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## Reflections on national “Sonderwege” in the era of transnational history

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On December 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>, 2010, the Research Institute of Comparative History and Culture held an international conference entitled *Postcolonial Reading of Sonderweg: Deconstructing Exceptionalism as National Narrative* at Hanyang University in Seoul, South Korea. Jürgen Kocka, Sebastian Conrad, Stefan Berger, Hans Erich Bödeker, Jie-Hyun Lim, Young-Sun Hong, Monika Baár, Alf Lüdtke, Lisa A. Kirschenbaum and Choi Chatterjee participated in the conference to discuss the meaning of *Sonderweg* in the context of the emerging idea of transnational history, as well as to review the logic of the *Sonderweg* paradigm that has widely proliferated in the historiographies of European and Asian nations.

The debate on *Sonderweg* between the Bielefeld School on the one hand and David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley on the other in the early 1980s concentrated on the German case; for the conference, the meaning of *Sonderweg* was expanded to include other European and Asian histories. For the most part, participants agreed with the assumption that every nation has its own *Sonderweg*, although the term was used with slightly different meanings at the conference. It sometimes meant “special path” or “exception” or “aberration”. However, this conference’s primary aim was to deconstruct the normative conceptions of the imagined “West” in the logic of the *Sonderweg* paradigm, which have imposed the hegemony of Western modernization on the historiographies of European

and Asian nations. Participants tried to reflect on the image of the idealized and standardized West engraved on the national historiographies in various ways.

Jürgen Kocka, a participant in the *Sonderweg* debate in the 1980s, summarized the historical *Sonderweg* discussions from 1940 to the present and tried to pinpoint the actual meaning of the debates, confining himself to the German case. The key question of the German *Sonderweg* thesis in the 1960s, "Why did Germany, unlike comparable countries in Europe and North America, turn to fascist and/or totalitarian perversion?" can inspire critical reflection on national history and give impetus to research on comparative history. Kocka was in principle skeptical about generalizing the *Sonderweg* thesis and rereading it in a postcolonial context, but he partly defied the classical *Sonderweg* discourses. This was also represented in his perspective of synchronizing the end of the German *Sonderweg* with the end of the two German dictatorships (Nazi and GDR).

While Kocka's discussion was limited to the German case, widespread European *Sonderweg* narratives were reviewed by Stefan Berger in the subsequent presentation. Berger pointed out the typical factors - geography, religion and war - that constitute the "special path" of other national histories. According to Berger, national history in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century can be regarded as a kind of product of historiographical nationalism; this led to the invention of myths of national histories.

The strong desire for national history seemed to be deeply related to the fear of extinction present in small nations that lacked an autonomous national history. Monika Baár assessed the cases of small nations in Eastern Europe, specifically Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary, addressing their fears caused by the awareness of a lack of statehood and national history. Here, desire and fear were the two sides of the historical nationalism that dominated the end of the nineteenth century: the smaller nations of Eastern Europe had the desire to follow the "developed" Western model, which gave impetus to resist the so-called threat of being "pushed back to Asia." Asia represents in this sense underdeveloped regions lacking western parliamentary and democratic systems.

The host of the conference, Jie-Hyun Lim, suggested a critical rethinking of Dahrendorf's question, "Why wasn't Germany England?" in a broader context: "Why wasn't East West?" He argued that this question can have many variations: for example, why is Japan not England and why is Korea not Japan? The normative logic inherent in the question relating to *Sonderweg* discourse has become widespread in the historiographies of Asian countries. Lim revised a number of theoretical assumptions about the Marxist theory of modernization that has served to make the British model of modernization the standard. He explained the presence of "red orientalism" in the cases of Marx, Engels and Lenin, whose logic of modernization has been adopted by the Korean theorists of colonial modernity, especially the "Colonial Plunder School".

With a different emphasis on *Sonderweg* discourses from a postcolonial perspective, Sebastian Conrad showed that the Cold War-era critical self-reflection on Japanese imperialism in relation to the Japanese *Sonderweg* has been converted into a substantially different way of understanding Japan's past through the emerging discourse about the successful modernization of Japan. Namely, the negative Japanese *Sonderweg* was

transformed into a positive one since the 1960s. According to Conrad, this structural transformation of historiographical understanding is due to the Weberian internalist approach in the Japanese theory of modernization that consequently resulted in making the loss of empire invisible and at the same time neutralized the triumph of market liberalism in postwar Japan.

Dominic Sachsenmaier (who did not attend, but contributed a paper) reviewed the Chinese *Sonderweg* with respect to changes in China's intellectual climate. In China Western Europe began to be portrayed as open, dynamic, and more progress-oriented on television and among intellectuals from the late 1970s onwards. However, with the increasing need to find China's own theoretical approach to modernization, and with a strong criticism of Eurocentrism, the perspective of Chinese historians has changed recently. Chinese scholars increasingly strengthened their views on Chinese modernity underlining the specific development of China's path into the modern world by adopting the concepts of multiple modernity and alternative modernity. However, Sachsenmaier critically commented on the "stereotyped vision of the 'West'" in recent Chinese academic publications, arguing that they ignore the contemporary movement against both Eurocentrism and the methodological nationalism in the Atlantic world.

During the conference, the idealization of the West in Asian historiography was compared and contrasted with the stereotyped vision of the West as a kind of reverse orientalism. However, participants shared the view that internalist approaches to national history caused many distorted representations of modern national histories, bypassing the fact that these national histories were, in principle, the results of transnational exchanges and influences. In this general agreement on the needs of transnational historiography, some participants accentuated the postcolonial perspective and synchronizing it with the transnational perspective, while others emphasized the transnational perspective.

Yong-Soon Hong, stressing the "postcolonial criticism" of *Sonderweg* discourses, focused on the two versions of modernity that have insisted on the "universal applicability of their own" system during the Cold War period. The competing standards of modernization in East Germany and West Germany, colored by the Cold War paradigm, were critically reviewed with specific reference to the case of humanitarian aid to Algeria in the 1960s. Alf Lüdtke's paper on "Redemptory Exceptionalism" showed how Germans have dealt with their dictatorial past by discussing interesting episodes surrounding the opening of the Stasi files and what was problematic in the legal-administrative German model in coming to terms with the past. He especially challenged the view that this model represents a positive German *Sonderweg* after the reunification.

The participants generally agreed that there has been a substantial shifts in focus from national historiography to transnational historiography. Parallel to this shift, so-called comparative history has also increased in importance since the 1980s. The reconstruction or deconstruction of *Sonderweg* narratives of national histories are also necessary. The "inward-looking perspective of national historiography" (Conrad and Berger), "nation-centered" (Sachsenmaier) views, and "theories of endogenous development" (Lim) were critically reviewed. The logic of colonial *Sonderweg*, along with "historical national-

isms," was brought up for discussion to correct a formerly dominant historiography in the new context of postcolonial and transnational views of history.

These critical reviews of national *Sonderwege* served as preparation for the wrap-up discussion, where transnational perspectives and methodologies of comparative history were the main subjects. Hans Erich Bödeker pointed out "the urgency of a comparison of the distinct national special paths" in his contribution during the last round of discussions. And he raised the question, how can the national histories be compared? "Asymmetrical comparisons" (Kocka) have been accused of selectivity, which should be compensated by intense empirical research. Another case mentioned as methodological praxis is translation. A "cross-categorical" translation abandoning the quest for a general standard and exploring the otherness of the 'other' was suggested by Lüdtke. Even though comparisons can be asymmetrical, they are selective and, without common references, can sometimes become aporia. However, participants concluded that comparison, however flawed, remains indispensable in this period of historical entanglement. Therefore, Kocka, in his closing statement, encouraged scholars not to give up comparisons.

The attempt to make balanced comparisons of many national histories without forcing any idealized models or assuming any common cultural and intellectual bases has been and will be a long and turbulent road. Yet, despite the many continuing difficulties, the transnational and postcolonial readings of histories as a praxis of doubling and redoubling mirrors seems necessary to obtain more promising results.