

Provincializing Europe? Potential and Pitfalls of (Non-) Western Approaches to History

Veranstalter: Prof. Dr. Alf Lütke; Sebastian Jobs M.A., Universität Erfurt

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Bericht von: Johanna Lober / Silvan Niedermeier, Erfurt

Since its publication in 2001, Dipesh Chakrabarty's highly acclaimed book „Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference“ has become a focal point of the ongoing debate on how to approach and write post-colonial history. In his work, Chakrabarty emphasizes the historian's need to acknowledge the contradiction between the post-colonial experience and the persistence of Western categories in scholarly explanations of post-colonial modernity. As Chakrabarty points out: „European thought is at once both indispensable and inadequate in helping us to think through the experiences of political modernity in non-Western nations, and provincializing Europe becomes the task of exploring how this thought ... may be renewed from and for the margins.“¹

The international workshop „Provincializing Europe? Potential and Pitfalls of (Non-) Western Approaches to History“, which was organized by Alf Lütke and Sebastian Jobs on behalf of the „Arbeitsstelle Historische Anthropologie“ of the Max-Planck-Institute of History at the University of Erfurt, sought to explore potentials and limits of conceptualizing and writing history after the post-colonial turn. The workshop took place on June 10th/11th 2005 in Erfurt and was supported by the University of Erfurt and the joint interdisciplinary Graduate School „Mediale Historiographien: Media of History - History of Media“ of the Universities of Weimar, Erfurt and Jena.

In his introductory remarks, Alf Lütke pointed out that it is Chakrabarty's notion of the paradox of „inadequate but indispensable“ that in his opinion indicates „a state of historical disciplines beyond the post-colonial turn.“ While claiming and signalling distance from previous master-narratives, the contradiction of „inadequate but indispensable“ al-

so reveals the existing „uncertainty of historians' about their own craft.“ In this respect, the workshop searched for potentials and limits of current approaches to history with a focus on spaces „in between' the polarity of 'western' and 'non-western' views“. From their respective theoretical and regional focus, the interdisciplinary contributions to the workshop reflected the attempt to conceptualize and, even more, to put such program into practice. As Alf Lütke put the central question of the workshop: „How to present history's case(s) in appealing forms that not only preserve but reveal complexities, ruptures, and also 'otherness'?“

In her contribution „Civilization and its Discontents: (Middle) Eastern against Western Discourses?“ Birgit Schäbler (University of Erfurt) approached the project of „Provincializing Europe“ by rethinking the „Western“ concept of civilization within the conceptual frame of modernity as a „global and conjunctural phenomenon“. According to her, discourses on civilization emerge from „encounters with Others“, which are constituent for global modernity itself, understood not as the expansion and repetition of the European experience but as a creative process of appropriation and transformation that achieves self-authentication through demarcation from the „other“. Birgit Schäbler illustrated this point by analyzing a 19th century debate on the relationship between „sciences“ and Islam held between the Orientalist Ernest Renan and the prominent Muslim Jamal al-Din al-Afghani. In his response to Renan's postulation of the incompatibility of Islamic religion with „European sciences“, al-Afghani drew on the enlightenment notion of universal civilization, stating that the Arab world would, like all nations, eventually convert to „civilized society“, not least of all with the help of religious education. As Schäbler noted, al-Afghani's response reflected the struggle for „self-authentication“ by a new group of reformist Muslim intellectuals that emerged from the „double-pressure“ of autocratic governments and strong European influence in the Middle East. She then compared this debate

¹ Chakrabarty, Dipesh: *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton 2000, S. 16.

with a second discourse on „Islamic sciences“ arising a hundred years later with the first Noble prize awarded to a Muslim scientist. This debate lacks any reference to the concept of universal civilization. Instead, Islamic religion is now presented as the only true promoter of a holistic and spiritual concept of sciences, which is superior to the materialistic compartmentalization of Western scholarship. According to Schäßler, this new language signals the tendency among Muslim intellectuals to reassert their otherness *against* „Western civilization“. An „utterly destructive“ articulation of discontent that reflects „one of the sad parts“ of post-colonial modernity, resulting from a century of frustrated expectations in the Middle East.

In his comment Sebastian Conrad (Free University of Berlin) built a bridge between Eastern discontent voiced in the late 19th century and the more recent rejection of Western civilization by Islamistic fundamentalism. As he pointed out, the high time of Western imperialism not only triggered the search for „alternative modes of modernization“ within the universal tradition of enlightenment and a beginning revival of Islamic religion, but also already bore the longing for „alternatives to modernity“.

Denis Laborde (Centre d'Ethnologie Française, Paris) presented an analysis of the state of his own field of ethnomusicology before and after the post-colonial turn. He reflected on the implications of the ethnomusicologist's scientific strategies and his/her practice of rating and classifying music and connecting music to questions of identity. Recapitulating the foundation of ethnomusicology, Laborde noted a „desire to absorb and understand the world's musical diversity“ as the starting point of his discipline. This desire resulted in „writing down the tunes of the world“ by translating them into the Western musical grammar and saving these „texts“ in collections and museums. Ethnomusicologists adopted an evolutionary theory that claimed an interrelation between musical scales and the society's state of development. From the 1970s on, some ethnomusicologists, such as Tim Rice, went beyond studying „about music“ by studying „music itself“. Here, the researcher plays the informant's music with

his/her „own hands“ in order to understand „what music is“. A „tactile, kinaesthetic domain of sensation and understanding“ is added to the researcher's work. Finally, Laborde asked, what actually happens when representatives of the „music of the world“ enter into the Western „World of music“ on the condition of respecting „Western listening characteristics“ by practising so-called „World Music“? Does the entrance of the „voiceless“ into Western genres of music confirm Fukuyama's notion of the „end of history“?

In his comment, Jürgen Martschukat (University of Erfurt) asked if there might be a hidden longing for authenticity in Laborde's interpretation of „World Music“, which repeats the colonialist's romantic gaze on the „Other“ and thereby reinforces Western dominance. As he argued, referring to West African Hip-Hop, African youths incorporate Western musical styles and technology into their youth-culture, thereby combining traditional African music with Western modes of musical production. These practices of „Aneignung“ should not be understood as an indicator for identity-crisis, but rather as strategies of „acculturation“ where historical subjects are appropriating Western modes into their own contexts, thereby making themselves „a home“ in a globalized world.

In her presentation „Holocaust: Historiography under the spell of words“ Alexandra Przyrembel (University of Göttingen) reflected on Chakrabarty's question as to whether there are (past) experiences that cannot be captured by the historical discipline. Investigating the historiography of the Holocaust, Przyrembel asked: Is it possible to show the „otherness“ of Holocaust experiences? As she argued, German historical writing on the Holocaust has established two fundamental narratives that fail to reflect and respect the difference between the experiences of the past and the historian's own stand-point. Following a teleological approach, the Holocaust is frequently presented as the final point of a linear development. Przyrembel also referred to a certain „leaning on environmental metaphors“ like „wave“ and „flood“ that are integrated into the story of anti-Semitic violence during the Holocaust.² Those metaphors es-

² Przyrembel mentioned Friedrich Meinecke's „Die

establish a picture of sudden tremor which appears to be the result of „natural forces“ rather than the consequence of individual acts of violence. The second narrative claims to be able to reconstruct the perpetrators' acts by the „accurate view“ of the historian.³ These examples stand in sharp contrast to works like Mark Roseman's „emotional“ and „angry“ book, „The Past in Hiding“.⁴ As Przyrembel criticized, despite earlier debates on the limits of representing the Holocaust, German historiography still adheres to the illusion of being able to „explain and reconstruct“ the Holocaust. Historians should accept, that a history of the Holocaust cannot be ultimately told by relying on cause-effect logic.

Commenting on Przyrembel's presentation, Eve Rosenhaft (University of Liverpool and Bochum) recommended that an adequate representation of the Holocaust requires the author's explicit reflection on his/her own position along with the integration of his emotional reaction towards the experiences of historical actors into the process of writing history. Rosenhaft stressed the importance of the very subjective feeling of being „surprised“ by the sources as one important way of „coming face to face with the difference“, thus giving credit to the „otherness“ of voices from the past.

From a social sciences approach to history, Roy Bin Wong's (University of Los Angeles) contribution „Writing History of a 'Non-Western' Setting: China in the 17th and 18th Centuries“ acknowledged the „inadequacy“ of the European experience as a „general guide“ for writing history in a post-colonial context. His central question was how the social sciences with their „tradition of assumed universality“ can find new ways of explaining historical change in a world where „Hegelian history is no longer persuasive“. In his brief sketch of the Chinese political economy from the late imperial state to the 1970s, Wong showed that China's economic growth cannot only be explained by increased access to new technologies within the context of globalizing capitalism. The specific strategies implemented by the communist state in order to modernize the Chinese economy reveal an interesting continuity with earlier patterns of economic reforms of the late Chinese empire. In

explaining economic growth in Asia, Wong argued in favour of a „path-depending“ approach that allows for similarities with European patterns of change but, does not take them as model for universal explanation. He urged for the creation of a new social sciences theory that is able to account for different and context-specific roads to modernity, yet does not completely give up the claim to universal explanatory power. According to Wong, a particular challenge for contemporary social sciences lies in the fact that conceptual categories are always bound to the language in which they emerge and can not simply be translated. Wong closes by urging for the generation of theoretical concepts that are transferable into different contexts and yet allow for a general level of comparison, thereby bringing us closer to the project of „Provincializing Europe“. In his comment, Reinhard Zöllner (University of Erfurt) cautioned that Wong's last point of „cross-referencing on a conceptual level“ implies the challenge of „creating an interculturally acceptable, impartial referential language“. He suggested the perspective of „world history“ that acknowledges the interrelation of human experiences and delineates „those crucial nodes“ that mark the parting of different paths of development.

In his own contribution „Genealogies and Translation“, Dipesh Chakrabarty (University of Chicago) pointed out that there are „multiple Europes to provincialize“. Provincializing Europe primarily means to take on a critical stance, depending on one's theoretical background, particular position and geographical place. Writing from within the perspective of the Indian middle class, Chakrabarty's own objective is to „provincialize“ an idealized image of Europe that functions as the prototype of political modernity within India.

deutsche Katastrophe“ (Meinecke, Friedrich: Die deutsche Katastrophe: Betrachtungen und Erinnerungen. Wiesbaden 1946) and Peter Longerich's „Politik der Vernichtung“ (Longerich, Peter: Politik der Vernichtung. Eine Gesamtdarstellung der nationalsozialistischen Judenverfolgung. München 1998).

³Przyrembel presented an analysis of Dieter Pohl's study on German killing action in Stanislaw: Pohl, Dieter: Hans Krüger - der „König von Stanislaw“. In: Mallmann, Klaus-Michael; Paul, Gerhard (Hg.): Karrieren der Gewalt: Nationalsozialistische Täterbiographien. Darmstadt 2004, S. 134-144.

⁴Roseman, Mark: The past in hiding. London [u.a.] 2000.

His inquiry into the history and use of modern political theory reveals the tension between a „desire to be context free“ and the inevitable „context-specificity“, in which conceptual thoughts are developed. In fact, no social science concept expressed in prose (as opposed to the „universal languages“ of the physical and mathematical sciences) can become totally universal, because „prose always ties it back to a particular history“. The question therefore is: How does the European origin of modern political theory matter for the application of political concepts to other contexts? And: If the desire for universal applicability is not denied, how can we then think of the universal without prescribing it? Referring to the Marxist discussion of labour as an abstract concept that can never find true correspondence in the real world, Chakrabarty stated: „One needs the universal to think, but there is never a concrete object that is universal“. He then suggested getting at „particular histories“ by looking at the multiple ways historical phenomena are connected with their specific past(s). Here, Chakrabarty brought Heidegger’s notion of „dwelling“ into play. By this metaphor he refers to the various possibilities of how to be in the world by relying on already existing settings. In parallel, the practice of writing history should alert to the problem of translation by employing Foucault’s notion of genealogy. Genealogy alludes to both changing contexts and, hence, changing meanings of categories over time. Accordingly, the history of categories has to be made part of the explanation of historical events.⁵

In a more general comment on Chakrabarty’s book „Provincializing Europe“, Stefan Berger (University of Manchester) pointed out three sets of questions to clarify the challenge of „Provincializing Europe“ for the historical discipline. Firstly, he asked for Chakrabarty’s definition of „historicism“. Does it follow the Rankean notion of historicism (dt. „Historismus“) or Popper’s use of the word (dt. „Historizismus“)? Moreover, he suggested that staggist theories of history are visible „within Europe itself“ as in the binary distinction of Western European „progressiveness“ vs. Eastern European „backwardness“. Finally, Berger applied Chakrabarty’s critique on West-

ern universalism to the concept of the „nation“, claiming the need for liberating history from the meta-narrative of the nation-state.

In the final session „Provincializing Europe‘- Nothing but Exceptions?“, Julika Funk (University of Erfurt) and Philipp Müller (University of Erfurt and Bauhaus-University Weimar) presented two statements reflecting the implications of Chakrabarty’s claim to „Provincialize Europe“ in their own field of study.

In her „Statement on Fetishism“ Julika Funk showed how the discursive history of the concept of fetishism in Europe reveals itself as „a story of how Europe provincializes itself“. From the very beginning the concept of ‘fetishism’ shows up in a twofold connotation: On the one hand there is an astonished, fascinated look at the African culture. But on the other hand the concept of fetishism appears as a very Eurocentric problem. Europeans were irritated about the fetishes and described them as objects of minor value accidentally chosen for sacral objects. Starting with Enlightenment, fetishism occurs in western discourses as a „mere picture becoming available for inner European battles“. Here, fetishism serves as a strategy of „othering“. In Sexology and Psychoanalysis fetishism appears as specific construction of an „‘otherness’ in between the European self“. Funk concludes that the history of fetishism therefore opens up a space of „hybrid entanglement“ that might be interesting for notions of identity.

In his statement, Philipp Müller substantiated the need of „provincializing the Old-Europe and its modernity“. He reflected upon this exercise by challenging two aspects central to Western scientific thought: Max Weber’s dictum of the „disenchantment of the world“ and the notion of „time“. Discussing the former, he argued that Weber’s assumption of a rise of rationality simply neglects the magic dimension of European modernity. As can be seen in the analysis of institutions such as the police, press and district courts, historians fre-

⁵ A proposal that touches upon the „Begriffsgeschichte“ as proposed by Reinhart Koselleck. (Comp.: Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland. Hrsg. von Otto Brunner, Werner Conze und Reinhart Koselleck (8 Bde.), Stuttgart 1972-1997).

quently craft a story of increasing control that neglects „magic dimensions“ because it fails to recognize the institutions' desire to invent their myths of origins that becomes visible in their extraordinarily symbolic effort to create own traditions and histories. Discussing the historians' notion of time, Müller claimed the need to „pluralize time itself and ground it in life practices“, thus alluding to multiple temporalities. According to him, the crucial question is how to dissociate oneself from the production of linearity that is inherent in the logic of written texts. He suggested historians organize text in a „different order“ that „subverts the illusionary identity of narrative and history“.

The workshop took place in an extraordinarily open and thought-provoking atmosphere. Its interdisciplinary contributions provided a broad forum for an intensive reflection on the current state of the historical discipline. Taking Dipesh Chakrabarty's call for „Provincializing Europe“ as a starting point, two major questions crystallized as the core of the discussion, which might also inspire further investigation. Firstly, how can we, as historians, grasp the „otherness“ of non-Western experiences in the process of writing history? As the contributors suggested, accounting for „difference“ requires self-reflection on the part of historian about his/her own ideological, cultural and emotional involvement and the acknowledgment of the craft's methodological limits. And secondly, how should we „provincialize“ the „Europeanness“ of concepts and theories in social sciences and humanities? The workshop stressed perspectives that emphasize the contextual embeddedness of historical categories. However, as Chakrabarty put it, these perspectives do not deny the existence of the „universal“, understood as „something generally human in all of us“.

Footnotes:

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