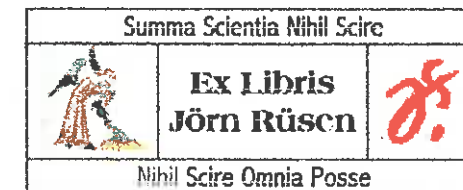


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Approaches to European Historical Consciousness: Reflections and Provocations

edited by: Sharon Macdonald
with the assistance of Katja Fausser

Results of the project
"European Historical Consciousness".
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Preface

Since 1989/90 crucial changes have had an enormous impact on Europe. During this relatively short period the continent has experienced the breakdown of communism as a political system and became part of a rapid and far-reaching process of global integration as well. In the framework of political, social and economic changes it soon became obvious that there is a substantial need for discussion about common values, national and supranational identity all over Europe. Excluding these topics from ongoing debates concerning the process of European unification would mean creating a purely artificial concept of Europe without "life and soul".

History, of course, plays an important role not only for the individual self-awareness but also for the development of a collective identity for society as a whole. A society that is not able to establish a critical view of its own past will also not be able to define its position and discover its opportunities in the framework of a multinational or even global community of the future.

Assuming this, the *Körber Foundation* has been very involved in historical-political project work for more than 25 years. Individual research on local history was triggered by the *Students' Competition on German History for the President's Award* where thousands of young people adopted a modified and often completely new view of their own history. With the establishment of EUSTORY in 1998 the *Körber Foundation's* work in the field of historical-political culture gained a European perspective. One of the main aims of EUSTORY is to foster a cross-border dialogue on history and identity in Europe. Various individuals and groups already actively contribute to this dialogue: Students, teachers, tutors and experts on the didactics of history are part of our European network of history competitions; historians, anthropologists, sociologists and other specialists are in-

attempt to understand these "others" on the illustrious basis of general humanistic values.

European Historical Consciousness is hardly to be found as a substance though it may already exist as a process or a tendency. Even in this quality, however, European Historical Consciousness must have almost as many different images as there are different communities to be found at present in our small communal Europe.

"Cultural Currency"

The Nature of Historical Consciousness in Europe

Jörn Rüsen

What is European Historical Consciousness? For the time being, there is no satisfying answer to this question. Undoubtedly there are European elements and European dimensions inscribed in the different historical cultures of the European countries, but there is no consensus as to what these elements and dimensions actually are.

I propose to pose three general questions in order to learn what European Historical Consciousness really is. (a) What is happening? (b) What should happen? And finally: (c) What can we do? From these questions we can see what we have to deal with: (a) empirical phenomena and (b) visions of a common European historical culture as well as (c) activities in topical procedures in which historical consciousness is articulated or intentionally practiced, e.g. in teaching and writing history, in presenting historical exhibitions, in museums etc.

In spite of the multifariousness of the European situation we may be able to articulate one important fact: namely, what a European Historical Consciousness is definitely not or, better, cannot be. It cannot be prescribed by European political institutions or implemented from above as a matter of practical politics. An attempt to create historical consciousness in such a way is always doomed to fail if there is no corresponding element "from below": there is no alternative to make the European character of historical consciousness plausible from and for the traditions of the different national and regional cultures. A lively historical consciousness cannot be prescribed from above. But there are ways to intervene in the ongoing developments of historical and cultural memory and the various realms of historical culture, in order to influence the direction of those developments.

But why should this happen? The answer to this question is as easy as it is urgent: because the political and economic process of European unification is in need of culture to accompany and to intervene in this process. Europe is growing together and this process always has a cultural dimension. The fact of the unification process itself raises questions about the historical identities of those who are creating this united Europe. The questions being asked in this respect are consciously considered and answered here.

The question of what "Europe" in its cultural and political dimension really is, is not only being asked today but has in fact been in debate for a long time.¹ But the progress of political and economic unification makes it more urgent. There is a need for the common currency to be accompanied by a corresponding "cultural currency" that could help the European nations and their citizens to identify culturally in the already existent economic area, so that they can treat it as their own. Such a cultural currency cannot be introduced, prescribed and pushed through in the same way as has been done with the "Euro". But there is the task to bring about a "cultural Euro" if we want to avoid a fatal disproportion between different dimensions of human life and practice in the united Europe, especially between culture on the one hand and politics and economics on the other. When asking for the cultural equivalents of European unification in the realm of historical culture, one quickly discovers the challenging fact of such a disproportion. In fact, it is growing and there is danger of an ever widening gap between cultural identity on the one hand and common economy and political institutions on the other. The gap leaves these spheres disconnected. In such disconnectedness, economy and politics develop their own dynamics which are experienced as alienating by the people concerned if they do not have a sense of integration within the political institutions and economic areas.

"Belonging" understood as historical identity is a special case.² It follows its own rules and directives so that political, and even more so, economic developments and strategies cannot be simply transferred to the historical cultures of the countries concerned. Relin-

quishing the national currency is one thing, but relinquishing the deeply rooted historical identity of a nation or a region is another. It will never merge into an overriding European identity. Therefore, a European Historical Consciousness that really provides an orientation for the people in the growing Europeanization of their life-world will be a highly complex mixture of elements: it will retain multiple forms of belonging together when integrating the European dimension. This calls for a high degree of flexibility and dynamics which has to overpower the traditional mental powers of inclusion and exclusion if "Europeanness" is to become a central element of life.

How this is going to happen in detail cannot be foreseen. But in regard to schoolbooks and the curricula of historical learning it is possible to outline a model that could take into account such multiple dynamics.³ It would be nonsense to enforce a European Historical Consciousness in the educational institutions of the European countries by means of a common curriculum. Such uniformity would be deadly because it would simply ignore the heterogeneity of historically rooted forms of belonging. But it is possible to define core elements of a curriculum that are identical in all the different historical cultures, so that they may serve as a basis for the forming of European consciousness. Historical memory should be based on these elements and this idea should be a foundation for teaching and learning processes in Europe.

What could those core elements of historical memory be? The first thing that comes to mind are topics and themes. What matters is concrete historical knowledge about aspects which define Europe historically. Take, for example, the history of the European unification process itself. But considerations confined to contents are not sufficient. Just as important for the liveliness of a European Historical Consciousness are its *forms*. Only in the dialectics of form and content can a historical consciousness fulfill the functions for which it has been formed – thus becoming a matter of public interest, education and many other practices of cultural memory. Its most important function is the orientation of people in the temporal change of their world and

of themselves. They have to have an idea of the temporal dimension of their world so that they can orientate their actions in the course of time. They have to get an idea of who they are themselves within their changing world, from the origins of their ancestors to the future of their descendants. Practical orientation and identity-building are the decisive functions of historical consciousness. They determine what the central elements of a European Historical Consciousness could be regarding their form and content.

As to the contents of a European Historical Consciousness, one can start with the deeply rooted factors of historical identity: tenacious events of the past which are constitutive for the present state of life. They have an identity building function insofar as they are charged with a high degree of positive norms and values: the origins and foundations which make one's own tradition worth subscribing to and valuable for the future. Such historical events are not fixed forever, but they have a tenacious life in memory; they perpetuate themselves in the change of generations and are very slowly transformed or substituted. This is usually the case when dramatic events of the present enforce new evaluations of the meaning of the historical facts previously considered as decisive. To give two examples for such identity forming events: for Protestants, the Reformation is, of course, such an event, whereas for the citizens of a modern parliamentary democracy it is the declaration of human and civil rights. Of course, there is a large variety of such meaningful events; every country, every nation and every group in the European countries refers to different events. But there are some meaningful events that can be easily identified as having a common meaning for most of the people in Europe: the declaration of human and civil rights, the ancient origins of Occidental rationality and of rational law, the rise of urban life, religious developments, especially in Judaism and Christianity, which have made European culture different from other cultural areas of the world. Of course, we must not omit the rise of the modern natural sciences, the state monopoly of power, the great achievements of the arts in different époques and a lot more.

A European consciousness is based upon the transnational meaning of such events and developments of the past. But it would be fatal if only these common historical grounds were taken into account. At least two more aspects have to be remembered. First, that Europe is defined by a history in which the network of relationships between and across countries and cultures is both widening and intensifying. Even the fact that Europe has become a communicative network of peoples, nations, states, regions and other communities (e.g. literary communities, scientific organizations, religious confessions etc.), is part of the European identity. In the face of present dynamics it can only be sufficiently understood if Europe's historical antiquity is kept in mind. The Europeanization of the world as a historical process is a constitutive part of European identity. That leads me to the second aspect: the historical burdens of Europe's history, and not only those connected to the Europeanization of the world. A historical consciousness is only valid for the future when its traditional ethnocentric structures become permeable, for they were written according to strict patterns in which belonging to one's own people is rated as positive and important historical events and developments are referred to, while the otherness of the others is rated as negative. Those others are, in comparison with one's own progressive, civilized group, either barbarians or retarded people of a remote type. Such forms of a normatively asymmetrical historical consciousness can be found everywhere and they are deeply rooted in the human mind. In their own cultural logic they systematically create a state of tension between the self and the other which can – depending on the context – engender violent conflicts.⁴ The history of Europe has always been the history of such conflicts; the emergence of a common Europe as well as the topical process of European unification has always been determined by them. This becomes evident when we consider the two world wars. Such negative historical experiences have to be kept alive along with the need to support the power of mediation in Europe that has been at work to transform those conflicts into a peaceful coexistence.

The ambivalence of the normative meaning of identity-building events requires such a mediation in historical consciousness, which in turn is able to overcome tensions and confrontations of ethnocentrism in the logic of historical differentiation between self and other. This is true for the history of inner-European relations but even more so for the relationship between Europe and the world, for the problems of colonialism and imperialism, of the slave-trade and imperial exploitation. It also appears to threaten the rigid claims for universalism, which are articulated in European civil and cultural norms and values, and to challenge the cultural identity of other countries.

This negative and dark side of European Historical Consciousness took on a universally human dimension when, within the framework of the European history, incredibly inhuman crimes were committed: in the Holocaust and in the criminal acts under Stalinism and communism. European identity is determined by the convincing power of universal norms and values such as human and civil rights, and also the universal validity of claims for reason and rational argumentation in the sciences. Equipped with such universal elements, which have been acquired by European culture in and through its own history, European identity self-confidently communicates with other cultures of the world. The memory of the experience of terror in European history muffles the ethnocentric element in historical thinking.

Instead, what are enforced are those traditions of European culture in which the experience and interpretation of differences among human life forms were not ethnocentrically devalued but understood as enrichment. Among these traditions are the aesthetic culture of fine arts, the hermeneutic culture of the Humanities, the judicial culture of individualism as well as a political system of representation, in which differences are peacefully negotiated. In these traditions, cultural heterogeneity is understood as a wealth of the nation. The acknowledgement of difference founded on those traditions has not restricted European Historical Consciousness to ethnocentric enclosure. Yet, such tendencies of exclusion have not been fully overcome, for they are a part of the differentiating logic of cultural belonging. They keep

emerging on a mental, cultural, political or economic level, thus providing a continuous challenge and civilizing stimulus. This stimulus is being constantly absorbed, in the process of defining belonging and non-belonging.

Europe provides us with many examples. Even the territorial dimension of a European Historical Consciousness is anything but well-defined or fixed. Where does Europe end?⁵ Politically, there are the borderlines of the European Union; economically its boundaries have disappeared into the international trade market; and culturally they are even more submerged. Even the critique of European cultural universalism is as universal as what it queries in respect to the history of European particularity. European Historical Consciousness is open to, and oriented towards, the future. Thus it is able to become a lively factor in the process of European unification as well as in the ways and means in which Europe situates itself in and communicates with the world.

Thus an important *formal* quality of a specifically European Historical Consciousness has been identified. It is not based upon given facts. It does not function within fixed boundaries between inside and outside, neither does it work synchronically nor diachronically. Instead, it has the dynamic character of a process. That means a lesser degree of unambiguous ethnocentricity and a higher degree of that inner heterogeneity which allows an increasing chance of historical orientation.⁶ The unambiguous ethnocentricity of a historical orientation is based upon three principles. First, the positive and normative evaluation of one's own history and the negative evaluation of the history of others (normative dualism of, or Manicheism of values). Second, an unbroken continuity of one's own development from origins to relevant projections of the future (reprojective teleology). And third, a clear location of one's own positive development in the centre of history and the corresponding discriminating marginalization of others (temporal and spatial centralism).

This general structure (understood as an "ideal-type") of historical consciousness as a cultural medium of identity-building can be identi-

fied in all cultures and all times. It has also determined the historical consciousness in Europe up to our times. Moreover, it can be easily used to form a European dimension of historical consciousness. It should not be difficult to find examples of the effectiveness of this structure in the cultural processes of European unification. It would certainly be a big surprise if it were not so.

Yet it is important to take notice of forces against this effective structure. The integration of negative experiences into historical self-understanding, the insight that the emergence of today's Europe is not an inevitable process from ancient origins to the modern secularized world, and the confrontations and heterogeneous development of different centres of cultural hegemony in Europe have brought about a non-centralist idea of territorial identity in which the relation between self and others can be locally observed. The normative dualism of ethnocentric conceptions of history is systematically undermined by the integration of negative experiences into the historical self-image. The reprojective teleology can also be invalidated by rationally considering the contingency, the gaps and discontinuities of historical developments. There is also another point of view to be considered. Ethnocentric historical thinking favours origins. The feelings of belonging are rooted in (supposedly) fixed determinants of the past. In contrast, a non-teleological historical consciousness would prove future-minded. The new vision of Europe directs the eye back to the past so that it may appear as an unresolved change.

In traditional ethnocentrism, relying on the fundamental differentiation between centre and periphery, European Historical Consciousness is decentralized. In Europe there is only a multitude of centres with their respective complex relationships. In terms of its normative structure, Europe is characterized by an ambivalence that makes it impossible to eliminate negative experiences from the image of the self, yet forbids the inscribing of such experiences into the image of the otherness of others. Barbarism is no longer transposed to the outside of Europe. Instead, it is acknowledged as an integral part of its own history. Thereby European Historical Consciousness gains a

communicative structure that enables it to acknowledge other cultures so that conflicts of the world can be contained and civilized. These characteristics distinguish (again) the European from other still ethnocentric forms of historical consciousness in a positive way. (Yet this does not imply a falling back into this ethnocentric conceptualization, because this ethnocentrism is remembered as a part of Europe's own history.) Such a European dimension creates an ethnocentrism of difference and historical consciousness and gains great potential for promoting peace.

If this European quality of historical consciousness becomes dominant as a means of orientation, achievements of mutual acknowledgement among the nations of Europe will increase. These achievements are related to those differences which, in the traditional national self-understanding of the past, were the major source of conflicts, contemptuous attitudes and aggressive actions. In such a form of historical consciousness Europe is defined as a community in and through difference or, as the classic formula puts it, as "unity in diversity". This unity is defined by transcultural principles which are most important in the global historical process of the Europeanization of the world: methodological rationality, formal law, universalistic morality etc. This universalism, however, is an abstract one. It makes differences disappear on the surface and is thus subject to becoming an ideology available to be filled with secret particularisms. In this case, Europe would stand for a world civilization and the cultural identity of non-European nations would be threatened. But to the extent that the acknowledgement of difference makes variety itself a point of reference of a European Universalism, this universalism becomes a chance for peace.

The orientating function of historical consciousness, however, will only be able to achieve this if it provides and reserves a space for ambivalence. Such ambivalence is generated by the integration of negative historical experiences into historical self-consciousness. This integration of the negatively viewed "other" (of the barbarian) into the positively conceived self (of the civilized) does not simply dissolve the

difference between the European and the non-European. On the contrary, it focuses the sensibility for cultural differences and enables the "others" to establish their position as others in a way that may be accepted. With this we have just formulated an abstract regulative principle. But to what extent it will thrive in the practical everyday life of cultural memory, e.g. in historical education and the different dimensions of the historical culture of the European countries (especially in historical studies) depends on the vitality of this principle. This in turn, however, depends on the extent to which the roots of this principle can be found in the respective histories of the different European countries and in the history of their relations to other nations, and on the extent to which these can be vitalized by memory.

The vitality of a European Historical Consciousness which has been conceptualized, envisioned and practically realized in this way depends heavily on whether and how it can spread and unfold in the new media. It still requires, however, to be made effective in the old media: in everyday communications and in the literacy of historical education. Here, the chances are not too bad: the growing intra-European and international relations support the chances of mutual acknowledgement in the realm of intercultural communication by concrete historical experiences of difference. In the realm of literature, the hermeneutics of the humanities (including recent approaches to the symbolic deep-structure of self and world awareness)⁷ come into play, especially in the field of education.

The intensification of communication in the new media can bring out these tendencies. But it may also engender a pressure towards homogenization; using these media may lead to an adjustment of thought so that the varieties of exclusive differences dissolve into the network of connections. Whether this is going to happen or not is an open question. It depends on the ways in which the people affected take an active part in the processes that shape the development of historical consciousness. Here, an astute awareness of the special character of European thinking – even in the visionary form of an outline for the future – is a factor that should not be underestimated.

Notes

- 1 Paul Michael Lützeler (ed.): *Plädoyers für Europa. Stellungnahmen deutschsprachiger Schriftsteller 1915-1949*, Frankfurt/M. 1987; id.: *Die Schriftsteller und Europa. Von der Romantik bis zur Gegenwart*, München 1992; id.: *Vom Ethnozentrismus zur Multikultur. Europäische Identität heute*, in: Michael Kessler/Jürgen Wertheimer (eds.): *Multikulturalität. Tendenzen, Probleme, Perspektiven im europäischen und internationalen Horizont*, Tübingen 1995, pp. 91-105.
- 2 Burkhard Liebsch: *Moralische Spielräume. Menschheit und Andersheit, Zugehörigkeit und Identität*, Göttingen 1999; an excellent short summary of the most important arguments can be found in Oswald Schwemmer: *Mischkultur und kulturelle Identität. Einige Thesen zur Dialektik des Fremden und Eigenen in der Einheit der Kultur*, in: *Divination. Studia Culturologica Series*, vol. 8, Autumn-Winter 1998, pp. 75-86.
- 3 Karl-Ernst Jeismann/Rainer Riemenschneider (eds.): *Geschichte Europas für den Unterricht der Europäer: Prolegomena eines Handbuchs der Europäischen Geschichte für die Lehre der Sekundarstufe II*, Braunschweig 1980; Falk Pingel (ed.): *Macht Europa Schule? Die Darstellung Europas in Schulbüchern der europäischen Gemeinschaft*, Frankfurt/M. 1995; id.: *Europa im Geschichtsbuch*, in: *Stiftung Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (ed.): Europäische Geschichtskultur im 21. Jahrhundert*, Bonn 1999, pp. 215-237.
- 4 Cf. Samuel Huntington: *The Clash of Civilizations*, New York 1996.
- 5 Elmar Holenstein: *Wo verlaufen Europas Grenzen? Europäische Identität und Universalität auf dem Prüfstand*, in: Manfred Brouckner/Heino-Heinrich Nau (eds.): *Ethnozentrismus. Möglichkeiten und Grenzen des interkulturellen Dialogs*, Darmstadt 1997, pp. 46-68.
- 6 Cf. Jörn Rüsen: *Für eine interkulturelle Kommunikation in der Geschichte. Die Herausforderungen des Ethnozentrismus in der Moderne und die Antwort der Kulturwissenschaften*, in: Jörn Rüsen et alii (eds.): *Die Vielfalt der Kulturen*, Frankfurt/M. 1998, pp. 12-36 (= *Erinnerung, Geschichte, Identität*, vol. 4).
- 7 Jürgen Straub: *Verstehen, Kritik, Anerkennung. Das Eigene und das Fremde in der Erkenntnisbildung interpretativer Wissenschaften*, Göttingen 1999 (= *Essener kulturwissenschaftliche Vorträge*, vol. 4).