

Transnational History

by Kiran Klaus Patel

This article delineates the subject and approach of transnational history and relates it to European history. It shows that transnational history was neither developed specifically for European history nor had its origins in Europe. Nevertheless, transnational history has great potential for research on Europe's past: this article argues that Europe is as much a space where transnational ties have become particularly strong as one created by these bonds in the first place.

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Introduction

The exact meaning of "transnational history" was and remains controversial; indeed, perhaps the very vagueness of the concept has contributed to the international triumphal march of the label "transnational" over the last few years. At the same time, history is something of a latecomer to the debate surrounding transnationality. Other disciplines, including not only law and political science, but also anthropology, had been working with the concept, each employing it in a different way, long before history paid any attention to it. "Transnational" also has a longstanding tradition of being used in the world beyond academia – various American companies in the post-war period included the term in their names in order to evoke a certain tone.¹

▲ 1

In contrast, the phrase only became important among historians in the early 1990s in different national historiographies and subdisciplines of history. At first, there was intense debate in the United States, above all with the aim of questioning and ending history writing's pervading fixation on national history – be it that of the USA, China or other parts of the world. This motivation soon also became the central component of the European discussion of transnational history. Today, about 15 years after the beginning of the debate in Europe, "transnational history" has penetrated the various historical subdisciplines and academic cultures of different countries very unevenly: whereas it has had a considerable impact upon part of the historiography of migration and colonialism, its influence on political history has remained much smaller. One can also see striking differences between individual countries. In contrast to Germany, where there is a lively discussion of the issue, transnational history has barely touched the academic communities in, for example, Italy and Bulgaria.²

▲ 2

This short glance at the development of the historiography reveals three points: transnational history is not a way of looking at the past, specifically developed for European history. The debate surrounding transnational history began in the USA, not in Europe. Moreover, the degree to which historians in Europe or experts on European history have drawn on this discussion varies considerably; to date, transnational history has, therefore, not become a central arena for a common understanding of European history-writing.

▲ 3

What is Transnational History?

Even after 15 to 20 years of debate, there is still no agreement among historians on a precise notion of transnational

history, other than the negative definition according to which it is an alternative to the still dominant concentration on national history. Transnational history's relationship to closely connected approaches – for example, to global history and post-colonial studies (→ Media Link #ab), to world history and *histoire croisée*, as well as to entangled history and international history – remains in dispute. Whereas some understand transnational history as an umbrella term in the debate, others see a plurality of different approaches or grant one of the other labels a position of primacy. Moreover, there is no consensus on the question of whether transnational history can be confined to certain periods or topics. The problem is made more difficult by the fact that the divergent concepts and theories in different languages do not correspond to each other directly.³

▲4

It remains unclear whether there will ever be a consensus on these questions. Due to a certain pragmatic axiom, the various participants in the debate have, however, so far avoided approaching this dispute as a doctrinal war. Instead, pragmatism has prevailed internationally, according to which it is more important to promote and produce empirical studies that follow a transnational model than to become entangled in a conceptual debate. The positive results of this stance are obvious. However, the lack of rigidity raises the danger that the concept "transnational history" will gain the appearance of a fashionable, but empty phrase – a possible development that is in nobody's interest.

▲5

Akira Iriye and Pierre-Yves Saunier, editors of the recent *Palgrave Dictionary of Transnational History*, provide a relatively open, and thus a perhaps – for some – rather vague definition: they claim that transnational history deals with the "links and flows", the "people, ideas, products, processes and patterns that operate over, across, through, beyond, above, under, or in-between polities and societies".⁴

▲6

At the same time, for Iriye and Saunier, transnational history cannot be defined by its (broadly construed) subject. They understand it not as a theory or method but as "an angle, a perspective". Although the concept of perspective remains undertheorised in history writing, it suggests a relationship between the object of analysis (the past) and the observer (the historian). Accordingly, the approach of transnational history is primarily defined by the questions guiding the historian's research on the "links and flows" mentioned above. Others have, in the past, provided a similar definition, but it remains disputed. The fact that the *Palgrave Dictionary*, which brings together around 350 authors and thus a large proportion of the "transnational historians", now also works with this definition, certainly gives it additional weight.⁵

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To sum up: it would be wrong to think that transnational history is an entirely unstudied subject or a completely new approach to history. Connections between societies have always captured the attention of historians, be they diplomatic and political, cultural and social or economic.⁶

▲8

Instead, the novelty of transnational history is really the idea of offering an alternative to the dominance of a historiography structured around the nation. Having said that, most of its practitioners do not want to understand transnational history as a new paradigm or a new master narrative; they see it as more than simply being an additional stratum in the "onion model" between local, regional and national history on the one hand and global on the other: transnational history defies this logic of layers and can directly connect the local to the supranational or transcontinental.

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On the other hand, there is a relatively firm consensus against making the concept of transnational history too theoretical or conceptual. Nevertheless, the term is bound up with an explicit interest in questions of method. Transnational history would be unthinkable without the considerable research of the recent decades that has refined our understanding of interactions that span borders, from work on comparative history (→ Media Link #ad) and cultural transfer to that on networks and diasporas, inspired by anthropology or post-colonial studies.

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In addition, one should not underestimate the fact that the concept "transnational" offers a common platform or point of

reference for research that empirically has very different directions. Such labels have the fundamental role of giving knowledge order and hierarchy. "Transnational" provides an important alternative to the dominant principle of territoriality in the organisation of historical knowledge; it allows, for example, a Japanese expert on US-East Asian relations living in America (Iriye) and a French urban historian (Saunier) to develop common research interests – something that under the premises of a historiography centred on the nation is scarcely imaginable.

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Where is Europe's Place in Transnational History?

Regardless of whether one prefers a narrow or broad definition of transnational history, it must be obvious that one can find many transnational phenomena in European history and that transnational history can help us to comprehend and explain them better. Transnational history can us give a deeper understanding of European history in three ways.

▲ 12

Firstly, it is an inherent part of European history to address the connections and circulations that cross borders. The Enlightenment, industrialisation (→ Media Link #ag) and, for example, the creation of the welfare state are transnational phenomena with a strongly European accent and therefore cannot be fully appreciated and understood from a purely local or national perspective. As a result, such phenomena have long been studied transnationally – for example, when Michael Werner and Michel Espagne wrote a form of transnational history *avant la lettre* on the cultural transfer between France and Germany, when Johannes Paulmann wrote about intercultural transfer or when, recently, the circulation of elements of high culture attracts particular attention.⁷

▲ 13

At the same time, European history reminds us that transnational history should by no means confine itself to the "links and flows" which Iriye and Saunier emphasise. It should be just as interested, if not more, interested in the suppression and subsiding, the diversion and destruction, the forgetting and fading of transnational relations. Internationalism before the First World War offers a good example in that many of the ties created then were cut during the world wars; one cannot write a monolinear history of the rise of the transnational. At the same time, it is not simply a matter of chronologies, but also one of parallels between and interdependence of seemingly contradictory phenomena. Many studies have rightly emphasised the fact that nationalisation and transnationalisation or globalisation can go hand in hand, intertwined with one another, and develop a dialectical potential.⁸

▲ 14

A study of the history of the "dark continent", to quote Mark Mazower⁹ reminds us that the transnational does not *a priori* have to possess positive connotations, even though the bulk of the research has studied contacts and exchanges of this sort. Limiting oneself to this underlying normative presupposition prevents one from studying the multiplicity of transnational structures, processes and experiences. One can find many transnational themes in the history of European organised slavery, the crossborder cooperation between anti-Semites (→ Media Link #al) and racists (→ Media Link #am) and environmental catastrophes, not all of which can be subsumed into a narrative of resistance and subversion.¹⁰

▲ 15

Secondly, transnational history cannot always stop at the borders of Europe. Its interest in connections and circulations should ideally follow the object under examination to all those places where this carries it – even when its itineraries contravene the etiquette of a historiography that is still based around territorial units. Many exchanges took place in only a part and not all of Europe, but are nevertheless quickly generalised as European history, particularly when they are connected to West European contacts. Clearly, the distinction between "real" or "important" and peripheral parts of the continent, which reached its height during the Cold War, continues in some respects to exert its influence. Instead, this raises the question as to what these specific histories of relationships teach us about Europe in general; the danger of premature, kneejerk conclusions is large.

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In addition, a large number of exchanges extended beyond Europe. Europe was and is no more monolithic than nations

or states. Many ties and networks within Europe arose through contact with the wider world and it would be wrong to suppress these *a priori*. In this respect, one should not frivolously ascribe the label "European" to historical phenomena. It is necessary to investigate which relationships can really be termed as specifically European, and what actually makes them "European".

▲ 17

This all suggests the danger which Konrad Jarausch, while writing about a European history not fixated on the nation, correctly termed the "Treitschke Versuchung" ("Treitschke temptation"): by this he meant that historians are today at risk constructing "Europe" as a new space of reference and an essentialised constant – regardless of whether this territorial attribution corresponds to the scope of the historical interactions or not.¹¹

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These two points are unlikely to cause much controversy. However, the third aspect refers to a more fundamental challenge, which to date has barely been the subject of reflection, arising from the vagueness of the concept "Europe" (→ Media Link #an). Many depictions of European history draw on a concept of Europe shaped by geography or culture and history that is, however, insufficiently well defined.¹² These are often "common-sense" ideas that, in fact, do not meet clear academic criteria.

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But how can "Europe" be defined clearly? For a start, the concept of Europe shares with the old national historiography the reference to a territorially delineated unit, and thus all the problems connected with it. While these challenges have in the case of national history decreased because the territorial shape of at least some nation states has barely changed over time, with Europe one faces a larger problem:¹³ as many studies at the intersection between history and geography underline, the criteria determining the definition of the continent are socially constructed and are subject to historical change. Thus, over the last 2,500 years, the meaning of the term "Europe" has changed again and again. The apparently firm border at the Urals is, for example, a convention of the 18th century, one goal of which was to underpin Russia's claim to belong to the European great powers. In the West, the situation is no better: for instance, it has always remained controversial whether Great Britain or Iceland should be counted as being European.¹⁴

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In light of this, a number of authors have suggested defining the concept of Europe as a social construct. A pioneering work in this area is Wolfgang Schmale's *History of Europe*, which examines the multifarious and divergent discourses and performative acts bound to the concept of "Europe" in the past and the present.¹⁵ Similarly, an international group of historians of technology led by Johan Schot have studied infrastructure projects and other large-scale technological ventures. They show how "actors design and use technology to constitute and enact European integration (or fragmentation)". In this way, technology seems to be a practice "in which specific concepts and visions of Europe became embedded in particular designs for artefacts and systems".¹⁶ In these studies, Europe does not appear to be the starting point for or a stage of transnational processes, but rather the product of a number of transfers that in their overlapping and intensification have repeatedly recreated Europe. A similar conceptual model is at the centre of a recently completed project, funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research, dealing with "Imagined Europeans".¹⁷

▲ 21

The transnational processes that created Europe in this manner could be thought of as Europeanisation (→ Media Link #ap). Strangely, this phrase, when used to mean the processes which enabled the appearance of "Europe", has so far only had a shadowy existence in history writing,¹⁸ whereas in the political sciences, a highly subtle debate has developed on the topic. However, because this primarily addresses the effects of the political integration of Europe, one can scarcely transfer it to discussions of history.¹⁹ An explicit attempt at defining Europeanisation would, however, aim to include all those political, social, economic and cultural processes that promoted or altered a lasting strengthening of intra-European ties and similarities, be it in the form of assimilation, exchange or networking. This always goes hand in hand with forms of exclusion or "othering",²⁰ as well as fragmentation and conflict.²¹

▲ 22

However, in order to be really able to talk about Europeanisation, something more is needed: from a certain period, the

historical figures themselves must perceive these processes as "European" and name them accordingly. There have long been processes of cultural, economic, political and social convergence, and they are often studied for a long time. However, if one connects them as "European" without using the terms employed by the actors themselves, then one invariably ends up with a definition of Europe that is either normative or essentialist – or only based on "common sense" presumptions. All of these seem to be analytically unsatisfactory. It is far more interesting to analyse the precise moments when processes of any kind are labelled as European. This includes, of course, the problem of the claims, hopes and attempts at exclusion connected to them and the question of which terms and meanings that were once dominant or more important – for example *christianitas*, the occident, nation or empire – lost influence, and as a result were re-ordered and recharged conceptually.²²

▲ 23

"Europe" has only developed into a meaningful category and coherent entity through a multiplicity of – often transnational – processes following a similar direction and via a connected process of labelling that identified the common impulse towards Europe. This began in the early modern period, became stronger in the 18th century, and even more so in the second half of the 20th century; before this, "Europe" barely existed in this sense. Only thus did "Europe" increasingly become a self-reinforcing subject.

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Although many historians had studied "Europe" for many years before the 1950s²³ today's European historiography must take into consideration the fact that without the process of political and economic integration initiated in the second half of the 20th century, it would have been condemned to a more peripheral existence. Roger Chartier once wrote hyperbolically that only the French Revolution created the Enlightenment²⁴ Similarly, one could claim that only European unification created Europe. That would undoubtedly be an exaggeration, albeit a revealing one: European unification presents research on Europe not only with the old Treitschke question of whether it can be more than just a legitimator for a current political project – a problem that should not be ignored but rather considered in a constructive way; it should also provide greater opportunity to investigate from a critical, historical perspective the integration process under the aegis of the European Union (EU), the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), the Council for Mutual Assistance (Comecon) and similar political projects and compare them to other transnational interactions in and around Europe.²⁵

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The thesis of this article, therefore, is that Europe is as much a space where transnational ties have become particularly strong as one created by these bonds in the first place. Transnational history can help us understand that the creation of the "European" in any space or part of the world through interaction is a central element of European history – and maybe even the most important one. In conclusion, perhaps only through a transnational approach can one identify correctly Europe's place in the world, at least from the limited perspective of European history.²⁶

▲ 26

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Appendix

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Notes

1. ^ For the best overview of the history of the term, see Saunier, *Transnational* 2009, pp. 1047–1055.
2. ^ An important starting point for the debate in the US is *AHR-Forum* 1991, pp. 1031–1072; also essential is Bender, *History* 2002; for the German debate, see, for example, Kocka, *Einladung* 2001, p. 463 and the contributions to *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* that followed, as well as those in the online platform *geschichte.transnational*: <http://www.geschichte-transnational.clio-online.net> [01/05/2009].
3. ^ Perhaps the best insight into the polyphony of voices is Bayly et al., *AHR Conversation* 2006; there are further references to the differing positions in Budde / Conrad / Janz, *Geschichte* 2006; Geyer, *Subject(s)* 2007, pp. 254–280; Conrad / Osterhammel, *Kaiserreich* 2004; Osterhammel, *Weltgeschichte* 2008, pp. 9–32; Yun, *Localism* 2007, pp. 659–678.
4. ^ Iriye / Saunier, *Professor* 2009, p. XVIII; see also Saunier, *Transnational* 2008, pp. 1047–1055.
5. ^ Iriye / Saunier, *Professor* 2009, p. XX; for a similar view, see Beckert in: Bayly u.a., *AHR Conversation* 2006, p. 1454; Patel, *Nationalfixierung* 2004, v.a. pp. 26–28.
6. ^ See, for example, the self-reflection on the writing of transnational history before this label existed in Saunier, *Learning* 2008, p. 159f.; on the term's novelty, see Thelen, *Nation* 1999, pp. 965–975.
7. ^ See, for example, *Espagne / Werner*, *Transferts* 1988; Paulmann, *Vergleich* 1998, pp. 649–685; Stachel / Ther, *Oper* 2009, as well as the other volumes in this series on the history of opera published by Oldenbourg-Verlag. These are, of course, only a few of the more recent works; as the article emphasises, the subject of transnational history is by no means new.
8. ^ See, for example, Geyer / Paulmann, *Mechanics* 2001 or Conrad, *Globalisierung* 2006.
9. ^ Mazower, *Kontinent* 2000.
10. ^ See, for example, Gerwarth / Haupt, *Terrorism* 2007; Patel, *Search* 2007, pp. 96–116; for more on this, see Mazower, *Kontinent* 2000.
11. ^ Jarausch, *Zeitgeschichte* 2004; for similar processes between Europe and non-European areas, see, for exam-

- ple, Paulmann, Grenzüberschreitungen 2004.
12. ^ See, for example, Davies, Europe 1996; Wasserstein, Barbarism 2007.
 13. ^ At the same time, one should not underestimate the challenge for national historiography; see Breuilly, Nationalismstheorien 2009.
 14. ^ See, for example, Schenk, Maps 2002, pp. 493–514; Landwehr, Definition 2009; Schulze, Europa 1997, pp. 35–65.
 15. ^ See Schmale, Geschichte 2001, esp. pp. 11–17.
 16. ^ Schot / Misa, Europe 2005, pp. 1–19; the quotation is on p. 8f.
 17. ^ Bluche / Lipphardt / Patel, Europäer 2009.
 18. ^ In contrast, there is an established and extensive body of work on the Europeanisation of non-European areas.
 19. ^ For an introduction and overview of the debate, see Graziano / Vink, Europeanisation 2007.
 20. ^ On this, see Conway / Patel, Europeanization 2010; Kaelble, Europäisierung 2007, pp. 73–89; a fundamental work is Burke, Europe 1980, pp. 21–29; for a classic study of "othering", see Edward Said, Orientalism, London 1978.
 21. ^ Conway / Patel, Europeanization 2010; Kaelble, Europäisierung 2007, pp. 73–89; a fundamental work is Burke, Europe 1980, pp. 21–29.
 22. ^ Conway / Patel, Europeanization 2010.
 23. ^ See, for example, Duchhardt, Heinz et al. (eds.): Europa-Historiker: Ein biographisches Handbuch, Göttingen 2006–2007, vol. 1–3.
 24. ^ Chartier, Origines 1990, p. 17.
 25. ^ For one example of the few studies to date, see Kaiser, Democracy 2007; Patel, Europäisierung 2009.
 26. ^ A fundamental work is Chakrabarty, Europe 2000.

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Editor: Johannes Paulmann
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DDC: 901 [Info ] , 907 [Info ]

Citation

Patel, Klaus Kiran: Transnational History, in: European History Online (EGO), published by the Institute of European History (IEG), Mainz 2010-12-03. URL: <http://www.ieg-ego.eu/patelk-2010-en> URN: urn:nbn:de:0159-20100921314 [YYYY-MM-DD].

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