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## Europe in Historical International Relations

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*Published in:*  
Routledge Handbook of Historical International Relations

**IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.**

*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Publication date:*  
2021

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Herborth, B., & Nitzschner, P. (2021). Europe in Historical International Relations. In B. de Carvalho, J. Costa Lopez, & H. Leira (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Historical International Relations* (pp. 432-440). Routledge.

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# EUROPE IN HISTORICAL INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

*Benjamin Herborth and Patrick Nitzschner*

## Introduction

At first glance, almost all of the historical work done in International Relations (IR) appears to be about Europe. Historical IR would thus seem to exacerbate a similar trend in history and historiography. Europe is taken for granted as self-evident centre and starting point both geographically and intellectually (Chakrabarty, 2000; Hobson, 2012; Çapan, 2016; Çapan et al. 2021 in this volume). In order to corroborate such an observation, historically oriented introductions to IR, though themselves an exception rather than the rule, are a case in point. In *Force and Statecraft*, for example, Paul Lauren et al. (2020) treat the emergence of great powers in Europe as the paradigmatic case to introduce international politics with a historical bent at large. In *Understanding Global Conflict: An Introduction to History and Theory*, Joseph Nye and David Welch (2017) expound a widely shared narrative starting with the Peace of Westphalia and gradually zooming in on contemporary international politics via the Concert of Europe and two World Wars. If it features at all in such conventional accounts, the non-European world appears as a target of imperial expansion and colonial violence and/or settlement (see Bayly, 2021; Caraccioli, 2021; both in this volume).

It is precisely because Europe is by and large taken for granted as the centre of geographical and intellectual attention, however, that it remains conceptually underexplored. The presumption of Europe goes without saying. Paying conceptual attention to Europe from the point of view of Historical IR thus not only sheds light on something previously neglected. It also allows us to explore what has been at stake in upholding Europe as a blind spot hidden in plain sight in much of the historically oriented work in IR. In order to do so, we will focus on what Europe does rather than on what Europe is.<sup>1</sup> This is to say that rather than mapping out more or less comprehensively who said what about Europe, we seek to reconstruct how Europe figures as an element of what Edward Said (2003 (1979): 71) termed ‘imaginative geography’.

In a nutshell, we suggest that Europe has not been conceptualized and has not been theorized in historical terms, because Europe itself represents an implicit theory of history, which organizes historical accounts that appear immediately plausible and relevant to the field of Historical IR conventionally understood (in this volume see also MacKay and LaRoche, 2021; and Hom, 2021). Unpacking this implicit theory, we suggest, not only allows us to get a clearer sense of what ‘Europe’ does in terms of conceptual work. It also opens up a wider range of historical and political imagination in thinking about Europe in the past, present, and future. The argument

proceeds as follows: in the following section, we discuss how ‘Europe’ is conceptually nested in the political semantics of modern politics and international relations. Specifically, we engage with key texts from both the English School tradition and Historical Sociology in order to demonstrate how Europe is used to invoke a linear, teleological view of history (on these, see also Go et al., 2021; Navari and Green, 2021, both in this volume). The third section follows up on such teleological uses of Europe by zooming in on debates on European integration as a vanguard project to overcome the perils of anarchy in international politics. In conclusion, we point to the potential of non-teleological readings of Europe.

### **Europe as the project of modernity**

IR imagines itself as quintessentially modern (Ruggie, 1993; Inayatullah and Blaney, 2004; Shilliam, 2010; Buzan and Lawson, 2015). A historical imagination cast in terms of modernity derives its rhetorical thrust from a simple yet powerful distinction. The modern sets itself apart from what had come before. It does so not only in the sense of marking a difference, but also in terms of evoking a sense of progressive development. The simple scheme before/after is thus imbued with historical meaning and, to the extent that such meaning is organized around binary oppositions with an inbuilt moral compass (e.g. modern/pre-modern, civilized/barbarian, reason/superstition), implicit normative judgement. We have previously suggested that ‘Europe’ is not only the empirical site where such a type of historical imagination is both thought up and put to test. Rather, ‘Europe’ is woven deeply into the fabric of IR’s historical imagination in such a way that the conceptual work done by what appears to be merely a geographical denomination is easily overlooked. As part of a powerful ‘imaginative geography’, Europe conjures up a series of implicit connotations which practically amount to a substantive theory of history featuring fixed ideas of centre and periphery as well as progress and development. To the extent that Europe stands on the progressive, advanced, and morally cherished side of the distinctions organizing its imaginative geography, Europe figures as both vanguard and *telos* of history.

Having long served as a safe haven for historical work in a summarily ahistorical discipline, the English School is a fruitful resource for the articulation of historical common sense. *The Expansion of International Society*, a classic collection of essays from an English School perspective (Bull and Watson, 1984a), states with exemplary clarity: ‘The purpose of this book is to explore the expansion of the international society of European states across the rest of the globe, and its transformation from a society fashioned in Europe and dominated by Europeans into the global international society of today’ (Bull and Watson, 1984b: 1). Bull and Watson proceed to distinguish the key concept of international society from the less ambitious notion of an international system. An international system accounts for a thin layer of strategically coordinated behaviour simply by virtue of the fact that a multiplicity of sovereign states exists in a context of interaction which forces them to take each other into account. International society, by contrast, adds a thickening layer of normative integration by means of ‘rules and institutions’. Notably, the normative upshot of the normatively ‘underdeveloped’ notion of the international system had been that actors could only encounter one another on a simple plane of strategic interaction, i.e. as moral equals. Normative integration in international society, by contrast, is expressive of a moral progress which is originally pioneered in Europe and then spreads across the world.

More recent works within the English School context have been quick to acknowledge that this is ‘a story of non-Europeans being integrated into an essentially Western order, socialized to accept European international norms and practices’. As an antidote, Tim Dunne and Christian Reus-Smit seek to foreground how ‘international society was, from the outset, profoundly influenced by encounters, engagements, and interactions between Europeans and non-European

peoples, producing a global international order that is culturally and politically far more complex than the conventional narrative allows' (Dunne and Reus-Smit, 2017a: viii). The dual move here is to give voice and agency to non-European actors and, consequently, to add complexity to the ensuing account of global order. Embracing the 'ubiquity of cultural diversity', however, Dunne and Reus-Smit (2017b: 37–39) already presuppose cultural diversity. Compare this with the sense of puzzlement expressed in Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe*. Chakrabarty, too, starts from the observation that Western and European thinkers have devised universal accounts of world history in complete ignorance of its overwhelming majority. This is not what puzzles him. The 'everyday paradox of third-world social science' is, on the contrary, that third-world social scientists themselves find such ignorant accounts surprisingly helpful in making sense of third-world societies. 'What allowed the modern European sages to develop such clairvoyance with regard to societies of which they were empirically ignorant? Why cannot we, once again, return the gaze?' Chakrabarty's answer to the puzzle speaks immediately to the semantic work that Europe is doing in our political and historical imagination:

Only 'Europe', the argument would appear to be, is *theoretically* (that is, at the level of the fundamental categories that shape historical thinking) knowable; all other histories are matters of empirical research that fleshes out a theoretical skeleton that is substantially 'Europe'

(Chakrabarty, 2000: 29; see also Grovogui, 2016)

The more detailed discussion of the narrative of an 'expansion' of international society provides us with an almost ideal typical template of the semantic labour performed by 'Europe'. Articulated initially as a taken-for-granted vanguard site of world history, 'Europe' comes under critical scrutiny as the one-sidedness of the conventional narrative appears both analytically wanting and normatively problematic. In response, a Eurocentric bias is rightfully diagnosed, non-European voices are brought into the conversation, and entangled and connected histories appear as a plausible way forward (Bhambra, 2010; Bilgin, 2016). Next to these important problem shifts, however, questions as to how the political semantics of 'Europe' has shaped our political imagination in ways that cut across such connections remain open. The somewhat stylized template holds, too, for an overview of uses of Europe at the intersection of IR and Historical Sociology. Here, too, an initial wave of scholarship posits Europe as the vanguard site of world-historical change.

Daniel Philpott (2001), for instance, recounts the conventional narrative of 'Westphalia' instituting a multiplicity of sovereign states in opposition to 'medieval European unity', the return of which he traces in the European Union (EU) suggesting that 'for the first time since the demise of the Holy Roman Empire, a significant political authority other than the state, one with formal sovereign prerogatives, became legitimate within the boundaries of the Westphalia system' (Philpott, 2001: 40). Historiographical doubts regarding these watersheds aside, Europe is posited as the site where world-historical benchmarks occur (see also de Carvalho and Leira, 2021 in this volume).<sup>2</sup> The rest of the world appears only 'in relation to Europe'. Similarly, Rodney Bruce Hall (1999), though committed to a stronger constructivist vision of history in terms of 'hopeful nondeterminism', discusses the development of national collective identity in relation to international systems through a series of exclusively European examples. In Benno Teschke's iconoclastic effort to debunk *The Myth of 1648* (2003), structural transformations are explained in terms of changes in European property regimes.

To the extent that identity is conceived relationally, i.e. in relation to an 'other', the constitutive role of non-European voices has been brought to the fore. Iver Neumann (1999), for instance, has focused on the way in which Russia and 'the East' figured in European identity formation, John

Hobson (2004) has highlighted the *Eastern Origins of Western Civilization*, and Ayse Zarakol (2010) has traced non-Western histories of coming to terms with being relegated to secondary status (see also Rae, 2017; Bilgin, 2017). More recently, Jason Sharman (2019) has debunked the myth of European expansion being the quasi-natural consequence of European military superiority as a historiographically dubious effort to project 19th-century common sense onto the early modern era and consequently ignore Europe's comparative weakness. Taking issue with narrating the history of capitalism as a predominantly European affair, Alexander Anievas and Kerem Nişancıoğlu (2015) have highlighted the role of global processes and non-European societies. Works such as these provide rich and nuanced accounts by placing European history in a broader global context. The historical imagination of Europe in IR is enriched rather than undermined by critiques of Eurocentrism. However, important as historical attention to non-European voices may be, the project of provincializing Europe is not an empirical one. Chakrabarty's eponymous account indeed starts from the observation that Europe as a region 'has already been provincialized by history itself' (Chakrabarty, 2000: 3). Europe as an implicit theory of history, however, remains a historical force and a political problem to be reckoned with.<sup>3</sup>

### **European integration in history and theory**

Much of the critical literature on predominant uses of Europe as an implicit theory of history has prompted research to focus on something other than just Europe. The prevalence of Europe, being used in such a manner, as an implicit theory of history, becomes particularly obvious, though, in the burgeoning literature on European integration. This, it would seem, is not least the case because European Integration Theory (EIT) constitutes a quite distinct realm of inquiry within the related fields of Political Science and IR which decidedly deals with Europe, conceived as the European Union. However, it is a common misperception that this exceptionality can be traced back to the EU as an object of study *sui generis*. Quite the contrary, integration theorists aimed for generalizability beyond their empirical and theoretical vantage point from the very beginning. This ambition is rooted in the *Zeitgeist* of EIT's foundational period, the 1950s. In the aftermath of the Second World War, émigré scholars persecuted by National Socialist Germany sought to theoretically come to terms with their experiences of fascism. In political theory, Hannah Arendt examined *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. In IR, her close 'thinking partner' Hans J. Morgenthau attempted to open up theoretical trajectories for overcoming the 'tragedy of the nation state' (Kostagiannis, 2014). EIT followed in the same vein, with Ernst B. Haas theorizing 'the conditions under which the state as we understand it disappears, disintegrates, weakens, changes' in order to 'get rid of' totalitarian states (Haas and Kreisler, 2000). While it would seem only natural that the EU served as nothing more than a starting point for greater goals like these, Haas' neofunctionalism set itself apart from coeval theorizations. Unlike his fiercely anti-behaviouralist contemporaries like Morgenthau who was steeped in the intellectual traditions of old Europe (Rösch, 2015), Haas' goal was to find a generalizable, positive explanation for regional integration in Europe and beyond. He was not merely interested in a theory of European integration but rather sought to explain integration in varied contexts, studying the EU as a 'laboratory', as a starting point for developing hypotheses and committing to rigorous empirical testing of their explanatory value (Haas 1960; see also Rosamond 2005). A broader debate on 'regional integration' would thus presume Europe as template and telos (Haas, 1970; Schmitter, 1970; Mattli, 1999).

Haas' theoretical propositions, of course, have become widely contested. Not least Stanley Hoffmann's (1966) intergovernmentalism emerged as a fierce contender of supranationalist readings of the integration process, emphasizing state bargains over neofunctionalism's institutional incrementalism and thereby questioning the very possibility of thorough integration in the

realm of 'high politics'. However, Hoffmann's reliance on the question of the Westphalian nation state and its sovereign interest, European constructs par excellence, did not break the path towards conceptual-historical attention to Europe. What would have posed a greater challenge to the project of EIT at large were Hoffmann's (1977: 57) reservations, comparable to those of Morgenthau, against the behaviouralist logic of science that still underpins progressive stories of integration. Yet, these reservations never gained much traction in integration theory. Haas' model of doing science set the tone for integration theories to come. Andrew Moravcsik's liberal intergovernmentalism is a case in point. While sticking to Hoffmann's emphasis on state interests and restating them as economically defined, Moravcsik is closer to Haas in setting EIT's standard of validity: only 'distinctive hypotheses and objective methods' tested 'against the best alternative theories' would qualify theoretical interlocutors who, according to Moravcsik, need to offer no less than 'empirical confirmation' (Checkel and Moravcsik, 2001: 266). This mode of inquiry determines the mode of contestation in the field: much of EIT develops theory-guided explanations of integration processes and operationalizes them for hypothesis testing, at times with the aim to make future predictions. In combination with modelled assumptions of rational behaviour and methodological individualism, it unites EITs such as liberal intergovernmentalism, institutionalisms, and multilevel governance theory. What keeps these integration theories distinguishable is their key variable: the question whether state bargains, individual decision-making under institutional constraints, or layered and intertwined, multilevel decision-making processes best approximate integration outcomes. The most crucial commonality, however, is that they are all committed to a reading of history that is grounded in the experience of the EU. While supranationalist readings rely on a quasilinear, progressive story of integration, their intergovernmentalist contenders espouse a circular reading of history that foregrounds the state's sovereign interest as a natural limitation of integration. Neither seems to think of history politically as an open-ended process.

The reliance of integration theories on either a teleological narrative of progressive integration or on a stalling of integration that would cement the status quo has occasionally provoked the accusation that EIT would have largely been occupied with 'celebrating through analysis the institutional bargains of the past' (Gilbert, 2008: 643). Indeed, EIT has been consistently occupied with its namesake 'integration'. Even with the introduction of constructivist bedrock concepts to EIT, authors remained occupied with developing 'testable constructivist hypotheses on European integration' (Checkel and Moravcsik, 2001: 219), with making constructivist concepts 'empirically applicable to international relations' (Risse, 2000: 7) and EIT.<sup>4</sup> This focus on integration may be the reason why the Brexit referendum was met with puzzlement in much of the field. Integration theorists were first alerted to the possibility of disintegration in the mid-2010s, with challengers to the idea of progressive integration anticipating a stalling, but not a rollback. Several subsequent theorizations of disintegration seem to be in accordance with their precursors, calling for a 'consistent and coherent set of testable statements' regarding 'the crucial factors and mechanisms that influence phenomena such as European disintegration' (Vollaard, 2014: 2). For this endeavour, existing integration theories remain the basis: additional concepts, especially of constructivist origin, are added to reinstate a progressive narrative of integration theory (e.g. Börzel and Risse, 2018). But strikingly, and despite the largely austere, scientific tone of respective contributions, normatively charged positions on (dis-)integration are resurfacing. For some, disintegration is a potentially contagious, even lethal risk (Schnapper, 2017), 'an existential dilemma for the European project as such' (van Meurs et al., 2018: 263), a question of survival (Webber, 2017). To rephrase Frederic Jameson's (2005: 199) *bon mot*, it seems to be easier for integration theory to imagine an end to Europe than an end to integration traditionally conceived. What remains strikingly absent is an attempt to rethink the historical, normative, and epistemological commitments of integration theory when encountering perceived crises.

In the philosophy of science, it seems, the crisis of integration theory has been foreseen. For the late Edmund Husserl (1970 (1936)), a misguided scientific rationalism lies at the heart of another ‘European crisis’, characterized not by a lack of integration but by a lack of reflexive, normative, and not least, historical thinking.<sup>5</sup> It is particularly striking that integration theory, which initially set out to become a scientific lesson from history, today reminds us of such an absence of historical and conceptual reflection. This seems to be the case because EIT has become overly focused on *integration*, much less on what is *European* about it. Of course, the idea of an integrated Europe that served as the initial normative impetus for EIT remains very present, if implicit. But EIT has progressively rendered integration an unproblematic means and simultaneously seems to have lost sight of its European end. Resources for questioning the orthodox story of integration and its ‘Europe’ are readily available, but much of EIT displays a lack of engagement with these ‘dissident voices’ (Manners and Whitman, 2016). A historical perspective on EIT could do more than just bring these voices (back) in: it would be imperative to reflect upon the mechanisms that enable the hegemony of an integrationist telos of Europe in the first place. Not least if we were to salvage Haas’ idea of Europe as a lesson from history, we would need to scrutinize EIT’s very own ‘geographies of knowledge of world politics’ (Agnew, 2007) and their historical production.

## **Conclusion**

The gist of our argument has been to tease out the curious ways in which Europe and Historical International Relations have become coterminous to such an extent that any attempt to single out parts of the literature on Historical IR as dealing specifically with Europe would be futile. Instead, we have sought to trace uses of Europe in the semantics of modern politics and international relations. Specifically, we have argued that it is through these very uses of Europe that an implicit theory of history is articulated which posits Europe simultaneously as vanguard and telos of world history.

Taking issue with such an implicit teleology is not only a matter of a historiographical critique. It also speaks to the way in which uses of Europe condition and curtail our political imagination – of Europe and beyond. It effects what Barry Hindess has aptly called the ‘temporalization of difference’ (Helliwell and Hindess, 2005; Hindess, 2007). By inscribing particular political concerns into a developmentalist narrative, the terrain of political engagement is effectively reorganized. Instead of an open-ended encounter between position and opposition, we are left with the temporalized hierarchies of the advanced and the mature vis-à-vis a difference that may still be growing up. Chakrabarty’s metaphor of a ‘waiting room’ of history brilliantly captures the way in which a teleological account of Europe effects a spatial and temporal reordering of our political imagination (Chakrabarty, 2000: 8). The waiting room is separated in space and suspended in time, as its occupants are waiting for admission rather than arrival.

This may serve as a reminder of how difficult it is to think beyond Europe when core categories of our political thought as well as our everyday political language (think, e.g. of development aid) are shaped by a particular articulation of Europe. Bringing non-European voices into the conversation will continue to be indispensable. But to the extent that cultural difference is equated with non-European voices, i.e. to the extent that cultural difference is different in relation to a fixed idea of Europe, the underlying image of Europe itself may remain by and large unchallenged. At the same time, in terms of avenues for future research, it follows that, for those substantively interested in Europe, defensive reactions against critiques of Eurocentrism are fundamentally unwarranted. It is precisely by not taking Europe for granted that a wider range of historical and political engagements with Europe becomes possible.

## Suggestions for further reading

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## Notes

- 1 For a more systematic outline and exploration of such an approach in relation to the concept of 'the West', see Hellmann and Herboth (2017) and Herboth and Hellmann (2017).
- 2 For a critical discussion of historiographical myths, see de Carvalho et al., (2011). On Westphalia, specifically, see Osiander (1994, 2001), Teschke (2003), and Stark Urrestarazu (2019). For a critique of the mobilization of the Middle Ages as the constitutive other of European modernity, see Costa Lopez 2020, 2021.
- 3 The political upshot of a view of Europe which takes its history to be contentious and open-ended rather than teleological becomes particularly clear in Charles Tilly's (2004: 257–259) contention that proposals to transfer models of social and political organization from Europe to the rest of the world fatally ignores how such models are abstracting from the century-long social and political struggle which gave rise to them.
- 4 It should be clarified that operationalizing the idea of social construction for hypothesis-testing takes away from its potential to explore the historical construction of the concept of Europe as such. In order to construct hypotheses, a given concept of Europe inevitably needs to be presupposed.
- 5 Ironically, thus, Husserl who himself set out to restore his own version of the European telos can be held against the contemporary teleology of EIT and its positivist thrust.

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