Jörn Leonhard

Comparison, Transfer and Entanglement,
or: How to Write Modern European History today?

«How to write modern European history today?» It is no coincidence that this question recalls the prize questions posed by the great academies in the eighteenth century. Back then, it might have been posed in an even more drastic form: «Can we still write modern European history today?» Whether understood in a technical sense or in terms of fundamental principles, this point of departure is interwoven with a number of other vital issues. What is European about Europe? Where does its identity originate and how far does it extend? Max Weber provided the classical formulation of this problem in the preface to his «Collected Essays on the Sociology of Religion», asking: «What nexus of circumstances led to a situation in which cultural phenomena emerged specifically on the Occident's soil, and only there, that [...] nevertheless lay within a developmental trajectory of universal significance and validity?».

To this day, this crucial question has lost none of its suggestive power. Beyond the challenge it poses to a historical discipline that aims to understand and explain, it reflects the fundamental problem of demarcation and identification: What belongs to Europe or to the «West» and what lies beyond? The titles of publications and projects dedicated to explaining the specifically European core of Europe from a historical perspective often reveal their retrospective logic as well as the politics of history underlying their analytical frameworks. They tellingly refer to the «Rise of the West», the «European Sonderweg» or special path, and, in the book series edited by Jacques le Goff, to their intention to «build Europe».


3 J. Le Goff, L'Europe est-elle née au Moyen Âge?, Paris 2003, German edition: Die Geburt Europas im Mittelalter, Munich 2004; Le Goff served as editor of the book series which was published by C.H. Beck under the title «Europa bauen».
pointedly put it, such eurocentrism always entails two dimensions, the affliction of «eurosis» and an emphatic «euroticism».\(^4\)

Contemporaries referring to Europe and European history often have European unity in mind as an objective and the integration process as the route to achieving it. Behind the assumed finality of this process one can discern the premise that such unity is possible on the basis of shared European values, institutions and experiences, which are in turn based on historical developments and learning processes. As a result, such phenomena as the European Enlightenment, the rule of law, the constitutional state or civil society are presented as specific Europeanisms. The crucial problem with this perspective lies in the inherent tension between two tendencies. The first rests on the notion of shared political-constitutional, societal and cultural values as well as the necessity of supranational institutions to solve common problems as a lesson to be derived from European history. The second involves the converse claim that European societies, states and nations exhibit a specific, historically evolved pattern of autonomy and diversity, resulting in a complex variety of conflicting collective self-images. The tension between these convergent and divergent tendencies is at the heart of every attempt to imagine and write European history.\(^5\)

Against this background, the following article proceeds in four steps – always using broad brushstrokes to provide a symptomatic sketch rather than aiming for systematic completeness. It begins with a brief overview of certain perspectives and functions characteristic of European historiography in an attempt to explain why past historians developed the programme of «European history» in the first place, before going on to analyse the costs and benefits of various systematic approaches to this subject. The aim is to modify the initial question in order to re-address the basic problem of the Weberian perspective: How to write a European history today that evades the epistemological trap of eurocentrism, while at the same time achieving not just illustrative narratives but analytical and explanatory rigour? In a third step, the article sketches the potential of such an approach, focusing on a specific case study: the comparison of the multi-ethnic empires of Habsburg, Tsarist Russia, the Ottoman Empire and the British Empire in the long nineteenth century. In conclusion, the fourth and final part of this article presents a number of preliminary methodological hypotheses on the writing of European history.

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### 1. Narrating Europe: Perspectives and Functions of Historiographic Approaches since the Nineteenth Century

The first major systematic narrative of European history was formulated in the eighteenth century, when historians increasingly began to develop an Europeanisation of universal history. In the German context, this process is illustrated by such figures as Friedrich Christoph Schlosser and later, Leopold von Ranke, who explicitly equated the «world historical eras of recent times» with the history of the European state system. From this perspective, Europe appeared as a historical space of universal historical significance, while the frame narrative was centred on Europe’s historical rise and the perfection of European civilisation during the era in which these historians were respectively writing. European history thus advanced to the status of the «world history of Europe».

A second major trend developed in the course of the nineteenth century. It can be characterised as the search for integrative leitmotifs. In his *History of the Nineteenth Century*, Georg Gottfried Gervinus wrote contemporary history to educational ends. To him, the progressive popular movements of his time reflected the progress inherent in history, which was bound to ultimately culminate in the victory of democracy. He understood European history as unfolding between a romantic-universalist and a Germanic-particularist pole. At the same time, however, Gervinus also looked beyond Europe. In the third volume of his work, for example, he provided a unique treatment of the South American revolutions as instances of a global wave of republican revolutions originating in North America and France, the unfolding of which was closely interwoven with events in Spain and Portugal. Gervinus thus represents an early example of a decidedly European history looking beyond Europe. At the same time, he remained firmly grounded in the tradition of earlier attempts to widen the perspective of European history, such as the eighteenth century work of Friedrich Christoph Schlosser, with its focus on the significance of the American Revolution for Europe.

A third trend in nineteenth century historiography leads to a converse interpretation. Early socialist authors from the 1840s onwards perceived the capitalist mode of production and bourgeois society as the defining characteristics of European history. At the same time, however, Marx and Engels, in their more analytical works, contributed to the understanding of very diverse developmental paths within Europe, which could not easily be reduced to the simple antagonism between bour-
geois capitalism and a class-conscious proletariat. Such was the case with Engels’s study of the working class in England as well as with Marx’s analysis of Louis Bonaparte’s success in putting an end to the French Second Republic in the early 1850s.9

From the early twentieth century onwards, a variety of new European master narratives were developed, taking up a number of motifs that had already emerged during the nineteenth century, especially within the context of the liberal and Marxist linear narratives of history. From a liberal perspective, Benedetto Croce wrote the history of Europe in the nineteenth century in terms of a triumphant history of ever increasing freedom, as evidenced by the unfolding of the liberal constitutional state – thus approaching a Whig interpretation of liberal Europe.10 From Eric Hobsbawm’s Marxist viewpoint, on the other hand, European history in the long nineteenth century appeared as the gradual unfolding of bourgeois capitalism between the dual revolution at the end of the eighteenth century and the First World War.11

Beyond such progressivist narratives, the First World War saw the emergence of a distinctly conservative-romantic and essentialist notion of European history. This perspective focused on an idealisation of the West, a European West representing a distinct alternative to the universalistic humanitarianism of the Enlightenment. As exemplified in the works of Max Scheler, this point of view was pervaded by a distinct nostalgia for the period before 1789.12 In the context of the twentieth century as an ideologically polarised «age of extremes», the period from 1917/18 onwards was often interpreted in terms of a European civil war gradually expanding into a global ideological civil war.13 In light of their experiences of the Second World War and National Socialism, European history in the guise of a universal history seemed to offer a possible way forward, especially to West German historians. The disastrous history of the German nation state thus gave rise to a new type of universal history, albeit one that always remained dependent on ideas of Europe and the Western world as conceived within the transatlantic framework of the Cold War context.

Until the 1960s, European history in the guise of world history could be presented as a history of continuous progress, facilitating a structural contrast between a progressive West and an East and South that were always «catching up». Correspondingly, this narrative provoked fantasies with marked civilisational overtones,

10 B. Croce, Storia d’Europa nel secolo decimonono (1932), Bari 1981.
in which certain countries succeeded in catching up to the West, while others did not. Increasingly, then, European history seemed to illustrate the world-wide unfolding of a Western community of values. Of course, this interpretation rested on downplaying the enormous differences between Western societies for the sake of a normative project; its specific form and influence was thus intertwined with the particular conflicts currently unfolding, be it in Eastern Europe or in the Middle and Near East.\textsuperscript{14} Since the 1970s and 1980s, and particularly after the upheavals of 1989/91, finally, European history continued to be interpreted as a history of the origins of human and civil rights and of a concept of «civil society» that should ideally become universal, even if such narratives have tended to become somewhat less ideological in nature.\textsuperscript{15}

This short – and certainly incomplete – outline shows that influential concepts of European history were often instrumentalised to ideological ends, that they were bound up with political positions and normative models of legitimacy, thereby reflecting expectations informed by specific politics of history. The suggestive plausibility of many of these approaches and their supposed clarity at least in part resulted from their retrospective teleology, their tendency to explain complex developments from the perspective of the present and therefore in light of the perceived results of historical development. Thus, narratives focusing on Europe as the result of a European Sonderweg or special path were and are predicated upon a presentist perspective. Yet, this common tendency to think through the prism of results comes with high analytical costs, leading scholars to ignore the historical alternatives embedded in the «past future».

\section{2. Some Approaches to European History – Costs and Benefits}

How might we systematise the great diversity of approaches to European history according to their analytical procedures? Four major ideal-types may be distinguished. European history can, first, be written as an accumulation of national histories that remain more or less isolated from each another. The classical conception, found in many textbooks on European history, is based on the aggregation of disconnected national histories (each like a pillar) with the result that the dimensions of comparison, transfer and entanglement, if they appear at all, are limited to the introduction or concluding chapter. The clarity and plausibility of the material’s organisation provided by this approach are bought at significant cost, as it necessarily overemphasises description at the expense of analytical explanation.

Secondly, European history can be presented as a normative project and as an autonomous history of Europe: a history largely sealed off from other world regions.


This kind of historiographical enclosure encompasses its own criteria for inclusion and exclusion: Europe appears as a geographically definable space in history. If, for example, historians refer to the territory between western, southern and northern coasts and the Ural Mountains in the east, then Russia and the Ottoman Empire belong to Europe, because some of the most important and most developed areas of these empires were found in regions within this space. Alternatively, Europe may be defined in temporal terms, existing between the establishment of the Westphalian system in the mid-seventeenth century and the end of the long European nineteenth century in the First World War. Closely connected to this is the approach to define Europe with reference to particular political, social and cultural values. These values are often explained in relation to particular moments in European history, for example the separation between church and state, the Enlightenment, successful political revolutions, the rule of law, constitutions, parliamentarian democracy, or the welfare state. Such criteria allow the exclusion of historical territories east of Poland, Turkey or the Maghreb.

Again, the analytical costs of these approaches are obvious: At best, marginal attention is paid to the relations between Europe and other historical regions, and it is no coincidence that general accounts often make use of chapter headings such as «Europe and the Rest of the World». There is also a tendency to downplay internal distinctions by privileging superordinate «Europeanisms». Ultimately, the highly fruitful discussions of a European «Sonderweg», «the miracle of Europe» and «the West and the rest» are all located within the same framework: Their point of departure is to question how one could explain the accumulation of wealth and modernity in the countries of the West, along with Japan and South Korea, vis-à-vis other world regions, in which the hopes inspired by modernisation theory have remained unfulfilled – in which many countries have failed to «catch up».

As an example of this type of approach, Michael Mitterauer’s 2003 essay on the medieval foundations of a European Sonderweg is highly instructive. The essay aims to provide an «interpretation of historical and current cultural phenomena in light of their origins». Despite the individual factors identified so convincingly in this essay – from the agricultural revolution, family and kinship, and feudalism through Christianity and church to crusades, proto-colonialism and mass communication – Mitterauer is still confronted with the same problem as Max Weber. This is because he explains the specifics of European history solely on the basis of...
internal factors, with the rest of the world serving largely as a contrast needed to illustrate European peculiarities.\(^\text{19}\) Whereas Mitterauer does not construct the Occident, he is still bound by his approach to define one Occident, one possible history of a space that provides the basis for his narration of Europe. The analysis of causation, of the interaction between different factors, and of the hierarchy of important and less important elements thus recedes into the background in favour of fluid metaphors of movement – «development», «path», «initial advantage», «setting the course» and so on. Here we encounter a fundamental problem that no historian can evade when writing European history: The description of a variety of factors cannot replace the search for and relative weighing of specific chains of causality, necessitating the use of comparisons. The occidental concept of Europe converges with the Weberian conception in that it equates this version of Europe with the knowledge produced by a discipline, in this case medieval history, which is in itself temporally specific. The result is a partial comparison that fails to take a more systematic account of the complex exchanges between the Catholic Occident on the one hand, and Byzantine Orthodoxy and the regions of Islamic faith or under Muslim control on the other, such as during the Crusades and Mongol invasions.\(^\text{20}\)

Thirdly, European history can be written with a focus on differentiation on the basis of comparisons, and by various combinations of comparisons with the analysis of transfer and entanglement. Narrative compartmentalisations resulting from nation- or nation-state-centred frameworks can be overcome through systematic, sectoral and problem-focused comparisons. Despite the high analytical value of many studies stimulated by these perspectives, the costs and problems associated with them have also become obvious: Comparisons usually show poor narrative quality. Furthermore, scholars have debated the tension between strict synchronic comparisons on the one hand, and research on transfer and entanglement on the other, both between statics and dynamics, and between structures and processes. Very often, the presence of comparison already presupposes an implicit relational history, a transfer that either exists inherently in the period of the past under examination or takes place in the imagination of the analysing historian.\(^\text{21}\) These problems can be addressed by combining synchronic cross-sections with a long diachronic perspective, a *longue durée*, in which transfers and entanglements become more visible. In many cases, comparisons are necessary to identify the exact areas of transfer and entanglement, so that a combination of all three

Another problem inherent in comparisons and histories of transfer and entanglement lies in their focus on a single set of relations. This is especially evident in strictly bilateral comparisons, which often tend to privilege one particular perspective, as exemplified in the histories of the First World War in terms of an essentially German-French conflict.

The most important requirement when putting comparative frameworks into practice is a clear focus on precisely defined historical problems. In this way, historians have looked at long-term developments in the light of institutions, such as in Wolfgang Reinhard’s work on the history of the modern state and its particular form of rule, Hartmut Kaelble’s works on the origins and varieties of the European welfare state, or Jörg Fisch’s analysis of the leitmotif of a coexistence of increased productivity and increased equality in the nineteenth century. Such a matrix may be supplemented by other research fields and analytical explorations, helping to put into practice an «open internal differentiation» without succumbing to excessive eurocentrism. Furthermore, the combination of multiple perspectives allows for a better understanding of modes of historical developments, often characterised by a coexistence of structural convergences and divergences in the perception and interpretation of changes. It also affects our understanding of the temporalisation of experience. In this field, comparisons help to identify the chronological simultaneity of historically non-simultaneous processes. Reinhart Koselleck’s idea of one «saddle epoch» in the history of modern political and social vocabularies, for example, could thus be transformed into the history of a variety of corresponding or divergent saddle epochs that existed at various times.

Fourthly, Europe-centric historiographies can be overcome by approaches inspired by global or world history. What underlies these approaches is a dual process of historiographical provincialisation, stimulated by the deconstruction of historiographic frameworks such as «special paths» and «exceptionalisms». What Dipesh Chakrabarty has called «provincialising Europe» in the light of global processes was preceded by the internal provincialisation of particular European cases through the productive deconstruction of national narratives, as in the case of the German Sonderweg, or of the Whig interpretation of history in Britain. Something similar has unfolded regarding the history of Europe from the perspective of global
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Yet, this global turn must not replace the many divergent histories within Europe with yet another artificial container-conception of «Europe».

The premise of global history as formulated by Chakrabarty is that we must detach the history of individual states and societies from the idea that the history of Britain, France or Germany, or even Europe as a whole, implicitly reveals a universal paradigm applicable to the history of other world regions. How then might we link the histories of European societies with the experiences in other parts of the world? One possibility is to study specific relations across large spatial distances, for example by concentrating on global economic history, in particular the examination of chains of production and the history of particular goods. Peter Rietbergen’s work on the cultural symbiosis between Europe and North America, and Jörg Fisch’s history of Europe from 1850, which integrates the imperial-maritime dimension into specific national histories, exemplify the strengths of this approach. Other examples of fruitful dialogues between European perspectives and global historiography have become prominent in the last decade: The historical development of the city was no singular European phenomenon, and neither was Europeans’ perception of the city based upon the ideal of the politically independent community of citizens. When focusing on the unfolding of «multiple modernities» on the level of public spheres, as well as communication and communication revolutions, the history of cities as spaces of experience cannot be reduced to the examples of Amsterdam, London, Vienna, St. Petersburg, Paris or Berlin, but must include Buenos Aires, Shanghai and San Francisco.

For the eighteenth century, both the period of the Seven Years’ War and the revolutions of 1776 and 1789 reveal their historical complexity only when interpreted as global events: as a global spiral of violence and a transatlantic entanglement. The same can be said of the period between the late 1840s and the 1870s. As Christopher Bayly has shown, the European revolutions, the Indian Mutiny, the American Civil War and the Taiping revolution together reveal a global zone of violent transformation. Jürgen Osterhammel and Sebastian Conrad have shed new light on our understanding of European nationalism since around 1860 by looking at global developments. They showed how in a period in which boundaries between multi-ethnic empires and nation states seemed to have become increasingly rigid, the European nation state in fact profited from periods of advancing globalisation. Inspired by the California School of comparative economic history,
historians have tried to explain the great divergence between the history of China
and Britain. During the Eurasian early modern period from the sixteenth to the
eighteenth century, there was no fundamental difference in performance between
the economies of Europe and Asia. Structural differences began to develop only
from the eighteenth century onwards, when China as an agricultural empire fol-
lowed a logic increasingly different from the industrialising societies in Europe.\textsuperscript{31}
Finally, in the field of conceptual history, we see a general trend towards global his-
tory, connecting the study of transformations of political and social vocabularies in
Europe to global transfers and the complexities of translations.\textsuperscript{32}

As exemplified in the work of Bayly and Osterhammel, these approaches pro-
vide a fascinating kaleidoscope of connections, rhythms and interactions, not least
between nationalisms and processes of globalisation. On the other hand, however,
these accounts sometimes seem to open up a possible pitfall: If everything seems
interconnected with everything else, causal explanations and hypotheses tend to
retreat behind the thick descriptions of similarities and constellations or instances
of simultaneity. To take the period between 1848 and the 1860s as an example:
What exactly is the causal impact of the Great Revolt in India on Ireland beyond a
chronological simultaneity? Our understanding of simultaneity and connectedness
of events, so much stimulated by the discovery of «global moments», is no compen-
sation per se for causal explanations of change over time.\textsuperscript{33}

3. Putting Approaches to the Test of Analytical Practice:
Multi-ethnic Empires in the Age of Nation States

For a long time, Europe’s multi-ethnic empires were described in the light of their
seemingly inevitable decline. This one-sided perspective on the demise of the major
continental empires of Habsburg, Tsarist Russia and the Ottoman Empire in the
First World War was linked to modernisation theories. The theories reinforced the
view that in the industrial societies of the nineteenth century, traditional religious,
dynastic or regional ties became weakened and outdated. These ties, so it was
believed, necessarily dissolved in the wake of a comprehensive process of moderni-
sierung und Nation im Deutschen Kaiserreich, Mu-

und die Welt in der Frühen Neuzeit}, Göttingen 2013.

J. Leonhard, «Von der Wortimitation zur seman-
tischen Integration. Übersetzung als Kulturtrans-
férer», in: \textit{Werkstatt Geschichte} 48 (2008), 45–63;
idiem, «Language, Experience and Translation. Towards a Comparative Dimension», in: J. F. Se-
bastián (ed.), \textit{Political Concepts and Time. New Appro-

33 E. Manela, \textit{The Wilsonian Moment. Self-Determina-
tion and the International Origins of Anticolonial Na-
tionalisms}, Oxford 2007; M. Goebel, \textit{Anti-Imperial
Metropolis. Intervar Paris and the Seed of Third
sation, being gradually replaced by the supposedly natural entities of nations and nation states. Given the political and cultural upheavals since the end of the Cold War, however, such a heuristic constriction to the structural conditions of the nation state increasingly seems problematic. Stimulated by three main factors – post-colonial studies, by the search for the historical roots of globalisation; and lastly the search for supranational models of political rule after the historicisation of the nation state and the end of the Cold War constellation in 1989/91 –, historians have re-discovered the category of the multi-ethnic empire.34

What new perspectives does such an empire-focused approach to European history offer? A history of multi-ethnic empires in the long nineteenth century documents complex interactions between continental and maritime empires as well as nation states. An isolated comparison between individual cases of these categories is in danger of overlooking many entanglements and hybrids. For instance, the situation colonial was not exclusively characteristic of maritime empires; it could also be found in continental empires, be it Bosnia-Herzegovina in Habsburg, Siberia in the Tsarist Empire or in the territories in the East of the German Empire of 1871.35 In this context, a broader comparison helps us to better understand the limits of traditional compartmentalisation in maritime and continental empires. Instead of these macro-categories, we may identify particular constellations of conflict on a meso-level, for instance the practice of civilising missions, the use of violence and the role of settlers as actors in the situation colonial, as well as the importance of perceived civilisational differences at the frontier.

When the method of comparison combined with a focus on transfer and entanglement to the relation between empires and nation states is applied, customary categories of historiography become permeable. The traditional dichotomy between multi-ethnic empires and homogenous nation states, which is implicitly present in the historiography of empires, distorts our view of a broad range of processes of convergence between empires and nation states in the second half of the nineteenth century.36 On the one hand, empires tended to draw on notions of order and integration derived from the nation state. This was evident in numerous transfers, from the invented monarchies and the constitutional models of citizenship to the funding of infrastructure and the idea of general conscription.37 The mise en scène of

37 J. Leonhard / U. von Hirschhausen (eds.), Multi-Ethnic Empires and the Military. Conscription in Eu-

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monarchies functioned as a transnational template for the dramatic staging of political power, while expert cultures and international conferences as well as emerging international financial markets served as transnational forums.\textsuperscript{38}

Attempts to deal with the model (rather than the reality) of the nation state since the 1850s were repeatedly catalysed by crises, particularly military defeats, such as in the cases of Russia in 1856, Habsburg in 1866, and the Ottoman Empire in the 1870s and again after 1908. However, within the practice of multi-ethnic societies, the adoption of such models often limited the flexible forms of power and the «imperial routine» that had long been typical for empires.\textsuperscript{39} Often, the integrative aspirations of nationalising empires were themselves a response to a defensive constellation. Against this background, many instruments and the implementation of models derived from nation states in multi-ethnic spaces actually fostered the nationalisation of specific groups. The reaction to the Turkification policies of the Young Turks in the Ottoman Empire, for example, led to an upswing in nationalist movements in Albania and Macedonia. In Eastern Europe, attempts at Russification provoked the emphatic opposition of Finns, Poles and the Baltic national movements. In India too, the symbolic representation of the virtual monarchy led to resistance from the emerging national movement.\textsuperscript{40}

At the same time, nation states themselves assimilated imperial elements, most evident through overseas expansion to legitimise political rule and communicate legitimacy. Without minimising the extent of multi-ethnic or multi-religious structures and the experience of legal and ethnic heterogeneity, which distinguished empires in the eyes of contemporaries before 1914, comparative analyses highlight the limits of historiographic ideal types. Instead of distinct categories of continental and maritime empires on the one hand and nation states on the other, we find a spectrum of practices of nationalising empires and imperialising nation states.\textsuperscript{41}

Such a broad re-integration of empires into European history also helps to critically contextualise ideas about a linear European or Western convergence in the sense of «high modernity» from the late nineteenth century onwards.\textsuperscript{42} The complex tension, interaction and entanglements amongst European states, nations and societies and their colonial possessions shed light on a different history that is based on the identification of «empires at home». Colonial goods and their importance for
the developing consumer cultures, global chains of production and consumption, and the presence of the colonial «other» in mass media brought the empire back to European societies. Regions of erupting conflicts such as Ireland or Algeria proved how closely connected centres and peripheries were. Colonies served as laboratories for racist exclusion; colonial warfare generated experiences of radicalised violence, which transcended boundaries between combatants, and civilians, and undermined the ideals of a disciplined state-war.⁴³

All of this had enormous implications for European societies and their self-images. For example, India, as the British Empire’s «garrison state», helped the empire to cling to the paradigm of having no «standing armies» in Britain, but developments in Ireland and the practice of war in South Africa increasingly called the self-image of a Pax Britannica into question. Correspondingly, French colonial practices in Algeria, Senegal and Indochina, as well as German colonial warfare against the Herero and Nama, illustrated experiences of violence that had repercussions on European societies. These constellations did not end in 1918 or 1945; they accompanied European societies such as those in Britain, France, as well as Portugal, Belgium and the Netherlands well into the 1950s, instead, 1960s and 1970s, into the era of decolonisation through emigration and immigration.⁴⁴

This sketch is not meant to foster the re-idealisation of «good» empires against «bad» nation states. Instead, it aims to elucidate the complexity of the concrete structures and processes that defy simple analogies, and underlines the need to make the historiographical container-concepts of empires, both continental and maritime, and nation states more permeable. From this broad perspective and based on a combination of comparison, transfer and entanglement, empires must be treated as part of a broad history of the long nineteenth century in which the limits of European history are more and more transcended.

4. European Histories and Beyond: Five Preliminary Theses

How can one write a modern European history today? The panorama of approaches combined with the sketch of some particular examples allows us to formulate a number of preliminary theses. First, European history is more than a positivist accumulation of national histories to be «synthesised» inductively into the history of a larger entity. It should be more than a collection of individual monographs on national histories of European societies, subsequently placed side-by-side to produce a synthesis of European history. European history should instead be the outcome of a conscious and problem-oriented lateral thinking. This argument rules

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out aspirations to produce an all-encompassing *histoire totale* as well as a merely illustrative narrative. European history requires a selective focus of interest. It is necessarily transnational in that it renders the historiographical casing of the nation states permeable and deconstructs their essentialisms.

Secondly, European history is not predicated upon an *a priori* recourse to allegedly unifying aspects of Europe. It does not take identificatory functions for granted, let alone historico-political sources of legitimacy, but instead focuses on the diversity and divergence of experiences, their conflictual nature, their ambivalence and often their asynchrony. European history should thus recognise the unique social, political, economic and cultural logics of societies and spaces of experience without reducing them to a simple model. In this sense, it aims to integrate an anthropological premise, namely the vital knowledge of the «cultural other», into the practice of historiography.

Thirdly European history should be based on comparison using a relatively clear and methodologically stringent set of rules, while at the same time incorporating an awareness of relational histories, transfers and entanglements. Through its focus on the «many moving targets» of multi-country comparisons and *longue durée* perspectives, it seeks to respond to the inherent problems of static and synchronic comparisons. It centres on processes of transfer and entanglement, not in the traditional sense of one-sided reception but through interactions involving changes in the objects of transfer themselves. Finally, it maintains an awareness of the local modifications that occur when exports are integrated. We can only understand transfers if we approach them from both sides, the importing and exporting.

Fourthly, European history appears as the outcome of multiple complex layers of experience, that is, distinct sediments that cannot be reduced *a priori* to a single concept of Europe. From an analytical perspective, the goal is to link successiveness and simultaneity: diachronically through the analysis of long-term developmental processes that cannot be narrowed down to an isolated, supposedly European date such as 1789, 1848 or 1914, and synchronically by examining the differences between various spaces of experience as well as the interactions and exchanges between them.

However, fifthly, writing modern European history today requires more than these considerations. European history can no longer be the result of a Eurocentric historiography: It requires an intensive dialogue with the writing of global and world history as the example of empires underlines. Dedicated not to the construction but to the deconstruction of centrisms and exceptionalisms, it must work from a template that is not just transnational but also transcultural.
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Contemporaries referring to Europe and European history often have European unity in mind as an objective based on shared European values, institutions and experiences. However, under close scrutiny, a particular tension becomes obvious: a tension between convergent and divergent tendencies that is at the heart of every attempt to imagine and write European history. Against this background, the article begins with an overview of perspectives and functions characteristic of European historiography before going on to analyse the advantages and disadvantages of various systematic approaches to this subject. In a third step, the article sketches the potential of an approach by focusing on a specific case study: the comparison of the multi-ethnic empires of Habsburg, Tsarist Russia, the Ottoman Empire and the British Empire in the long nineteenth century. In conclusion, the final part presents a number of preliminary methodological hypotheses of the writing of European history.

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