

R E V I E W

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Staatssoziologie. Historische Prozesse, theoretische Perspektiven.*
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OTTO HINTZE
BETWEEN SOCIOLOGY
OF THE STATE AND
HISTORICISM

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No one these days ignores the obsolescence of the Habermasian narrative about a coming “postnational constellation”. Moreover, the deepening crisis of the great western democracies seems to indicate that we may be, in some cases, on the threshold of what Max Weber called “plebiscitary revolutions” (Weber 2006, 100-101). It shouldn’t surprise us, therefore, that Otto Hintze’s work is once again being revisited. The book edited by Andreas Anter and Hinnerk Bruhns can be seen as evidence that this classic of historiography is still capable of telling us something about our own time.

Despite his dry and heavy prose, Hintze still deserves to be read, and not only as a possible precursor of the Bielefeld School. His importance has long since gone beyond the borders of his country and is recognized by historians from countries such as France, Spain, the United States, Italy, Japan and Brazil.¹ This collection of essays sheds light on an important facet of Hintze’s intellectual legacy by focusing on his sociology of the state. The editors also had the fortunate idea of including the influential 1931 essay *Essence and Transformation of the Modern State* as an appendix (p. 177-199).

The chosen subject explains why Hintze’s historiographical work from the period preceding the First World War receives little attention from the seven authors. It seems to me, however, that the dividing line between the historian *tout court* and the historical sociologist could have been better nuanced, since there is less a radical caesura than a continuum between the two – something that Stefan Breuer (p. 140-141) sees as a limitation of the Berlin scholar.

In his chapter, Hinnerk Bruhns reconstructs Hintze’s political thinking on the basis of his lesser-known texts, published in magazines and newspapers. Hintze viewed the Prussian political legacy less pessimistically than Weber, although he was also critical of the German constitutional model. His interesting concept of the *Staatensystem* (according to which the characteristics of a state depend on its specific geographical and geopolitical situation) is a heuristic tool that helps us explain some of the singularities of German development throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. It is crystal clear how much this approach owes to the work of Friedrich Ratzel, whose books Hintze examined in reviews published in the *Historische Zeitschrift* in 1898 and 1903.

The spatial dimension of Hintze’s theory of the state is also highlighted in Wolfgang Neugebauer’s essay, which focuses on the notion of the state “as an enterprise” (*Betrieb*), which the German historian had absorbed from Weber. Particularly interesting and timely, in this sense, is the relationship observed by Hintze between rationality, intensity and extent of the domination exercised by modern states (p. 54). The weight of Weber’s influence is attenuated after the reading of the following essay, by Maurizio Riccardi, which examines Hintze’s interest in the work of Franz Oppenheimer. It could perhaps be said that one of Hintze’s great merits as a historian – his open-mindedness in the face of advances made by other disciplines – may also have been, at times, his Achilles heel. This is evident in the evolutionist leanings of his 1897 essay on Lamprecht (Hintze 1982, 315-322), in his interest in the long-winded books of Oppenheimer, a sociologist whom Riccardi describes as an “insignificant author” (p. 65), and also in the fact that Hintze establishes a discreet dialogue with those same “energetical” theories of culture (p. 179) that Weber had harshly criticized twenty years earlier.²

¹ Brazilian studies on Hintze were made by Durão (2019) and Wotkosky (2020).

² Thus Hintze distinguishes between *Anstalt* and *Betrieb*: while the former is a “potenzielles Energiesystem”, the latter is a “funktionierendes Energiesystem” (p. 179).

The extent to which the German historian's sociology of the state owes to Georg Jellinek is evident in the essays written by Andreas Anter and Christoph Enders. While Enders explores Hintze's use of typologies in his constitutional history, Anter emphasizes his "empirical-realist" method. Hintze seems always willing to reconfigure his positions in response to the demands of the moment, bringing about as a collateral damage a good number of contradictions. The most serious of these emerges when the inexorable democratization in which he seemed to believe right before the war gives way to a resigned view of the "total state" in the 1930s (p. 96–98).

The last two chapters deal with Hintze's theory of feudalism. Hajime Konno presents us with the "Japanese perspective" on this subject. While providing a compact intellectual history of the Japanese reception of Weber's and Hintze's views on feudalism in his country, nothing is said about the current state of Japanese historiography in this research field. To what extent do the analyses of the two German authors remain heuristically relevant today? This question is also not answered by Breuer, who dedicates his essay to Hintze's famous article *Wesen und Verbreitung des Feudalismus*. The broad scope of the analysis, which takes into account not only Europe but also Russian, Japanese and Islamic civilizations, led Hintze to postulate the evolutionary stages of this socio-economic system, as well as an historical connection between feudalism and pre-modern imperialism (p. 131).

Breuer attributes the innovative nature of this study mainly to Hintze's reading of Weber, at a time when historians "not infrequently pursued with suspicion" the advances made by the nomothetic sciences, and regrets that in France not even Marc Bloch gave Hintze the "recognition" he deserved (p. 127). In fact, this was due less to some kind of historiographical nationalism than to the fact that, in this regard, German historians were lagging behind their French colleagues: Hintze's essay was hardly perceived by Bloch as greatly innovative. As early as 1890, Charles Victor Langlois was already reflecting on the challenges of a comparative medieval history. Henri Berr's influential *Revue de Synthèse Historique* published in 1913 a long essay by Louis Daville on the comparative method in history. The influential Belgian historian Henri Pirenne and his younger friend and admirer Bloch also wrote important articles on the subject in 1923 and 1928 (TRENCSÉNYI, IORDACHI, APOR 2021). At the same international congress where Bloch gave his famous lecture "A contribution towards a comparative history of European societies", the Austrian historian Alfons Dopsch presented a brief summary of his *Naturalwirtschaft und Geldwirtschaft in der Weltgeschichte*, which appeared two years later (Dopsch 1928, 6-7).

As can be seen, in order to adequately situate the application of wide-range comparisons by Hintze, the German intellectual context alone is not enough. One should note how, at the beginning of the 20th century, other historiographical communities developed their own path towards comparative history, and how they absorbed impulses not only from political economy but also from disciplines such as history of religions or linguistics, in a movement that went beyond the borders of Germany and that did not always face the same difficulties imposed by the German academic establishment.

Breuer concludes that Hintze's great limitation was not having freed himself from the legacy of Ranke's "naive historicism", and not having perceived the "rich set of [conceptual] instruments" offered by Weberian sociology (p. 140–141). In its various incarnations, this criticism has been heard by historians since the time of Henry Thomas Buckle. For his part, Otto Hintze knew that historicism never disregarded the importance of "general statements about the real-spiritual tendencies in historical life" (Hintze 1927, 196). We all know how energetically Weber emphasized the role of generalizations, concepts, and theories in his methodological studies. The *purely instrumental character* that these heuristic constructions have for Weber, however, continues to be silenced by the majority of his interpreters: "Knowledge of what is general is never of value to us in the cultural sciences for its own sake" (Weber 2012, 119). Yes, Hintze did not get rid of historicism. But wouldn't such a caesura, had it been carried out, have meant making a tabula rasa of his own past, a past without which he would hardly have become, by the end of his life, a well-known and highly respected name in the German academic elite? The fact that in his will he ordered the destruction of the manuscript of an unfinished *General constitutional history of the modern states* (Neugebauer 2024, 41-42) could also be interpreted as a last expression of intellectual debt to the generation of Ranke, Droysen and Waitz. The great historiographical work of Otto Hintze does not mark the overcoming of an old-fashioned "paradigm", but rather the continuous renewal of the historicist tradition.

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