

Postcolonial Reading of „Sonderweg“

Veranstalter: Research Institute of Comparative History and Culture, Hanyang University Seoul

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The conference „Postcolonial Reading of Sonderweg“ organised by the Research Institute of Comparative History and Culture (RICH) of Hanyang University brought a great number of eminent scholars to the South Korean capital. The idea for the conference came from a certain unease felt by Korean historians, including the convenor Lim Jie-Hyun, with the normative concept of the West inherent in the Sonderweg thesis. The strict distinction between „normal“ democratic developments and „aberrant“ dictatorial ones has been criticised. Dictatorships were rather a common feature of explicitly modern developments in manifold geographical contexts. Moreover, the classical Sonderweg thesis, as a particular kind of exceptionalism, claimed the existence of a universal model. But not every particular development followed a universal model. One of the big goals of the conference was thinking about how to discuss differences between nations without the imaginative West as a normative model.

In his keynote speech JÜRGEN KOCKA (Freie Universität Berlin) underlined that the term „Sonderweg“ is used by the critics of the concept and historians of historiography and is thus a construction of second order. Kocka then recapitulated the development of the Sonderweg thesis in its academic and societal context of the 1860s and 1870s and discussed the main criticisms forwarded against it, as he had done in an earlier publication. He particularly pointed out that the development of transnational history makes the traditional Sonderweg arguments seem parochial and opens up the debate towards new argumentations. Kocka argued that the Sonderweg thesis makes sense only when looking at the main question, that is why Germany turned fascist in the interwar period. Kocka argued that transnational and

global arguments have to be integrated into the debate and the references of comparison have to change, without, however, being able to give an answer as to how this can be done.

STEFAN BERGER (University of Manchester) widened the scenario and spoke on the proliferation of Sonderwege in Europe. He argued that Sonderwege were national responses to crises of modernity. These occurred at the end of the nineteenth century with the transition to monopoly capitalism and a new regime of territorialisation which led to a new phase of globalisation. Sonderwege were thus central ingredients of a European way of conceptualising national histories on the road to modernity. Berger raised thirteen common points which characterise most national accounts. These national histories have lost some of their force over the last few decades. Historiography became less apologetic and more critical. Europeanisation, particularly the cultural politics of the European Union, and globalisation fundamentally changed historiography. The Sonderwege, highly praised by traditional national historiography, have nowadays become an obstacle in adjusting nation-states to the global modernity of the twenty-first century.

In a discourse where historians implicitly compared Germany to countries further west, MONIKA BAÄR (University of Groningen) asked: Then what about Eastern Europe? In the first part of her paper she discussed the historiography of this region. She insisted on the „usual suspects“, such as backwardness and the small size of the countries. The issue of fear, however, played a central role, too. In the second part BaÄr focused on the Hungarian historian BibÄ³ IstvÄ³n.

CHOI CHATTERJEE (California State University) focused on Americans who visited the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s. Her paper analysed the actual conditions of the physical encounter that produced the images. She insisted on the importance of everyday practices such as standing in lines, bargaining, lack of toilet paper and unfriendly personnel. Eventually these accounts contributed to the image of socialism as an aberration from capitalism perceived as a natural economic order and legitimised American modes

of consumption. The Soviet experience was thus perceived as a kind of Sonderweg.

LIM JIE-HYUN (Hanyang University, Seoul) started his presentation with Ralf Dahrendorf's question "Why wasn't Germany England? Why wasn't Poland Germany? Why wasn't Japan England? Why wasn't Korea Japan? Why wasn't Mongolia Korea?" Above the nation-state level these binary couples create relational concepts, most prominently the imaginative geography of the East and the West. A country's position is thus always located between one of these two poles, the West being regarded as the normative and desirable option. This accommodates Eurocentrism and signifies a temporalisation of space. Lim pronounced himself against this kind of historicist, unilinear and stagist narratives. A postcolonial reading of Sonderweg thus demands a critical review of Marxist historicism. Marxism actually fostered a colonial modernity narrative that legitimated colonisation as a developmental strategy. Marx denied agency to colonial subjects, be they Slavs, Indians or Chinese. Lim then analysed how this narrative gave rise to the colonial modernity approach to Korean history according to which the Japanese brought capitalism and modernity to the peninsula. In opposition to this thesis emerged the colonial Sonderweg narrative which argued that an allegedly normal development towards capitalism in Korea had been interrupted by Japanese colonial aggression. Both approaches are based on a unilinear reading of history which "from a postcolonial point of view" has to be overcome. Lim's paper ended with a plea for a transnational history of modernity and capitalism.

HONG YOUNG-SUN (State University of New York, Stony Brook) notably raised the question how non-European actors perceived and created Germany and alleged German particularities. As became clear in the discussion, the Sonderweg served as a cultural icon in the non-European world. Exactly the fact that Germany developed modernity without democracy was perceived as a model, for ex-

ample in Korea.

SEBASTIAN CONRAD (Freie Universität Berlin) dealt with the question how a Sonderweg reading emerged in Japan in the aftermath of the Second World War. Japan had for a long time been perceived as a country of uniqueness. Immediately after the war Marxist historians studied the long-term path of Japan into fascism. They detected the heritage of feudalism and the strong state authority in the Meiji period as the main factors for Japan's deviation from a normative democratic path. The "Conference on Modern Japan" in Hakone in 1960 completely reversed the discourse when American social scientists positioned modernisation theory against the Marxists. What was formerly perceived as pathological now turned into a success story of Japan's development. Interestingly, the explanatory strategies of both approaches were internal, thus fostering an "island view". Historians read as self-generated what was actually global. One of the consequences of this reading was that the history of the Japanese empire became quasi invisible. The discussion focused on the specific academic and societal situations that shaped the trajectories of Sonderweg discourses. Jürgen Kocka raised the question why German historiography did not experience a similar transition from a negative to a positive evaluation of Sonderweg development. Conrad suggested that in Japan, leftist scholars opposed themselves explicitly against modernisation theory which they perceived as an imperialist American tool. In Germany, left-wing scholars embraced modernisation theory and integrated it in their own critical explanatory models. Whereas the German Sonderweg thesis operated in a transatlantic framework, Japan was perceived as the only one amongst non-Western nations as having developed capitalism.

DOMINIC SACHSENMAIER (Duke University) could not attend the conference. In his forwarded paper he discussed intellectual currents in China during the last few decades in the context of the Sonderweg concept. In the debates of the 1980s, scientism, European Enlightenment and Western humanism were the major references. Whereas this paradigm

saw Chinese specificities as hindrances to modernisation, this changed in the 1990s when scholars began to describe China's path to modernity as a creative, unique and successful blending of Chinese and foreign elements. Sachsenmaier encouraged researchers in the Atlantic world to take into account the counter-movements to Eurocentrism developed by Chinese and other scholars.

LISA A. KIRSCHENBAUM (West Chester University) traced the colonial genealogies of the Spanish Civil War and the Soviet support for the Spanish republic. She took Stalin's linkage of the Soviet Union to all advanced and progressive humanity which he saw represented by the Spanish republicans as his rejection of a Soviet Sonderweg as a starting point for her analysis. Kirschenbaum reviewed the historiographical evaluations of the Soviet engagement in the war which vary decisively whether one interprets the Soviet Union as an abnormal Stalinist regime or as a normal state. However, these debates eclipse colonial aspects such as the use of Muslim Moroccan mercenaries by Franco and the continuity of colonial patterns of thought on the republican side.

ALF LÄDTKE (Universität Erfurt/Hanyang University, Seoul) spoke on strategies of coming to terms with the past after the fall of dictatorial regimes. His paper dealt with the handling of the documents of the East German Staatssicherheit. LÄdtke started his paper with two statements from Joachim Gauck and another high official depicting the German experience as a dream of the suppressed of all over the world and serving as model everywhere. LÄdtke thus showed how the first director of the agency administering the Stasi files proudly stages Germany's institutional and legal solutions. The East German revolutionary citizens' movement together with the critical self-awareness of West German society as having partially failed in denazification, according to this narrative, both lead to the existing model. This created a positively connotated German Sonderweg which historians have to question.

In his concluding comment HANS ERICH

BÄ-DEKER (Max-Planck-Institut für Geschichte, Göttingen) focused on five theoretical issues of the conceptual apparatus of the language of exceptionalism. He discussed the assertion of the singularity of a distinct national history, the theoretical necessity of a normative normal path, the inherent urgency to compare distinct national paths, the assumed teleological element and the underlying concept of the nation state.

In the subsequent wrap-up discussion, Bädeker asserted that one should not only state uniqueness, but research it. He was joined by other discussants who urged researchers to look at particular cases. Regarding the postcolonial reading of Sonderweg, Lim argued that the question "Why was Germany not England?" the guiding paradigm of the Sonderweg thesis leads researchers into a trap by postulating a normative Eurocentric path. For Conrad the notion of the universal applicability of development was the core of the problem. Kocka also asked where we now are in the Sonderweg debate compared to the 1970s. He argued, firstly, that today's debate is less polemical. Secondly, the notion of entanglements has opened up internalistic argumentations. Thirdly, the concept of the West has fundamentally changed since then. No more alternatives to capitalism exist. As the example of China shows, capitalism can flourish in an authoritarian regime. The question of whom does one select to compare with and, related to this, the role of the West and other normative models was discussed. Furthermore, one of the big questions was the relationship between Sonderweg, particularism and exceptionalism. When does a national path turn into a Sonderweg, Kocka asked.

At some points it was surprising for the author of this report how influential the notion of the "West" still seems to be as a heuristically valid though criticised concept, considering the frequent use of the term throughout the conference. Finally, only well-defined research projects with a strong emphasis on original empirical research will contribute to the construction of the master narratives of the twenty-first century.

Program

3 December

Chair: Larry Frohman (SUNY, Stony Brook)
Jürgen Kocka (Free University of Berlin / WZB): The German „Sonderweg“ Thesis after Some Decades: Looking back on a Controversial Debate about German History

Stefan Berger (University of Manchester): Sonderweg or Normality or Sonderweg and Normality? Some Reflections on the Proliferation of Sonderweg and their Critiques in Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century European Historiography

Chair: Sang-Woo Lim (Sogang University)

Monika BaÅr (University of Groningen): The Sonderweg and Nation-building

Choi Chatterjee (California State University): Everyday Life in Transnational Perspective: Consumption, Consumerism, and Party Favors, 1917-1939

Jie-Hyun Lim (Hanyang University): Colonial Modernity or Sonderweg?: A Post-colonial Reading of Marxist Historicism

Round Table Discussion, chaired by Young-Sun Hong (SUNY, Stony Brook)

4 December

Chair: Hoi-eun Kim (Texas A & M University)
Young-Sun Hong (SUNY, Stony Brook): The Ugly Germans in the Age of Three Worlds

Sebastian Conrad (Free University of Berlin): Fictions of Uniqueness: Deviant Paths, Model Paths, and the Loss of Empire in Cold War Japan

Chair: Michael Kim (Yonsei University)

Dominic Sachsenmaier (Duke University): A Sonderweg Hypothesis? Chinese Theories of Modernity and Modernization

Lisa A. Kirschenbaum (West Chester University): „The Cause of All Advanced and Progressive Humanity“ and the Stalinist Sonderweg: Paradoxes and Polemics of Soviet Intervention in the Spanish Civil War

Keynote Address

Alf Luedtke (University of Erfurt & Hanyang University): Redemptory Exceptionalism? Coming to Terms with the East German 'Stasi' after 1989/1990 - The Temptations of the 'German Model'

Wrap-up Discussion with lead-in by Hans Erich BÅdeker (Max-Planck-Institute for History): Case Studies Instead of Sonderweg

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