

Blom, Philipp: *Die Welt aus den Angeln. Eine Geschichte der Kleinen Eiszeit von 1570 bis 1700 sowie der Entstehung der modernen Welt, verbunden mit einigen Überlegungen zum Klima der Gegenwart*. München: Carl Hanser Verlag 2017. ISBN: 978-3-446-25458-9; 302 S.

Rezensiert von: Christian Pfister, Historisches Institut, Universität Bern

Historicising climate requires working through a considerable body of knowledge. The German philosopher, journalist and historian Philipp Blom who graduated about Nietzsche has so far primarily written about the social and cultural upheavals in early twentieth century Europe. He became known through his books „Der taumelnde Kontinent. Europa 1900–1914“ (2009) and „Die zerrissenen Jahre 1918–1938“ (2014). His recent book deals with the Little Ice Age. The three themes mentioned in the subtitle are only loosely connected in the text.

About the climate of the Little Ice Age: „Long icy winters and short cool summers: climate in seventeenth century Europe changed dramatically. Grain supplies became short. Economies and societies plunged into a deep crisis. The Little Ice Age may give us an idea about the severe consequences of a change in climate.“ In these words the author propagates his book in the blurb. He visually underlines his description with the painting of a winter landscape created by the Dutch painter Hendrick Avercamp representing conditions during the severe winter of 1608.

In order to further stress the severity of the seventeenth century climate Blom quotes a text by Jean Nicolas de Parival (1654) who refers to St John's Book of Revelations: „Hence this is the terrible century which is described in the Holy Bible: the seven angels have poured out their bowls.“ Finally the author quantifies the drop in temperatures: „Until the mid-fourteenth century Europe had benefitted from a warm period during which [annual?] temperatures were two or three degrees higher. After 1400 temperatures plummeted two or three degrees below the twentieth century average which adds up to a difference of four to five degrees compared to the Medieval Warm Period.“ (p. 19)

This is strong meat. Not considering the biased chronology the magnitude of the error is shocking. The difference of the annual temperatures between the Medieval Warm Period and the Little Ice Age is about 1.5 degrees, whereas the difference between the final decades of the Little Ice Age and the twentieth century is somewhat less than 1 degree. The author provides no proofs for his text except for source quotes. In compensation he presents an impressive bibliography of more than 300 titles. Blom's fake temperature data play directly into the hands of climate sceptics. If the Little Ice Age was two degrees colder than the present, concludes the Swiss conservative periodical „Weltwoche“, why should we worry about a two degrees warming in the future? In fact, this argument rather needs to be turned around. Precisely because past temperature changes were rather small, there is a reason for concern about the future! But, in order to do justice to Blom, it needs to be stressed that he is not a sceptic. Rather, he worries about the anthropogenic climate change (p. 245).

The reasons for this „demonstrably dramatic change in climate“ are enigmatic according to the author. There are only hypotheses including periodical fluctuations of solar irradiance, changes in the rotation of the earth's axis, volcanic eruptions and a high number of earthquakes. „But these are only theories“ (p. 20). This unfounded claim avoids him coming to grips with the vast scientific literature on his topic. There is the reason why he fails to provide a scientifically adequate chronology of the Little Ice Age. This period lasting in Europe from the late thirteenth to the late nineteenth century was not a homogenous block of cold climate. Its worst effects were felt during the last three decades of the sixteenth century, when harvests simultaneously failed in many regions of Europe and when – resulting from a climatic change paranoia – thousands of witches were burnt on the stake. In contrast, the climate of the seventeenth century was rather heterogeneous, including short periods of rough climate alternating with clusters of higher temperatures.

About the development of the modern world: Through the cooling down of the cli-

mate by more than four degrees a social system that had been stable over several centuries was thrown off the track (p. 21). The dramatization of the Little Ice Age as a „mortal threat“ (p. 44) provides him the stage for presenting his core thesis, according to which the development of new world views in the seventeenth century resulted to a considerable extent from the dramatic change in climate he depicts. Undoubtedly, religious world views were profoundly challenged during this period. Nature was no longer considered as a moral universe focused on religion. A new generation of intellectuals created new world views which separated morality and religion. For Baruch de Spinoza the new transcendence was to be found in the moral laws of nature. National greatness mattered for the philosopher John Locke. For Bernard de Mandeville the key to success was the „survival of the most ruthless gangsters.“ The projections of the leading intellectuals were hardly related to harsh climatic conditions. People suffered far more from the consequences of the brutal wars between Great Powers ravaging without interruption almost throughout the century. The dreams of the rationalists were geared for freedom, for universal Human Rights, but also for the freedom of the strongest and most efficient and the unbridled freedom of the market following Karl Polanyi's „Great Transformation (1944). In dealing with these topics Blom shows intellectual brilliance.

Reflexions about the present situation of the World: Bernard Mandeville's „Fable of the bees“ (1705) serves him as an allegoric model leading over to the discussion of the present time. As a synthesis his thoughts are worth reading albeit they contain quite a few truisms, for instance that modern capitalism destroys its own foundations.

In sum, it is hardly understandable why the publisher did not ask for an editing of the book by a qualified scientist before submitting it to the public. One reason may be that Blom's fake data also include my person as a climate historian. He credits me for the support I should have provided him for his book though we never had any communication.

Blom, Philipp: *Die Welt aus den Angeln. Eine Geschichte der Kleinen Eiszeit von 1570 bis 1700 sowie der Entstehung der modernen Welt, verbunden mit einigen Überlegungen zum Klima der Gegenwart.* München 2017, in: H-Soz-Kult 30.06.2017.

HistLit 2017-2-207 / Christian Pfister über