

Research Notes **【研究討論】**

Future-directed Elements of an European
Historical Culture

歐洲歷史文化中的願景元素

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Gegenstand der Geschichte ist dasjenige, an dem die Erkenntnis als dessen Rettung vollzogen wird.

Walter Benjamin¹

The process of the European unification has come into a crisis. Two nations, the French and the Dutch, have refused the new constitution in a plebiscite. There is a growing dissatisfaction of the peoples of Europe with the policy of further enlargement of the Union. This is particularly the case with Turkey's effort to become a member.

All this indicates a structural lack in the unification process. Till now this process has brought about a lot of progress in economy and partly in politics, but it has neglected the cultural dimension of the lives of the European peoples. If they had felt more European, they would not have rejected the idea of a common constitution. But this unifying cultural factor of a collective identity is very weak. Nevertheless, there is no alternative to the unification. If Europe wants to play a role in world politics and be respected by the other global players it will need further elements of political unification. Otherwise it may make progress in economy, but it won't have any corresponding progress in politics, and this is—as we know—not good for economy. So for the question what a European historical identity is, no generally satisfying answer can be found till today. My paper should be understood as a part of the ongoing discussion and debate of finding an answer.

The realm where this discussion and debate take place is *historical culture*. I use this term instead of *collective* or *cultural memory* although the meaning of both

1 "Subject matter of history is the consideration which is its rescue," in Walter Benjamin, *Passagenwerk, Gesammelte Schriften*, edited by Rolf Tiedemann, vol. 1 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991, c1980), pp. 595sq.

terms is approximately the same. Yet 'historical culture' is a more open and comprehensive concept than 'collective memory'.² The memory-discourse has not yet sufficiently tackled the future dimension of human time orientation. At least in the German-speaking world the term 'historical culture' includes this perspective. It is not characterized by a structural gap between historical studies and collective memory as it has been the case in the memory discourse from its beginning with Maurice Halbwachs and its further development by Pierre Nora till today. So I will use the term 'historical culture' and by this I mean the *procedures and institutions to interpret the past in order to understand the present and to develop a future perspective* of human life. These procedures and institutions include memory politics in its various fields and dimensions like history teaching in school, the erection of monuments and memorials, historical museums, public debates about the past.³ It includes the works of art representing the past, and it includes, of course, the cognitive efforts of academic disciplines.

In my following argumentation I will not refer to specific fields of historical culture in Europe, but I would like to prefer a more general and rather abstract theoretical argumentation, which concentrates on basic criteria of historical sense generation. It is exactly on this fundamental level of making sense of the past by historical thinking where Europe is developing ideas and discursive strategies which I think are of interest not only for the Europeans.

2 The applicability of this concept has been stressed by Klas-Göran Karlsson in "The Holocaust as a Problem of Historical Culture: Theoretical and Analytical Challenges," in Klas-Göran Karlsson and Ulf Zander (eds.) *Echoes of the Holocaust: Historical Cultures in Contemporary Europe* (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2003), pp. 9-58; cf. "Interpreting the Holocaust: Some Theoretical Issues," in Klas-Göran Karlsson and Ulf Zander (eds.) *Holocaust Heritage: Inquiries into European Historical Cultures*. (Malmö : Sekel, 2004), pp. 35-62.

3 The most famous German example for such a public controversy is the co-called Historian's Debate in the 80s about the role the reference to the Nazi-period should play in the conceptualization of German identity especially in respect to its national dimension.

Therefore my paper can be understood as presenting some basic elements of Europeanness, which are not yet fixed, and established all over Europe, but which are a subject matter of an ongoing discussion.

Before I start to answer the question what elements of a European culture can be identified as relevant for the future of Europe in the ongoing process of unification, I would like to start with a definitely negative answer to the question what European identity is and how it should be conceptualized. European identity cannot be stated or ordered by European institutions besides, beyond or above the established national, regional, and local historical cultures of the European countries. European identity cannot be an effective element in the cultural life of the European peoples if it is not rooted in the living and mentally powerful established historical cultures. Most of these cultures and their related identities are national ones. There are some members of the European Union like Spain or Belgium where this national dimension of historical identity is rather weak or even in a process of falling into pieces. But for these states the negative answer is true as well: Since they already refuse a national identity imposed on the traditional regional ones by a central government or a ruling elite they would even more refuse an imposed European identity developed by an institution of the European Union. Most of the European people would estimate such a European identity as highly artificial, or even strange for them since they have grown up in different traditions of their ideas of historical identity. Therefore a common European historical culture can only be a growing part of the already established national and regional historical cultures.

Europe's Future in the Past

Historical culture synthesizes experiences of the past and perspectives of the future. In this context Europe only has a future, if it has a common past. This common past can be identified in two respects: Firstly as a strong conviction of

common traditions, and secondly as a strong conviction that Europe has to transgress its tradition into the future, so that this past contains a strong push, a driving force into the future.

Nobody doubts that the different European countries and nations share common traditions. There is one comprehensive inheritance in the manifold different heredities of the different countries. So the different national or regional master narratives of the European peoples, which present them their identities, share certain elements of the past. Let me enumerate some of them: Greek philosophy, Roman law, Christianity, the chain of Renaissances and Reformations, the division of spiritual and secular power, urban life forms, scientific rationality and technological innovations, an aestheticized concept of art, secular enlightenment, human and civil rights, the life form of a Civil Society, democratic organisation of political domination, the principle of tolerance, the concept of national identity.

A Future of Europe by Overcoming Its Past

The driving force in the common past of the Europeans, which pushes their historical culture to further developments, are common negative experiences, mainly the European catastrophes of the 20th Century. This series of catastrophes started with the so-called 'Original Catastrophe' (Ur-Katastrophe) of the First World War and it led into the Cold War after '45. Recently Adolf Muschg, a famous Swiss writer, expressed this future orientation of the European past in his Krupp-lecture at the Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities at Essen.⁴ He spoke on

⁴ I would like to thank Adolf Muschg for this lecture, delivered in the Winter term 2004/5. I owe him new perspectives on Europeanness and a deepened insight into the complexity of European identity.

European identity and he said: "Ruins are the unprepossessing but yet indispensable fundament" of Europe.⁵

Based on this common negative historical experience the Europeans developed the common will for peace by merging their economies and by economically and later on politically relativizing their national sovereignty.

It is this awareness of a burden of the past, which is bringing about a new quality of historical culture in Europe. The Europeans are deeply convinced that they have to change all those attitudes of identity formation, which have led into the catastrophes of the 20th century. Let's look at the elements in concern. Among the foremost we'll find identity and the question is, whether identity can be a source of conflict, struggle and even war. The answer to this question is, of course, a clear 'yes', and as you all know that is not only true for Europe, but for most if not all traditional modes of historical identity formation. The reason lie in the way traditionally historical identity is brought about in cultural processes, which follow the logic of *ethnocentrism*.⁶ It was ethnocentrism in the form of a nationalistic conceptualization of historical identity, which contributed to the European catastrophe. Therefore in the ongoing processes of creating a future directed European historical identity we can observe strong tendencies of overcoming this ethnocentrism.

5 Adolf Muschg, *Was ist Europäisch? Reden für einen gastlichen Erdteil* (München: C. H. Beck, 2005), p. 16.

6 Cf. Jörn Rüsen, "How to Overcome Ethnocentrism: Approaches to a Culture of Recognition by History in the 21st Century," *Taiwan Journal of East Asian Studies*, 1, 1 (June, 2004) pp. 59-74; also in *History and Theory*, 43 (2004), pp. 118-129; "Tradition and Identity: Theoretical Reflections and the European Example," *Taiwan Journal of East Asian Studies*, 1, 2, (Dec., 2004), pp. 135-158.

What Is Ethnocentrism?

In order to make clear what I am stressing, it is necessary to give a short description of the logic of ethnocentrism.

The logic of ethnocentrism in the cultural processes of identity formation is characterized by three main principles: (1) the first is an a-symmetrical, unbalanced, non-equitable evaluation in stating the difference between oneself and the others. The historical self-image is filled with positive values (like: We are the children of God; we have achieved the highest standards of civilization; we are the true believers etc.). Correspondingly negative values are attributed to the image of the others (the others are barbarians, non-believers etc.). This asymmetrical interrelationship is filled with an unconscious constraint: In order to put all the light on one's own people, the dark sides of oneself is projected on and exterritorialized into the features of the others. In fact the negativity of the others is thus inseparably tied to the image of oneself. Today we can observe a specific variant of this one-sided evaluation: By characterizing the others as aggressive, dominant, inhuman, immoral, violent, one's own people stand for the contrary. I would like to call this mode of self-evaluation a *negative ethnocentrism*. The positive self-esteem gains an enormous plausibility for if one can present oneself as a victim of the ugly activities of the other. Therefore we find a general tendency of self-victimization in historical culture today. To be a victim furnishes a people with moral superiority on the perpetrators.

(2) The second principle of ethnocentric identity formation is an origin-orientated teleology. The history of one's own people starts from a remarkable beginning where the constitutive positive quality of one's own people originated, and its further development is characterized by a continuity of keeping up, preserving and sometimes even growing of this quality. In its essence the future is a continuation of this past.

(3) Finally ethnocentric identity formation is characterized by a spatial centralism: Our people live in the centre of the world, the others are marginal. The best example for this centralism is the Chinese conviction, that the Chinese people live in the middle of the world (*Zhongguo*).

It is evident that this logic of ethnocentrism creates tensions, conflicts and clashes, since the others follow the same strategy. They put their others into the same negative shadow of normative quality as they have been put by these others in their respective concept of historical identity.

There is one factor in this mutual devaluation and marginalization, which sharpens the conflict: Many cultures conceptualize their identity by using universalistic attributes for themselves. They sharpen the peculiarity and individuality of their identity with universal values, which at the same time include and exclude the others. They are included since the validity of these values is universal; but at the same time the difference of the others, which cause them to become others is at least potentially negated or dissolved. If the same synthesis of peculiarity and universalism takes place in interrelated identities the conflict between these peoples will develop a dangerous potential of mutual exclusion. Forms of religious fundamentalism are prominent examples.

Overcoming Ethnocentrism

I do not think that the tensional interrelationship of ethnocentrically conceptualized cultural identities can be totally and principally overcome. Why so? Human beings need a positive self-esteem as a constitutive element of their identity, and they have to realize this normative quality by discriminating themselves from the others. And since human life is always a struggle for getting the means for life and since there is always a shortage of means to fulfil one's own needs, people have

to struggle for the available means. This struggle goes along with the cultural procedures of identity formation. It is this interference, which loads the discrimination of the others with a non-equitable distribution of values. But nevertheless, there is a large space of possibilities to moderate, to limit, to pacify or to civilize this tendency to non-equity in favour of a relationship between one's own self and the otherness of the other, which is characterized by respect and recognition.

It is the main thesis of my paper that Europe is in a process of developing such a tendency towards equity in its interrelationship with other cultures on the deep level of historical identity. The reason is obvious: Europe remains aware of those catastrophic events in its own history, which have pushed it into the process of unification. A paradigmatic example is the development of historical culture in Germany.⁷ By internal (domestic) and external (international) pressure the Germans have not been able to forget and suppress the crimes against humanity their nation has committed in the period of Nazi-dictatorship. In a process covering three generations the Germans have accepted moral and historical responsibility for these crimes and have tried to work it through. Finally this working through has led to an integration of definitely negative historical elements in their concept and feature of German historical identity. This development can easily be observed by looking at the way the Germans have talked about the Nazi-perpetrators. In the beginning they were addressed as 'they'. Now the Germans have come to say 'we'. This 'we' does not mean at all that they identify themselves with these crimes; on the contrary: The crimes have remained morally totally condemned, but they have become an element in and a part of the German historical identity. A striking symbol of this integration is the fact that a monument was officially erected close to the Parliament building (Reichstag) in Berlin which is dedicated to the memory of the Holocaust victims. The official opening took place spring 2005.

⁷ Cf. Jörn Rüsen, "Holocaust-Memory and German Identity," *History: Narration, Interpretation, Orientation* (New York: Berghahn Books 2005), pp. 189-204.

It is an open question how far this integration of negative experiences into the historical self-awareness of the Germans will go and whether it will ever reach the level of everyday life communication. But one cannot deny that on the level of official historical culture, — in textbooks, events, monuments, memorials, exhibitions, in historical museums etc. this growing awareness of ambivalence has become a characteristic feature.

Such ambivalence runs against the logic of ethnocentrism. The others are no longer the only place where one can put all those elements of historical experience, which contradict one's own morality and high self-esteem. So with a growing ambivalence within the realm of one's own identity the chances for recognizing the others grow. The concession of negativity in oneself is a concession of positivity for the others at the same time. This rearranges the mental strategy of identity formation towards a new potential of recognition and acknowledgement.

The German case is only an example. There are similar trends in other European countries as well. The French have worked through the burdening negative experience of their crimes in the Algerian Liberation War. Imperialism as a European affair is another example. Its dark sides have been realized and led to a high degree of European self-criticism. This self-criticism has become a powerful factor in European identity across the differences of European countries and nations. It is remarkable that the Swedish Government started its project "Living history" in 1997 on the Holocaust in a European perspective. This project tackles dimensions, contexts and conditions for the Holocaust, which go beyond the limits of German history. Our neighbours have become aware of their involvement in the crimes, of their cooperation. General European features of the Holocaust have become visible: anti-Semitism, racism and similar factors, without which the Holocaust would not have taken place.

The author Adolf Muschg has called this integration of negative elements into a European historical identity "a specific achievement of memory".⁸ It is an open question what consequences this paradigmatic change in the cultural procedures of identity formation will bring about. This process is going on. It has not yet sufficiently infiltrated the still powerful nationalistic elements in the historical identity of European countries, mainly in Eastern Europe. On the other side there is a danger to become proud of this ambivalence and to ground the European self-esteem on this pride. But my general impression is different: we can observe strong doubts of the European *intelligenza* about themselves. To quote Adolf Muschg again: "The golden standard for the credibility of the European construction is hidden in the depths of doubts about its load-bearing capacity."⁹

It is this doubt and its expression in debates and discussions and a general anti-triumphant relationship to the past which characterizes European historical culture at least in the very perspective within which it appears as future-directed. Elements of mourning indicate new components of sense generation in historical culture as well. The clear moralistic distinction between perpetrators and victims is replaced by a much more complex interrelationship, within which the perpetrators even can become victims and the other way around.

As to the second attribute of ethnocentrism—an origin-oriented teleology—the Europeans at least on the level of academic and public discourse—have given up the idea of an uninterrupted development of Europe from its very beginning in Greek antiquity.¹⁰ There is a structural change in the logic of historical thinking under way: Instead of an origin-oriented teleology history is becoming a future-oriented reconstruction of the past. In this kind of historical perspectivation the

8 Ibid., p. 40.

9 Ibid., p. 65.

10 According to one of our leading humanists Jan Assmann even this origin lies in old Egypt's achievements of a civilized human life Assmann, *Ma'at. Gerechtigkeit und Unsterblichkeit im Alten Ägypten* (München: C. H. Beck, 1990).

European history gains a new outlook, including ruptures, a high amount of contingency, ambivalence, unrealized possibilities etc.

In respect to the third attribute of ethnocentrism, namely a monocentric perspective, Europe definitely is polycentric. Its historical culture is characterized by a multi-perspectivity, a pluralism of historical perspectives in the formation of European identity. It is an open question whether this pluralism and multi-perspectivism can be realized as a new way of a European universalistic approach to its identity in relationship to all the other cultures in the world. I think, that the European tradition of universalism includes the possibility for such a pluralism and a divergence and variety of perspectives. Why do we need such a universalistic integration? Simply in order to avoid cultural relativism in the processes of identity formation. Relativism is unable to meet the clash of civilizations, which will be the logical consequence of ethnocentric identity building in the interrelationship between different countries and cultures.

A New Universalism in European Historical Culture?

Indeed, I think that a universalistic frame for multi-perspectivity and pluralism is necessary for Europe in order to interrelate itself to the non-European cultures in this future directed way to overcome or, at least, to civilize ethnocentrism.

I have already said that most advanced concepts of cultural identity as they have originated in the so-called axial time of world civilizations have supported and even sharpened the antagonistic structure of intercultural relationship by using cultural universals like humankind, reason, liberty, progress, etc. as means of conceptualizing identity. Why shouldn't we give up this inbuilt tensional universalism in favour of a general relativism in the claim for validity of differing identity concepts? The answer to this question is a simple one: Relativism does not

solve the problem of the clash of civilizations since it negates any cross-cultural idea of reconciling its oppositions and antagonisms. A clash can only be criticized and even avoided on the level of intellectual discussion and reflection if elements of a comprehensive rule are introduced into this relativism. Introducing argumentative elements as conditions for respect and recognition means to re-introduce universalistic principles. So it is not a question, whether one should conceptualize universalistic elements of cultural identity or not. But we should look out for what kind of universalism can be taken into consideration.

Here I think Europe can contribute to the solution of this problem. With the already described new elements of historical culture Europe is able to reconceptualize its own universalistic traditions in favour of a non-ethnocentric quality of identity: It may reformulate relevant universals like humankind, truth claims, modes of rational thinking, rule of law, democratic criteria for legitimizing political domination etc. In a simple logic argumentation one can describe this reconceptualization as a change from exclusion to inclusion.¹¹

What does this mean for European historical culture? This change consequently necessitates a universalistic perspective of European historical identity. This new universalism is no longer an essentialist metahistorical universalism in the sense of traditional or even up-to-date typologies of culture. On the contrary: This universalism is an "idea" (to quote Kant's famous essay), a concept of humankind in a temporal perspective, within which Europe's relationship to other cultures appears as a process from excluding to including otherness in its own identity.

11 That this is possible can be shown by a re-interpretation of classical texts representing European universalistic ideas. I have tried it with Immanuel Kant's essay "Idea of a Universal History in a Cosmopolitan Intent" from 1784 (Jörn Rüsen, "Following Kant: A European Idea of a Universal History with an Intercultural Intent," in *Groniek Historisch Tijdschrift*, 160 (2003), pp. 359-368; also in *Ex/Change: Newsletter of the Centre for Cross-Cultural Studies*, 10 (July, 2004), pp. 4-8; Chinese "Zunzhi Kangde: Gua wenhua shiye xia Duzhourende" in *Historiography Quarterly*, 49, (2004), pp. 117-122.

The basis for this universalism is the concept of *humankind* as an empirical dimension of historical experience on the one hand and a normative value on the other. The efforts to give this comprehensive idea of humankind an inclusive feature will lead to new approaches to respecting and recognizing other cultures. Europe has brought about elements of such a historical culture of recognition: In the field of Fine Arts the idea of its aesthetic nature has led to a universal attitude of recognizing varieties, differences and changes. Nobody in Europe could violate his or her European identity by admiring Chinese art, literature or philosophy. And the same is true in the other direction.

But this aesthetization in the interrelationship of cultures is limited. It diverts cultural difference away from the hard facts of political struggle for power and similar non-aesthetic features of human life. Therefore we need further steps into a culture of recognizing cultural difference. An important step in this direction reaches beyond an aestheticized reality. It has been taken in Europe by anchoring the idea of equality in the depth of its political culture. Equality is an abstraction from differences, but it is a logical presupposition for recognition of otherness. The next step would be to approach this difference in a further developed humanistic concept of humankind. There difference itself is considered a mode of realizing the same universal (humankind) under different conditions in different ways which can be called individual. The look at cultural difference as result of individualization of humankind in time and space brings this difference into an interrelationship, which is guided by recognition. In order to become able for such a recognition one condition must be fulfilled: We must be able to understand the others in their difference. Here I see another European achievement: It is the hermeneutical approaches of the humanities to culture.

Indeed, in the realm of the humanities we are confronted with the intellectual task of keeping up universalistic criteria like truth claims in our cognitive work. Under such criteria we are tackling the manifold varieties of human culture not in an attitude of neutrality. Such neutrality is impossible by epistemological reasons,

but we should proceed in a perspective originating in the peculiarity of our own cultural identity. Universal criteria of sense generation can open our perspective to different other perspectives constituted in different identities. This openness is effective in an intercultural discourse. This discourse is guided by the very universalistic elements we share across our differences and we feel committed to in the individual features of humankind in our cultural peculiarity. If we synthesize universalistic approaches and individualize tendencies in identity building the intercultural discourse about cultural difference will be guided by the rule of mutual recognition. It is on us to decide how powerful this rule can become.[§]

§ A first version of this paper was presented at the conference on "Chineseness' and 'Europeanness' in East Asian Perspective" in September 2005. I am very grateful to Professor Chun-Chieh Huang for his invitation, for his inspiring questions and his commitment to an intercultural discourse in the humanities.