



## Building on the Past Online Papers

### No. 7

Author: **Antonis Liakos**

Title: ***The Implied Canon of European History: Framework of Comparative Activities***

First publisher: Extensive form of this paper in: Neni Panourgia, George Marcus (eds.), *Ethnographica Moralia. Experiments in Interpretative Anthropology*, New York, Fordham University Press, 2008, 138-156

Notes: Paper to the Conference "*Comparative History in/on Europe. The state of the art*", Budapest, Central European University, November 9-11, 2007

# *The Implied Canon of European History: Framework of Comparative Activities*

Antonis Liakos

Comparative history is part of a broader practice of comparative activities, which began in the last decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in certain parts of Europe and has grown to embrace the rest of the world ever since.<sup>1</sup> These activities were stimulated by the Enlightenment, nation building, capitalism, technology, emigration, and every movement which was not confined to local and national borders. History was one of these comparative activities, even before it was conscious of being comparative. My argument is that comparison is not a method *à la carte* but a given and even coercive framework which was historically formed and imposed from within the historical discipline since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. What I am arguing is that together with historical theory and method, and inside the description of the world past, a *canon* of world history was offered as an implied code. Something like a worm into the apple! This implied canon imposed a hierarchy of nations and civilizations on the concept of history, the consequence of which was that each nation, in writing its own history, was constrained to deal with the problem of its alluded place in the mental global map. Through encountering the *canon*, a comparative framework was established, which produced and determined the scope and the meanings of comparison inside national knowledge, and aspired to transnational dialogue.

## 1. *The implicit comparison of national self-representation*

The term “history” is a linguistic and cultural indicator of diverse ways of understanding social temporality, which differed over time and in various parts of the world. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century the term has acquired a stricter meaning, epitomizing principles and values which had been elaborated in Western Europe up to then. Historicism transcended German borders and became a philosophy, theory and method of history. As a consequence, what we now recognize as History has spread across national cultures over the past two centuries. It took the form of written text and not of oral stories; it was written in prose and not in verse, it described linear and not circular time; it aimed at verisimilitude and not fiction; it constructed narratives which

---

1. Deborah Cohen, Maura O’ Connor (eds.), *Comparison and History, Europe in cross-national perspectives*, Routledge, London 2004.

claimed evidentiality; it used footnotes and provided references for its sources; it conformed to the norms and the standards of historical research and so on. This type of writing has displaced and substituted all previous historiographical traditions. Although elements of historical writing, such as the criticism of sources, the sequence of cause-effect relationships, etc., were common to Arab and Chinese historiography, there was an epistemic rupture visible in particular national historiographies. This rupture occurred in some countries during the formation of nation-states and the era of colonization in the 19th and the first half of the 20th century, and in some others during the post-colonial nation-building in the post-World War II period.

While each period has its specificities, they also share some common elements. The encounter between the different ways of writing history and their consequences for the formation of historical consciousness is worthy of study. The formation of nation-states was the most efficient vehicle for the worldwide transplantation of the Western concept of history. The diffusion of historiography runs parallel to the diffusion of the novel. Since the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, “the novel arises just about everywhere as a compromise between West European patterns and local reality. The abstract formal patterns of Western novel construction meet the raw material of non-western social experience”.<sup>2</sup> The idea of the plot and of the simultaneity of disperse actions belongs to the pattern; the social characters belong to the local reality. But unlike the novel, in history writing form and content were not indifferent to one another. The reason is that the writing of history was not solely about knowing the past. History was also a way of self-representation.

National historiographies were constructed not only as a nation’s self image but, at the same time, as a representation of the nation to the world. Both instances constituted a performance of the nation in which it shaped its own image of the past. Even when addressing an internal audience, national histories were to give an account of the reputation and the place of the nation as part of the world. As a consequence they could not neglect other societies and had to adopt a comparative perspective towards them. They had to give an account of the nation’s place in the imagined line of progress and civilization. From this point of view, interaction with the canon was one of the formative elements of national historiographies.

## 2. *“European civilisation”: a normative frame of comparison and its limits*

Since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the tradition of history writing in Europe involved not only a description of the past, but also the imposition of a hierarchical view of the world, with Western Europe perched at the top. This hierarchical view took the form of a description of a linear course of civilization in time, space and values. The centre of history was moved from the Middle East to Greece, then to Rome, and then to Chris-

---

2. Franco Moretti, “Conjectures on World Literature”, *New Left Review*, 1 (2000), pp. 54-68; Benedict Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparison*, Verso, London 1998, p. 30.

tian Europe.<sup>3</sup> It moved from the Renaissance to the Reformation, the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment, and then to Modernity. Modernity and progress, taken as the capacity of society to fashion and re-fashion itself, lies at the core of the canon.<sup>4</sup> This course of history, implicit or explicit in historiography, philosophy of history and social theory, identified the concept of “civilization” with the concept of “European civilization”. This identification was first made in the epoch of the Enlightenment. As a consequence, all other civilizations were conceived in negative terms, or as deviationary currents from this main course. This form of thinking universal history as bifurcated between the main trajectory and the unfinished or deviating paths could be described as “Canon”. When for instance Italian Unification was characterized by Gramsci as “Rivoluzione mancata” and this idea became a central idea in post-world war Italian historiography, the underlying idea was a comparison between the “complete” French and the “incomplete” Italian revolutions. A comparison with Britain and France was the presupposition of the German *Sonderweg* debate.<sup>5</sup> Other societies were described using the negative terms of incompleteness and absence.

This negative consciousness was stronger in the Eastern and Southern borders of Europe. The invention of the term Central Eastern Europe and the categorization of history within this regional conception was a consequence of this encounter with the canon. Central-Eastern European historiography describes this region as not completely European, but more European than Eastern Europe. The causes of the deviation from the canon were attributed to external factors, such as Russia in Eastern Europe and the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans.

The other side of this negative consciousness was an awareness of “overcompensation” towards an internal and an external audience. The significant pasts of each national history were organized, firstly, around the “contributions” to the European history, secondly, on the similarities with the core elements of European society, and thirdly, on the sublimation of differences and dissimilarity. All of these elements were grounded in a comparative discourse, the concepts and categories of which were defined by the canon. Conceptual frameworks, such as the Modern and the Traditional, and concepts such as transition or cultural transference among others were seen as products of the canon’s comparative function. Although implied, the canon of European history created the categories and the concepts with which we comprehend the very sense of modern history and it has colored them with comparative nuances. Concepts like culture and civilization, nation, civil society, citizenship, public sphere, and others, cannot be used without imagining a comparative framework comprising both the societies where these concepts were forged and the societies in which they were applied. This conceptual substratum determines the canonical discourse of European history, beyond the chronological structure of the historical events themselves. As a

---

3. See, for example, the words of Michelet: “The grand human movement from India to Greece and to Rome, and from Rome to us [the French]”; Jules Michelet, *Le peuple*, Hachette Paulin, Paris 1846, quoted from the English edition *The People*, Longman, London 1946, p. 240.

4. Gerard Delanty, *Modernity and Postmodernity: Knowledge, Power, the Self*, Sage, London 2000.

5. Jürgen Kocka, “Asymmetrical Historical Comparison: The case of the German ‘Sonderweg’”, *History and Theory*, 38 (1999), pp. 25-39.

consequence, we write history regarding these concepts as an imaginary backbone of an ideal model against which we measure delays, deviations, deformations or particularities. In most cases this ideal model is nothing but an image of Europe as “seen through an inverted telescope”. We are seeing the history of European in a very schematic way. These differences gave an all-embracing structure to the historiography of European national histories, but also give rise to internal tensions.

### 3. *Conclusion*

Since the nineteenth century, national histories implied a concept of Europe and were written in constant comparison with it, or with parts of it. This dialogue took various forms: from the adaptation and assimilation of national histories to the patterns of European history, to the invention of national versions of European history. This dialogue was decisive in shaping national historiographies. On the one hand, a European cultural and political project was intrinsic to the concept of the nation and the construction of nationalism. On the other, European history implied a canon of history which prioritized, marginalized or excluded certain aspects of national histories. As a consequence, accommodating to European history was a constant concern for national histories. With the same gesture, the *canon* was accepted, contested or modified by national histories. The implied canon of European history created the categories and the concepts with which we comprehend the very sense of modern history, and which we engage in comparative activities with or without our will and awareness. The encounter with the implied canon and the strategies of overcoming it have produced a derivative discourse by which the *spectres of comparison* (to use the title of Benedict Anderson’s book<sup>6</sup>) have been engrafted onto historical work.

---

6. For the story of the “inverted telescope”, see Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparison*, p. 2.