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Centre, Periphery and Back: European Historiographical Itineraries

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Athena Syriatou

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Centre, Periphery and Back: European Historiographical Itineraries. Introduction

Athena Syriatou

Democritus University of Thrace

It is often noted that the concept of European history has always been somewhat elusive, even though at various moments it has been presented as a unified field of research.¹ The most recent instance of such unity emerged around the time of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, when the prospect of deeper European integration made the development of a shared European consciousness a priority in public discourse and education.² Yet, this was also the period when a new war erupted on European soil, the first since the end of the Second World War, prompting renewed scholarly attention to the study of nationalism. As both centrifugal and centripetal forces came into play, perceptions of Europeanness and European history were significantly challenged. “European” history has come under criticism not only for ignoring its global entanglements but for ignoring its parts, thereby obscuring Europe’s heterogeneity and prioritising its northwestern part. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent re-examination of Eastern European countries, as regards their cultural right to be included in European history, since their political rights had been restored, is an obvious example. Indeed, the idea of Europeanness was also re-examined, especially as political and cultural properties, such as civility and imaginary stability, were often presented in the political sphere as essentialised European characteristics. European studies and European history have become sine qua non elements of most university curricula, accompanied by new journals on European studies.³ In most European universities, the subject of “European history”, alongside, yet distinct from, national histories, gained prominence as a marker of an outward-looking, historiographical approach. Moreover, European history courses were seen as aligning with the ideals of European cultural integration, serving as an educational gesture towards postwar values of cooperation and peace. This was also a period when numerous books on European history appeared aiming “to Europeanize the continent’s national histories”.⁴ Yet only a few years later, the notion of “Europeanness” as civilising capital – and thus an anticipated asset for nations to acquire – was seriously challenged by historiographical critiques of

Eurocentrism⁵ and the West as well as the growing body of imperial and global history publications.

Twenty-five years into the twenty-first century, can we say that European history has been transformed to meet the new questions raised by historians of transnational, imperial and global history and of globalisation in general? Has the proliferation of historical works examining the interconnectedness of the world before the European “conquest” – both literal and historiographical – been able to displace the already elusive notion of a European history? It is not a surprise that new publications and conferences have sought to problematise once again the continued presence of European history in academia. This was the case of the special issue of the journal *European History Quarterly* to celebrate its 40th anniversary, titled “Writing European History Today”, in 2010. The volume editors, Laurence Cole and Philipp Ther, consider that European history has been “de-centred” as a result of the so-called “postmodern” challenge. National histories have been significantly revised and demythologised, and they acknowledge the tremendous changes following the 1989 breach to reconstruct what have been considered regions and nation-states in European history,⁶ or, one could add, centre and periphery. For a new Europeanised history, they refer to Michael Geyer’s proposals for writing a European history worthy of its name: “first, consider families and communities as European subjects; second, treat migration and migrants as the systemic counterweight to nations; third, think of civil societies as supreme mimickers of one another.”⁷ In that sense Michael Werner’s remark in a special issue of *Annales* in 2021 that “European history can never be to Europe what national history has been to the nation”,⁸ suggests that European history could indeed be demythologised, freed from the burden of imaginary contested values, such as liberty and rationality, which have been taken as essentially European and absent in other cultures. Richard Evans, too, in his “Global Histories of Global Europe”, emphasises the benefits of the global turn to writing new European histories which take into consideration global conjunctures.⁹ Yet, he also notices that in the 2010s new, aggressively nationalistic histories of European nations emerged that “stimulated the rise of a new nationalism, fueled by a resentful hostility to immigration, that in many cases spills over into xenophobia and racial hatred”, acquiring temporary popularity beyond academia.¹⁰

At a conference held in May 2018, titled “When the Periphery Interprets the Centre: Greek Historians of European History”, which took place at the Democritus University of Thrace, several Greek historians specialising in European history, from early modernity to contemporary times, attempted to answer, within their respective fields, their perceptions of what remains of the “European” in European histories. As the first generation of historians who established the field of European history in Greece, they sought to address several questions regarding their object of study, which lies at the centre of European history. These historians, on the one hand, face the inherent challenge of conquering the self-

evident cultural values of their object of study. On the other hand, because they possess the tools of historians from the periphery, they are able to examine, compare and question the national cultural facts of the “others”, especially those from the European centre, from unexpected yet fruitful perspectives. Moreover, they are well positioned to interpret the trajectories of dominant historiographical themes, both within and outside of national histories, and to trace how these narratives have been challenged by the dynamics of histories from the periphery. At the same time, it is more common and widely accepted to see the reverse: historians from central Europe or the United States specialising in the histories of smaller European nations.

Positionality – the relationship between the researcher and their object of study – has increasingly been scrutinised in recent years, whether from anthropological, historical, educational or even political perspectives.¹¹ In historical scholarship, the interest in the nationality and training of historians studying countries other than their own has only recently gained attention, both as an asset, in bringing a fresh perspective distinct from that of native historians, and as a potential limitation, due to possible gaps in understanding local historical contexts. Whether the outcome of their historical work is viewed positively or negatively ultimately depends on their publications – but for these to be judged at all, they must first pass through the filters and constraints of the Anglophone academic marketplace. In *Cosmopolitan Islanders*,¹² Evans argues that British historians have shown a particular interest in histories beyond their own nation, presenting comparative statistics from France, the United States, Germany and Italy to demonstrate that, by contrast, their European colleagues tend to show less curiosity about other countries and foreign pasts. Evans does not consider historians from other European smaller nations from the periphery of Europe who publish both in English and their own language about countries that are not their own. As Giorgos Plakotos observes in this volume, Evans’ thesis can be read as a “refashioned centre/periphery perspective”.

In a polemical response to Evans, Peter Baldwin questions his statistics and examines the historical production of three large European countries – the United Kingdom, France and Germany – as well as the United States, to conclude that, contrary to Evans’ claim, historians from central and northern European countries are indeed interested in foreign pasts. Baldwin stresses that the domination of the English language worldwide evaluates and excludes all non-English publications as inferior or irrelevant on the academic world stage.¹³ However, even Baldwin, who explicitly analyses the problems that historians of other nations and languages face in publishing and promoting their work, also concentrates on bigger European countries and the United States and refers to quintessential European events, namely the French Revolution and the two world wars, despite the fact that many other events that shaped modern European history started in the peripheries.¹⁴

This special issue brings together six articles by historians from the periphery of Europe, examining the perplexities and challenges posed by European historiography of the centre. The contributors aim to interpret pivotal moments that have shaped recent historiographies, particularly in light of the rise of global history. They reflect on how world history has – successfully or not – reconfigured concepts such as nation, empire and interconnectedness through the lenses of economy and culture. Their aim is not to write a different history than that of a native historian – after all, academic connectedness and informed research are the aims of every historian in any case – but rather to articulate how, in their view, ruptures in dominant convictions and essentialised ideas are currently at work within historiography. A common thread in these articles is the observation that, despite the expansion of methodologies and the rise of globalised historiographical endeavours, the nation continues to function in many recent historical works as a constant, essential unit within the historical profession. In that sense, even when the peripheries have enriched historical research, they rarely produce holistic works or independent theoretical frameworks.¹⁵ More often, historians of the periphery engage with case studies on an already elaborated and dominant theory (Androniki Dialeti), or, after acknowledging the value of histories from the periphery, they revert to again stress the uniqueness of the Western, European or, at times, British centre (Giorgos Plakotos, Athena Syriatou). Even in native historiographies, historical themes that were once marginalised often resurface, only to return to the centre and answer older questions that were considered outmoded by applying new methodologies and using new sources, such as oral history archives and queries into gender and childhood (Maria Papathanasiou, Konstantinos Raptis). Finally, it is important to see how historiographies from the periphery have, at times, gained the power to reconsider long-accepted periodisations, such as the 1914–1918 span for the First World War. New periodisations have been proposed for nations involved in the war to include wars which preceded the Great War and others that followed (Elli Lemonidou).

More analytically in this volume, Androniki Dialeti examines the shaping of centre and periphery in the historiography of gender history. She argues that recent historical studies in gender history, which examine geographically and chronologically distant societies from Western ones and consider other social and cultural categories, have destabilised the Eurocentric and patriarchal contexts that typically dominated the field. However, she observes that, despite academic globalisation, the Anglophone model of scholarship and the English language remain dominant. Thus, researchers from other regions and countries are underrepresented in global gender historiography. In this way, the Anglophone academic centre typically assumes the role of “the observer”, while other academic peripheries are kept in the position of “the observed”, as writing in English frequently becomes a criterion for academic significance. Dialeti also notes that regional historiography often incorporates case studies from afar into pre-existing theoretical

frameworks “made in the West”, sidelining categorisations of gender from regional cultures that do not align with them. She also detects historiographical, geographical and chronological priorities and silences in four academic journals from 2011 to 2020. An overwhelming majority of the articles in these journals focus on modernity, rather than the premodern world, with more than half examining European history and, to a lesser extent, the United States and the “rest of the world”. Yet, as Dialetti concludes, gender history has contributed to the internationalisation of history and the deconstruction of Western paradigms, without being able to eradicate polarities such as centre/periphery. Her radical proposal is to study the “centre” as alterity, posing the question “to what extent does the periphery shape the centre”?

George Plakotos analyses the historiographical production concerning early modern history in the twenty-first century, focusing on how recent historiography frames early modern European history through the angle of centre and periphery. He argues that history is a “nationally defined” discipline, despite historians’ efforts to move beyond academic national constraints in the production of historical knowledge and the politics of historical research. He highlights the dominant position of the English language and English-speaking publishing industry, which function as a “centre” ill-equipped to handle the transnational and global research agendas of the peripheries. He discusses historians’ perceptions of a new globality in the early modern period, which is often portrayed as polycentric, emphasising asymmetries of power and avoiding older teleological histories that cast the early modern period as a stage in the triumph of the West, a historical period which used to be labelled as the Renaissance. In so doing, these historians take into consideration the interaction and interconnections of centre and periphery, especially those including material culture in their studies. They thus emphasise that both the material and cultural identity of early modern Europe emerged from direct encounters between artifacts exchanged among international communities at different geographical locations, which were also undergoing “renaissances” and were also at some stage of cultural and material modernity. Plakotos underlines that while European historiography recognises the advancement and sophistication of other societies far from Europe, it also tends to colonise other peripheral pasts by emphasising, at the same time, the uniqueness of European (and British) exceptionalism and assumed superiority of civilisation.

Athena Syriatou examines the notion of centre and periphery by concentrating on the way historians have approached the history of Britain as national, world or transnational history. She analyses pivotal publications on British history throughout the twentieth century to assess how historians have positioned Britain’s past, uncovering essentialised perceptions attributed by them to the nation. In so doing, her article also engages with historians writing “from afar”, that is, the Anglophone world, who claim British history as their own, be it of Britain and Ireland, the Commonwealth or the long-time lost empire,

which places Britain at the centre and, more rarely, at the periphery of world developments. Her article mentions how social historians of the 1960s reappraised the universal dimension of the Industrial Revolution, which began in Britain and elevated the country to a position of global influence and power. It also analyses the decline debate, particularly as it re-emerged in the 1980s, dividing historians on Britain into two camps: those who lamented the loss of Britain's position at the centre of world developments and sought to explain its causes, and those who maintained that Britain's world position is still powerful, albeit not as powerful as it used to be. Moreover, the article turns to historians who examine British history as part of European history and who stress that Britain was formed by its opposition to France and Catholicism. Finally, it turns to those who study the constant entanglement of Britain both with the British Empire and world history. Yet, the nation seems to return even in those historiographies to claim a central role for Britain in world history.

Maria Papathanasiou and Konstantinos Raptis examine how certain historical topics have emerged from the academic periphery to take centre stage within the historiography of German-speaking Europe. More specifically, they explore the parameters that bring marginal subjects to the centre of academic trends, resulting in enriched and more nuanced scholarship on underrepresented historical issues. Papathanasiou's article concentrates on the popularity, since the 1980s, of the social and cultural history of rural Europe and, specifically, Austria from the late nineteenth century to the outbreak of the Second World War. Rather than sketching the social stratification of agricultural workers in Austria in economic terms, new approaches, based on oral history and the written ego-histories, have radically changed our knowledge of the experience of these workers and the rural past in general. Power hierarchies and techniques of subordination, gender and age discrimination, as well as social duties, which entail the suppression of personal feelings and the manipulation of personality, are explicitly studied in the collection of such endeavours, formulating a rich and dynamic archive at the University of Vienna's Institute of Economic and Social History. Papathanasiou's article highlights how the sources and historical studies emerging from this archive have brought rural history to the forefront of historiographical developments in Vienna.

In his article, Raptis argues that the history of the elites was marginalised following the rise of social history in the 1950s and cultural studies from the 1970s to the 1980s, an era of widespread "anti-stuffiness", as Georg Iggers put it. The marginalisation of bourgeois and elite history occurred because of adverse circumstances in which the elites were involved, which made them an unpopular subject of historical research. Yet, this situation began to change after 1989 and the collapse of the socialist regimes, with elites, as a social group, coming to the forefront of historical analysis, though in a different manner than in the Rankean model. New trends in the study of the bourgeoisie proliferated, first in France and Britain and eventually in Germany. The University of Bielefeld played a key role in

deepening comparative studies of the middle classes as political, economic and cultural forces in the shaping of European history. In central European countries, similar research expanded after the fall of communism. In addition, the growing interest in the elites of the nineteenth and early twentieth century in the German-speaking and central European area extended to the study of the nobility and landed aristocracy in the nineteenth century and their efforts to remain at the top of the social pyramid in the following century. Sociocultural queries now lead new studies on the aristocracy, along with gender issues, family histories and self-consciousness. Moreover, new perspectives on the study of empire have become topical in German historiography. Recent research on the global bourgeoisie has highlighted that the study of the middle classes and nobility has regained a central historiographical position, moving from a once-neglected, peripheral role after the post-war rise of social history.

Elli Lemonidou examines how the dominant historiography of the First World War has long focused on the experiences of a significant “centre – the Western Front – while underestimating the experience of other participants, who were often considered, “secondary” or “peripheral”. She begins her analysis with an overview of the three phases of European historiography (mainly British, French and German) of the war, such as the interwar period, the 1960s to 1980s following the 50th anniversary of the war and, finally, the period after the end of the Cold War. Lemonidou’s examination of a peripheral historiography of the war, focusing on the Greek case, reveals more silences and gaps in Greek historical narratives that fail to relate major national traumas to the war, instead treating it as an irrelevant war of Europeans. Yet, after the centenary of the Great War and the subsequent “explosion” of historiography, many previously neglected issues have come centre stage. The most significant change has been the fact that the study of the First World War has become an important historiographical issue not only in countries that once considered the war irrelevant but also in those where its discussion was almost banished. This led to a new periodisation of the war, incorporating smaller wars that preceded 1914, such as the Balkan Wars, and well as those that followed 1918, including the wars in the Adriatic and even in Asia Minor. In this way, it can be argued that the transnational study of the First World War has reshaped how the conflict is perceived, challenging the conventional periodisation that once centred solely on the war between the great powers in European historiography.

Finally, Ada Dialla, in the afterword, begins by reflecting on the location of the aforementioned conference, held in the Greek periphery, that led to this publication. She comments on the topicality of the distinction of the idea of centre and periphery, especially in light of the ongoing war in Ukraine. She emphasises that, beyond the historiographical work of European historians, the way we perceive centre and periphery is primarily a political issue, extending far beyond the confines of academia.

- ¹ Richard Evans claims that Europe itself can be dated to the early modern period, in view of the religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It was extended after the efforts of Peter the Great to include a large part of Russia during the eighteenth century, and recently there have been attempts to equate European history with the history of member states of European Union, at times excluding Britain. See “What is European History? Reflections of a Cosmopolitan Islander,” *European History Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (2010): 593–605, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265691410375500>. More recently, Michael Werner has also commented on the problematic nature of specifying European history in “Décentrer l’histoire européenne par les marges: Visions plurielles d’une modernité fragmentée,” *Annales: Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 76, no. 4 (2021): 669–83, <https://doi.org/10.1017/ahss.2021.159>.
- ² The attempts on the part of Council of Europe to write a new “Eurohistory” ended in a notorious publication of Jean Baptiste Duroselle, *Europe: A History of its Peoples* (London: Viking, 1991), which evoked even political protest over the omission of some of its “peoples”. See, especially, Norman Davies, *Europe: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 42–45. In 2008, a co-authored textbook by teams of German and French historians, published in both languages, only demonstrated a narrow concept of Europe, accentuating positive shared aspects of Western European culture only. See Evans, “What is European History?,” 601. However, the development of history didactics, along with organisations such as the EuroClio Association and the Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation, has played a crucial role in addressing history teaching in schools across Europe. These institutions are actively involved in organising conferences and meetings for history teachers to discuss new methods for teaching difficult and conflicting aspects of European and world history, with the aim of fostering a more tolerant understanding of the past.
- ³ European history courses, within history or political science departments, became widespread in many universities across Europe from the late 1980s through the first decade of this century. During this period, many universities also established departments of European studies to explore the history and cultural affinities of Europe.
- ⁴ David Motadel, “Global Europe,” in *Globalising Europe: A History*, ed. David Motadel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025), 5.
- ⁵ Dipesh Chakrabarty’s *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000) has become a pivotal work in rewriting both European history and global histories since.
- ⁶ Laurence Cole and Philipp Ther, “Introduction: Current Challenges of Writing European History,” *European History Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (2010): 583, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265691410377159>.
- ⁷ Michael Geyer, “The Subject(s) of Europe,” in *Conflicted Memories: Europeanizing Contemporary Histories*, ed. Konrad Jarausch and Thomas Lindenberger (New York: Berghahn, 2007), 256, cited in Cole and Ther, “Introduction,” 589.
- ⁸ Werner, “Décentrer l’histoire européenne,” 670.
- ⁹ Richard J. Evans, “Global Histories of Modern Europe,” *Annales: Histoire, Sciences Sociales (English Edition)* (2022): 6–8, <https://doi.org/10.1017/ahsse.2022.12>.
- ¹⁰ Evans (ibid., 7) is referring especially to those British historians who contributed in the ideology behind Brexit, a history imbued by nostalgia for Britain’s imperial past, such as Robert Tombs, *The English and Their History* (London: Allen Lane, 2014), as a result of an educational policy of successive governments where school curricula and examinations were revised to include greater proportions of English history, cementing national identity and transmitting it to immigrants and their children.
- ¹¹ Among many publications, see Jasmine K. Gani and Rabea M. Khan, “Positionality Statements as a Function of Coloniality: Interrogating Reflexive Methodologies,” *International Studies Quarterly* 68, no. 2 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqae038>; Naoki Sakai, “Positions and Positionalities: After Two Decades,”

Positions 20, no. 1 (2012), <https://doi.org/10.1215/10679847-1471385>; Sun Yee Yip, “Positionality and Reflexivity: Negotiating Insider-Outsider Positions Within and Across Cultures,” *International Journal of Research & Method in Education* 47, no. 3 (2024): 222–32, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1743727X.2023.2266375>; Johannes Fabian, *Anthropology with an Attitude: Critical Essays* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001); Christopher C. Jadallah, “Positionality, Relationality, Place, and Land: Considerations for Ethical Research with Communities,” *Qualitative Research* 25, no. 1 (2025): 227–42, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14687941241246174>.

¹² Richard Evans, *Cosmopolitan Islanders, British Historians and the European Continent* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

¹³ Peter Baldwin, “Smug Britannia: The Dominance of (the) English in Current History Writing and Its Pathologies,” *Contemporary European History* 20, no. 3 (2011): 351–66, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S096077731100035X>.

¹⁴ The examples here are abundant. One of the most prominent advocates who showed the effect of the periphery on the centre was Franco Venturi in *The End of the Old Regime, 1768–1776: The First Crisis*, trans. R.B. Litchfield (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), who argued that the ancien régime in France has been eroded from the periphery. Recently Mauricio Isabella, in *Southern Europe in the Age of Revolutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023), has argued that the historical moment in the 1820s, when a series of simultaneous uprisings took the quest for constitutional government to Portugal, Spain, the Italian peninsula, Sicily and Greece, was an outcome of an original popular constitutional culture in southern Europe. Ada Dialla, *Η Ρωσική Αυτοκρατορία και ο ελληνικός κόσμος: Τοπικές, ευρωπαϊκές και παγκόσμιες ιστορίες στην Εποχή των Επανάστασεων* [The Russian Empire and the Greek world: Local, European and global histories in the Age of Revolutions] (Athens: Alexandria, 2023), by introducing Greek 1821 in a broader spatial context, beyond the usual Western-centric one, highlights anew and with a critical eye the historically neglected Russian/Eurasian perspective while Russia appears not only as a great power in league with the insurgents, but also as a hybrid modern empire, with a significant European, Eurasian and global role. Diana Mishkova, in *Beyond Balkanism: The Scholarly Politics of Region Making* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), reinstates the subjectivity of “the Balkans” and the responsibility of the Balkan intellectual elites for the concept and the images it conveys and invites us to rethink the relationship between national and transnational (self-)representation and the communication between local and exogenous – Western, Central and Eastern European – concepts and definitions more generally.

¹⁵ The work of Immanuel Wallerstein is typical in analysing the role of the periphery in the formation of modern world. See, especially, Immanuel Wallerstein, “Semi-Peripheral Countries and the Contemporary World Crisis,” *Theory and Society* 3, no. 4 (1976): 461–83. See also Tessa Hauswedell, Axel Körner, and Ulrich Tiedau, eds., *Re-Mapping Centre and Periphery Asymmetrical Encounters in European and Global Contexts* (London: UCL Press, 2019).