

From History of Civilization to World History: Rethinking the Boundaries of Europe

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Rethinking the boundaries of Europe is an earnest exercise that calls for critical reconsideration of our existing spatio-temporal constructions. First of all, it should be established that this kind of an exercise does not only necessitate a re-mapping of the cartographical space within which “Europe” is placed, but more so a re-thinking of the intellectual space within which history is situated.

Social scientific endeavors, including the study of history, have been going through a process of radical critique since the 1970s. As the interests, foci, and discourses of the social sciences and history are structured and conditioned by contemporaneous conditions, this change of attitude should be located in the world historical context of de-colonization movements and the de-centering of European dominance. These processes not only enabled non-European societies to re-claim their own histories, but simultaneously forced former colonial powers, whose collective identities were organically linked to their empires, to search for new identifications which were to be found in the European identity. The creation of the Common Market undergrid the emerging new imaginaries of Europe which were also thoroughly imbricated with the geopolitics of the Cold War. More recently, with the deepening intensity of globalization, the nation-state has begun to loose its centrality as the unit of analysis in both the social sciences and history as scholars are now urged to think in terms of larger units, be they regional or global. The trends that directed historical studies away from the political and intellectual arenas to the social and cultural spheres enabled the rapprochement first between history, sociology, and economics, and later with anthropology and literary studies.

These movements within the space of social scientific knowledge opened up an intellectual space. That is to say, the new subject matters of history prepared the ground for the re-thinking of the boundaries of Europe. Studies on structures and practices of daily life or discussions concentrating on the formation and nature of the public sphere among others forced “European” historians to think beyond the rigid geographical boundaries within which they were operating. To put it differently, the blurring of boundaries in the intellectual field between the social science disciplines and history has also blurred the boundaries of European history.

Another aspect that needs to be emphasized is that the notion of European history cannot be thought without its organic ties to a conception of the idea of Europe in an abstract way. Bringing back the interconnectedness of notions of time and space and the ways in which these notions have been shaped by socio-cultural, economic, political, and historical processes enables historians to talk about historicized spatio-temporal wholes rather than about societies.

The first step in this direction would be to historicize, albeit very crudely within the confines of this brief commentary, the spatiality of the notion of Europe. The idea of Europe leaps far beyond its geographical boundaries, in every attempt to draw and redraw the latter. Europe has historically been “an intricate game of inclusions and exclusions”.¹ Yet, I would like to argue that, in this game entangled with fantasy, desire, along with concrete socio-economic and political processes, the bounding of the Western Christianity and the concomitant transformation of Christendom into Europe lies at the heart of the process of setting its boundaries. The interconnectedness of Christianity and Europe still strongly resonates in shaping our understanding of contemporary history and society as underscored by the debate on the admission of Turkey into the European Union or the ban on headscarves but not crucifixes in France.

The idea of Europe as an organic unity is one of the mainstays of civilizational history. Yet, as it is well known, to invoke the very notion of Europe was mainly a rhetorical strategy until at least the sixteenth century.² Upon the disintegration of Western Roman Empire, Dennis Hay sees a slow and gradual process of unification under Christianity which was more or less complete by the thirteenth century. He carefully underlines that the idea of Christianity was not simply tied to “any narrow man-made frontiers, and had no boundaries in time and space”.³ It was exactly this, the bounding of the notion of Christianity with Western Christendom and its gaining a territorial identity which was a slowly developing process and shaped by the Islamic threat. Muslim expansion in Asia and Africa, capturing the Holy Land, not only cut off Christian communities of Asia and Africa but also territorialized the notion of Christianity. The Crusades were central in defining the geographical boundaries of Christianity and it was through the confrontation with Islam that the essence of a European-identity-in-formation was to be shaped. By the fourteenth century, Hay writes, Christendom in Asia Minor and

¹ Maria De Chiara, A Tribe Called Europe, in: Iain Chambers/Lidia Curti (eds.), *The Post-Colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, London 1996, pp. 228-233, here p. 232.

² Timothy Reuter, Medieval Ideas of Europe and Their Modern Historians, in: *History Workshop Journal* 33 (1992), pp. 176-180, here p. 180.

³ Dennis Hay, *Europe: The Emergence of an Idea*, Edinburgh 1957, p. 4, p. 21. See also Robert Bartlett, *The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonization and Cultural Change: 950-1350*, Princeton 1993.

beyond, and in Africa was cut off from the West so that the idea of a reunion of these varied Christian lands was only a chimera.⁴ Consequently, once Europe alone was conceptualized as Christian, the ground was prepared for the idea of Christendom to be transformed into the idea of Europe.

Cast thus, the key characteristics of the European experience were the Roman *imperium* and Christianity, the Enlightenment and industrialization, characteristics designed, as Talal Asad pointedly notes, to exclude Muslims.⁵ Spain was a part of Europe, but its medieval history – Arab Spain – was excised from the European experience.⁶ Likewise, the Ottoman Empire, despite being a central player in the European state system, was left outside of the borders of Europe. This had far reaching repercussions as Ottoman, and later Turkish, studies were excluded from European studies thereby reinforcing the Eurocentrism of historical and social studies. This stance persists in a distorted manner in contemporary history. Successor nation-states of the Ottoman Empire have been partitioned into different areas of study. While the Christian successor states, such as Greece, Bulgaria, and Serbia, were included within Europe, albeit with some reservations, Turkey and the Arab nation-states were classified as parts of the Middle East.⁷ Put differently, the Ottoman Empire, seen as a predominantly Islamic formation, was allowed no part in European history, despite its organic role in the latter. After its disintegration, only its peripheries – Ottoman Christendom – could be welcomed back into Europe. Bosnian Muslims continue to point towards the liminal space that is created by the identification of Europe with Christianity: they “may be *in* Europe but are not *of* it”⁸.

A related issue that needs to be emphasized here is that the boundary of Europe also marks the boundary of the West. It is not surprising to find Turkey in a rather problematic position since this geography has historically formed the “frontier” between the “East” and the “West”, and marked the discursive, political, social, and military space that played a central role in the genesis of this frontier, and the idea of the West itself. This especially paves the way to schizophrenic subject positions in Turkey eternally squeezed in the non-space of the frontier between “East” and “West”. As Meltem Ahiska succinctly observes, Turkey has been thought of as “a bridge” both by “Europeans”, Ottomans, and later by the peoples of Turkey. For her, Turkey “has an ambivalent

⁴ Hay, *Europe* (fn. 3), p. 66.

⁵ Talal Asad, Muslims and European Identity: Can Europe Represent Islam?, in: Anthony Pagden (ed.), *The Idea of Europe: From Antiquity to the European Union*, Cambridge 2002, pp. 209-227, here p. 215.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

⁷ Biray Kolluoglu-Kirli, From Orientalism to Area Studies, in: *New Centennial Review* 3 (2003) Issue 3, pp. 93-112.

⁸ Asad, Muslims and European Identity (fn. 5), p. 213.

relation not only to the geographical sites of the East and the West, but also to their temporal signification: namely, backwardness and progress. Turkey has been trying to cross the bridge between the East and the West for more than a hundred years now, with a self-conscious anxiety that it is arrested in time and space by the bridge itself.⁹

The idea of the specificity (but also simultaneous universality) of Europe, stripped off from its temporal and spatial qualifications, formed the basis of ahistorical (in terms of time) and essentialist (in terms of space) constructions of the “East” and the “West” which informed social scientific inquiry. The Turkish anxiety that Ahiska underscores also illustrates that European history has become equated with the history of modernity to which people everywhere aspire. While most European historians, Dipesh Chakrabarty argues, continue to narrate this history in relative ignorance of non-European histories, historians of the non-European world cannot afford the luxury of being ignorant of European history.¹⁰ But what exactly European history means is rarely discussed in non-European histories: it is a frozen, “silent”, yet an imposing reference. That reference is modernity’s “actuality”, and to the extent that links with the non-European world are suggested by a new European history, there is the ever-present danger of representing non-European histories in terms of – usually cultural – difference, thereby masking power relations. As the history of the non-European world continues to be narrated in terms of difference, new terms and binary oppositions are invented, this time to idealize non-western histories, such as late-comers, newcomers, developing, under-developed, and traditional societies. All this reference to difference then serves the purpose of reproducing the two ideal types in a continuous manner. The discipline of history has been deeply complicit in this process of reproduction of ideal types, though it remains to be the only tool in our quest to overcome these intellectual fractures.¹¹

One research agenda would be to problematize European history itself, while writing about the non-Western world. Here European history is not conceived in its totality, but in terms of the development of certain analytical concepts and institutions that marked modernity – for instance law, the nation state, and private property among others. An example would be Huri Islamoglu’s recent work, where she problematizes the development of private property as a “contested domain” within the web of power relations rather than an ideal type that the modernity’s silent referent generally suggests.¹²

⁹ Meltem Ahiska, *Occidentalism: The Historical Fantasy of the Modern*, in: *South Atlantic Quarterly* 102 (2003), pp. 351-379, here p. 353.

¹⁰ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for “Indian” Pasts?*, in: *Representations* 37 (1992), pp. 1-26.

¹¹ See Harry Harootunian, *Overcome by Modernity: History, Culture, and Community in Interwar Japan*, Princeton 2000.

Harootunian's work is also relevant here. Criticizing terms such as "alternative modernities", or "retroactive modernities" that suggest "the projection of an image of different temporalities", he proposes the term "co-eval" modernity which suggests contemporaneity.¹³

In this intellectual endeavor it is important to acknowledge the particular space of Europe within world history and to break down the singularity of European modernity. I would like to conclude with a concrete observation that represents a significant step taken in this direction. In the curricula of history departments in universities in various countries, most notably in the United States, "History of Civilization" courses, which had hitherto formed the backbone of the undergraduate history curriculum, have been renamed and replaced by "World History" courses. This is a very significant development since it represents first and foremost the rejection of the unqualified equalization of civilization with Western civilization. World history courses in their inclusion of the multiple dynamics and processes that have been generated in different geographies establish the proportionate role of Europe. Nevertheless, these multiple processes and dynamics continue to be assessed in relation to an idealized European trajectory of change, an idealized narrative of European socio-historical transformation that is woven into the conceptual categories of the historical social sciences. If we are to successfully "provincialize Europe" and see European history as the history of a particular cartographic quadrant rather than as *the* universal history, we need to integrate the dynamics of these non-Western histories more closely into our theoretical models of large-scale social change.

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¹² Huri Islamoglu, *Constituting Modernity: Private Property in the East and West*, London 2004.

¹³ Harootunian, *Overcome by Modernity* (fn. 11), p. XVI.