

Done With Eurocentrism? Directions, Diversions, and Debates in History and Sociology

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Ever since the Enlightenment, and especially over the past century of scholarship, Eurocentrism has been virtually the exclusive source of vocabulary, imagery, objects, language, legal infrastructure, geopolitical imaginaries, even the geographical orientation by which we routinely make sense of ourselves, our histories, our futures, and our surroundings. Even in actively centrifugal and anti-hegemonic approaches such as postcolonial studies, theories of local-global entanglements, transnational studies, feminist approaches to history and sociology, and history from below, 'Europe' has sustained its rather invisible power as the norm with which other thoughts, definitions, practices, forms of knowledge, and other temporalities and spatialities are compared.

With its 8th Annual Seminar, the Bielefeld Graduate School in History and Sociology (BGHS) aimed at taking stock of the current state of Eurocentrism in historical and sociological research as well as exploring fruitful trajectories potentially leading away from Eurocentrism. The three-day conference, which hosted a highly diverse and international group of post-graduate researchers, was organized by Yaatsil Guevara, Mahshid Mayar, Marius Meinhof, and Junchen Yan (all Bielefeld) and took place from June 30 to July 02, 2016. The program included three keynote lectures, six panels with presentations and subsequent discussions, an art/science exhibition, and a concluding roundtable discussion.

The opening keynote lecture, delivered by ANGELIKA EPPLE (Bielefeld), departed from the basic assumption that the concepts of modernity and Eurocentrism are inextricably linked throughout historical research. In terms of methodology, she argued that var-

ious debates have led to what she called a more „reflexive Eurocentrism“ in the sense that researchers have become increasingly aware of their often implicit Eurocentric assumptions. She also pointed out the difficulty of looking for a historical solution to the problem. Focusing on the temporal implications of the concept, she indicated that Eurocentrism is grounded on the historicity of modernity to the extent that the latter infuses its teleological assumptions concerning history within the conceptual structures of the former. Epple closed her keynote lecture by suggesting a „praxeological approach“ as a way of escaping this centric tradition.

The seminar then proceeded to Panel One, titled „Eurocentrism and the Academy.“ JULIA ROTH (Bielefeld) gave the first presentation entitled „Feminism Otherwise: Intersectionality beyond Occidentalism.“ Capitalizing on Michel Foucault's notion of epistemic violence, Roth examined the implications of Eurocentric knowledge production in reducing „other“ cultures and worldviews outside its realm into „single stories.“ The second presentation was given by PHILIPP BERNHARD (Augsburg). With the title „Perspectives for History Teaching beyond Eurocentrism,“ Bernhard argued that current history curricula and textbooks in Bavaria, Germany, are highly distorted in their representation of „other,“ mainly non-European societies and cultures. ANITA MISRA SHUKLA (Noida) presented a critique of the contemporary state of academic sociology in India in a talk entitled „Studying the Indian Society in Western Way: Evaluating the Theoretical Models Adopted by Indian Sociologist.“ BEATE LÖFFLER's (Duisburg / Essen) presentation revolved around the issue of what she called „petrified worldviews.“ She argued that, though it is hardly ever addressed in explicit terms, the legacy of Eurocentrism is omnipresent, especially in the existing body of academic knowledge.

Panel Two dealt with „religion and ethnicity. In their presentation, LUIS MANUEL HERNÁNDEZ AGUILAR (Frankfurt am Main) and ZUBAIR AHMAD (Berlin) showed how religion – understood by the speakers as a trans-historical category – has served as an instrument of governance and

domination, particularly in the context of Islam. From the perspective of interdisciplinary dance studies, LUKE FORBES' (Essen) talk, „Dancing Indigeneity: Re-presentations of Australian and Indigenous Australian Identity and Culture in Dance Performance and Dance Historical Texts,“ demonstrated how historical narratives have been employed as instruments in the exclusion of native Australian communities. Focusing on the racialization of religious belonging in Cambodia, THIEN-HUONG T. NINH (San Luis Obispo) called for a turn away from Eurocentrism in favor of transnational approaches to religious and ethnic belonging. The final presentation on this panel, „The Concept of 'Indigenous Peoples': Eurocentrism Redux,“ delivered by TATHAGATO GANGULY (Hyderabad), discussed conceptual alternatives to Eurocentric notions of indigeneity by emphasizing the issue of authenticity.

The second day of the conference began with SHAHZAD BASHIR's (Stanford) keynote lecture on the topic of Eurocentrism and Islam entitled „Eurocentrism and Islam: Space, Time, and the Intellectual Politics of Cultural Essentialism.“ In it, Bashir cautioned against understanding Eurocentrism as a „problem to be solved.“ Closely examining how the history of Islam as we know it today in the West has been produced, perpetuated, and propagated by famous western 'orientalists' since the dawn of the Enlightenment, the take-home message of Bashir's insightful talk was that Eurocentrism needs to be understood as a historically contingent, non-homogenic set of ideas and practices which must be analyzed, contextualized, and re-conceptualized without reproducing the binds that come with traditional binary or dialectic distinctions.

Panel Three, titled „Politics and International Policy,“ revolved around reworkings of – and resistance to – Eurocentric ideas in national, international, but also very localized political and policy-making contexts. MARINA RUDYAK (Heidelberg) focused on the historical background and conceptual implications of the term 'foreign aid' in the context of Chinese foreign policy. JUAN MANUEL DELGADO RASCÓN's (Madrid) talk dealt with the relationship between the widespread

primacy of economic growth and the emergence of an international human rights framework over the past three decades. According to the speaker, this branch of international law, as well as overarching international agreements such as the United Nations General Assembly's Declaration on the Right to Development in particular, have the potential to provide an alternative framework for an international development agenda. PILAR RAMÍREZ GRÖBLI (Bern) provided an empirically grounded analysis of local resistance and empowerment practices in the context of agro-fuel production in a rural community in Colombia.

Panel Four, which dealt with „Memories, Discourses, and Narratives,“ encompassed localities from Beijing to Bogotá and spanned the entire second half of the twentieth century. Looking at the heterogeneous character of social protests around St. Nicholas Church in Leipzig and Tiananmen Square in Beijing, DANIEL PALM (Bremen) highlighted the tension between the synchronicity of protests on the one hand, and their local particularities on the other, and pointed out the significance of urban structure in shaping the emergence and proceedings of protests linked to the „global moment“ of 1989.¹ HENDRIKJE GRUNOW (Konstanz) introduced a critical perspective on the Eurocentric biases which may accompany the notion of „historical consciousness“ by demonstrating that the 'break with the past' commonly associated with this notion does not necessarily apply in contexts outside of Europe. Finally, MIRKO PETERSEN (Bielefeld) presented the story of Argentina's role in Cold-War geopolitics between 1947 and 1950 as a case in which the often-cited dichotomous relationship between the capitalist West and the Eastern communist bloc was undercut by „Argentine third position.“

The third keynote lecture by HSUAN L. HSU (University of California, Davis) highlighted the historical emergence of American exceptionalism as a variety of Eurocentrism, exemplified by the racialization of Asian immigrants in public health policies of the late-19th century United States. Through a di-

¹Sebastian Conrad / Dominic Sachsenmaier (eds.), *Competing Visions of World Order: Global Moments and Movements, 1880s–1930s*, New York 2007.

verse set of examples in the case of China, „Geographies of Risk: Environmental Violence and the Global South“ demonstrated that, though continuously changing over the course of the 20th century, „eco-Orientalism“ has persisted in debates over climate change as well as health and hygiene issues well into the present. As Hsu argued, eco-Orientalism has shaped the domestic discourses within the USA about Chinese communities, restaurants, and practices in important ways and has clouded the country's foreign policy toward China.

The second conference day ended with the opening of an 'art/science exhibition' of twenty photographs taken by WILFRIED RAUSSERT (Bielefeld), professor of American literature and Culture at Bielefeld University. Under the title *Art Begins in Streets*, the scholar/photographer opened the exhibition by commenting on the color photos of murals and people he had taken of people on the streets of the Americas spanning from Lima to Ottawa.

The last day of the conference included two panels and a roundtable discussion. Panel Five ventured into the realm of „Semantics and Interpretation.“ OLEKSANDR SVYETLOV (Kiev) discussed his research on collective memories of inter-ethnic conflicts in the border regions between Poland and Ukraine. Afterwards, MIRJAM HÄHNLE (Basel) presented her current research on how early modern Europeans gathered knowledge about the Orient. Her work seeks to shed light on intercultural encounters by „reading the archives“ of European expeditions and looking for their voices in related texts. Expanding Michel de Certeau's notion of the „solar eye“ of the scientist², she argued that there are, in fact, two vantage points of observation: travelers' as well as the researcher's own eye, with the latter of being far removed from the actual expedition in spatial as well as temporal terms.

Panel Six looked at „Ethnographic Engagements.“ Shifting the view to Africa, ALMAMY SYLLA (Bamako) discussed the current research he is conducting in tandem with SUSANNE SCHULTZ (Bielefeld) with regard to deportations of Malians from other African countries since the 1960s. They argued that

by taking a diachronic look at the deportation discourse, it is possible to establish a more Afrocentric perspective on this issue. The topic of borders was taken up again in FABIO SANTOS' (Berlin) contribution which looked at entangled spaces along the French-Brazilian border in Latin America. His ethnographic findings highlighted the fact that several borders of EU member states actually lay outside of continental Europe, which challenges generally held assumptions about political borders, global/local flows and entanglements, and ways in which borders can be crossed. Lastly, HANNAH SCHILLING (Berlin) presented her research on young precarious workers in Abijan, Ivory Coast. According to the speaker, global sociology frequently makes use of inherently Eurocentric concepts, an example of which can be found in its conceptualization of labor as if it had only one definition.

The 8th BGHS Annual Seminar concluded with a roundtable discussion of the initial question of whether or not we are „done with Eurocentrism.“ All in all, there seemed to be a general consensus reached by the end of the discussion that, as BASHIR's keynote speech had already put it, „Eurocentrism is not a problem to be shed, but something to be discussed.“ Thus, both an awareness of Eurocentrism and an openness to reflect on how it can affect our lenses of inquiry seem to be the most practical approaches in coming to terms with it. Though radically diverse in their geographical scope as well as with regard to their respective empirical approaches – ranging from local land-rights activism to the international policy-making arena –, the talks presented over the course of the conference provided ample evidence that Eurocentrism has anything but lost its impact on contemporary inquiries within the humanities and social sciences.

Conference overview:

Keynote Lecture: Modernity and Eurocentrism: Twin Sisters Revisited
Angelika Eppele (Bielefeld, Germany)

Panel 1 – Eurocentrism and the Academy
Feminism Otherwise: Intersectionality be-

² Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Trans. Steven Rendall. Berkeley 1984.

yond Occidentalism

Julia Roth (Bielefeld, Germany)

Perspectives for History Teaching beyond Eurocentrism

Philipp Bernhard (Augsburg, Germany)

Studying the Indian Society in Western Way: Evaluating the Theoretical Models Adopted by Indian Sociologist

Anita Misra Shukla (Noida, India)

Petrified Worldviews. Eurocentristic Legacy in Academic Knowledge Bases

Beate Löffler (Duisburg-Essen, Germany)

Panel 2: Religion and Ethnicity in Conversation

Of Eurocentric Orders and Divisions: Reflections on „Race“ and „Religion“

Luis Manuel Hernández Aguilar (Frankfurt, Germany) / Zubair Ahmad (Berlin, Germany)

Dancing Indigeneity: Representations of Australian and Indigenous Australian Identity and Culture in Dance Performance and Dance Historical Texts

Luke Forbe (Independent Scholar)

Turning Away from Eurocentrism: Transnational Orientation toward Religion and Ethnicity

Thien-Huong T. Ninh (California Polytechnic State University, USA)

The Concept of „Indigenous Peoples“: Eurocentrism Redux

Tathagato Ganguly (Hyderabad, India)

Keynote Lecture: Eurocentrism and Islam: Space, Time, and the Intellectual Politics of Cultural Essentialism

Shahzad Bashir (Stanford University, USA)

Panel 3 – Politics and International Policy

Why Words Matter: Understanding the Black Box of Chinese Foreign Aid

Marina Rudyak (Heidelberg, Germany)

Alternative Approaches to International Development Agenda

Juan Manuel Delgado Rascón (Rey Juan Carlos University, Spain)

Cultural Meanings of Nature: Local Identities and Empowerment Practices in the Context of

Agrofuel Production. The Case of Colombia
Pilar Ramírez Gröbli (Bern, Switzerland)

Panel 4: Memories, Discourses, and Narratives

Narratives on 1989: Towards a Global Perspective by Comparing Protests in Leipzig and Beijing

Daniel Palm (Bremen, Germany)

Eurocentrism as a Model for Post-Colonial Ukraine?

Oleksandr Svetlov (Ukrainian Academy of Sciences, Ukraine)

Being Conscious of One's Past: An Approach to Historical Learning in a Non-European Context

Hendrikje Grunow (Konstanz, Germany)

Beyond Bipolarity? Rise and Fall of the Argentine Third Position (1947-1950)

Mirko Petersen (Bielefeld, Germany)

Keynote Lecture: Geographies of Risk: Environmental Violence and the Global South

Hsuan L. Hsu (University of California, Davis, USA)

Photo Exhibition and Reception: Art Begins in Streets. Art Lives in Streets

An Exhibition of Photos by Wilfried Raussert (Bielefeld, Germany)

Panel 5 – Semantics and Interpretation

Eurocentrism in the Historiography of Israeli Literature: Is There a Levantine Literary Tradition?

Judith Müller (Ben Gurion University of the Negev, Israel)

In Love in East Asia: A Sketch on the Semantics of Love in Japan and China

Justus Heck (Bielefeld, Germany)

Knowledge about the „Orient“ between Voice and Scripture: The Expedition to Felix Arabia (1761–67)

Mirjam Hähnle (Basel, Switzerland)

Keynote Lecture: The Colonial Methodology of Development Studies and Post-Colonial Alternatives

Aram Ziai (Kassel, Germany)

Panel 6 – Ethnographic Engagements

Deportations of Malians from African Countries: The Missing Link

Susanne Schultz (Bielefeld, Germany) / Al-mamy Sylla (ISFRA Bamako, Mali)

Re-mapping Europe: Fieldnotes from the French-Brazilian Border

Fabio Santos (Berlin, Germany)

Health and Culture beyond Eurocentrism: African Belief in Spiritual Attacks and Illness Only Curable by Traditional Medicine

Adetayo Olorunlana (Okada, Nigeria)

Working with Concepts: Conceptualizing Work

Hannah Schilling (Berlin, Germany)

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