

## An Emperor without Clothes? The Debate about Transnational History Twenty-five Years on

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Transnational history<sup>1</sup> seems to be on the rise across countries, sub-disciplines, and specializations. Beyond a constant stream of articles, books, and collections that contribute to the debate empirically, recent years have witnessed some of the ultimate signs of the consolidation of an approach or field. Various book-length introductions to transnational history have been published,<sup>2</sup> journals have been launched,<sup>3</sup> and there even is a monumental dictionary.<sup>4</sup> Several universities have set up centers and study programs dedicated to transnational history.<sup>5</sup> Finally, the field has entered a self-reflective turn, with articles being published on antecedents and roots of transnational history in specific historiographies.<sup>6</sup> In that sense, transnational history has started not only to impact on the topics of the profession, but even on the way it assesses its own past. Frederick Jackson Turner, for instance, has long been interpreted as a pioneer of an Exceptionalist interpretation of U.S. American history that imported the ideology of the nation into its working premises. More recently, however, another Turner has been rediscovered, sensitive to transnational concerns, and anything but a narrow, nation-centered historian.<sup>7</sup> In France, the recent edition of an unpublished book manuscript by Lucien Febvre has

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<sup>1</sup> This article is the revised and expanded version of a keynote lecture given at the International Conference in Political History, Leiden University, September 5, 2014, where a European association for political history was established. I would like to thank Marc Lazar, Henk te Velde, Jakob Vogel, and the journal's two anonymous peer reviewers for their interest and their comments. The nature of that conference and my expertise explain why there is a certain focus on political history and, more importantly, why the article mainly focuses on the debates in the United States and Europe.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Pierre-Yves Saunier, *Transnational History* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Akira Iriye, *Global and Transnational History: The Past, Present, and Future* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Margit Pernau, *Transnationale Geschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, [www.geschichte-transnational.clio-online.net](http://www.geschichte-transnational.clio-online.net) (last accessed June 9, 2015); *Journal of Transnational American Studies*.

<sup>4</sup> Akira Iriye and Pierre-Yves Saunier (eds.), *The Palgrave Dictionary of Transnational History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/cth>; <http://standrewstransnational.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk>; <http://www.unige.ch/lettres/fr/etudes/plans/histoire-transnationale/> and, obviously, [www.eui.eu/HEC](http://www.eui.eu/HEC) (all four last accessed June 9, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, [http://www.ed.ac.uk/polopoly\\_fs/1.1216271/fileManager/wp-whelelan.pdf](http://www.ed.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.1216271/fileManager/wp-whelelan.pdf) (last accessed June 9, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Bender, "Introduction: Historians, the Nation, and the Plenitude of Narratives," in Thomas Bender (ed.), *Rethinking American History in a Global Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 1–21; and, as a literature overview of the role of the transnational in the history of historiography, Philipp Stelzel, "Transnationalism and the History of Historiography: A Transatlantic Perspective," *History Compass*, 13 (2015), 78–87.

led to similar debates.<sup>8</sup> Transnational history, so it would seem, is not only apparently history's way forward, but also deeply rooted in the discipline's own past. This is a remarkable achievement given that this debate is only some twenty-five years old, and in many parts of Europe considerably younger. After a quarter century, and hoping to avoid the pitfall of triumphalism, this seems a good moment to take stock of the discussion. Where do we stand today? What actually is transnational history? And to what extent has it really changed the way historians (and others) think about the past?

This article begins by tracing the early stages of the debate and demonstrates that history is a latecomer to the discussion. It proceeds to explore the meaning of the term and define transnational history primarily as a research perspective. It also assesses the rise of transnational history from the perspective of the sociology of knowledge, revealing the specific circumstances that facilitated this debate, before scrutinizing central challenges transnational history has to face. The article then discusses the place of Europe in transnational history and ends with some ideas on how the field might look some twenty-five or fifty years from now.<sup>9</sup>

In sum, this text stresses the specificity of the moment that gave rise to transnational history. It weighs merits and achievements against the term's relative vagueness that make it seem more a transitory than a stable historiographical category. Is transnational history like an emperor without clothes? Not necessarily — but still, it might be more impermanent than many might think today.

As a starting point — and to dispel any idea that the rise of transnational history could be summarized as the triumphant march of a new paradigm — it is important to note that history is something of a latecomer to the debate surrounding transnationality. Other disciplines had been working with the term long before it came to be used by historians in any meaningful way, and had loaded it with conceptual and theoretical implications.<sup>10</sup> Broadly speaking, the growing currency of the term reflected rising awareness of an increasingly global world, in which trans-border flows challenged the dominance of the nation-state both as an empirical phenomenon and as an explanatory framework for scholarship. Political scientists began writing about transnational politics from the late 1960s; more than a decade earlier, legal scholars such as Philip Caryl Jessup had already started to conceptualize what they called “transnational law.”<sup>11</sup>

The oldest references we know of take us all the way back to the 1860s, to linguistic debates on the nature and of relationships between human languages. And university professors were not the only ones using the term. “Transnational” also has a lengthy

<sup>8</sup> Lucien Febvre and François Crouzet, *Nous sommes tous des sang-mêlés: Manuel d'histoire de la civilisation française* (originally 1950), (ed.) Denis Crouzet and Elisabeth Crouzet-Pavan (Paris: Albin Michel, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Other questions will not be dealt with extensively. For recent themes and topics in transnational history (albeit with an exclusive focus on literature in English), see, e.g., Iriye, *Global and Transnational History*, 70–80; with a strong focus on non-European dimensions: Pernau, *Transnationale Geschichte*; more detailed on methodology, Saunier, *Transnational History*.

<sup>10</sup> Some historians had actually used the term in passing in a rather unsystematic way before an explicit debate on transnational history started; for this, see, for example, Iriye, *Global and Transnational History*, 10–35.

<sup>11</sup> Philip Caryl Jessup, *Transnational Law* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956); see, for instance, also Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye (eds.), *Transnational Relations and World Politics* (Boston: World Peace Foundation, 1971).

tradition in the world outside academia, with various American companies including the term in their names in the post-war period in order to evoke particular associations. In comparison, the roughly twenty-five years in which historians have referred to the transnational appear rather short, demonstrating just how much the nation-state — as an object of investigation, as the dominant subject in analyses, and at times even as the project undergirding historical research — has dominated our profession.<sup>12</sup>

To date it more precisely, the phrase became important among historians during the early 1990s. The discussion started in the United States, above all with the aim of challenging and ending history writing's pervading fixation on national history, and was driven by the debate on multiculturalism in a nation deeply steeped in Exceptionalism.<sup>13</sup> Even if multiculturalism was less of a factor in Europe, a conversation did emerge in some parts of the Old World, first revolving around concepts such as cultural transfers, with a stronghold particularly in French and parts of German academia.<sup>14</sup> As in the United States, the debate has to be seen against the backdrop of globalization, and German historians likewise saw it as their task to challenge the “discourse of newness” underpinning the contemporary debate.<sup>15</sup> Against this backdrop, the term “transnational” then gained wider currency some five to ten years later than in the United States.

Today, twenty-five years after the beginning of the debate, “transnational history” has achieved a very uneven level of penetration within the various historical sub-disciplines and the academic cultures of different countries. It has had considerable impact upon parts of the historiography on migration and colonialism, and less on branches of political history, though it is difficult to generalize. One also finds striking differences between countries. In contrast to the United States and Germany, where there is a lively discussion, transnational history has touched the academic community in other countries to a much lesser extent, for instance in parts of eastern Europe or Japan. Transnational history is certainly transnational, but that does not mean it is the same everywhere. Specific conditions continue to matter, and one could argue that the history of transnational history thus exemplifies many traits characterizing transnationalism in general.

This leads to the obvious question: what, then, *is* transnational history? The term transnational, as used by historians, has a double meaning. It refers to a certain kind

<sup>12</sup> On these early uses of the term, see Saunier, *Transnational History*, 13–32; Pierre-Yves Saunier, “Learning by Doing: Notes about the Making of the Palgrave Dictionary of Transnational History,” *Journal of Modern European History*, 6 (2008), 159–180; Kiran Klaus Patel, “Überlegungen zu einer transnationalen Geschichte,” *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, 52 (2004), 626–645.

<sup>13</sup> See, as some of the earliest interventions, Akira Iriye, “The Internationalization of History,” *American Historical Review*, 94 (1999), 1–10; Ian Tyrrell, “American Exceptionalism in an Age of International History,” *American Historical Review*, 96 (1991), 1031–1072; David Thelen, “The Nation and Beyond: Transnational Perspectives on United States History,” *Journal of American History*, 86 (1999), 965–975; Thomas Bender, *The La Pietra Report: A Report to the Profession* (Bloomington: Organization of American Historians/New York University, 2000), available online <http://www.oah.org/about/reports/reports-statements/the-lapietra-report-a-report-to-the-profession/> (last accessed June 9, 2015).

<sup>14</sup> See, as a succinct summary, Jan Rüter, “OXO: Or, The Challenges of Transnational History,” *European History Quarterly*, 40 (2010), 656–668.

<sup>15</sup> Matthias Middell, “Kulturtransfer und transnationale Geschichte,” in Matthias Middell (ed.), *Dimensionen der Kultur- und Gesellschaftsgeschichte* (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2007), 49–69.

of phenomena at the empirical level (sometimes called transnationalism),<sup>16</sup> but more importantly, transnational history is a research perspective. Transnational history involves the analysis of phenomena that transcend nations and nation-states; that span territorial borders and boundaries. Transnational history thus seeks to examine interconnections and transfers across borders, as well as the circulatory regimes that might result from them. This obviously includes the analysis of processes that control and restrict transnational flows.<sup>17</sup>

This definition is quite capacious, with several elements and implications. Firstly, most historians today agree that transnational history is best defined as a specific perspective for examining and interpreting the past. In political science and related disciplines, in contrast, “transnational” is normally defined as a quality of actors, denoting persons and organizations working beyond state boundaries and acting independently of traditional state authorities. Leaving aside a minority of scholars who often take their cue from interdisciplinary cooperation with social scientists,<sup>18</sup> most historians apply a broader definition, which does not define transnational history by its subject (however broadly construed), but rather by its scholarly approach. Akira Iriye and Pierre-Yves Saunier, editors of the recent *Palgrave Dictionary of Transnational History*, for example argue that it is “an angle, a perspective.”<sup>19</sup> Although the concept of perspective remains under-theorized in history writing, it suggests a relationship between the object of analysis (the past) and the observer (the historian). Accordingly, transnational history is defined primarily by the questions guiding the historian’s research on interconnections, transfers, circulations, and their limits. While others have argued similarly before,<sup>20</sup> the adoption of this definition by the *Palgrave Dictionary* in 2009 has a certain weight, since the volume brings together around 350 authors representing a large proportion of “transnational historians.”

This, secondly, implies that transnational history is not about a specific method or theory. Nevertheless, the term is bound up with an explicit interest in questions of method. Transnational history would be unthinkable without the considerable research in recent decades that has refined our understanding of interactions that span borders, from work on comparative history and cultural transfer to that on networks and diasporas, inspired by anthropology and post-colonial studies, among others. Only a few elements can be mentioned here. The analysis of intercultural transfer — sensitive to the context of all societies concerned, to the actors involved in such processes, and to the transformative experience of transfer — is a central element of transnational research. Even material objects are often changed enormously by travelling from A to B, as they are appropriated in different social contexts, value systems, and commodity chains. It did, to give but one example, make a tremendous difference if one wore a pair of Levi jeans in Montana, Milan, Mumbai, or Moscow during the 1970s. Closely linked to the analysis of transfers is the research

<sup>16</sup> See, e.g., Patricia Clavin, “Defining Transnationalism,” *Contemporary European History*, 14 (2005), 421–439.

<sup>17</sup> On circulatory regimes, see Saunier, *Transnational History*, 58–79.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Wolfram Kaiser, Brigitte Leucht, and Michael Gehler (eds.), *Transnational Networks in Regional Integration: Governing Europe, 1945–83* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

<sup>19</sup> Akira Iriye and Pierre-Yves Saunier, “Introduction,” in Iriye and Saunier, *The Palgrave Dictionary of Transnational History*, XX.

<sup>20</sup> See, e.g., “AHR Conversation: On Transnational History,” *American Historical Review*, 111 (2006), 1440–1464; Patel, “Überlegungen.”

on perceptions, representations, and the expression of meaning — as issues where transnational history can draw on cultural studies. Comparative research, to mention but one further strand of work inspiring transnational history, is often also helpful, for instance to compare transfer processes from one society into other places, or to assess the transformation and adaptation as an object, institution, person, or idea travels from one context to the other.<sup>21</sup>

Thirdly, this definition of transnational history hinges on a particular understanding of the quality of borders and boundaries. While transnational history zooms in on loopholes, fissures, and notches, it still assumes that borders and boundaries are meaningful; that at least potentially, they may control, complicate, stop and re-direct flows. If, in contrast, borders were completely porous and permeable in the first place, transnational history would tend to lose its object of analysis. As much as it is interested in links and flows, it has to consider the characteristics of borders; to their changing geography, but also to the various ways in which they have “hardened” or “softened” (legally, administratively, culturally) over time. Of particular interest in this context are groups who hold an interest in the existence of the boundaries due to their specific abilities that allow them to cross. All this implies a rather broad definition of borders, and thus transnational history pays particular attention to space and territoriality as a central historical category, long overshadowed in many historiographies by a concern to focus on its sibling category, on time.<sup>22</sup>

Other questions pertaining to transnational history have remained contested or unclear. The biggest open question is the relationship between transnational history and other approaches and fields — for example, global history and postcolonial studies, world history and *histoire croisée*, as well as entangled history and international history. Whereas some understand transnational history as an umbrella term in the debate, others see a plurality of different approaches or grant one of the other labels a position of primacy.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, there is no consensus on the question of whether transnational history can be confined to certain periods or topics.<sup>24</sup> The problem is made more difficult by the fact that concepts and theories in different languages do not correspond to one another directly.

<sup>21</sup> See, with more details, particularly Saunier, *Transnational History*.

<sup>22</sup> See as a general plea to stress this category Karl Schlögel, *Im Raum lesen wir die Zeit. Über Zivilisationsgeschichte und Geopolitik* (Munich: Hanser, 2003); in France, history has kept closer links to geography, as epitomized by the Annales School. On the relationship between the two disciplines, also see, e.g., Alan R. H. Baker, *Geography and History: Bridging the Divide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); on territoriality, Charles S. Maier, “Consigning the Twentieth Century to History: Alternative Narratives for the Modern Era,” *American Historical Review*, 105 (2000), 807–831.

<sup>23</sup> See as some of the latest interventions in this debate, also with references to the older literature, Philipp Gassert, “Transnationale Geschichte, Version 2.0,” *Docupedia Zeitgeschichte*: [http://docupedia.de/zg/Transnationale\\_Geschichte\\_Version\\_2.0\\_Philipp\\_Gassert](http://docupedia.de/zg/Transnationale_Geschichte_Version_2.0_Philipp_Gassert); “Interview über die Globalgeschichte mit Sebastian Conrad,” *Zeitenblicke*, 12 (2013): [www.zeitenblicke.de/2013/1/Conrad/dippArticle.pdf](http://www.zeitenblicke.de/2013/1/Conrad/dippArticle.pdf) (both last accessed June 9, 2015).

<sup>24</sup> On the debate over whether the term makes sense for early modern or even earlier periods of history, see, Bartolomé Yun Casalilla, “Transnational History: What Lies behind the Label? Some Reflections from the Early Modernist’s Point of View,” *Culture & History Digital Journal*, 3 (2014): <http://dx.doi.org/10.3989/chdj.2014.025> (last accessed June 9, 2015) (pro, at least by tendency) and Jeroen Duindam, “Early Modern Europe: Beyond the Strictures of Modernization and National Historiography,” *European History Quarterly*, 40 (2010), 606–623; and Patel, *Überlegungen* (both contra), which argues that contemporary historians have quite a bit to learn from early modern modernists who discarded the primacy of a national perspective much earlier.

The result of this discussion is interesting. Such questions had been examined particularly thoroughly during the first decade of the debate, whereas scholars now seem less concerned. This conversation has led neither to a sophisticated consensus nor to academic turf wars in which each camp insists on its specific definition. Instead, pragmatism in most parts of history looms large, quite in contrast to other disciplines.<sup>25</sup> More precisely, an international consensus has prevailed that it is more important to promote and produce empirical studies that adopt a transnational perspective than to become trapped in futile conceptual debates.<sup>26</sup> The shared thrust is to challenge the still dominant concentration on national history,<sup>27</sup> and I would even argue that the very vagueness of “transnational history” as a label has contributed to its seemingly seamless and triumphal advance.

If the lack of a binding theory is one reason why so many scholars have found it rather easy to go transnational, another element also features: it would be wrong to think that transnational history is a completely new perspective. Admittedly, the rise of professional history writing during the nineteenth century was inextricably linked to a focus on nations, states, and particularly nation-states as the key framework of analysis. That said, connections between societies, be they of diplomatic, political, cultural, social or economic nature, have always also captured the attention of historians. Transnational is new as a label, and debates have reached a new level of sophistication, challenging the methodological nationalism of much of the existing literature. The empirical analysis of transnational phenomena, on the other hand, is not completely new.

Instead, the novelty of transnational history is the idea of offering an alternative to the dominance of a historiography structured around the nation. Although most of its practitioners would not regard transnational history as a new paradigm or master narrative, they do see it as more than simply an additional layer in an “onion model” (situated between local, regional, and national history on the one hand and global on the other). Transnational history goes beyond the “container” and the scalar model; it defies the logic of layers and can directly connect the local to the supranational or transcontinental.<sup>28</sup>

Having focused thus far on definitions and questions of approach, it is now helpful to examine the trajectory and content of transnational history from the point of view of a sociology of knowledge. Academic trends are not just about ideas, they are also about power — the power to define and implement intellectual agendas, with all their institutional and wider societal implications. At this stage, there is very little research

<sup>25</sup> This does not mean that there are no controversies at all; see, for instance, Nancy L. Green, “French History and the Transnational Turn,” *French Historical Studies*, 37 (2014), 551–564; various contributions in Jean-Paul Zúñiga (ed.), *Pratiques du transnational: Terrains, preuves, limites* (Paris: Centre de recherches historiques, 2011); Gunilla Budde, Sebastian Conrad, and Oliver Janz (eds.), *Transnationale Geschichte: Themen, Tendenzen und Theorien* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006).

<sup>26</sup> Very clearly expressed in Iriye and Saunier, “Introduction,” XVIII–XIX.

<sup>27</sup> See already some of the early contributions to the field: Thelen, “The Nation and Beyond”, *op.cit.*; Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1995); Bender, *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*, *op.cit.*.

<sup>28</sup> Saunier, *Transnational History*, 118–121; Bernhard Struck, Kate Ferris, and Jacques Revel, “Space and Scale in Transnational History,” *International History Review*, 33 (2011), 573–584.

on this dimension of transnational history,<sup>29</sup> so this section is rather exploratory in nature.

The rise to prominence of transnational history coincided with a transitional period in the university systems of many countries, facilitating its impact on the profession. During the 1960s and 1970s, many university systems in the Western world experienced massive expansion, allowing comparatively smooth and successful careers for a whole generation of scholars, often born between 1930 and 1940. By and large, this university generation was not only impressively productive, but also stood for great innovation—structural and social history were added to the agenda, some rethought history from cultural, gender, and everyday life perspectives. Still, most of this work focused on *national* history.

For the German context — on which the following deliberations will focus as a case-study, largely for pragmatic reasons — Paul Nolte has spoken of a “long generation” of historians including, among many others, Reinhard Koselleck and Hans-Ulrich Wehler.<sup>30</sup> Entering academia in the 1980s, in contrast, was much more difficult, as the universities ceased expanding and senior posts — key to making innovation sustainable — were already filled. Transnational history became hot exactly at a time when some prominent representatives of the “long generation” started to move into this direction, while simultaneously, a younger cohort of historians born in the 1960s and 1970s also pushed for this perspective. Luckily for the latter, they were also able to bring them to fruition both intellectually and institutionally since several senior university positions opened up again at the time.

Beyond the German case, this also coincided with an increasing mobility between academic systems — which fostered transnational cross-fertilization between academic systems as much as it did empirical work with a transnational perspective. As so often, the flexibility of Anglo-American institutions of research and higher education allowed them to concentrate more resources on this new field more quickly than in many other places. National differences aside, the element of intergenerational cooperation combined with wider tectonic changes in academia formed an important structural condition that facilitated the rise of transnational history.

The best example of intergenerational cooperation is again the *Palgrave Dictionary*, to which I shall return again later. Akira Iriye, born in 1934, co-edited this work with Pierre-Yves Saunier, born in 1963. Both — as well as many of their volume’s authors — also represent a comparably new form of global mobility: Japanese-born Iriye has taught in the United States for decades, but regularly returns to Japan while French-born Saunier currently works in Canada. Beyond the example of the *Palgrave Dictionary*, there are also other indications for transnational history’s intergenerational dimension. If good parts of the research are now carried out by scholars born in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, there are also clear links to an older generation. David Thelen, for instance, as one of the first to use the term “transnational history” prominently, was born in 1939. Daniel Rodgers, another American star in this field, was born in 1942; Jürgen Kocka, key in launching the German debate, in 1941. This intergenerational cooperation certainly helped to further transnational history’s cause.

<sup>29</sup> See, as one of the first attempts to do so, Kiran Klaus Patel, ““Transnations among Transnations”? The Debate on Transnational History in the US and Germany,” *American Studies*, 53 (2009), 451–472.

<sup>30</sup> Paul Nolte, “Die Historiker der Bundesrepublik. Rückblick auf eine ‘lange Generation,’” *Mercur*, 53 (1999), 413–432.

We obviously lack a thorough sociological analysis of the networks and the generations that contributed to the discussion on transnational history. And it would be wrong to downplay the stark differences between national and sub-disciplinary contexts. Still, it seems important to go beyond content-related arguments to explain the relative success transnational history has witnessed in academia over recent years.

The political stakes are obviously higher in some countries than in others. Given its present situation, a transnational history of Ukraine has broader political ramifications than a similar study of Germany or one focused on transnational links in interwar internationalism.<sup>31</sup> The contested and entrenched nature of American academia and society, in which one camp insists on the Exceptional qualities of the American experience, charges transnational history with more explicitly political connotations than in many Western European countries. Trends within U.S. academia also work out differently than in many parts of Europe: with Asian history on the rise, U.S. scholars specializing in European history in particular have started to go “transnational” to demonstrate the continuing relevance of their sub-fields. Europeanists working in Europe face no comparable challenge (here, public and academic pressure have not jeopardized European history in similar ways), but here the ever-growing importance of the European Union creates an atmosphere prone to adopt a transnational perspective, regardless of the concomitant rise of Euroskepticism.

And there is another dimension from the perspective of sociology of knowledge that deserves mention: while few scholars today would claim that transnational history is a new paradigm, it certainly does challenge established hierarchies of knowledge and power relations. Iriye and Saunier can again serve as examples. In a historiographical age dominated by a nation-centered approach, there was little that would have brought these two scholars together. By background and training, Iriye is a classical diplomatic historian, specializing in U.S.-Japanese relations during the twentieth century.<sup>32</sup> Saunier, in contrast, initially worked on French urban history during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. From their original research fields, both moved on to an interest in the transnational dimensions of their research fields, and this was the precondition for their joint project of editing the *Palgrave Dictionary*. Similar things could be said about the long list of authors who contributed to this endeavor.

The project — like the editors’ backgrounds — demonstrates that “transnational” offers a common platform for research that takes very different empirical directions. “Transnational” provides an important alternative to the dominant principle of territoriality in the organization of historical knowledge. It destabilizes established divisions and hierarchies—while also creating new ones. While not a paradigm, one should not underestimate the thrust of transnational history, simply because such labels have the fundamental role of ordering and hierarchizing knowledge and because they play a role in recruitment and promotion policies. These implications should be kept in mind when discussing transnational history or any other historiographical trend.

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<sup>31</sup> Georgiy Kasianov and Philipp Ther (eds.), *A Laboratory of Transnational History: Ukraine and Recent Ukrainian Historiography* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2009).

<sup>32</sup> Iriye reflects on his process of becoming a transnational historian in Iriye, *Global and Transnational History*, 1–18.



Doing meaningful research in transnational history is often difficult, however. Finding a good source base can pose a serious challenge, and primary sources are neither neutral nor innocent. One important dimension of paper trails is to demonstrate the significance of the actors who produced them. Most of them are, however, generated within the framework of national institutions and mindsets — a characteristic they share with the bulk of the secondary literature. In political history, for instance, civil servants and politicians often have no interest in documenting that their choices were inspired or driven by processes elsewhere; mental and administrative frameworks dovetail with an orientation on the nation(-state). Transnational historians therefore have to learn to read sources against the archival grain, but they cannot ignore what Reinhart Koselleck has famously called the “veto power” of primary sources.<sup>33</sup> Some transnational history will therefore have to remain unwritten for lack of sources.

Any serious transnational effort will have to factor in the various sides concerned. This is a core element of transnational history, which obviously implies logistical, linguistic, and other challenges. Problems are amplified due to different archiving traditions and the loss of primary material for all kinds of reasons, which often leads to a very asymmetric source base. The issue becomes even more pressing if more than two societies are considered — something few existing transnational histories have ventured, and yet an urgent need in order to advance the agenda.<sup>34</sup> In general, transnational history should do more to follow actors, commodities, or any other subject under study to wherever they choose to take us. This will make our findings more complex than the dominant bilateral focus suggests, but it also creates vast challenges. Beyond access to sources and linguistic and logistical challenges, such work also demands profound knowledge of all societies and elements concerned as something an individual might find very difficult to master. Co-authorship and intense forms of cooperation might provide answers, but they only go so far.

And there is another challenge. A recent article by Ann-Christina L. Knudsen and Karen Gram-Skjoldager has produced a careful analysis of the aforementioned *Palgrave Dictionary*.<sup>35</sup> Among other findings, they demonstrate that political history plays a prominent role in the various entries, and that International Organizations (IOs) and International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) appear as the most prominent actors in the entries. There are many reasons explaining this focus, but the source problem mentioned above is certainly not the least among them. To some extent, Knudsen and Gram-Skjoldager argue, organizations such as the League of Nations, the United Nations, and the European Union have replaced the nation as the sociopolitical center of narratives, while also bending the narratives strongly in the direction of political history.

The *Palgrave Dictionary* is certainly not fully representative of the diversity of transnational history, and its brief entries by necessity make scholars adopt different narrative formats than in longer articles or monographs. Still, Knudsen and Gram-Skjoldager’s findings are rather disturbing. Trading the nation-state for international organizations and NGOs as subjects and narrative centers comes with obvious pitfalls

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<sup>33</sup> On Koselleck and this idea, see Stefan Jordan, “Vetorecht der Quellen, Version 1.0,” *Docupedia Zeitgeschichte*: [http://docupedia.de/zg/Vetorecht\\_der\\_Quellen](http://docupedia.de/zg/Vetorecht_der_Quellen) (last accessed June 9, 2015).

<sup>34</sup> A point already noted in Clavin, “Defining Transnationalism,” 430.

<sup>35</sup> Ann-Christina L. Knudsen and Karen Gram-Skjoldager, “Historiography and Narration in Transnational History,” *Journal of Global History*, 9 (2014), 143–161.

and problems. It can easily obfuscate human agency in favor of institutional actors.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, it might lead to new “whig” accounts, particularly if these organizations are identified as positive historical forces (which is frequently the case, according to Knudsen and Skjoldager).<sup>37</sup> Such a focus tends to marginalize the darker sides of transnationalism—since not all interconnections and circulations furthered the good of humanity. To this day, transnational history cannot completely deny its origin in emancipatory, leftist cultural milieus; for some of its protagonists, transnational history was very much a political agenda to free oneself from the restrictions of nationalism in favor of a cosmopolitan alternative. This, in turn, has led to a relative neglect of topics such as war, violence, human and drug trafficking, and radical ideologies as areas of transnational history. Also transnational bankers and traders, commodities and colonizers have not yet received quite the attention they deserve. In sum, therefore, existing research does not yet do full justice to the multifarious character of transnationalism.

Despite its recent successes, transnational history therefore faces serious practical challenges. While it shares some of these problems with other approaches such as comparative and diplomatic history, they take a specific, often particularly intricate shape for transnational history. Moreover, initial critical assessments of the empirical results in transnational history identify serious shortcomings. Admittedly, the short entries Knudsen and Gram-Skjoldager analyze are a very specific genre, and a focus on monographs would certainly lead to a different result. Still, future research has to be aware of these biases and voids.

And there is a final challenge at the practical level that deserves mention. The impact of transnational history on the profession and beyond also hinges to a good extent on access to resources to conduct this kind of research. The stakes are probably slightly less high than in the digital humanities or in global history; still, this material dimension matters. The opportunities for contributing to the field are much better at a well-funded research university than under less favorable economic conditions; transnational history can critique transnational imbalances and asymmetries in its empirical work, but it would be naïve to think that it does not express and contribute to such asymmetries itself, too.

In Europe, most historians practicing transnational history are obviously less concerned with the histories of the United States and Japan as two places mentioned so far. Despite an increasing tendency to bring in global perspectives, most of those working with a transnational perspective focus on transborder flows and processes within Europe, which also reduces the effect of some of the material, linguistic, and logistical challenges mentioned above. Against this backdrop, it might seem appropriate to ask: where, if at all, is Europe’s place in transnational history?<sup>38</sup> Regardless of whether one prefers a narrow or broad definition of transnational history, it must be obvious that one can find many transnational phenomena in European history and that transnational history can help us to comprehend and

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<sup>36</sup> See, as an alternative, e.g. “AHR Forum: Transnational Lives in the Twentieth Century,” *American Historical Review*, 118 (2013), 45.

<sup>37</sup> Knudsen and Gram-Skjoldager, “Historiography,” 150; also see Saunier, “Learning by Doing,” who himself identifies similar gaps and imbalances.

<sup>38</sup> On this issue, also see Patricia Clavin, “Time, Manner, Space: Writing Modern European History in Global, Transnational and International Contexts,” *European History Quarterly*, 40 (2010), 624–640.

explain them better. I argue that transnational history can us reach a deeper understanding of European history in three different ways.

Firstly, addressing the connections and circulations that cross borders is an inherent part of European history. The Enlightenment, industrialization, and, for example, the creation of the welfare state, are transnational phenomena with a strongly European accent that cannot be fully appreciated from a purely local or national perspective. As a result, such phenomena have long been studied transnationally – for example, when Michel Espagne and Michael Werner wrote a form of transnational history *avant la lettre* on the cultural transfer between France and Germany, when Johannes Paulmann wrote about intercultural transfer, or when, more recently, the circulation of elements of high culture attracts particular attention.<sup>39</sup> Journals such as *Genèses* in France (established in 1990), *Comparativ* (since 1991) in Germany, and the Anglo-American *Journal of Global History* (since 2006) have played important roles in this context, and facilitated the focus on transnational history.

Secondly, European history reminds us that transnational history should by no means confine itself to links, flows, and other interconnections. It should be equally, if not more, interested in the suppression and subsiding, the diversion and destruction, the forgetting and fading of transnational relations. Internationalism before the First World War offers a good example in that many of the ties created then were cut during the world wars; one cannot write a mono-linear history of the rise of the transnational,<sup>40</sup> even if transnational history itself is a strong reminder that we should also not over-emphasize the ruptures and discontinuities. In fact, the most recent research on the interwar years has clearly demonstrated that many links between societies survived the atrocities of World War One – or were newly created thereafter and more meaningful than an older research had it.<sup>41</sup>

Thirdly, many exchanges extended beyond Europe. Europe was and is no more monolithic than nations or states, quite the contrary. Many ties and networks within Europe arose through contact with the wider world and it would be wrong to ignore these a priori. During the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, Europeanization often unfolded in intercontinental encounters or completely beyond the shores of what is often hastily labeled Europe.<sup>42</sup> This holds true for

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<sup>39</sup> See, for example, Michel Espagne and Michael Werner (eds.), *Transferts : Les relations interculturelles dans l'espace franco-allemand (XVIII<sup>e</sup> et XIX<sup>e</sup> siècles)* (Paris: Editions Recherche sur les civilisations, 1988); Johannes Paulmann, "Internationaler Vergleich und interkultureller Transfer: Zwei Forschungsansätze zur europäischen Geschichte des 18. Bis 20. Jahrhunderts," *Historische Zeitschrift*, 267 (1998), 649–685; Peter Stachel and Philipp Ther (eds.), *Wie europäisch ist die Oper? Die Geschichte des Musiktheaters als Zugang zu einer kulturellen Topographie Europas* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2009); also see Christophe Charle, "Les sociétés impériales d'hier à aujourd'hui. Quelques propositions pour repenser l'histoire du second XX<sup>e</sup> siècle en Europe," *Journal of Modern European History*, 3 (2005), 123–139; Christophe Charle and Daniel Roche (eds.), *Capitales culturelles, capitales symboliques : Paris et les expériences européennes, XVIII<sup>e</sup>–XX<sup>e</sup> siècles* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2002).

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, Martin H. Geyer and Johannes Paulmann (eds.), *The Mechanics of Internationalism: Culture, Society, and Politics from the 1840s to the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Sebastian Conrad, *Globalisierung und Nation im Deutschen Kaiserreich* (Munich: Beck, 2006).

<sup>41</sup> See, e.g., Davide Rodogno, Bernhard Struck, and Jakob Vogel (eds.), *Shaping the Transnational Sphere: Experts, Networks and Issues from the 1840s to the 1930s* (New York: Berghahn, 2015); Daniel Laqua (ed.), *Internationalism Reconfigured: Transnational Ideas and Movements between the World Wars* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011).

<sup>42</sup> See, for example, Kiran Klaus Patel, „Where and When Was Europe? Europeanness and its Relationship to Migration,” *National Identities*, 15 (2013), 21–32.

industrialization, welfare statism, but for instance also for white supremacism. In a similar vein, Frederick Cooper and Ann Stoler argue that: “Europe was made by its imperial projects, as much as colonial encounters were shaped by conflicts within Europe itself.<sup>43</sup> For this reason, one should not overlook processes that at first glance seem remote from the concerns raised here.

Having said all this, it is necessary to investigate which relationships can really be termed as specifically European, and what actually makes them “European.” A few years ago, Konrad Jarausch warned of what he called the “Treitschke Versuchung” (“Treitschke temptation”) when writing about a European history not fixated on nations. By this he meant that historians risk constructing “Europe” as a new space of reference and essentialized constant transferring it to their object of investigation—regardless of whether this territorial attribution corresponds to the scope of the forms of historical interaction or not.<sup>44</sup>

How, then, to avoid this trap? The heart of the problem is the very vagueness of the concept of “Europe.” Many depictions of European history draw on geography and history in search of a definition.<sup>45</sup> Such approaches are problematic, I argue. For a start, the concept of Europe shares with the old national historiography the reference to a territorially delineated unit, and all the problems connected with that. While these challenges have in the case of national history decreased because the territorial shape of at least some nation-states has barely changed over time,<sup>46</sup> Europe poses an even larger problem: as many studies at the intersection between history and geography point out, the criteria determining the definition of the continent are socially constructed and subject to historical change. Thus, the meaning of the term “Europe” has changed again and again over the last 2,500 years. Its apparently clear end at the Urals is, for example, a convention dating from the eighteenth century, one goal of which was to underpin Russia’s claim to belong to the European great powers. The situation is no better in the West: for instance, it has always moot whether Great Britain or Iceland are really European.<sup>47</sup>

In the light of this, a number of authors have suggested defining Europe as a social construct. A pioneering work in this area is Wolfgang Schmale’s *History of Europe*, which examines the multifarious and divergent discourses and performative acts bound up with the concept of “Europe” past and the present.<sup>48</sup> In this and other studies, Europe appears not as the starting point for or a stage of transnational

<sup>43</sup> Frederick Cooper and Ann L. Stoler, “Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda,” in Frederick Cooper and Ann L. Stoler (eds.), *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 1–56, quote 1.

<sup>44</sup> Konrad Jarausch, “Zeitgeschichte zwischen Nation und Europa. Eine transnationale Herausforderung,” *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, B39 (2004), 3–10.

<sup>45</sup> See, e.g., Norman Davis, *Europe: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Bernard Wasserstein, *Barbarism and Civilization: A History of Europe in our Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>46</sup> At the same time, one should not underestimate the challenge for national historiography; see, e.g., John Breuilly, “Nationalismstheorien und kritische deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte,” in Sven-Oliver Müller and Cornelius Torp (eds.), *Das Deutsche Kaiserreich in der Kontroverse* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009), 102–118.

<sup>47</sup> See, for example, Frithjof Benjamin Schenk, “Mental Maps: Die Konstruktion von geographischen Räumen in Europa seit der Aufklärung: Literaturbericht,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 28 (2002), 493–514; Achim Landwehr, “Die unmögliche Definition Europas: Zu einem Artikel in Zedlers ‘Universal Lexicon’ (1734),” *Themenportal Europäische Geschichte* (2007), online: <http://www.europa.clio-online.de/2007/Article=250> (last accessed June 9, 2015).

<sup>48</sup> Wolfgang Schmale, *Geschichte Europas* (Vienna: Böhlau, 2001), esp. 11–17.

processes, but rather the product of a number of transfers whose overlapping and intensification have repeatedly recreated Europe.<sup>49</sup>

The transnational processes that produced Europe in this manner might be given their own term—Europeanization. Strangely, this phrase, when used to mean the processes that enabled the appearance of “Europe,” has not been used by many historians so far, whereas in political science and other disciplines a wide-ranging debate has developed. However, because this primarily addresses the effects of the political integration under the auspices of the European Union, one can scarcely transfer it to broader discussions of history. An explicit attempt at definition would, however, aim to include under Europeanization all those political, social, economic, and cultural processes that have promoted or affected a lasting strengthening of intra-European ties and similarities, be it in the form of assimilation, exchange, or networking. This always goes hand in hand with forms of exclusion or “othering,” as well as fragmentation and conflict.<sup>50</sup>

However, in order to be really able to talk about Europeanization, something more is needed, I contend: namely that historical figures themselves must perceive these processes as “European” and identify them accordingly. There have long been processes of cultural, economic, political, and social connection and convergence, and they have often been studied individually. However, if one calls them “European” without using the terms employed by the actors themselves, then one invariably end up with a definition of Europe that is either normative or essentialist. Both options seem analytically unsatisfactory for empirical historical research. It is far more interesting to look at the great variety of processes that are perceived as being specifically European — and to keep them apart from others that were not. This includes, of course, the problem of the claims, hopes, and attempts at exclusion connected to them and the question of which terms and meanings that were once dominant or more important — such as *christianitas*, Occident, nation or empire — lost influence as a result and were reordered and recharged conceptually.<sup>51</sup>

“Europe” has only developed into a meaningful category and coherent entity through a multiplicity of—often transnational—processes following a similar direction and via a connected process of labeling that identified the common impulse towards Europe. This began in the early modern period, became stronger in the eighteenth century, and even more so in the second half of the twentieth century. Before this, “Europe” barely existed in this sense.<sup>52</sup> Only thus did Europe increasingly become a self-reinforcing subject. Although historians had studied “Europe” for many years before

<sup>49</sup> See, e.g., the by now classical article Johan Schot and Thomas Misa, “Inventing Europe: Technology and the Hidden Integration of Europe,” *History and Technology*, 21 (2005), 1–19; now also see Johan Schot and Phil Scranton (eds.), *Making Europe: Technology and Transformations, 1850–2000*, 6 vols. (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013-).

<sup>50</sup> Martin Conway and Kiran Klaus Patel (eds.), *Europeanization in the Twentieth Century: Historical Approaches* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Hartmut Kaelble, “Europäisierung,” in Middell, *Dimensionen der Kultur- und Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, 73–89; a central reference in this context is Peter Burke, “Did Europe Exist before 1700?,” *History of European Ideas*, 1 (1980), 21–29; for a classic study of “othering,” see Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

<sup>51</sup> Conway and Patel, *Europeanization*.

<sup>52</sup> Winfried Schulze, “Europa in der frühen Neuzeit—Begriffsgeschichtliche Befunde,” in Heinz Duchhardt and Andreas Kunz (eds.), *Europäische Geschichte als historiographisches Problem* (Mainz: Zabern: 1997), 35–65.

the 1950s,<sup>53</sup> today's European historiography must always take into consideration the fact that without the process of political and economic integration begun in the second half of the twentieth century, it would be consigned to a more peripheral existence. Roger Chartier once wrote hyperbolically that the French Revolution created the Enlightenment.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, one could claim that only European integration since the postwar years created Europe. That would undoubtedly be an exaggeration, albeit a revealing one: European integration presents the research on Europe not only with the old Treitschke question of whether it can be more than just a legitimizing force for a current political project — a problem that should be considered constructively rather than ignored.

The argument of this section of the article, therefore, is that Europe is both a space where transnational ties have become particularly strong and one itself formed by these bonds in the first place. Transnational history can help us understand that the creation of “Europeanness” through interaction in any sphere or part of the globe is an element of European history — and maybe the most important one. Studies that demonstrate the importance of the colonial world and of exile for the debates about Europeanness provide evidence for this argument.<sup>55</sup> In conclusion, only through a transnational approach can one correctly identify Europe's place in the world from the perspective of European history.

Terms and concepts never live independently of their specific contexts and constellations. This also holds true for transnational history, which is very much a product of our own time. As a perspective, label, and field of investigation it gained momentum during a very specific historiographical moment: a phase that saw an important transformation of statehood, coupled with an intense phase of globalization. Ideas — and for some, also hopes — harbored particularly during the early stages of the debate in the 1990s, that a transnational age would see the withering of the nation/state as a central point of allegiance, of governance, and of social organization have receded to the margins. Paradoxically, this might make the analysis of transnational phenomena more relevant in the future. As the transformation of the world that drove the debate in the first place continues, transnational history loses nothing of its topicality. This holds particularly true as more recent research has overcome stark dichotomies, for instance between nationalization and transnationalization. Instead, scholars now focus more on the transformation of nations, states, and societies through transnational flows and circulations — and *vice versa* — as an open-ended, complex, and often contradictory

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<sup>53</sup> See, for example, Heinz Duchhardt, Malgorzata Morawiec, Wolfgang Schmale and Winfried Schulze (eds.), *Europa-Historiker: Ein biographisches Handbuch*, 3 vols. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck: & Ruprecht, 2006–2007).

<sup>54</sup> Roger Chartier, *Les origines culturelles de la Révolution française* (Paris: Seuil, 1990), 17.

<sup>55</sup> See, for example, Hartmut Kaelble, *Europäer über Europa. Die Entstehung des europäischen Selbstverständnisses im 19. Und 20. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2001); V. G. Kiernan, “Europe in the Colonial Mirror,” *History of European Ideas*, 1 (1980), 39–61; Bart Luttikhuis, *Negotiating Modernity: Europeanness in Late Colonial Indonesia, 1910–1942* (unpublished PhD thesis, European University Institute, Florence, 2014).

process. Transnational flows thus might help to reify nations, as much as nationalism might drive transnational agendas.<sup>56</sup>

Having said this, the relative vagueness of transnational history also makes it seem more a transitory term than a stable category. In their times, social and cultural history and other innovations revolved around theoretical and methodological cores. In comparison, transnational history seems to share some of the ephemeral and elusive qualities of the very objects it investigates. The danger of an inflationary use persists, particularly in light of the methodological challenges that transnational history faces. The fact that the term's success to some part hinges on its very vagueness also raises concerns. A lot has been achieved empirically, and yet a later generation might feel that the added value of the term is meager. Most practitioners today would readily admit that the emperor has no clothes. For this reason, it would not necessarily be bad if, in twenty-five or fifty years from now, the debate might have branched out and thickened into slightly more specific concepts. Or, put in a nutshell: the biggest success of transnational history would be if it managed to help make itself superfluous.

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### Abstract

This article assesses the debate on transnational history some 25 years after it first stated. It demonstrates that history is a latecomer to the interdisciplinary discussion on transnationality. It proceeds to explore the meaning of the term and define transnational history primarily as a research perspective. It also assesses the rise of transnational history from the perspective of the sociology of knowledge, revealing the specific circumstances that facilitated this debate, before scrutinising central challenges transnational history has to face. The article then discusses the place of Europe in transnational history and ends with some ideas on how the field might look some twenty-five or fifty years from now. In sum, this text stresses the specificity of the moment that gave rise to transnational history. It weighs merits and achievements

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<sup>56</sup> See, as an early point of departure for this debate, Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," *Theory, Culture & Society*, 7 (1990), 295–310; as a recent example Kiran Klaus Patel, *The New Deal: A Global History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

against the term's relative vagueness that make it seem more a transitory than a stable historiographical category. Is transnational history like an emperor without clothes? Not necessarily—but still, it might be more impermanent than many might think today.

**Key words:** Transnational History; Europe; Historiography; Sociology of Knowledge; Globalization.

### Résumé

Cet article fait le point sur l'état de l'histoire transnationale, 25 ans après les premiers débats. Il montre que la discipline historique est relativement tard-venue dans le traitement multidisciplinaire de la transnationalité. Il revient sur les différentes acceptions du mot et définit l'histoire transnationale principalement comme une approche de recherche. L'article envisage également le développement de l'histoire transnationale comme objet de sociologie des sciences, insistant sur les circonstances particulières qui ont facilité l'émergence de cette proposition historiographique, puis s'intéresse aux principaux défis rencontrés. L'article discute de l'Europe, objet d'histoire transnationale. Il propose enfin une réflexion prospective sur l'histoire transnationale dans 25 ou 50 ans. L'article insiste sur le « moment » qui a permis l'émergence de l'histoire transnationale, évalue ses mérites et ses apports au regard de sa définition vague et de sa faible théorisation qui en font une catégorie qui semble plus transitoire qu'il n'y paraît.

**Mots clés :** histoire transnationale ; Europe ; historiographie ; sociologie de la connaissance ; mondialisation.

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