

Budde, Gunilla; Conrad, Sebastian; Janz, Oliver (Hrsg.): *Transnationale Geschichte. Themen, Tendenzen und Theorien*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2006. ISBN: 3-525-36736-8; 320 S.

**Rezensiert von:** Michael Geyer, Department of History, University of Chicago

### Transnational History – The New Consensus

First off, I would like to join the homage to Jürgen Kocka who is honored with the present volume for a life-time of successfully pushing his own historical research and writing in ever new directions, and for making students, colleagues, friends – as well as bureaucracies and funding agencies – do the same. Of course, moving on, developing and incorporating new ideas and approaches is what research is all about. But theory and practice rarely jive as well as they do in the case of the honoree.

The challenge for the illustrious group of well-wishing authors consisted in connecting their own work with the current excitement about transnational history. Some authors approach this task with more enthusiasm than others, and some insist that nothing is ever new under the sun (and that they've been right there all along). However, the striking feature of the entire volume is how consensual the notion of transnational history has become over the last few years. Most everyone, it seems, agrees on the basic presupposition that there is history „beyond the nation state“ and that this history is more than a history between nations.<sup>1</sup> That is, there is a history other than national and inter-national history; that this history mandates a „global“ or, in any case, grander-than-national horizon for thought and action; and that it makes a difference not simply in the way we „do“ history, but in the way we understand the past.

The emerging consensus is also suitably vague. We should, therefore, try to find out what is agreed upon in the current volume, even if and when we find a lot of backsliding. But the latter is the least of our problems. It

is the promiscuity of it all that may raise some eyebrows. For what we get is really three quite different things, all neatly tucked under the label of transnational history and happily cross-pollinating. The transnational consensus, as it emerges in the current volume, articulates, first, a new sense of going about history, which it shares with many other sub-fields. It suggests, second, a novel frame of reference for understanding the past and claims that familiar histories, like national histories, must be understood and will be told quite differently, if re-jigged in the new frame. Last but not least it gestures to a new practice – except that we run into a bit of a problem here. What transnational historians actually do, is not really represented well in the current volume, which leads us to query what this discrepancy might be all about.

Transnational history is part and parcel of a shifting sense of history or, perhaps more properly, of an shifting sense of what historians accept as legitimate subjects and methods. The protocol of what historians do, and what they cannot do, have been changing hugely and is commonly underestimated. Needless to say, there has been considerable debate on this matter. But the fact is that entire new subjects, practices, and explanatory strategies have come about over the last few decades. None of this is the doing of transnational history per se. But the latter has picked up these new trends and merged them in a distinct field of research, which is why historians who are only tangentially involved in the actual business of transnational history find so many resonances and may consider themselves part of it.

Undoubtedly, the most enticing element of transnational history is its sense of openness and experimentation. It is not quite that „anything goes,“ although it may look that way if we follow Hans-Ulrich Wehler's account in „Transnationale Geschichte – der neue Königsweg der historischen Forschung“. But certainly most everything is being tried in terms of subjects, methodologies, and even epistemologies. There is a distinctly experimental edge to the transnational study of the past that occasionally comes with a disregard for older scholarship and a lack of knowledge, if not dismissal, of intellectual traditions. But

<sup>1</sup> Osterhammel, Jürgen, *Geschichtswissenschaft jenseits des Nationalstaats. Studien zur Beziehungsgeschichte und Zivilisationsvergleich*, Göttingen 2001; Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation. Questioning Narratives of Modern China*, Chicago 1995.

---

older scholarship and intellectual traditions have not been kind to transnational actors and agents, which have been around for a long time without being noticed. Therefore, opening up space for them without hemming them in by conventions requires genuine effort. Typically, two of the main proponents (of otherwise quite different versions) of transnational history in Germany, Sebastian Conrad and Jürgen Osterhammel, refuse, and make a virtue of refusing, to make over transnational history into a theory or even into a unified approach beyond insisting that it must uncover „connections and constellations, which transcend national borders.“<sup>2</sup> In the same vein, a leading French scholar in the field, Pierre-Yves Saunier, insists that transnational history must not peddle a new paradigm, but should be „adopting a perspective [or] angle“ by virtue of paying attention to „movements and forces that cut across national borders.“<sup>3</sup> In the first instance, transnational history follows these movements, forces, and subjects to wherever they may lead – and this occasionally turns into quite an adventure. The resistance against a „paradigmatic“ narrowing of the scope is partly due to a post-postmodern fear of sounding faddish. In part, though, it reflects a puzzlement over, and an on-going inquiry into, who these actors are and how best to tell their history.

Such open-ended journeys – surprisingly often into genuinely uncharted domains – are the main reasons why transnational history has caught on. Of course, as with Columbus’s discovery, the new world is an old one for those who have been toiling there all their lives, as historians of migration will readily attest. Also, as Emma Rothschild notes in „Arcs of Ideas: International History and Intellectual History“ and as Margrit Pernau has observed elsewhere, these discoveries do come at a cost.<sup>4</sup> Still, the excitement prevails that

there are worlds across borders who have been absent from history and whose presence changes what history can do. At stake here is the amalgamation of nation, history, and the West. Although transnational history is many things to many people, it does not trust this amalgam. It may reject paradigms, but it sure has a bone of contention.

Most of our authors agree that nations and their subject(s) operate within the „context“ – this would not be my choice of word, but it is the word of choice for many of them – of transnational movements, forces, and circuits. If the nation, irrespective of its continuing importance, is no longer considered to be second nature or is no longer refashioned into a second skin, the very concept of the nation, the nation-form, is opened up for renewed questioning. James Sheehan, in his essay „Paradigm Lost? The ‘Sonderweg’ Revisited,“ explains quite brilliantly the longing for and unease with the nation in postwar German historiography and the normative postures that informed the postwar idea of German exceptionalism. In a similar vein, Moshe Zimmermann’s essay „Die transnationale Holocaust-Erinnerung“ highlights the inherent tension between singularizing the Holocaust and generalizing genocide history. The resulting impasse is more than historiographic. It indicates that the nation (and its memory) is always already in question, because it collides with and interacts in a wider world. If the Sonderweg generation took the nation to be quite self-evidently insular, they could have known that it takes walls to insulate the nation and its memories. In this world, questions of norms and values, of normativity, do not emerge from isolation, but from interaction. Therefore, it is one thing to see „wall jumpers“ do their work – and a lot of historians simply like their traveling and transgressing histories. It is another one to wonder and to reflect on, what kind of work these cross-border actors and agents are doing because much as nations they are never innocent or self-evidently good. The one thing that will not work is to wish them away.

The second feature is a heightened sensi-

---

<sup>2</sup> Conrad, Sebastian; Osterhammel, Jürgen, Einleitung, in: Conrad, Sebastian; Osterhammel, Jürgen (Eds.), *Das Kaiserreich transnational. Deutschland in der Welt 1871-1914*, Göttingen 2004, pp. 7-27, here p. 14.

<sup>3</sup> Saunier, Pierre-Yves, *Going Transnational? News from down under*. Transnational History Symposium, Canberra, Australian National University, September 2004, in: *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung* 31,2 (2006), pp. 118-131, here p. 119.

<sup>4</sup> Pernau, Margrit, *Global History. Wegbereiter für einen neuen Kolonialismus?*, in: *history.transnational*

---

web-forum, at: <<http://geschichte-transnational.clio-online.net/forum/id=572&type=article>>, accessed 19. July 2006.

vity to agency, the (relative) capacity of individuals and collectives to act. What is gone for good are the categorical „black boxes“ of postwar historiography, such as nation, corporation, class, or gender (conspicuously absent from this volume) that were propelled through history by forces only social scientists and historians were able to divine. The quest for identifiable, human agency has proven to be a strong solvent for these postwar „engines of history.“ The „container“-nation has disappeared from the scene, much as the social forces that accelerated ever upward (like the proletariat) or, as the case may be, ran into proverbial walls (like the German bourgeoisie). Old-style modernization theory was a casualty of this upheaval long before transnational history came into play. In his essay „Cultural History“, Peter Jelavich explains admirably the epistemic break that arrived with cultural history. Partha Chatterjee, in „A Brief History of Subaltern Studies“, and David Sabean, in „Reflections on Microhistory“ point to the other two main inspirations that moved history beyond the age of mechanical propulsion.

World systems theory followed much the same pattern, except that it had the logic of capitalism and empire, the world-system, wield supreme power and flushed everything into its metropolitan, semi-peripheral, or peripheral space. In the meantime, neither capitalism nor empire have disappeared, but the turn to cross-border traffic has rather dislodged – and, at the very least, complicated – previous certainties about capitalism, empire, and the course of modern history. If, as Chris Bayly has argued, the industrial revolution follows, rather than precedes, the globalizing revolution of pilgrims, merchants and empires, the order of the world as we know it is turned upside down.<sup>5</sup> If the movements of people across the globe are not simply taken as an abstract pattern, but as the pursuit of labor and livelihood over grand distances, the pushes and pulls – the axes of power and exchange as Natalie Zemon Davis puts it in her essay „What is Universal about History?“ – of capitalism and empire assume a more truthful place. People, things, images, and ideas mo-

ving across borders expose „cracks in categories like gender, class, and nation“ (Jelavich, p. 230) and opens up possibilities for a more generative history that studies social bonds and identities in the making. The very sense of nation changes in the presence of migrants, as has been demonstrated in abundance lately. The logic of capitalism and empire teams with people and ideas which are difficult to contain in their respective spaces. As a result, the eighties rage to de-construct has rather given way to a fuller and richer exploration of the capacity, and its limits, of people (and things) to act; of their ability to harness collective resources; and the challenge to set up viable life-worlds and rules of conduct to live by. The wager of transnational history in all of this is that even the most parochial and inward-turned worlds are imbricated in other worlds of action and imagination that range beyond parish or nation.

Jelavich also points to new thought on change and to a new curiosity about the ways and the directions in which people or nations „develop“ or „modernize“ – and the reasons why, in being pulled together through interaction, they come to diverge so much. Where an older approach discerns force-fields and vectors of change (and hence presumes a stable universe of fields), Jelavich, following Marshall Sahlins, looks at the moment of collision between words. His salient point is that people come under pressure to change when the way they understand the world (the linguistic/symbolic codes they live by) and the worlds they encounter diverge.<sup>6</sup> But in changing they also preserve what they got. Much of the transnational debate is over the „stickiness“ of social values, norms, and imaginaries in the cross-traffic of people, goods, and ideas. The grand surprise is not only that there are other than European modernities, but how persistent people are in preserving their field of vision or horizon of experience even, and especially, when they change and transform themselves.<sup>7</sup> They „develop“, but do not converge. Convergence toward a normative modernity, it turns out, has not happened, not least because it failed to deliver the goods

<sup>5</sup> Bayly, C.A., „Archaic“ and „Modern“ Globalization in the Eurasian and African Arena, ca. 1750-1850, in: Hopkins, A.G. (Ed.), *Globalization in World History*, New York 2002.

<sup>6</sup> Ziemann, Benjamin, Überlegungen zur Form der Gesellschaftsgeschichte angesichts des 'cultural turn', in: *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 43 (2003), S. 600-616.

<sup>7</sup> Sahlins, Marshall, *Islands of History*, Chicago 1985.

---

when it was tried. Difference and differentiation matter, because they prove to be the more successful „development.“ A whole world of presumptions over development, modernization, and global convergence has fallen apart – and given way to a heightened interest in the conditionality and multi-directionality of transnational interaction.

Transnational history explores the interface of connected worlds and the mediators that cut across them. It studies how things, like movies, straddle different worlds, are picked up, rejected, adapted, and, not uncommon at all, condemned while being appropriated even across enemy lines. Mickey Mouse in the Third Reich, Hollywood in Japan, Tokyo (plus Moscow and Paris) in Shanghai – this circulating „vernacular modernism“ is the stuff modernity is made off.<sup>8</sup> Alternatively, historians have turned to technology, pretty much with the same questions about the lines of transfer/reception/adaptation.<sup>9</sup> The latter is never an easy or self-evident process. It is always fraught with tensions. (Japanese cinema in China was as attractive as it was contested, much as some of the products of the Third Reich in occupied and neutral Europe.) The persistence of cross-cutting disturbances has become the very substance of transnational history. Its main wager is that such disturbances ripple across regions and cut across borders, where they had previously been seen as product of endogenous clashes over modernization.

No nation, not even presumably „first nations,“ generate modern ways of life from within, although all of them instantly historicize and, that is, nationalize modernization (to the ridiculous, but telling point that all modern inventions are ascribed to indigenous origins). The long and the short of this is that the development of nations is predicated on transnational interaction.<sup>10</sup> Such interacti-

on can be perceived both as threat and as opportunity. In any case, the exogenous perspective of transnational historiography competes with, and supersedes the genealogical principle that has defined history and historiography for so long.

Transnational history, in this sense, is not just another field to be added to national history. Rather, in exploring the disjunctures between inside and outside, it is poised to develop, not simply another perspective, but a different national history. For the time being, it rather amounts to a project with many loose ends than a distinct approach and it is more of an orientation than a paradigm. But this inchoate openness is also its main strength – and in that its current status resembles that of *Gesellschaftsgeschichte* forty years ago. Much as it was obvious then that society could not be negated as a subject of history, notwithstanding the entrenched values and practices of then prevailing historiography, it is quite as self-evident now that the nation is not a „monad“ or a „container“. Putting pressure on the transnational consensus, I would add that processes of remaking the body social and politic turn as much on the (exogenous) transactions between the nation and the world as on the osmosis between an (endogenous) past, present, and future.

This is where the jostling over frames of reference begins. The open question is how to turn a consensual perspective (that nations are part and parcel of an interdependent world) into particular research strategies that produce new insights. In my view, there are basically three ways to go about the task, all of which are exemplified in the present volume.

A first research strategy consists in exploring the transnational horizon of the nation. The vantage point here is from the inside out, that is, from the nation to the world, although outside influences may dent and fracture the interior lines of sight and action. This approach has been worked out most succinctly in US-American initiatives to „internationalize“ American history, which quickly drif-

---

<sup>8</sup> Hansen, Miriam, *The Mass Production of the Senses. Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism*, in: *Modernism/Modernity* 6,2 (1999), p. 59-77, and her forthcoming essay: *Vernacular Modernism. Tracking Cinema on a Global Scale*, in: Durovicova, Natasa; Newman, Kathleen E. (Eds.), *World Cinemas. Transnational Perspectives*, New York 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Adas, Michael, *Dominance by Design. Technological Imperatives and America's Civilizing Mission*, Cambridge 2006.

<sup>10</sup> Gourevitch, Peter, *The Second Image Reversed. The In-*

---

*ternational Sources of Domestic Politics*, in: *International Organization* 32 (1978), p. 881-912; Katznelson, Ira; Shefter, Martin (Eds.), *Shaped by War and Trade. International Influences on American Political Development*, Princeton 2002.

ted toward an exploration of social solidarities stretching across borders as well as the question of the American frontier.<sup>11</sup> The notion of the American nation as simultaneously a fiercely protective entity, as a global nation, and as a transnational *imaginaire* beyond the control of the United States is equally well established, if less acceptable to the more national historians.

Though lacking the programmatic focus of the American project, this approach is also at the center of transnational history in the German context. Typically, challenges have arisen over the very fact that Germans have reached way beyond their lands by way of travel and migration and, by the same token, that *Ausländer* have persistently and in significant numbers migrated into German lands. That Germany's prosperity depended, throughout the modern era, on the export of its goods is still not fully incorporated even into postwar histories. That German arts and knowledge traveled far and wide is now a more commonly accepted story, but the expulsion, flight, and sheer destruction – and the transnational survival – of knowledge and the arts, while increasingly well researched, is still treated very much as a separate story. That Germany reached into the world as an exceptionally violent force – in its colonies and metropolitan wars – is commonly accepted, although only infrequently linked to a transnational perspective.<sup>12</sup> Add to this that Germans over the past two centuries have had a particularly lively imagination of the world beyond the nation, ranging from the wholesale, cosmopolitan embrace of the world to a sense of superiority and supremacy (“*Am deutschen Wesen ...*”) and on to utter panic. All of this makes the transnational horizon of the nation an extraordinarily rich area of study and, so one would think, a significant aspect of the Ger-

man past; that is, significant not least in the sense that such cross-border projections shape the national project right into the everyday habitus, mentality and world pictures of ordinary Germans. The nation as a space of identity, we may conclude, always encompasses and incorporates the world.

The basic proposition of Germany as a „transnational nation“ seems unproblematic and even innocent. To be sure, we might want to debate the usefulness of post-colonial theorizing or the discovery of endless varieties of German orientalism (with or without Edward Said). We should be wondering more about the uneven cross-border reach of German loyalties and ethnic/racial identities in Europe and the Americas. We could even approach genuinely difficult questions such as the German role as a secondary and aspiring empire and corporate nation (and the tortured learning curve of a second-tier country). There is plenty of material for debate. But it is striking that, whatever the issue, these initiatives have sooner or later run into a brick wall. The truly strange thing about Germany is that the German lands and their peoples have been so deeply entangled in the world and, yet, Germans, and German historians at that, have such tremendous difficulties to come to terms with that fact and its consequences. Dieter Langewiesche in his essay, „Nationalismus – ein generalisierender Vergleich“, gives us a good sense of the ferocity with which the invulnerability and the untouchability of the nation has been written into the politics, as well as the history and memory, of the nation. Moreover, Germany's educated classes – and they are not the only ones – have traditionally had a very lively „global“ imagination that continuously implicated the entire world and, yet, they preferred to shelter the nation (and themselves) against it. They were, or so it appears, cosmopolitans without consequence.

I find this attitude exemplified in Heinz-Gerhard Haupt's essay „Historische Komparatistik in der internationalen Geschichtsschreibung“. The disjuncture between thought and action, so evident even in minor matters such as the controversy between comparative and transfer history and so abundant in the intellectual and political formulas of a preemptive evocation of the world, suggests

<sup>11</sup> Thelen, David, *The Nation and Beyond. Transnational Perspectives on United States History*, in: *Journal of American History* 86,3 (1999), p. 965-975; as well as: Bender, Thomas, *The Nation and Beyond. Transnational Perspectives on United States History. The Journal of American History* 86,3 (1999); Bender, Thomas (Ed.), *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*, Berkeley 2002; and his: *A Nation among Nations. America's Place in World History*, New York 2006.

<sup>12</sup> See, however, Frevert, Ute, *Europeanizing German History*, in: *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute* 36 (2005), p. 9-24.

---

to me that the issue at stake is less an in-ward turned parochialism or nationalism than a claustrophobic cosmopolitanism. While the phenomenon has been studied selectively, the entire complex will require further thought. For it seems that there is more at stake than a peculiar intellectual configuration, although the latter is well worth detailing. The blockage that mutes a cross-border imagination rather seems indicative for persistent and heightened turbulences along the material, social, and mental boundaries between inside and outside, between Germany and the world. With this in mind, moving from mere „perspective“ to a sustained argument about „national transnationalism“ seems to me an eminently worthy enterprise.

A second transnational research agenda deals with the question how to explain the rise of the nation-form as a global phenomenon in place after place – and why some nations come together, while others fall apart. The nation-form is, after all, among the few truly global phenomena. The question for transnational history is how to make sense of it. The wager is that the proliferation both of nation and state-building is best explained as a transnational process of learning, adaptation, competition, and legalization. With this research agenda, transnational history moves from the outside in. It makes no sense to think that all over the world the nation is created from within time and again. There must be more than a national story. Therefore, it is sensible to assume that exogenous „forces and movements“ condition the nation. But who and what are they? Markets, ideas, social practices, competition over resources, security? The debate on this matter is fierce – and it is a debate eminently worth having.<sup>13</sup>

Charles S. Maier’s reflections on the changing nature of territoriality, „Transformations of Territoriality, 1600-2000,“ lift this entire debate onto a new level. His contribution is one of the most important essays in the entire volume.<sup>14</sup> He suggests that we consider the crea-

tion and transformation of territorial regimes and, in this context, the rise and demise of the integral nation as the key force in modern history. At its apogee, roughly between the 1860s and 1970s, the nation state was both „identity“ and „decision“ space. It became the territory „to die for“ as Langewiesche puts it. Maier flags technology (railways) and the rise of industry as main factors of the nationalization process, although his approach is open to a variety of explanations. In my mind, a fuller version of the transformation of territoriality in the mid-nineteenth century – especially if we consider identity and decision space as the central features of a territorial regime dominated by nations – would have to figure in the rapid intensification and extensification, as well as the accelerated velocity, of interaction, to use the lingo of globalization theory.<sup>15</sup> Still, Maier’s notion of territoriality proves to be a significant advance in making sense of the rise of the nation in a global age.

Maier’s conceptualization instantly opens up a range of possibilities for thinking about the nation and transnationalism. Thus, it provides a frame of reference for Shulamit Volkov’s provocative essay „Jewish History: The Nationalism of Transnationalism.“ She sets herself up against a history that puts the diasporic experience of Jews at the center. By contrast, she points to the relentless nationalization of Jewish history emerging out of the transnational or „diasporic“ experience. The focus of modern Jewish history, even diasporic history, has become Israel. Her perspective from the outside in – from the diasporic „configuration“ onto the nation – is an immediately compelling one, even if it comes as somewhat of a shock for all those who would rather prefer to identify transnational with diasporic history, and certainly for all those who idealize diasporic and expatriate existence. The less well articulated double bind in Volkov’s ca-

---

lume, see also his: *Consigning the Twentieth Century to History. Alternative Narratives for the Modern Era*, in: *American Historical Review* 103,3 (2000), pp. 807-831; see also: Bright, Charles; Geyer, Michael, *Where in the World is America? The History of the United States in the Global Age*, in: Bender, Thomas (Ed.), *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*, Berkeley 2002, pp. 63-99.

<sup>15</sup> Held, David; McGrew, Anthony; Goldblatt, David; Perrotin, Jonathan, *Global Transformations. Politics, Economics and Culture*, Stanford 1999.

<sup>13</sup> Geyer, Michael, *Deutschland und Japan im Zeitalter der Globalisierung. Überlegungen zu einer komparativen Geschichte jenseits des Modernisierungs-Paradigmas*, in: Conrad, Sebastian; Osterhammel, Jürgen, *Das Kaiserreich transnational. Deutschland in der Welt 1871-1914*, Göttingen 2004, pp. 68-86.

<sup>14</sup> „Transformations of Territoriality 1600-2000“ in this vo-

se is that Israel cannot escape its precarious position in the Middle East, one of the crucial shatter-zones of empire.<sup>16</sup> And its nationalizing practice is difficult to fathom without the ties that bind Israel to the Jewish diaspora and the United States. Its nationalism emerges out of the diasporic experience of Jews and is sustained by Israel's transnational ties, we might say.

In his essay, „Imperien“, Jürgen Osterhammel offers a somewhat different take on territoriality, arguing that empire is the quintessential transnational actor and that nations should be seen as products of empire. To this end, he stretches the notion of empire to its breaking point, though not beyond what is now commonly accepted in a new imperial history.<sup>17</sup> The latter has come to conflate commercial, colonial, and market empire in what seems to me a British slight of hand. But Osterhammel's main point about the enduring importance of empire and the imperial origins of nations hits home. In relation to empire, the rise of nation states is a late and incomplete development. Moreover, the phenomenon of the nationalization of empires is a crucial element in the story, which is quite commonly underplayed in transnational history. The appreciation of the role of nationalizing empire began, above all, with a re-valuation of China. A more comprehensive history would have to account as well for Mexico, Brazil, Iran, India, and, above all, of Russia and their varieties of nationalization. It seems that empires (or fragments thereof) either transform into mega-nations or fall apart. It is in the European ambit, from the British to the Ottoman Empire, that empires have withered.

But what about Europe? Michael Mann, „Globalization, Macro-Regions and Nation-States,“ is right with his pithy observation: „Very little that is transnational is global“ (p. 28). Much of it is indeed regional and regional configurations and hierarchies remain remarkably stable over time. While Mann's brief essay is mainly concerned with the na-

tion as a product of globalization, his strongest suit is to remind us of the „clotted“ nature of the globalization process. Transnational interaction never spreads out evenly. Nothing is ever converging smoothly. Globalization induces inequalities – and regionalization is their first and foremost expression. As connectivity spreads across space, it also thickens or „clots.“ There is no more successful „clot“ than Europe or, possibly, the North-Atlantic seaboard. If we leave aside the ornery question of a North-Atlantic versus a (continental) European region, the question is what, analytically, do we do with this European entity. It can neither claim the identity and/or decision space of nations, nor is it an empire. Still, it exists as a discrete space. Thinking of Europe as „clotted“ sphere of action helps. The intensity and velocity of action matters in shaping the region. That such action includes war is worth recalling, because the obvious is often forgotten.

The essays by Hartmut Kaelble on „Europäische Geschichte aus westeuropäischer Sicht?“ and by Manfred Hildermeier on „Osteuropa als Gegenstand vergleichender Geschichte“ demonstrate the principle of clotting very nicely. Their most poignant insight is that spaces of actions generate both high levels of convergence, but also significant divergence – so much so that we can indeed speak of a western European „mental map“. However, it does not follow that we can speak of a northern, eastern and southern „map“ with quite the same confidence. In being pulled together through particularly dense and intense contact (Hildermeier points to „contagion“ as one of the more virulent forms of interaction), regions differentiate within, create their own internal peripheries, much as they set themselves apart from the rest of the world. That this rest of the world may begin in Kreuzberg as much as in the banlieus of Paris or the rust-belt in Lorraine/Saar/Luxembourg should not surprise, although it is often forgotten. By the same token, it is only sensible to think of such concentrated spaces of actions as places of connected, even if agonistic, memory, as Etienne François suggests in his essay „Europäische lieux de mémoire“.

The issue of internal peripheries leads us to a third and likely the most controversial,

<sup>16</sup> On the notion of the shatter zone: Engel, Ulf; Middell, Matthias, Bruchzonen der Globalisierung, globale Krisen und Territorialitätsregime. Kategorien einer Globalgeschichtsschreibung, in: *Comparativ* 15,5/6 (2005), pp. 5-38.

<sup>17</sup> Cain, P.J.; Hopkins, A.G., *British Imperialism, 1688-2000*, Harlow 2002.

---

transnational research strategy. Rather than setting the nation in relation to the world or vice versa, the approach questions and explores the degree to which the nation is able to secure and protect, and to set apart, its citizens. Accordingly, it proceeds to explore forces and movements – people, things, ideas, institutions, and regimes – that cut across nations and establish circuits that lift entire spheres of life out of their local/national context into another transnational world. Empires typically do that, as Osterhammel and others have demonstrated, but can we stretch the concept of empire so as to encompass all manner of transnational circuits? Is global capitalism really capable of empire, as Negri and Hardt have insisted?<sup>18</sup> Victoria de Grazia, in her essay on „Globalizing Commercial Revolutions“ is among those in the current volume who study transnational actors. She does so in a careful comparison of cross-border retailing by Woolworth and Wal-Mart (and Carrefour). In the transnational circuitry of Wal-Mart, China and Great Britain belong to the Wal-Mart „nation“, as it were, whereas Chicago (because of its minimum wage ordinances) never did and Germany has just been thrown out because its picky customers (trained by Aldi or Lidl in different, if class-specific modes of shopping) are too difficult to handle. Whether Wal-Mart is an American or actually a Chinese success story – or not just simply a transnational one – is yet another issue.

Whether or not Wal-Mart is transnational makes no difference when it comes to low-cost retailing that, under certain circumstances, drives other retailers out of business. The sheer force of transnational industry is most blatantly evident in the proliferation of rust-belts in Europe and North America in a world in which steel-production skyrockets. Hence, it is no surprise that the two essays on labor and on corporate culture, by Marcel van der Linden on „Transnationale Arbeitergeschichte“ and by Gerald Feldman on „Business History, Comparative History, and Transnational History“, speak most evocatively of the entire issue. Whichever way you turn, labor and management very visibly have become part of a transnational world of production. The crea-

tors of a *histoire croisée* may have had more sophisticated schemes of intersecting spheres and narratives in mind.<sup>19</sup> But the bottom line of an „entangled history“ is that „forces and movements“ beyond the control of nations interlace the seemingly autonomous unit of the nation, define or deny opportunities and options, and create material and cultural incentives for locals to act. For the most part you notice them only when the transnational „pie“ is no longer in the sky, but manifestly in your face – which is my way of saying that we should get real about transnationals and study them, historically and otherwise, rather than ventilate. This means also research into where they cause pain and humiliation and where they alleviate misery – and often do both at the same time. It turns out that colonial and post-colonial historians have often a far better understanding of this predicament than German and European ones, which suggests, once more, that the European metric may not be the most suitable one to explore transnational history even in Europe.

Lest we forget, „entanglement“ in this more practical sense is one of the oldest bones of contention in historiography. It is the operating principle behind one of the genuinely paradigmatic, modern theories, the notion of division of labor and of comparative advantage. World systems theory thrived on this set of theories, turning them up-side down, and so did theories of development and underdevelopment ever since the thirties. The explanatory complex of entanglement, division of labor and comparative advantage is also upfront and center in one of the fiercest and most pivotal debates in modern history. How to explain the historical rise of the West? And, by the same token, how to make sense of the historical decline of the East, in particular of China? This is the subject of Patrick O'Brien's stellar essay, „The Divergence Debate: Europe and China 1368-1846“. He revisits the seemingly interminable debate on how important the wealth generated in the Americas was for the relative advantage and advances of European (imperial) civilization. The answer requires comparison on a grand scale and it requires an

---

<sup>18</sup> Hardt, Michael; Negri, Antonio, *Empire*, Cambridge 2000.

<sup>19</sup> Werner, Michael; Zimmermann, Bénédicte, *Vergleich, Transfer, Verflechtung. Der Ansatz der histoire croisée und die Herausforderung des Transnationalen*, in: *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 29 (2002), pp. 607-636.

appraisal of the benefits of imperial entanglement. O'Brien's judicious assessment of this debate – its intellectual background and its current tenets – is a masterpiece of scholarship, which acknowledges his own shifting thought on the matter and, at the same time, opens up new lines of inquiry. He has come around to thinking that the critics of Max Weber have a point when they stress the import of transcontinental, American and Asian, entanglements in generating the European advantage. But in order to get there, the entire apparatus of anti-Weberian thought is also turned upside down – by revising the received wisdom about the backwardness of Asian economies, re-valuating the role of commerce and consumption (the so-called „industrious revolution“), and not least rethinking the notion of the industrial revolution itself as a relatively late development. If you want a standard for evaluating what transnational scholarship can do, this macro-historical debate with its many micro-historical tendrils in places all over the world is the best possible starting point. It is also a reminder that, for being so novel, the „transnational“ debate is actually quite old.

Where does this leave us? Transnational history, like *Gesellschaftsgeschichte* half a century ago, is not really a singular approach. It emerges from the experience and the recognition that the nation, any nation, makes only sense in its entanglements; that its citizens have regularly reached beyond its boundaries with irreversible and frequently catastrophic effects; and that even the most removed and elevated sovereigns have eventually been shaped and transformed by forces and movements that cut across the sovereign realm and reach deep into the national fabric. It took a while until the pretense of national autonomy crumbled in the metropolitan world. The entire enterprise is surely not helped by neo-liberal pundits, politicians, and bankers who see globalization everywhere, busily rewriting the Communist Manifesto into a neo-liberal manifest destiny: „All that is solid must melt into air.“ Either way, the entanglement of nation and world has become a vital and indispensable subject for historians.

Then again, this is where the consensus

ends and the excitement begins. There is a lot that is not in this volume, which is consensus history in the sense that it puts the nation within the frame of transnational formations – and works by flipping the nation and the transnation up-side down and sideways as it were. In contrast, transnational historians, who work the field, are fascinated by people and things that move – and move long-distances across borders. The absence, in this volume, of migration, of even so much of a gesture to those whose lived worlds stretch across borders, is hard to believe. Money, commodities, ideas and images, anything that circulates, do not figure much either, Rothschild's essay being the exception. That is, inasmuch as they are mentioned, they are not subjects in their own right, but play a role as they pertain to nations. The transnational history assembled in this volume is more interested in dykes and canals than in flows and currents. Whatever moves is suspect, or so it seems. More broadly, the entire arena of inter- and transnational institutions, regulations and practices is just barely touched. John Keane's quite perfunctory reflections, „Global Publics? Civil Society, Journalism and Democracy across Borders,“ do not do justice to the world of civil society actors such as old and new social movements, non-governmental organizations or, for that matter, journalists. The absence of civil society as transnational force is striking in a volume honoring Jürgen Kocka. I would have thought that transnationalizing civil society was one of his most productive and conceptually most daring departures.

Why movies and popular culture still have not really made it into either civil society or transnational history remains a riddle. War and terror appear only indirectly in the context of nationalism. Religious practices are completely absent, which is not to say that your average transnational historian is aware of them either. Extra-European history makes an appearance, but it cannot remotely be said that the empire writes back or, to cite Dipesh Chakrabarty's injunction, that Europe is provincialized.<sup>20</sup> Osterhammel remains the exception and his subtlety is easy to misread as

<sup>20</sup>Chakrabarty, Dipesh, *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton 2000.

---

confirmation of a Europe-centric status quo. In short, beyond the consensus on the project of transnational history, as professed in this volume, there is an actually existing and ongoing transnational historiography that tangibly and literally goes beyond the nation. It would take another review and another book to do this historiography justice. However, any such effort will want to take up George Iggers plea in his essay on „Modern Historiography from an Intercultural Perspective“ and Natalie Zemon Davis’s appeal in „What is Universal about History?“ to find truthful accounts of the past in multiple stories written from alternate, complementary and clashing, vantage points. All historians will do well adopting Davis’s admonition to the „global community of historians“ to speak truth to power, both secular and sacred.

HistLit 2006-4-032 / Michael Geyer über Budde, Gunilla; Conrad, Sebastian; Janz, Oliver (Hrsg.): *Transnationale Geschichte. Themen, Tendenzen und Theorien*. Göttingen 2006. In: H-Soz-u-Kult 11.10.2006.