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WHY EUROPE, WHICH EUROPE?

A Debate on Contemporary European History as a Field of Research

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Why Europe, Which Europe? Present Challenges and Future Avenues for Doing European History

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What is the current status of European history as a field of research, and what are its challenges at present? Why should we research European history at all, and how should we do it? Surprisingly, there has not yet been a Europe-wide debate on these issues. Despite many demands for a transnationalisation of historical perspectives, historiographical debates in Europe are still predominantly framed within national contexts. This also concerns debates about the methods and topics of European history. Up until now, these have only taken place within national or narrow transnational contexts, with few partners, and so by no means encompass 'all' of Europe. But the questions historians put to European history, the challenges they perceive, and their diagnoses of the current state of research and future potential of the field differ, not least, along the boundaries of established national historiographies. While scholars of European history in Brexit Great Britain, for example, possibly share some concerns and approaches with their colleagues in Hungary or Finland, there are also many, possibly more, concerns and approaches that separate them.

We would like, therefore, to invite historians from within the diversity of European and non-European historiographies to enter into a new discussion on European history as a field of research: on the status quo of European history, its goals and its future, its relationship to both national historiographies and global history. The project, then, is about discussing the opportunities, limits, and challenges of European history. Above all, however, it is about doing so in a new way: by expanding the debate and inviting a pluralistic approach within and beyond Europe.

European history as a discipline has become increasingly self-reflective. A few years ago, many optimistically viewed it as ‘the’ means to break out of national history. The upswing in transnational and global histories has since made it clear, however, that European history needs more than just the aim of transcending borders to legitimise itself. We see this challenge as productive, because it lays the foundation for a reflective choice of space and scale in designing research projects. It prevents a naive, seemingly natural focus on areas within Europe, or on areas which have been defined according to European perspectives. European history must define more precisely its place in relation to national and global history. In politics, voices propagating a return to nationalism have become stronger for some time. Today’s political climate, then, also raises questions about the task and potential of European history.

So what is European history? There are a number of uses of the term ‘European History’ which mean very different things. At US universities, for example, ‘European History’ as a term includes scholars specialising in French or Italian history. In this case, ‘European’ refers to the geographical area in which a research project or research focus is located, even if the project takes a nation-state perspective. At the same time, there is a long tradition of writing European history, which focuses on Europe as a whole (with more or less clearly defined borders) and seeks to create grand narratives. This debate is not about ‘European History’ in either of these two forms. Rather European history, for us, is about what could be called ‘doing European History’: empirical research that transcends the nation-state in various ways – e.g. projects which are conceived in a transnational, comparative, trans-local way and which at the same time are located in Europe in one way or another. In order to provide some coherence, the debate will focus on research into contemporary European history, broadly conceived, and particularly on the period since the late 19th century. In our view, some of the challenges identified below are particularly relevant to research on the 20th century.

We would like to open the debate by putting forward eight propositions:

1. European history’s position within the various national historiographies appears to be as varied as it is unclear. To ask for its place in these historiographies respectively

forms an important basis for fruitful dialogue.

In the early 2000s, turning the focus to Europe appeared to German historians as a quasi-natural response to calls for an expansion and correction of the historiography that had hitherto been focused on the nation-state.¹ The historiographical debate in Germany reflected the growing public interest in Europe, and was driven by the assumption that the same or similar considerations held true for other national historiographies in Europe. But while a number of papers on Europeanising German History were published,² no comparable papers on Europeanising British History, on *l'eupéanisation de l'historiographie française*, or – as far as we can see – on Poland, Hungary or Portugal came into print. Since the end of the 20th century, however, these historiographies have also undergone processes of transnationalisation, sometimes more pronounced, sometimes less. In many of these cases, however, methodologies that overcame national borders were not primarily interested in neighbouring European countries. For many years, for instance, British historians have focused mainly on Atlantic and post-imperial relational histories.³ Although a lively interest in 'European' (signifying continental European) history developed in Britain, it remained largely separate from British history. Within French historiography, the broadening of historical perspectives has often meant focusing on the Mediterranean region, and for Portuguese historiography, the reappraisal of the history of transatlantic relations with South America has become central.

The first step, then, would be to investigate which geographical areas have come under scrutiny in different historiographies, and which areas have been left out and to ask what the reasons for these choices could be. How do institutional structures and established mental maps shape the spaces of investigation of historians? What are the different conceptions of European history to be found in the respective national historiographies, and to what extent does European history interact in each case with national history?

2. We need a dialogue about the mental maps of historiographies within Europe and empirical research that interrogates their implications.

Historians have often discussed what is meant by Europe and asked how to define its borders. In answer to this, a social-constructivist concept of Europe has proven to be helpful: an approach to Europe as something that is in a permanent process of construction and reconstruction. Particularly in the case of Turkey and Russia, but also for North Africa, we can observe how central the debate on their belonging or their relationship to Europe has been for self-perceptions. However, analysing discursive constructions of spaces and their consequences applies to Europe as a whole and the

question of its borders, but also particularly to the *mental maps*, the concepts of political and cultural spaces within Europe.⁴ Notions of Eastern or Central Europe have changed radically numerous times since the 19th century. Western Europe, too, has taken on many different contours and connotations. The concept of Western Europe commonly adopted in German historiography has found little resonance among British European historians. All of these constructions of geographically named, but conceptually meant spaces within Europe, indicate that Europe is far from uniform and highlights the central role that debates on different concepts of Europe may play for European history.

Dipesh Chakrabarty's call to 'provincialise Europe' hit a nerve; it became a figure of speech.⁵ The author, however, was not interested in Europe as a region or its history, but in the emancipation of historiography from interpretations that take 'European' developments as a benchmark, not least by adopting European terminology. That was an important point. The popular concept of provincialising Europe has, however, developed a life of its own, and has come to suggest a unity that does not exist. Here in particular, a dialogue with non-European historians would be necessary and fruitful. But the debate can also be taken up within Europe. A challenge and a great potential for European history is what could be described as 'internal provincialisations'.⁶ These would include the deconstruction of 'normal' and 'special paths' and of implicit teleologies, as well as a critique of narrative structures based on notions of a norm and deviation from that norm. An assumed 'Western' development in European history often functioned as an implicit norm and 'deviant' pathways of development were characterised as deficient, backward, or delayed. Self-positioning of countries or regions in Europe and the demarcation of European regions became the basis for powerful historiographic narratives, the deconstruction of which is one of the core tasks of current and future empirical research. The refutation of the theory of a German *Sonderweg* or 'special path' is one example of the immense heuristic gain of such deconstructions. Many comparably powerful patterns of interpretation, however, are still deeply rooted in Spanish, German, Greek or Polish historiography – as well as in the respective public spheres. An intensive dialogue between these historiographies would provide an opportunity to emancipate ourselves from such narratives and to generate new questions.

3. Interlinking historiographies would boost innovative research.

The 'pluralising Europeanisation' of historical debate can only be understood as part of the necessary process to internationalise historical scholarship, a process which does not end at the borders of Europe. It would, though, be an important step towards such internationalisation. A recent goal envisaged for global history is to interweave

historiographies: scholars, it has been said, should interweave ‘European’ and ‘Asian’ historiography.⁷ As desirable as this is, we have to recognise that it is by no means possible to speak simply of a ‘European’ historiography. For many topics, periods, and research areas, more than a superficial weaving and interweaving of the many national historiographies within Europe is still a distant goal. Very often ‘European history’ has taken the form of edited collections, in which national case studies stand next to each other, but interact to a very limited extent.

Barriers to dialogue exist between Eastern and Western European history, as has already been widely discussed. But such limitations also apply to those historiographies that appear from an outside view to be closely interwoven and are often grouped together as ‘Western European’ perspectives: French, British, German history. Interpretative approaches from national contexts – such as ‘After the Boom’, a term coined by Anselm Doering-Manteuffel and Lutz Raphael within the German context, or the concept of ‘vingt décisives’ introduced to the debate by Jean-François Sirinelli for France – are hardly ever received and applied beyond national borders.⁸ This is true even when claims made by such interpretations reach beyond national boundaries. Thus the decade of the 1970s, which historians have flagged as an epoch of ‘transnationalisation’, continues to be debated primarily within national discourses. Even large projects of ‘European’ historiography such as the project ‘Écrire une nouvelle histoire de l’Europe’ remain clearly anchored in one nation; they are shaped by historians from a specific historiographical context, which brings with it its specific questions, patterns of interpretation, and methodological approaches.⁹ True, there are some fields of research in which transnational communication and cooperation have become more intense: the late 19th century, the First World War, and more recent fields of research such as the history of migration. Research on the First World War, in particular, shows the innovative potential of an intensified exchange of historiographies. Dutch universities have developed as places of productive interweaving of different historiographical traditions, as has the European University Institute in Florence.

However, the 20th century, in particular, is still shaped to an astonishing degree by national narratives of research. This applies especially to the historical phase following 1945, in which transnational developments have increased massively on many different levels. Even the dialogue between German and French historians remains limited; Spanish, Greek or Swedish historiography coexist with little connection. The United Kingdom holds an ambivalent position. On the one hand, its universities are key points of interaction and networking since the British academic labour market has been relatively open up to now. At the same time, however, ‘British History’ itself remains largely cut off from the historiographical debates beyond its borders.

4. The methodological diversity of European historiography offers an important laboratory for analysing more accurately the relevance of the nation as well as transnational interdependencies in empirical studies.

Exploring the relevance of national, transnational and subnational, local and regional spaces and their interrelationships is, especially for the second half of the 20th century, a desideratum that has remained largely unfulfilled. We need the combination of comparative and transnational perspectives both for a precise assessment of the importance of national path dependencies and especially where transnational processes have crossed these paths. Between the grand narratives on the one hand and empirically dense descriptive histories on the other, comparison and *histoire croisée* in particular seem suitable methods to arrive at conclusions of a ‘middle range’, because they offer an important point of friction for established national narratives.¹⁰

European history could enable balanced, detailed and differentiated comparisons and analyses of transfer, interweaving and exchange processes between the different historiographies. In many fields, such research is still lacking. In this context, the study of the history of border regions has proven to be especially fruitful for multi-perspective interpretations. Thus, European history provides a virtually inexhaustible laboratory of possible constellations of investigation with which to pinpoint precisely similarities and differences, convergences and divergences. It could allow scholars to deconstruct national histories empirically. By no means does the nation-state have to be the primary object of investigation. Cities and regions – including cross-border ones – form, as repeatedly shown, equally meaningful objects of comparison or regions for investigation.

A dialogue on spatial categories, methodological instruments, concepts and variants of a European history would bring national historiographies, with their respective methodological trends and questions, into play and thus help to critically reflect on these trends and questions and their national characteristics. This would create a basis for broader and more closely-knit research cooperation across national borders.

5. European and global history are variants of transnational history with many common features. Instead of binary oppositions of ‘European’ versus ‘global’, it is important to ask about the relevance and the contours of transnational spaces, depending on the issue at hand, and to select and delimit spaces of investigation accordingly.

As a subject for research, the integration of European societies with other world regions was long overlooked; here there have rightly been calls for new approaches. Today, awareness of the epistemic trap of Eurocentrism has increased considerably.

Nevertheless, the resulting pragmatic and conceptual challenges for research are still considerable.

The same can, however, be said of the state of research on entanglements within Europe. For many topics, themes and epochs of modern history, it is hardly better, if at all. Empirically, the 'national container' has often remained the dominant frame of investigation. For key phenomena of the 20th century, such as Second Wave Feminism, neither the European integration of movements, their interactions, transfers, similarities and differences, nor those that transcend Europe's borders have been sufficiently investigated. The pragmatic challenges remain considerable, particularly in view of the plurality of languages.

Not least for linguistic reasons, British historiography has proved better at investigating 'global' relationships – especially within the region of the former Empire – than it is at researching the no less significant integration, relations, differences, and similarities with the European continent. The British 'New Imperial History' has achieved something that still remains a distant goal for British European history: the investigation of the repercussions of transnational interdependencies on British society.

A polarity of 'European' versus 'global' arises in current debates, although many practitioners of global history repeatedly distance themselves from this. This polarity reifies borders rather than overcoming them, and creates secondary exoticisms in some cases. Transnational history can focus on a range of fruitful geographical areas, each of them coming with their own heuristic gains and losses. The significance of influences and interdependencies within Europe as well as beyond its borders will have to be worked out and determined precisely for different regions, phenomena and developments. Thinking within boxes, binaries or 'containers' of any kind is not helpful for this study.

6. European contemporary history as a field of research must be aware that it stands in a specific political context. This challenge should be taken up by historians in a conscious and purposeful way.

With some reason, European history has in the past been under the latent suspicion of being used to legitimise European unification. Some studies looked for commonalities and convergences or even assumed these unquestioningly. European history, however, must generate questions, not presuppose answers. Investigations into the extent of convergence as well as into existing or growing differences between European societies must be carried out with an open mind, be empirically founded, and argued in

a differentiated manner. The desire to leave the nation-states behind, both politically and in academic debate, must not tempt us to underestimate the significance of the nation-state.

Without doubt, historical scholarship should counter the suspicion that it serves to legitimise the project of European unification. This does not mean, however, that European historians should abstain from taking political positions. Especially in times when there are strong political currents that maintain that Europe is the problem and the nation-state the solution, it seems both scientifically and politically necessary to deconstruct old and new national myths while also deconstructing European unification myths. There are many ways of doing this, of which transnational-European perspectives are just one variant, but nevertheless an important one. At the same time, this also means that a European-oriented historiography must emancipate itself from questions of possible political interest or disinterest in Europe. Moreover, it should not mirror political or social cycles without thoughtful deliberation.

As mentioned above, however, there is also an associative proximity between the preoccupation with European history and a suspected Eurocentric perspective on history as a whole. This can be countered by pointing out that Europe should be seen as one of the world regions whose research is on an equal footing with others and is in an ongoing dialogue with them.¹¹ Eurocentrism is to be distinguished from an engagement with European history. Questions concerning asymmetric processes, the formation and development of interdependencies do not only arise between Europe and the global world, but also within Europe.

The political context of history is not independent of the place where and when history is written. What political implications do historians in different European societies perceive in their choice of research spaces? What about the implications for those who research European history outside of Europe? How do cycles of public interest and academic interest interact? National public spheres and historical research are related in many ways. Discussing the diversity of these territorial constraints would create an important basis for the dynamic development of European history as a field of research.

Finally, the last two propositions concern questions of research structures.

7. New and different research infrastructures are needed to promote the Europeanisation and internationalisation of historical studies.

National research funding programmes continue to target primarily relatively closed academic labour markets in each individual country. They are not designed to promote transnational, European research collaborations. Cooperation programmes exist, but their scope is very limited. The funding opportunities through EU programmes are relatively small compared to national programmes and the EU bureaucratic hurdles are relatively high. The EU ‘Societal Challenges’ programme offers just a few opportunities for the whole field of humanities and cultural studies and is designed to produce directly applicable results. The ERC (European Research Council) and Marie Curie programmes support basic research, but not primarily cross-border collaborations and thus contribute little to Europeanisation in the sense of an interweaving of historiographies. Language barriers, and nation-specific career paths, hinder more extensive mobility and cooperation.










8. We need a change in the publishing world, and we need to address the issue of linguistic boundaries and the associated limits to dialogue.

The eighth and last point relates to the market for scientific books and journals, which is at present still very national in scope. The English language transcends language barriers to a certain extent, resulting in a whole range of journals and forums with a European focus. However, the book and journal markets are still largely shaped by national cultures, which are decisive for the formation of disciplinary cultures and interpretations of history. The resulting discourses remain largely bound by national and linguistic borders. Without being a panacea, increased open-access in publishing could improve the situation just as much as an intentional and systematic internationalisation of the review culture. The digitisation of communication has so far contributed disappointingly little to the internationalisation of historiographical debates. Creative and innovative solutions need to be sought in this field with new determination, if historiography wants to meet the challenges of the present. New and more effective answers must be found to the question of language barriers and to the limitations on dialogue that accompany them. This is an important challenge, especially for doing European history.

Certainly, the arguments formulated here are to a certain extent attributable to our German perspective and also in other respects to our own research priorities. We have tried to address conceptual, methodological, research pragmatic, structural and, last but not least, political issues. Our goal for the course of this debate is not to ‘defend’ these points in any way. Rather, they are intended to provide an initial impetus for debate, which will generate its own questions, themes, theses, focal points and controversies.

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