



From Citizens to Subjects. City, State, and the Enlightenment in Poland, Ukraine, and Belarus, Pittsburgh :
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Reviewer: Dr. Manuel Torres Cubeiro
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"History texts are fabrications designed to obscure the past rather than to elucidate it [...] written history is an attempt to re-create so-called actual events according to the political, social or religious convictions of the author [...] The travesty is that a great many historians actually believe what they're saying. Their motives are unconscious and cultural, based on prejudices and wish fulfillment."
[1]

This book by C. G. Murphy scaffolds an argument against the socially constructed common sense among so-called civilized societies. As well-instructed civilized individuals, each of us has been educated to assume that any given government works better if its control over the population is rational and somewhat centralized. The almost automatic implication is that in the absence of centralized control, nothing would work, and chaos would bloom. Rowing against such good sense, the eloquent monograph *From Citizens to Subject* seeds healthy doubts on our good judgment. Murphy deconstructed this common evidence with his complex investigation of the history of the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth. The delicately constructed argument is not only essential to the understanding of the History of Poland, Ukraine and Belarus during the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries in Central Europe, but it also raises pivotal political questions linked to current issues in Europe.

Murphy displays two differing worldviews about the formation of states in Europe that coexisted since the 17th century. In this sense, he argues that, "since the 19th century, European states have alternated between centralizing and devolutionary tendencies" (222). The first is what he calls the *Civic Republican cosmovision* (224) and is related to decentralizing or devolutionary tendencies. From this perspective, central-local municipal institutions are or should be the core of any given government. This view is coherent with devolutionary tendencies present since the existence of the institution of the state, linking the proto nation-states with medieval feudal villages and free cities: "Civic republicanism was a worldview (...) [that] shaped the assumptions of all urban residents [within the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth]" (224-225). In this sense, the city was the center of the universe, and *urbes* were the land of freedom and liberties for their residents.

The assumption would be that medieval feudal cities emerged to provide services and liberties to their residents under the local municipal rulers and against central institutions of the land. This first worldview, as Murphy shows in his book, refers to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. "Civic republicanism was a worldview" (224) with no internal contradictions for city residents; a position somehow situated between following orders from the local ruler and the very existence of the residents' freedoms. Furthermore, it "shaped the assumptions of all urban residents" (225). During the Commonwealth period, cities became the center themselves with no hierarchy overruling them; this, because the different jurisdictions applied created freedom, allowing a civic activity to bloom (223). City residents were then able to participate in collective decision making; and to be part of negotiations with other groups and authorities as well. "Civic republicans (...) understood politics as persuasion and co-equal decision-making" (9). Murphy does not just state this but bases his argument in detailed research presented in his book.

Murphy links this first word view with core political, philosophical ideologies. In this sense, Murphy could have chosen to follow a theoretical or philosophical line of argumentation, defending, for instance, the juxtaposition of Machiavelli's republicanism and Kant's defense of enlightened, rational governments. However, far from those philosophical disquisitions, Murphy's research presents the reader, with detailed specific data, a solid foundation on which he grounds his book. Murphy's investigation points to the legal conflicts throughout the studied region. In this sense, chapter 1 explains how cities in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth set up their privileges and urban freedoms under Magdeburg Law. Under the King's protection, burghers enjoyed a high degree of independence (26). The *liberum veto* allowed objections over any piece of legislation (35). In the successive chapters, Murphy analyzes public documents reflecting legal disputes between the different ethnic and economic powers throughout the towns of the Commonwealth.

For instance, in chapter 2 he shows how two policies affected urban life in royal towns before the Four-Year Sejm: "the institution of Good Order Commissions for the principal cities and the government-supervised alcohol monopoly [were] instituted in all but the largest cities" (55). The legal conflicts that Murphy describes regarding alcohol commerce and the Jewish population show in detail how the above-mentioned chaos of jurisdictions worked.

As far as the second worldview is concerned, both English philosophers and state officials, as Murphy shows in his work, tended to view the government as a centralized and therefore rational institution. One of the central arguments Murphy presents is that: "Once the rational unitary nation-state emerged as the only conceivable political model, alternative views of social and political organization fell into obscurity" (xiv-xv). Murphy summarizes this view as follows: "18th century thinkers proposed that new scientific knowledge and economic theories offered rulers a bird's eye view of the entire country and therefore the prerogative to make decisions affecting the whole. [...] From the 1760s forward, every regime viewed the solution to bridging the gap between reality of urban life in the Commonwealth and the idealized city of the imaginations in much the same way: [...] professional official appointed [...]. Allocate money [...]. Single law and single shame of property rights [...]. Each of these abstract plans failed because of the realities of the ground" (225-226). In other words, reality did not match worldviews.

Nevertheless, "enlightened centralism produced uneven results because of the one-size-fits-all mentality of legislators, who set uniform targets for administrative and policing costs regardless of need or condition" (227). This is the main argument that Murphy scaffolds throughout his book: reality was at odds with the enlightened imaginary of how the government should function. "Consistent with the ideology of enlightened reformers, few observers questioned the assumptions and values coded into the reforms or investigated the reasons that might have resisted or sabotaged the new provisions" (54), especially given that Enlightenment officials saw themselves as entitled to the monopoly of reason and rationality.

Confronting this black and white view of the Enlightenment common in History text books, Murphy states that: "It is my conviction that European history, in general, requires a greater understanding of the territories of the former Commonwealth, not simply to correct erroneous stereotypes (often produced by imperial powers to justify their conquests) but also to reintroduce lapsed vision of liberty, self-government, and the political good" (xiv). Murphy's endeavor is to demonstrate the complexity of this matter. In this context, complexity means not just a synonym of "difficult to understand", but a concrete, detailed description based on a meticulous consultation of archives to describe, stitch by stitch, the fabric of the very social imaginary of a Central European enlightenment state. As "Enlightenment government[s] destroyed the remnants of medieval, positive liberty without offering much in the compensation except for affirmations that this process constituted progress," (12) "the necessity of centralization, or its equation with modernity, has remained largely unquestioned" (14).

Murphy proposes, as mentioned above, a view that drives us to a healthy doubt, given that historical facts are impossible to grasp, i.e., no historian can have access to all the data about every single event at any given time. Any observer, any historian is, therefore, an interested and partial observer, and selects data or information to construct his or her perspective [2]. As such, it is a fact that there is no entirely accurate description of any given moment in history.

In consequence, history, as any observation, is a constructed simplification. Moreover, once a simplification is well constructed, the fact that is a simplification becomes obliterated. Simplifications, stereotypes, worldviews, or ideologies, as much as fairy tales, help us to forget the constructed nature of our views. Considering that, what historians could provide us with is an accurate description of the complex interactions that produce our present – Murphy does so in his book. That is their job. Murphy is, therefore, an honest historian.

Notes:

[1] Mosley, Walter, *John Womán* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press 2018), p. 110.

[2] See George Spencer-Brown's epistemology in *Laws of Form* (Boston: E. P. Dutton 1979). Niklas Luhmann applies Spencer-Brown's epistemology to explain how society works, providing citizens with their worldviews, see Niklas Luhmann, *Social Systems* (Stanford: Stanford U.P. 1995), and Hans-Georg Moeller, *The Radical Luhmann* (New York: Columbia U.P. 2013).

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