EUROPE FROM THE OUTSIDE IN: A COMMENT
COMMENT ON JOHANNES PAULMANN'S LECTURE, WASHINGTON DC, NOVEMBER 8, 2012

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Most educated Americans received their introductions to European history in courses on Western Civilization, and these, at least in the United States, had as their central purpose to teach Americans about their common European past. During the 1930s and 1940s, when such courses were first taught, this European past was, as concerned the modern era, defined principally as England, France, and to some extent Germany — with Italy largely out of the picture since the Renaissance, except for a brief moment during unification in the 1860s; with Russia only in with Peter the Great, perhaps Catherine as well, and then again with the Russian Revolution; and Spain out of the picture since Charles V, except to offer brief resistance to Napoleon and a last stand against the United States in Cuba in 1898. Holland, despite its importance for the Atlantic world and as a motor of early globalization, fell out except in art history because it fit ill into a scheme defined by powerful nation-states; so, too, did the Austrian and then Austro-Hungarian Empire, except for 1914 and 1918. Finally, what to do about Istanbul remained a mystery.¹

Against the background of this tradition we may measure the departure proposed by Johannes Paulmann, an early and important pioneer in transnational history. He is in the process of writing a methodologically exciting work on Europe from 1848 to 1914 in which imperialism, relations of center and periphery, and asymmetries of power play a crucial role. He defines Europe not by nation-states but by its contested margins, and focuses not on landmasses but on strategic waters, arguing that these waters, a series of straits, are not margins at all but crossroads that define Europe’s encounters and make up its character. He takes the reader to these waters: the Kara Stait allowing unfrozen passage northeast along the coasts of Siberia; the Øresund, separating the Danish island Zealand from the Swedish province of Scania; the English Channel, or La Manche, as it is called in the Francophone world; the Suez Canal, completed in 1869; the Strait of Gibraltar; and the Dardanelles and the Bosporus. In Paulmann’s telling, they are not natural givens — as waters had sometimes been for late nineteenth-century, geography-as-destiny thinkers. Rather, he sees them as worked on and transformed by

human knowledge and technology; as sites of labor and labor history; as places of prodigious transnational and intercontinental mixing; as objects of military strategy and intervention; and as places of encounter, usually with stark asymmetries of power: man against man, man dominating nature. Paulmann’s is a history that foregrounds space instead of time, connections over development, routes rather than roots — not to the exclusion of the second elements in these dyads, but so that the first elements become more visible, central, located less on the margin, placed more in the middle.

But space, as we know from Karl Schlögel’s wonderful book, is also a place to read time. Paulmann tells us of a Europe at the zenith of its power: financial, technological, military. From this space, the story of the straits is one of dominance; they are in the first order roads to imperial rule. Suez is the clearest case: allowing for faster, easier British suzerainty over India, and serving as the starting point, in competition with the French, for the transition from informal to formal empire, or, to put it more plainly, from commercial to political and military control of Africa. The story has the ring of truth when we consider the yawning divergences between Europe and Asia in per capita gross domestic product (GDP) as well as in agricultural and industrial productivity, and the fact that a large part of the globe was by century’s end under Europe’s direct or indirect control. Europe, in the time Paulmann writes about, is imbued with self-confidence — shading into hubris.

It was not always so. The earliest post-classical articulations of Europe tended to the reverse: a sense of smallness, enclosure, and powerlessness. Throughout the Middle Ages, one did not even refer to Europe but instead to “Christian territories,” or, as Albert Magnus put it in the thirteenth century, to “our quarter of the inhabitable world.” Europe, as a geographical concept, came into wider use with the rediscovery, at the beginning of the fifteenth century, of the second-century coordinates of Ptolemy, which charted out the earth with far greater precision than anything conceived of in the Christian world. Not coincidentally, the manuscript of the Geography was discovered in Constantinople, crossroads of a sputtering Christian civilization with a more advanced Islamic one. When mapped, Ptolemy’s coordinates equalized space and fixed areas, allowing one to “represent the several localities of the entire earth in a picture.” The picture showed Europe as barely more than a sliver of a peninsula of Asia, and plotted European proportions vis-à-vis large-area Africa more accurately in terms of area than most Mercator-influenced maps

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4 Citing the introduction to the Ulm Ptolemy of 1482, Denis Cosgrove, Apollo’s Eye: A Cartographic Genealogy of the Earth in the Western Imagination (Baltimore, 2001), 105-6.
that students still see in Western Civilization textbooks. But what really spurred Europe-thinking was Christian defeat at the hands of the Ottoman Turks in 1453. “We are wounded and thrown down in Europe,” wrote Enea Silvio Piccolomini, the Italian humanist, soon to become Pope Pius II, in response to the calamity on the Bosporus, “in our fatherland, in our own home, and our residence.” The first to employ “European” as an adjective, and the first to compose a History of Europe whose purpose was to describe the continent and its people, Piccolomini also advanced a plea for unity in the face of division and downfall — with a not-so-secret agenda that the European cities and princes should send money for Christian armies.

Paulmann’s approach to Europe starting with the straits has, therefore, a venerable pedigree, and it is not unimportant that the tradition is both at the very beginning of Europe-thinking and that it marks Europe at its self-conceived weakness vis-à-vis the world. Straits can be about European weakness as well as its strength. There is in any case nothing gimmicky about starting this way. In his description of Europe, Piccolomini did not start with England, France, and Germany, as many of our textbooks do, but with Hungary, Transylvania, Thrace, Turkey, Macedonia, Peloponnesia, and Albania — cradles, Piccolomini thought, of ancient civilizations and contact zones between Christian and Islamic worlds. It was, in fact, the contact zones that Europeans had understood, long before they accurately conceived or mapped Europe’s heartland. As early as the thirteenth century, Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese charts evinced a remarkably precise sense of the shape of the continent, and oriented their understanding towards points of departure: as we can see with the famous, evocative Portolan charts (“related to ports of harbors”).

What Europeans knew less well was the distances and geometric patterns between the continent’s interior cities. They also understood little about the height of the mountains (most of which were not named), the curvature of the rivers (the Rhine, for example, was mapped exceedingly straight into the sixteenth century), and the extent of the great forests (though in central and western Europe they were already disappearing). Even if we concede that Shakespeare likely engaged in conscious fantasy when in The Winter’s Tale he cast a shipwreck on the Bohemian coast, it remains that in the first three centuries of European self-awareness, circa 1450-1750, knowledge and interest in the land lagged behind the passion for the sea. Mental maps, the informal cartographical understanding that people carry with them, hardly pierced the countryside; indeed, it was not until...
deep into the eighteenth century that European travelers even reported on rural areas, except to complain about inns, people’s boorish manners, and muddy pot-holed roads, with occasional ethnographic remarks about the dress, food, customs, and religious behavior of rustics. Montaigne, from whom we might have expected better, tells us about the valleys of the Austrian Alps only when they are well cultivated and adorned with noble houses; for the raw countryside, he had only disdain. Nearly two centuries later, in the 1760s and 1770s, our best guide to Europe would have been James Boswell, the biographer of Samuel Johnson; but he, too, lost few words on those vast stretches where most people lived, except to complain about the table strewn with straw where he was forced to sleep in a village somewhere along the Westphalian Hellweg connecting the Rhine with the Elbe. Finally, Europeans understood little about their vast, thinly populated, to some extent still pagan, expanses. *Extra Ptolomaeum* is how at the end of the fifteenth century one still described poorly mapped Scandinavia and especially virtually unknown Finland. The expansive Russian lands were similarly unknown. Not until Boris Godunov commissioned a survey at the end of the sixteenth century was there a well-documented Russian-made map of the whole of the Czar’s territories.

One wonders if, as in the sixteenth century, and much of the early modern period, understanding of the waters, the focus on the dynamic periphery, does not render more difficult an appreciation for the land, and for those who participated less in the multiethnic contact zones that Paulmann begins with. It would be wrong to imagine the countryside as defined by stasis. But it is equally important to recall how long and how late many things on the continent retained their basic morphology. Consider, for example, the percentage of people living in rural communities (communities below 2,000 inhabitants). Between 1500 and 1750, these percentages changes significantly in England, the Netherlands, and the country we now associate with Belgium; but in these 250 years they remained virtually the same in Germany, Austria, Hungary, Poland, France, Spain, and Italy — with only the last three below a ninety percent rural population rate (France still at 87%, Italy at 78%, and Spain at 79%). Even when we take in the next hundred years — to the beginning of Paulmann’s work, the continued predominance of the rural over the urban populations remains daunting. Circa 1850, Great Britain, Belgium, and the Netherlands were the only European countries that had crossed the threshold at which agriculture employed less than fifty percent of the workforce.

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Moreover, except for that immensely productive and dynamic triangle between Manchester, Amsterdam, and Paris, Europe witnessed little endogenous change in fundamental life-quality indicators, including average caloric intake, amount of diet drawn from inferior caloric sources, stature (as far as this can be ascertained from recruitment lists and skeletal remains), infant mortality, life expectancy, and throughout much of Europe, literacy. The nineteenth century certainly brought change, though in the short and medium term not always for the better. Germany’s high rate of infant mortality, to take one example, actually worsened in the middle years of the nineteenth century, especially in cities; while real wages likely declined before they dramatically improved in the last third of the century. There was, it is true, a tremendous amount of human movement away from the countryside and into the city, so that already by mid-century cities, their protective walls torn down and railroad stations in their place, had become ruralized in the same measure as rural landscapes felt the pull of the urban. Yet there is some truth in Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl’s sense that the rural hinterlands represented forces of perseverance, beharrende Kräfte, the pull of custom affirmed against the jerk of rapid change. Perhaps one does not want to follow Riehl, whose sense of the countryside of Germany (which he never ventured outside of) was powerfully shaped by his dismay at the radical turn of the Revolution of 1848. But one can also glean the force of perseverance in Pierre-Jakez Hélias’s evocation of the melancholy of change in a Breton village in his serene The Horse of Pride, or in in “the bottomless sadness of the desolate countryside” painted by Carlo Levi in Christ Stopped at Eboli, or Milovan Djilas’s controlled descriptions in Montenegro of harsh village life in the craggy mountains of the sparse homeland of his youth. My intention here is not to substitute poetic evocation for scholarly studies, or to suggest there was little or no change in the countryside. On the contrary, urbanization, the rail and the bicycle, mass emigration and re-migration, and the tilting of even rural markets towards global trade, meant that the horizons of rural Europeans were wider than ever before. Perhaps the church tower and the fields to be tilled never circumscribed rural horizons — in the latter half of the nineteenth century, they certainly did not. My point is only that the accelerated pace of interaction that we associate with contact zones and cities (places, as Richard Sennett puts it, “where strangers meet”) cannot be taken as a norm. Finally, it also bears recalling that at the end of the nineteenth century, urbanization and industrialization notwithstanding, more people lived in the European countryside than at any prior time or any subsequent time.


12 A central theme in the best of his major works. See Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl, Land und Leute 8th ed. (Stuttgart, 1883).


14 For one illuminating example, see Hartmut Berghoff, Zwischen Kleinstadt und Weltmarkt: Hohner und die Harmonika, 1857-1961 (Paderborn, 1997).

countryside than in any time in its history. It was true in England, the most industrialized place in Europe, and it was true for Germany, where there were as many people working in the agricultural sector in 1913 as across the economy in 1800.\textsuperscript{16}

If persistence is one issue, movement, paradoxically, is another. At one level, Paulmann’s evocation tells of the starting places for interaction with other continents. But from a European standpoint, the great intercontinental movement of peoples involved not the straits, or proximate points of contact, but the mass migrations across the Atlantic. Between 1860 and 1914 roughly 52 million migrants left European shores for the Americas — as if one major country, say Germany in 1900, got up and left (with some returning).\textsuperscript{17} Paulmann obviously knows this, and will integrate the great transatlantic migrations into his larger historical synthesis. But there remains a question about how a Europe defined by geographical borders, however watery, take this fundamental fact of European life in the late nineteenth century into account. It also seems to me that the emigrants did not leave as Europeans, but as Westphalians, Sicilians, and Ruthenian Jews — even if, as Robert Wiebe powerfully argues, in the process they became, perhaps for the first time, Germans, Italians, and Jews.\textsuperscript{18} What they did not become, as far as I can tell, was European — except in one powerful sense.

Perhaps I can illustrate what I mean with a story. When I was four years old, my mother took me from one small town in southern Germany to another in the United States, where we then lived and I grew up. In many ways, the two towns were similar — small, not very exciting, each near a body of water, one Lake Constance, the other the Atlantic Ocean. There was, however, one salient difference. The American town was religiously and ethnically diverse: in place of two churches, a large Catholic and a small Protestant, there were at least eleven, spanning the religious field from Congregationalist to Russian Orthodox, and in place of Germans and virtually no one else, the American town was full of Greeks, Poles, French, Irish, Italians, and, so it seemed to me, one German. As a boy I remember lots of fights in the schoolyard: Polish against Greek kids, Irish against French. But I never remember anyone saying we’re all European. The only context in which that could occur was racial, and even then its vocabulary was not about continents but about skin complexion. So I wonder about the effect of race on the sense of being European. At the end of the nineteenth century, racial ideologies infused with Social Darwinism were in full strength; and colonial rule often segregationist, brutal,
and murderous. How did these forms of interaction impact the emotional resonance of being European, especially a European among others? Perhaps the straits help us see this in more complex ways. One is drawn to the European-African dynamic that unfolded just to the west of Suez, where the “colonized colonizer,” as Eve M. Troutt Powell describes Egyptian nationalists in the 1880s, appropriated, changed, and extended the logic of European racism and British understandings of rule to justify Egyptian dominion, personal and territorial, over Sudan. Or one may follow Russian anthropologists through the Kara Straits to discover, however obliquely, mirrors of European Russia in the circumpolar hunters and gatherers strewn throughout the tundra and taiga of Asian Siberia.

Certain is only that in his circumnavigation Paulmann allows us to be travelers to those places that set off Europe from Africa and Asia and serve as conveyers of exchange between Europe and the rest of the world. Although even the most conventional of historians cite travel reports, Paulmann highlights travel as a way to know place in time, and as a source of insight into how countrysides, cityscapes, and borders have been understood. There is now a burgeoning literature on these questions. In *Nicht West, Nicht Ost*, Bernard Struck has, for example, shown how it was not until the 1840s that Germans travelling across the border into France or into the Polish lands used the occasion to reflect on leaving home. One wonders about this with respect to Europe. When did one know that one was entering Europe? Was it when one entered the bustle of Europe’s busy harbors, humming with the sounds of peoples, steam, and machines? Was it about a different literary and cultural landscape? Was entry into Europe even mentioned? Or did one enter nation-states? Or cities? And was this different according to the origin of the traveler, whether from Africa, Asia, or the Americas? Was there a gender or racial component to it? Did it change over time? And when did travelers perceive they were leaving?

By defining Europe from the outside in, as it once was, Johannes Paulmann has helped us to ask these questions in new ways.

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