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WOLFGANG BEHRINGER, *Im Zeichen des Merkur: Reichspost und Kommunikationsrevolution in der Frühen Neuzeit*, Veröffentlichungen des Max-Planck-Instituts für Geschichte, 189 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003), 861 pp. ISBN 3 525 35187 9. EUR 114.00

‘The introduction of regular scheduled transport in Europe began in the late 1620s. The initiative came from France. . . . In 1683 a post coach network began to be developed in Electoral Saxony. . . . In 1686 the first coach went from Frankfurt via Würzburg to Nuremberg’ (pp. 438, 450). What looks, at least on such evidence, like a belated representative of the factual-anecdotal ‘old cultural history’ of the late nineteenth century turns out to be a flagship of its current and entirely ‘new’ incarnation. *Im Zeichen des Merkur* is a ‘big’ book in every sense of the word: it covers almost 900 pages, dissects mountains of primary and secondary sources, presents masses of new data, and offers a string of weighty conclusions. To digest such a monumental piece of research requires considerable time and effort, but it is a worthwhile investment.

Educated at the universities of Munich and Bonn, Wolfgang Behringer obtained his first chair at York, but recently returned to German academia to succeed Richard van Dülmen as Professor of Early Modern History at Saarbrücken. He is best known in Britain for a number of seminal studies on the socio-economic context of the European witchhunt, but has a much broader track record. Previous publications range from *Der Traum des Fliegens: Zwischen Mythos und Technik* (1991) and *Shaman of Oberstdorf: Chonrad Stoeckhlin and the Phantoms of the Night* (German version 1994; English version 1998) to model company histories of the *Löwenbräu* and *Spaten* breweries in his native Bavaria.

Prompted by the ascendancy of the internet to investigate the emergence of earlier information networks, the author sets out to write a new history of pre-modern communications. His main interests are not so much senders, receivers, or contents, but the channels or media used to transport people and information. The primary focus of this book is the development of one particular organization, the German *Reichspost* (Imperial post), from the sixteenth to the early nineteenth centuries, yet always with a view to its wider social and cultural implications. Behringer thus concentrates on the allegedly static era before the so-called ‘acceleration’ of history (Reinhard

Book Reviews

Koselleck) conventionally associated with the modern age. The empirical basis for his argument consists of an entire 'ocean of sources' (p. 47). In addition to his core repository, the *Fürstliches Zentralarchiv Thurn und Taxis* in Regensburg, and numerous central and local archives throughout continental Europe, Behringer draws on a wide range of printed materials. Principal genres include charters, correspondence, and administrative records relating to the *Reichspost*, but also contemporary legal tracts (*Reichspublicistik*), atlases, travel literature, and guides. Furthermore, serial records such as station registers, timetables, and accounts allow a substantial amount of quantification.

After a first section dedicated to existing scholarship, research questions, and documentary evidence, the main argument is structured in three parts. The second section covers the origins and development of the *Reichspost*, from first traces just before 1500—and an initial emphasis on the transport of messages by post-riders—to the organization's official period of existence from 1597 to 1806 (the end of the old empire) and the gradual build-up of parallel/rival territorial services in the German principalities. The third section deals with subsequent innovations building on the new infrastructure, particularly the periodical press (a passage focusing on the early 1600s) and the establishment of *Fahrposten* (that is, stage coach facilities for passenger transport, particularly from the later seventeenth century). The fourth section offers an extensive summary of the early modern 'communication revolution', followed by a series of appendices, including a chronology, bibliography, lists of illustrations and a laudably detailed index. To facilitate geographical orientation—and as a special treat—readers are offered a thirty-three-page reproduction of the entire map of postal routes through the Holy Roman Empire as compiled by Johann Jacob von Bors and Franz Joseph Heger and published under the title *Neue und vollständige Postkarte durch ganz Deutschland* in 1764. By that date, the density of provision, for instance, around cities such as Strasburg and Augsburg in the southwest of the Empire, appears impressive indeed. Less fortunate is the choice of an author-date system for the footnotes, which turns the reading of this book into an orgy of page-turning between main text and bibliography, especially as the number of references verges on the excessive. The latter, no doubt, owes much to the book's origins as a German *Habilitation* or second doctorate.

Only a fraction of the many insights conveyed by the book can be sketched here. The second section identifies the first explicit reference to the term 'post' in the German lands in December 1490 among the records of Maximilian's Innsbruck administration (p. 59). Right from the start riders were under great time pressure as handover details had to be meticulously recorded. In contrast to earlier messenger lines, the new postal service—contracted out to the Italian Tassi dynasty—was much more systematically organized. Key principles such as the apportionment of space through fixed stations (*positae stationes*, the semantic roots of the term 'post') and the division of labour between riders allowed non-stop journeys from starting-point to destination. The existence of a dense network of inns and entrepreneurial publicans—happy to turn into postmasters—facilitated the establishment of the network, which Behringer compares to a modern 'franchising' system (p. 72). By the 1530s, two preconditions for a whole avalanche of subsequent transformations were in place: the service was regular and open to the public. Perceptions of time and space changed accordingly as administrative and commercial business became focused on the days of outgoing post, while travellers accepted significant detours and longer distances to benefit from safer roads with better infrastructure.

The emergence of a 'travel science' (*ars apodemica*) in the 1570s marks another milestone, as does the proliferation of travel aids and guides around 1600 (the author is a little vague about typological distinctions within this heterogeneous genre). Services expanded dramatically after the institutionalization of the *Reichspost* as an Imperial prerogative in 1597. Improvements owed much to the 'communication genius' Johannes von den Birghden († 1654), postmaster in Frankfurt, who pioneered the use of posters and timetables, but also to enhanced demand for up-to-date information during the Thirty Years War. From the late 1640s, German states like Electoral Brandenburg and Saxony—but not Bavaria—as well as the Swiss city republic of Berne, developed independent postal systems, a trend reinforced by the recognition of territorial sovereignty in the Peace of Westphalia. State formation and postal developments now evolved in close interaction. Legal and institutional tracts debated the constitutional implications of the new system, while post ordinances increasingly read like 'documents of the early Enlightenment' (p. 295). Services were to be based on general principles such as justice,

Book Reviews

equality, and human dignity, with no special privileges for social élites.

The third section summarizes a series of seventeenth-century media revolutions. The emergence of the periodical press, which symbolized the victory of the 'new' (current affairs) over the 'old' (established knowledge, as recorded in books), depended directly on postal infrastructure. Behringer's meticulous survey of early news gathering, news 'agents', and news distribution leading to the 'invention' of the weekly newspaper (by the printer Johann Carolus of Strasburg in September 1605, p. 349) will be of great interest to communication historians. Periodicals nurtured more informed political discourse among their readers and thus the 'emergence of a public opinion in the modern sense' (p. 380). A few decades later, the European travel experience was equally transformed by the emergence of regular stage coach services (privately organized in England, but linked to the official postal networks in Germany). Behringer finds the earliest example in Kassel in 1649 (p. 442) and argues that the greater accessibility, reliability, and predictability of services democratized travel. This was a gradual process, however, as substantial areas remained without regular passenger transport until well into the eighteenth century. The final chapters feature new research on developments in cartography and road-building, fields in which France played a prominent role. By the end of the *ancien régime*, the Imperial post had evolved from a feudal institution into a provider of services with a distinctly 'modern' business mentality.

Despite the book's length, of course, the argument cannot be exhaustive. Behringer himself points to the genesis of the early franchising system, the intricacies of territorial post networks, the huge numbers of private transport facilities, and the systematic study of sources such as post visitation records as areas meriting further study. But what are the overall conclusions in the fourth section? They fall into three categories, relating to a) the specific achievements of the *Reichspost*; b) wider socio-cultural repercussions; and c) implications for current scholarly debates. With regard to the organization of postal services, Behringer emphasizes regularity, reliability, and growing speed (through apportionment of space) as fundamental innovations. What distinguished the Imperial service from postal systems in other civilizations was its private, commercial nature; what was new compared with medieval times was the principle of

general accessibility. In the second category of findings, the new infrastructure is credited with fostering basic components of 'western' mentality such as discipline, rationality, and equality (in terms of the treatment of customers) as well as new conceptualizations of space (reflected in maps and travel guides) and chronology (timetables demanding more exact measurements): 'Essential categories of modernity were thus created in the medium of the organized communications system' (p. 670). Furthermore, subsequent innovations such as the periodical press – associated in turn with a series of major repercussions – would have been unthinkable without the availability of regular channels of distribution. Thirdly, with regard to historiographical debates, Behringer proposes some major reassessments. The dating of key structural transformations, usually associated with the time of bourgeois ascendancy and industrialization, should be moved back into the *early* modern period, which deserves to be recognized as a distinct era of communication history. Between 1500 and 1800, but particularly in the course of the seventeenth century, Europe experienced a series of media revolutions culminating in an early modern 'communication revolution'. The roots of the political public sphere, in turn, should not be sought in elite milieux such as salons and coffee houses, but in the 'public accessibility' of communication services, with key changes occurring in the *earlier* rather than the later half of the early modern period (pp. 672, 681).

If the book is 'big', then so too are its celebrity targets. In addition to Jürgen Habermas's *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (German version 1962; English version 1989), Elisabeth L. Eisenstein's *Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe* (1983) receives censure for being too narrowly focused and unaware of the principal 'agent of change', that is, innovations in postal infrastructure. Postmodernists, too, are dismissed as 'unhelpful' when it comes to practical historical work (p. 25). At this point, perhaps, it should be said that Behringer does not suffer fools gladly. In an initially refreshing manner, he passes frank judgement on the works of fellow academics. After a while, however, the tone becomes a little irritating. Few scholars, among them Werner Sombart, pass muster, while countless others face scathing attacks. Some random examples may illustrate the point: 'The sections on communication systems in standard social and economic histories reveal a lack of any profound understanding of systematic connections, or contain a shameful number of errors (p.

Book Reviews

26); '[The claim that early publishers never edited news] is completely untenable and is based—to put it bluntly—on inadequate source criticism' (p. 369); 'At this point Habermas is extremely vague, and one does not really know whether he is referring to the sixteenth century, the early or the late seventeenth century ... For Habermas it all seems to be the same anyway' (p. 435, n. 537); '[Foucault's influence is evident] in the disappointing book by [Johannes] Burckhardt' (p. 643, n. 4); 'Recently the amnesia [of research] is assuming grotesque forms' (p. 682, n. 183). Do we need such a litany of past underachievement? Behringer is so obviously going beyond existing scholarship that he could have let his research do the talking.

The German *Habilitation*, of which this book is an outstanding example, has well known advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, it forces historians to develop expertise in more than one field—something Behringer demonstrates almost beyond saturation (the bibliography covers eighty-eight pages, including more than 'a pinch of sociology, media theory, social anthropology, geography, and psychology of perception', p. 25). On the other hand, there is an implicit expectation that such works should be not merely good and useful, but also exhaustive and revolutionary, with findings of preferably global significance. Candidates—facing scrutiny by an interdisciplinary faculty of eminent scholars—feel under pressure to challenge paradigms, redirect scholarship, and stress the pioneering nature of the conclusions they are defending (which explains some of the point-scoring just reported). *Im Zeichen des Merkur* is no exception to this rule: it claims that exciting things happened much earlier than we all thought, and that the root causes of historical developments were neither princes, intellectuals, armies, nor confessions, but the good old post coaches so often overlooked in visits to traffic museums. This communication revolution, we are assured, was 'the mother of all communication revolutions' (p. 42). Subsequent media breakthroughs simply repeated its patterns.

Will such dramatic findings stand up? Do they not exaggerate the technological and organizational roots of modernization? Behringer steps on enough toes in this book to secure both publicity and intensive debate of his conclusions, but he should be able to stand his ground. The argument is well substantiated, particularly with regard to the *Reichspost* proper, and the more general conclusions point in the right direction. Habermas's concept of the public sphere, of

The Post Coach and the Communication Revolution

course, has long been the object of scholarly reassessment, with works such as Andreas Würzler's *Unruhen und Öffentlichkeit: Städtische und ländliche Protestbewegungen im 18. Jahrhundert* (1995) and David Zaret's *Origins of Democratic Culture: Printing, Petitions and the Public Sphere in Early Modern England* (2000) highlighting earlier and alternative sources of sustained public discourse. Furthermore, Behringer's emphasis on the desire for faster communications and changing spatial perceptions echoes other indications of the 'modernity' of pre-industrial Europe, for example, its highly developed commercial infrastructure, growing consumer power, and evidence for 'advanced' concepts such as leisure. While stressing the far-reaching implications of his research, the author (briefly) accepts that no one medium alone should be held responsible for fundamental change and that each needs to be contextualized as a 'social construct' (p. 23). The relative significance of the postal revolution compared with rival breakthroughs associated with printing, science, and military affairs remains to be decided, as does the question of how exactly other media fit into the picture presented here. Nevertheless, scholars will no doubt place much greater emphasis on communication infrastructure in future explanations of historical change.

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