



Edited by Marjet Brolsma, Robin de Bruin, and Matthijs Lok

# Eurocentrism in European History and Memory

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Press

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Cover illustration: The tympanum of Amsterdam City Hall, as depicted on a 1724 frontispiece from David Fassmann, *Der reisende Chineser*, a serialized fictional travel account whose Chinese protagonist 'Herophile' describes his travels through Europe in letters to his emperor. The satirical use of the foreign visitor to describe Europe's politics and culture was a typical device of Enlightenment literature. The image shows the world's four continents bringing tribute to the *Stedemaagd* or 'City Maiden' of Amsterdam. Europe, the only crowned continent, is depicted as superior to Asia, Africa and America. Here, in contrast to the original tympanum, Europe is placed not on the all-important right of the City Maiden, indicating her seniority over the other continents, but on her left. Above the tympanum appears the mythological figure of Periclymenus, one of the Argonauts, who was granted the power of metamorphosis by his grandfather Poseidon.

Source: Beeldbank Stadsarchief Amsterdam. See also: David Faßmann, *Der auf Ordre und Kosten Seines Käysers reisende Chineser* [...], Part 2, fascicule 3 (Leipzig: Cornerischen Erben, 1724). The image is discussed by Michael Wintle, *The Image of Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 263.

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A Collection of Essays in Honour of Michael Wintle

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# Foreword

*Joep Leerssen*

A discipline is a working community of specialists: academics who apply a specific method to a specific corpus. Disciplines are much less stringently defined than specialisms. A discipline, as a working community, can bring very diverse types of specialists together. All they need to share, minimally, is a common field of interest, such as gender for women's studies, language for linguists, the past for historians, or Europe for European studies.

Unsurprisingly, such a working community with diverse specialisms will spend a lot of time trying to clarify and specify the nature of their common working ground. What is gender? What is language, and how does it work? What can we know, reliably and relevantly, about the past? And what does the 'Europe' in European studies stand for? Such self-questionings are the starting point of theory; all theories start in trying to explain what we think we are doing. Why do we consider certain things more important than others? What knowledge, what themes of interest, do we highlight or prioritize in our teaching programmes?

But there is also something else that binds disciplines and academic working communities together, and that is the human factor. Working communities are precisely that – communities: groups happy to share information, groups eager to communicate, to exchange ideas, to deliberate together. Working communities are about people sharing, not just a field of interest, but also a certain *esprit de corps*. The very different specialists assembled in these pages share, not only a general interest in things European or transnational, but also specific sense of collegiality and sympathy around the person of Michael Wintle.

Michael Wintle has for decades given guidance and leadership to the diverse, multispecialist discipline of European studies. Both within the departmental setting of Amsterdam and in the wider field, nationally and internationally, he has been a quiet, slightly reserved, but highly appreciated and authoritative figure in our deliberations and in our tentative trajectory towards something like a theory. His study of cartography, of Eurocentrism, of the interplay between cultural representation and power politics, have given us fruitful (and what is more: workable and sensible) ideas on what the 'Europe' in European studies stands for. The fact that such diverse specialists are here gathered, in these pages, is a tribute to



Wintle's role in uniting us into a working community, both through his sterling academic inspiration and through his capacity to inspire sympathy and collegiality.

*Libri amicorum*, in the present publishing climate, are the sort of collected volumes that hardly dare to speak their name anymore. But a book this is; and friends we are.

# 1 Introduction<sup>1</sup>

*Marjet Brolsma, Robin de Bruin and Matthijs Lok*

## The Theft of History

In his polemical work *The Theft of History* (2006), Cambridge anthropologist and comparative sociologist Jack Goody fiercely critiques the – in his view – pervasive Eurocentric biases of much historical writing. Goody castigates the often implicit idea that the history of Europe is unique and different from other parts of the world. In his view, phenomena such as capitalism, democracy, individualism, feudalism, and even romantic love – often put forward as uniquely ‘European’ developments – are not present only in European history, but can be found in some form in different societies all over the world.<sup>2</sup> Even the idea of uniqueness is not unique to the European continent – ‘a hidden ethnocentric risk is to be eurocentric about ethnocentricity’ – as ethnocentrism is a part of all societies and partly a condition of the personal and social identity of their members.<sup>3</sup>

A false ‘divergence’ between a ‘free Europe’ and a ‘despotic’ and unfree Orient was conceptualized in the age of antiquity.<sup>4</sup> According to Goody, this Orientalist notion of difference was reinforced by the voyages of discovery and the return to classical antiquity in the Renaissance and nineteenth-century industrialization and imperialism. Peter Burke has, for instance, questioned the unique character of the European Renaissance, pointing out

1 This edited volume would not have been possible without the commitment and enthusiasm of the European studies staff at the University of Amsterdam. We would like to express our deepest appreciation to Nienke Rentenaar, for her indispensable help in processing the manuscript, and to Boyd van Dijk, Alex Drace-Francis, Artemy Kalinovsky, Sudha Rajagopalan and Jamal Shahin, for their language corrections and valuable comments.

2 Goody, *The Theft of History*, 2.

3 Ibid., 5.

4 See also: Said, *Orientalism*.

that in many parts of the world some sort of a return to a lost cultural golden age can be observed.<sup>5</sup> According to Goody, if a divergence exists between the 'West' and the 'East', both economically and intellectually, this could only have been a recent development that would prove to be temporary.<sup>6</sup>

Goody also deconstructs the notion of continuous and coherent 'European history' starting from the 'Greek genius' and the classical world and essentially culminating in the contemporary Western World.<sup>7</sup> According to Goody, contemporary Europe has very little in common with the ancient world. In his view, 'antiquity' was appropriated and 'invented' by Europeans. (Early) modern Europeans projected their own image on the classical world, remodelling 'antiquity' as their own ideal. Instead, ancient Greece had been part of a larger Mediterranean world, the ancient Greeks had more in common with Africa and the Middle East than with modern Europe.<sup>8</sup>

Other forms of historiographical Eurocentrism can also be discerned next to the notion of the uniqueness as well as coherence and continuity of European history. Gerard Delanty, for instance, defines Eurocentrism as the 'arguments or assumptions, implicit and explicit, that the West is superior to the rest of the world or the tendency to take Western experiences as the norm by which the rest of the world should be judged'.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, a possible third bias of European historiography is its alleged universalizing claim. In the first global histories of the Enlightenment, European development begins to be regarded as the 'model' for all other histories.

Exemplary in this regard is Voltaire's famous *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations* (*Essay on the Manners and Spirit of Nations*), which was written in the 1740s and 1750s, but published for the first time in 1756. Voltaire started his description with developments in China, as a criticism of Catholic universal histories which took the biblical creation as its starting point. However, the stadial development of Europa into a 'modern' commercial and urban society is seen by Voltaire as the horizon and end point of all human societies.<sup>10</sup> European history became the 'norm', whereas development in

5 Burke, *The European Renaissance*; see also Wintle, *The Image*.

6 Goody, *The Theft of History*, 2. On the divergence: Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence*.

7 For instance: Arjakovsky, *Histoire de la conscience européenne*.

8 Goody, *The Theft of History*, 26-27. See also: Bernal, *Black Athena*.

9 Delanty, *The Cosmopolitan Imagination*, 178. Cf. Amin, *Eurocentrism*; Bhambra, *Rethinking Modernity*; Blaut, *The Coloniser's Model of the World*; *ibid.*, *Eight Eurocentric Historians*; Latouch, *The Westernisation of the World*.

10 Lilti, 'La civilisation', 156; Asbach, *Europa und die Moderne im Langen 18. Jahrhundert*.

Asia and Africa, were framed as 'exceptional'.<sup>11</sup> The history of Europe, and often more specifically – depending on the author's nationality – national histories of France, England or Germany etc., is regarded as *pars pro toto* of a universal human development.<sup>12</sup>

In the nineteenth century 'universal histories' were even more Eurocentric than their enlightened predecessors. Europe was seen by leading historians such as François Guizot and Leopold von Ranke as the historical continent par excellence. Following Hegel's lead, the dynamic and evolutionary nature of European history was contrasted by historians with the static or even declining development of non-European histories.<sup>13</sup> After World War I, an increasing number of world histories were published which were mainly dealing almost exclusively with developments in Europe and seeing Europe as the route to modernity all other continents would eventually follow.<sup>14</sup>

A fourth form of historiographical Eurocentrism concerns the uses of categories. As European history was the norm for all other modern histories, the categories and periodization in which the history of the world was written were derived from European history. Global conceptions of time as well as space have followed from European definitions.<sup>15</sup> In his *Provincializing Europe*, Dipesh Chakrabarty criticized the supposedly universal value of European historical concepts and their underlying imperial power structure: '[H]istoricism – and even the modern, European idea of history – one might say, came to non-European peoples in the nineteenth century as somebody's way of saying "not yet" to somebody else.'<sup>16</sup> In Chakrabarty's view, therefore, European history needed to be intellectually 'provincialized'.

The criticism of the writing (and teaching) of modern history in general, and European historiography in particular, was met with a response. In his overview of European history, *Europe: A History* (1996), Norman Davies, for instance, conceded that European history should not be mistaken for universal or global history. For him, the 'way forward' was to pay more attention to the interaction of European and non-European peoples and

11 Goody, *The Theft of History*, 66. For a criticism of the enlightened (Anglo-Saxon) historiography of the Spanish New World, see: Cañizares-Esguerra, *How to Write the History of the New World*.

12 See the chapter by Stefan Berger in this volume.

13 Guizot, *Histoire*; Schulin, 'Leopold von Ranke', 147; Pasture, *Imagining European Unity*; Pitts, *A Turn to Empire*.

14 Stuchtey and Fuchs, *Writing World History*.

15 'One major problem with the accumulation of knowledge has been that the very categories employed are largely European' (Goody, *The Theft of History*, 23).

16 Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 8; Delanty, *The Cosmopolitan Imagination*, 179.

to use non-European sources for the elucidation of European problems. However, according to Davies, 'European history-writing cannot be accused of Eurocentrism simply for focusing its attention on European affairs.'<sup>17</sup> Davies was above all critical of the exclusive emphasis on (north)western Europe in so-called histories of 'Western Civilization'. The trend to exclude 'Eastern' Europe from the mainstream of European history started in the eighteenth century but was reinforced by World War II and the coming of the Cold War.<sup>18</sup>

Davies' *Europe: A History* formed part of a larger wave of overviews of European history that have appeared in the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989 and that prioritize intra-European East-West historical relations.<sup>19</sup> As Tony Judt has pointed out, the reconfiguration of the past was a key element of the political transitions that took place in Europe in 1990s: constructing a new historical order was part of the attempt to create a new political order.<sup>20</sup> The new histories of Europe published in the 1990s and 2000s seem, above all, to be a conscious or unconscious attempt to heal the division of the western and eastern half and to construct a common past, in which the experience of communism is integrated in the wider narrative of European history.<sup>21</sup> This also seems to be a main goal of the House of European History, erected in Brussels in 2017. The histories of Europe, written in the 1990s and early 2000s, could also be considered a reflection of the new dynamic in the process of European integration, leading to renewed attention to European history.

The changes in the writing of European history since World War II are part of transformations of a wider social or political 'European memory'.<sup>22</sup> Memory scholars as well as historians, such as Judt, have described how the horrors of Auschwitz have become the key experience of European history, or even a 'foundational past' since 1945.<sup>23</sup> The memory of World War II became the 'European memory' par excellence. However, some memory scholars have also warned that the exclusive focus on the uniqueness of the experience in

17 Davies, *Europe*, 16.

18 Ibid., 19-42. See also the chapters by Drace-Francis and by Rodríguez Pérez in this volume.

19 Some well-known examples are: Davies, *Europe*; Mazower, *Dark Continent*; Judt, *Postwar*.

20 Judt, 'The Past Is Another Country', 108; Müller, *Memory and Power in Post-war Europe*.

21 Ifversen, 'Myth and History'.

22 On the contested and problematic notion of 'European memory' and history, see Assmann, 'Europe'; Pakier and Stråth, *A European Memory?*; Leggewie, 'Seven Circles'; Rigney, 'Transforming Memory'; Pestel, Trimçev, Feindt and Krawatzek, 'Promise'.

23 Judt, 'The Past Is Another Country'; ibid., *Postwar*, 803-832: 'Epilogue: From the House of the Dead: An Essay on Modern European Memory'; Confino, *Foundational Pasts*.

World War II has brought to the fore a new kind of Eurocentrism. This new Eurocentrism is no longer underscoring the 'unique qualities' but instead the 'unique evilness' of Europe, and also its superior way of dealing with war crimes and trauma.<sup>24</sup>

This notion of a uniquely European evilness is also the main feature of 'Occidentalism', a dehumanizing picture of the West that, according to some, was born in Europe itself.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, former communist countries in Central Europe, and to a lesser extent Southern European countries, felt that the exclusive focus on the memory of World War II and the victory over fascism by Western European countries as part of the Atlantic alliance, led further to the forgetting of the historical experience of other parts of Europe.<sup>26</sup>

Others have pointed out that the exclusive focus on the memory of the Holocaust has resulted in a Eurocentric forgetting of the colonial and imperial past and the ways in which European history is entangled in often violent ways with the other continents.<sup>27</sup> As a result, European wars of colonization and decolonization of which no one was proud could be confined to a 'memory hole'.<sup>28</sup> This has hindered the view on 'roads not taken' after the decline of European empires, such as lasting federal relations between European metropolises and non-European overseas countries and territories.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, it has obstructed our understanding of the deep entanglement of nation-state formation in Europe and European integration with imperialism as a fundamentally European endeavour. Until recently, colonialism, neo-colonialism and postcolonial resentment were generally excluded from European integration history.<sup>30</sup> However, for proponents of European unity such as Richard Count Coudenhove-Kalergi or Robert Schuman, their community extended far beyond the European continent.<sup>31</sup>

Increasingly, historians of all backgrounds (history and memory scholars, literature and art historians, and historically oriented cultural anthropologists and social scientists) turn to the study of global interconnectedness,<sup>32</sup>

24 Müller, 'On European Memory'; See also the chapter by Üngör in this volume.

25 Buruma and Margalit, *Occidentalism*, 6.

26 Pakier and Stråth, *A European Memory?*, 1-14; D'Auria and Vermeiren, 'Narrating Europe'.

27 Stoler, 'Colonial Aphasia'; De Cesari and Rigney, *Transnational Memory*. On forgetting and memory, see Erll, *Memory in Culture*, 8-9.

28 Judt, *Postwar*, 281.

29 Cooper, *Citizenship between Empire and Nation*.

30 Legêne, 'The European Character'.

31 Mikkeli, *Europe as an Idea and an Identity*; Hansen and Jonsson, *Eurafrica*.

32 Osterhammel, *Die Verwandlung der Welt*, 13.

inspired by researchers such as Christopher Bayly, who have emphasized that industrialization, urbanization, nationalism and the development of the state were not just Western export products, but the results of global exchange that reverberated throughout the world.<sup>33</sup> In an attempt to overcome the geographical 'compartmentalization of historical reality'<sup>34</sup> and the tenacity of 'banal'<sup>35</sup> everyday representations of European superiority, historians of Europe now focus increasingly on processes of global interconnectedness, such as the interrelation of processes of decolonization with the post-war European integration project.<sup>36</sup> National history, today, can also be described from a global perspective.<sup>37</sup> Others, by contrast, have turned to local history or a transnational regional perspective to write about Europe's past.<sup>38</sup>

As Gerard Delanty has remarked, avoiding the charge of Eurocentrism is not easy since the term lacks specificity and Eurocentrism is often an all-embracing category that covers virtually the entirety of scholarship.<sup>39</sup> Nonetheless, partly thanks to the work of Michael Wintle and other historians of Eurocentrism, 'European historians' have become more aware of the often Eurocentric biases evident in the historical approach, of the foregrounding of select topics, and the essentially problematic nature of many currently used historiographical concepts.

## Structure and Contents

This book has been edited with two objectives in mind: first of all it provides a collection of essays in honour of Michael Wintle and his work. Secondly, this book offers a state of the art overview with regard to Eurocentrism that, for instance, would be useful as a textbook for students in European studies. Evidently, the volume does not claim to be in any way comprehensive or all-encompassing. Our goal in this volume is to explore and critically analyse manifestations of Eurocentrism in representations of the European past

33 Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World*; Stanziani, *Eurocentrism*.

34 Conrad, *What Is Global History?*, 5.

35 Billig, *Banal Nationalism*.

36 Pasture, 'The EC/EU'. For some critical remarks concerning the surge of 'global historians', see the chapter by Berger in this volume.

37 Hill, *National History and the World of Nations*. Cf. Moyn and Sartori, *Global Intellectual History*.

38 Mishkova, Strâth and Trencsényi, 'Regional History'; Kaiser and McMahon, 'Narrating European Integration'.

39 Delanty, *The Cosmopolitan Imagination*, 178.

across disciplines – history, literature, art, memory and cultural policy – as well as offer different geographical perspectives. We have looked, especially, at the role that imaginings of the European past since the eighteenth century played in the construction of a Europeanist worldview and at the ways in which ‘Europe’ was constructed in literature and art.

The first part of the book, on history and historiography, opens with a chapter by Stefan Berger chronicling the history of European history in past centuries. At the end of his contribution, Berger discusses the danger of the marginalization of European history as a subdiscipline between global history and national history. In the next chapter, Matthijs Lok argues that the pluralist narrative of European history has a strong, but often implicit and overlooked, Eurocentric dimension, and should be examined more critically by historians of Europe.

The subsequent chapter, by Uğur Ümit Üngör, discusses two strands of Eurocentrism in mass violence research: ‘Holocaust uniqueness’ and Orientalism. In the former approach, Europe is set as an example, albeit a negative one. In the second line of thought, the genocidal violence of non-European Others is constructed as cruel and inefficient. This first part of the volume on history and historiography is concluded by Michael Kemper, who shows how Ismail Gasprinskii, the founding father of Muslim cultural reform in Russia, successfully made use of clichés about European haughtiness and Islamic, especially Asian-Islamic, sincerity in his 1881 essay ‘Russian Muslimhood’.

The second part of the book, on Eurocentrism in literature and art, opens with a critical analysis by Wolfgang Schmale of the depictions of the six continents by the Austrian painter Maître Leherb (1933–1997), who continued the tradition of the continent allegories, popular since the sixteenth century, in a contemporary way. Subsequently, Joep Leerssen argues in his chapter that part of the Eurocentric imagination of the Orient involves the phantasm of a world where (in sharp contrast to Western mores) religion and sensuality overlap. Located on that interstice are often the figures of dancing Oriental maidens, whose dancing is the sort of motion that is directionless. This type stands in contrast to the Western, Eurocentric heroine with a sense of purpose and directionality. In the third chapter of the second part, Ton Hoenselaars argues that four ways of interpretation of ‘Shakespeare’ and ‘Europe’ should be distinguished, and that these together constitute the phenomenon of ‘Shakespeare as a European site of memory’.

In their contributions, Yolanda Rodríguez Pérez and Alex Drace-Francis show that the term ‘Eurocentrism’ may also be considered to include West European discourses on sub-regions within Europe. Rodríguez Pérez identifies the construction of a strong North-South division in nineteenth-century English and Dutch literary historiography. This polarity is further



complicated by an association of the South with the Oriental Other. Drace-Francis shows that certain aspects of East European discourse on Europe may also be considered as a variant of Eurocentrism, as they foreground the centrality and symbolic power of something called 'Europe' while simultaneously often minimizing the role of 'eastern' influence in the region.

The topic of the third part of the book is Eurocentrism in memory from institutional (EU and Council of Europe) perspectives. Jan Ifversen describes two different versions of Europe in two transnational museums: the Schuman House and the House of European History. The exhibition in the first museum is based on the myth that Europe exists to avoid conflict between nations, while the Europe exhibited in the latter is a Europe split between expansion and crisis, between unity and division, between peace and war, between democracy and dictatorship. European integration is not salvation as in the case of the Schuman House, but a project to tame the destructive forces that also belong to Europe. Finally, Claske Vos describes the ambiguity of EU intervention in the field of cultural policy. On the one hand EU intervention is hegemonic and the result of Western normativity; on the other, it provides a cultural space in which actors can freely manoeuvre.

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