in view of future expectations, thus involving credit, risk and profit.

Kocka does not hesitate to argue against too facile applications of sociological insights. His main point is simply that contemporary scholars can now survey and analyze stretches of history (non-Western history in particular) that lay outside the purview of the classics themselves and of later authors they inspired. Thus on-going research is bound to encounter some situations in serious contrast with the judgments (if any) one can derive from the classics themselves. Of course one may sometimes dissent from Kocka’s assessment of what is or is not valid in the arguments of authors (classic or otherwise.) I, for instance, do not share all his reservations about Polanyi’s views on “the great transformation.” But Kocka takes care throughout to identify the most significant existent views on topics he raises, and indicate their pros and cons.

His own main theme is how far in time and how widely across civilizations one may find capitalistic phenomena. By the same token, Kocka points up their variety. For instance, he criticizes the persistent view that capitalism is associated with forms of labor that one may characterize as free. In fact, slavery, indentured labor, the management of plantations have played a critical role in the development of modern capitalism itself; and one can find free labor within non-capitalistic economic situations. Finally, even the employment relationship typical of capitalism proper has aspects that limit if not exclude the worker’s freedom – in particular, the unequal labor market conditions mostly confronted respectively by employers and employees; and the necessity of binding managerial control upon the workforce.

Another very significant theme in the book is the relationship between “market” and “state.” Kocka’s most explicit treatment of it, at the very end of the book, begins by acknowledging the reasons for viewing them as antithetical phenomena, particularly when the prevailing political regimen is democratic. Their legitimacy rests respectively on property rights as against equal citizenship rights; the market obeys the logic of exchange,

the state that of public controversy settled ultimately by the electoral confrontation of bodies of opinion; the medium of the first is money, of the second power – and so on.

Thus, significant contrasts between market and state are recurrent; yet the historical rule is a close connection between them: “state interventions were indispensable for the genesis, the structuring and the survival of capitalism.” Markets need frameworks which can only be established by political action: for instance, the sanctioning of slavery relations in antiquity or colonial policies in early modernity. Capitalist development, and recurrent economic crises, often affect destructively social and cultural conditions, which must be repaired and reshaped by state policy in order to secure a degree of public acceptance of capitalism itself.

Kocka’s treatment of these themes throws light, among other things, on recent developments, including increasing social inequality and the ravages caused by financialization. At the very end of the book he also discusses the significance of the critique of capitalism. Quoting some passages from the final paragraph may be an appropriate way to wind up this review.

The critique of capitalism is as old as capitalism itself. It has not hindered its victorious, worldwide itinerary. However it has influenced it. The historical treatment presented here shows the huge variations capitalism has shown over the centuries. The criticism of it, in association with political and social movements, has been a significant factor in those variations. Capitalism itself does not decide the social and political conditions under which it develops. It can flourish under different political systems; its affinity with democracy is less marked than it has long been hoped and assumed. From a certain standpoint each time and each civilization has the capitalism which it deserves. At present, one cannot detect alternatives superior to capitalism itself. However, within capitalism one can conceive and to an extent observe different variants and alternatives. It is how they develop that matters. The reform of capitalism is a constant task. Here the critique of capitalism plays a central role.

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