Introduction

Like any intellectual project, the emergence and rise to prominence of European history as a distinct scholarly field was bound to a specific time and conjuncture. During a moment of optimism towards the end of the 1990s, European societies seemed to be aboard a high-speed train towards ever-deeper levels of political, economic, social, and cultural integration as well as simultaneous expansion to “the East”. The “ever closer Union” mantra which appeared to emerge as predominant at the time exerted a significant impact on the humanities and the social sciences too. European history as a scholarly field was never uncritical of such teleological buzz and the ahistorical romanticism it often engendered, but it drew good parts of its intellectual impulse from the widespread sense that l’heure européenne had arrived.¹ For those who were academically socialised during what might now be labelled the vingt glorieuses of
European history writing beginning in the second half of the 1990s, this left a distinctive mark on their scholarly imaginaries as well as their specific professional trajectories.

Approaching the writing of contemporary European history from an inter-generational perspective that takes this specific historiographic moment, and its subsequent attenuation, as its point of departure, this essay seeks to reflect on the state of our field today to sketch a plan for renewal. In doing so, we shall suggest concrete ways in which contemporary European history can be combined with global approaches by outlining four analytical themes that, in our view, ought to move centre stage: connecting Eastern and Western European histories, reconceptualising the political, tracing the rise of a new individualism, and foregrounding planetary-environmental concerns.

European history as an intergenerational project

If we applied William Strauss and Neil Howe’s influential notion of generation to ourselves – a ‘cohort-group whose length approximates the span of a phase of life and whose boundaries are fixed by peer personality’ – we would have to conclude that, all three of us, born in the 1980s in Europe’s geographic and economic peripheries (internal, as in Budapest and Madrid, or “global”, as in Buenos Aires), belong to the same cohort of European historians. As such, we are part of a group with an identifiable biographic trajectory, the study of which can help reveal how “the personality of our generation” has been shaped by specific circumstances and exchanges with members of previous generations, especially in our “formative years”.

Indeed, while the three of us studied in different national contexts in the early twenty-first century, our academic socialisation took place within shared European intellectual spaces. By specialising in European history, our scholarly conceptions were originally shaped by comparable trends in scholarship as well as by reading many of the same authors whether in Bonn, Budapest, Edinburgh, Florence, Madrid, Oxford, or Utrecht – well before we were appointed to positions at Maastricht University’s History Department.

Books on modern and contemporary European history in our formative years were abundant, intriguing, and remarkably popular. Their relevance and intellectual rationale was practically unquestioned at the time. The authors of some of the most significant contributions, such as Mark Mazower and Tony Judt, were, for intergenerational reasons of their own, intimately familiar with and critically distanced from the continent’s recent past. They quickly established themselves as influential commentators without ever
having to justify their choice of writing European history in a comparative or transnational manner, not to mention having to legitimise their approach in more theoretical terms.

One of the keys to understanding the popularity of that innovative wave of European historiography, typically written by what Strauss and Howe would have called ‘baby boomers’ (those born between 1943 and 1960), is that it successfully synthesised new research to revise previous interpretations. The 1970s and the 1980s had witnessed the publication of pioneering work on crucial moments and developments in recent European history, most notably those of the first half of the twentieth century. This included ground-breaking interpretations of the inter-war crisis of liberal democracy and the rise of authoritarian movements. A great deal of effort was devoted to exploring the nature of Fascist and Nazi rule and to uncovering histories of mass violence and the involvement of European societies in it. The field of Cold War history experienced rapid expansion, too, and divested itself of some of the ideological baggage of the preceding decades. An additional boom followed in the wake of the “archival revolution” in studies on the Soviet Union, and Stalinism in particular, since the 1980s. Middle-aged historians exerted a considerable impact around the turn of the millennium partly because they could draw on the arguments in these detailed studies to craft new, less deterministic, and more discomforting narratives of the “old continent”. These new narratives neither pathologised the fascist and Soviet communist experiments nor bracketed them as historical phenomena of necessarily restricted reach.

It was also a time for European history to be written differently because Europe’s place in the world had radically changed. This new understanding was perhaps best encapsulated in Mazower’s remark, in the epilogue to his *Dark Continent*, that if Europeans ‘can accept a more modest place in the world, they may come to terms more easily with the diversity and dissension which will be as much their future as their past.’ The resulting European histories, critically aware of the disturbing ambiguities in Europe’s recent past and the continent’s decreasing importance in the world without yet aiming to ‘provincialize’ it, would justly come to exert a major intellectual impact, including on the next generation of historians.

Looking back from the early 2020s, one might wonder what the medium-term consequences of this dynamic moment in European history writing have been, and how it has shaped the agendas, expectations, and later experiences of a subsequent generation. Our perception is that after a dynamic period of rapid expansion, which saw the publication of a host of influential comparative and transnational works, the field of European history has lost some of its intellectual momentum. That is not to suggest that there have been no real advances. Innovative work has been completed on key
aspects of the social and political history of the twentieth century and there has also been increasing interaction with neighbouring disciplines that have enriched the conceptual frameworks of historians. Sub-fields such as the history of European integration have flourished considerably by giving up some of their ideological fixations and adopting a range of new approaches. Nonetheless, it is difficult to escape the general conclusion that the high expectations raised around the turn of the millennium have only been partially met and that more recent years have seen an ebbing of conceptual and methodological innovation in the historical study of contemporary Europe.

Condemned to try and reinvigorate itself at a time when universities have been increasingly subjected to the logics of market fundamentalism, the field is struggling to move forward within a broader context in which stable appointments as well as research funding for multi-year, multi-archival and multi-language projects are increasingly rare. In addition, publishers often prefer books on local and national subjects or on, at least seemingly, wider, more global horizons. Yet the crisis of European history, which is embodied in disciplinary stasis and in a decrease in public interest, which many younger historians experience acutely, also has to do with internal difficulties at finding a new social role. As Pieter Lagrou has forcefully argued in a recent essay, professional historians can no longer be viewed as heroic taboo breakers. Their scholarship, rarely truly daring and at times even somewhat complacent, no longer worries the power holders. It is therefore not just that today there are fewer innovative and significant books on European history, but that even the best scholarship tends to have a more limited impact than was the case until recently. The prospect of our “formative years” that contemporary European history would keep on expanding towards the production of ever more comparative and transnational scholarship, while retaining a firm presence in the public sphere, has therefore not been fulfilled.

In an age of web-based cultural saturation dominated by virtual global simultaneity, presentist modes of thinking, and a concomitant shrinking of long-term temporal horizons, the social relevance and prestige of professional historiography has increasingly been questioned. European societies in the early twenty-first century have largely ceased to ‘think with history’, to employ Carl Schorske’s memorable phrase, and to use history as an analytical tool to understand their current condition. This weakening of historical consciousness has fed into the current situation in which public debates on historical subjects tend to get reduced to questions of binary judgement. Nazi Germany, Soviet communism, and European colonialism have all become the frequent subject of well-intentioned critiques, which are, however, often stuck in a form of moral condemnation that does not yield original analytical insights. This fading of the public role of history is all the more worrisome given how the fundamental skills of
the profession, most notably those used for critical source analysis, are urgently needed in the face of an onslaught of systematic distortion of facts and evidence.

In response to our diagnosis that contemporary European historiography appears to have lost part of its innovative thrust, critical edge, and public prominence in recent years, we shall try to delineate a path forward by suggesting specific questions that might help renew and reinvigorate the field. In doing so, this essay aims to offer an alternative to narratives that present Europe as a continent in decline and interpret the last decades primarily as expressions of the ways in which key phenomena of the past have been superseded. Many such historical accounts privilege a focus on the post-industrial, the post-ideological, and the post-modern character of contemporary Europe. Conversely, we seek to present an argument about why the European scale continues to matter while surrendering any claims to exceptionalism or universalism.

Combining European and global approaches

Europe, however defined, has always been a rather porous place, if one that has tended to employ remarkably powerful self-demarcation strategies; there are signs that the “waning of territoriality” has again been followed by its reassertion. The choices made for “more Europe” since the 1980s may indeed be viewed as part of this process. The supposedly “borderless” Schengen Area obviously leaves a different impression if one needs to enter it from the outside.

The point for historians is not, however, about choosing to “remain European” or “go global” but rather, as Frederick Cooper has suggested, to simultaneously avoid being too European and too global. Their task is to study empirically the density of connections and their different impacts over time. In other words, the varied shapes European networks have taken over time should be further explored and – in accordance with Philipp Nielsen’s suggestion – so should the shifting relevance of this scale as compared to others. An empirical investigation of the European scale’s actual relevance over time can, in turn, help us paint a more nuanced and convincing picture than prevalent master narratives do. Such master narratives include the EU’s preferred teleological and rather sanitised story of “continuity without conflict,” the one that contrasts European democracies with “totalitarian dictatorships” to draw politico-moral lessons, and the one that focuses singularly on European imperialism and neo-colonialism to propagate projects of emancipation. All three narratives tend to take for granted the existence of “Europe” as a historical actor.
It is true that numerous dynamics analysed by historians of contemporary Europe have been expressions of wider, more global phenomena and that many of them have had their origins outside Europe. To us, this only confirms that the emergence of global history should not be viewed as a threat or in any way incompatible with European history. In fact, if we adopt Sebastian Conrad's suggested definition of the booming field of global history, understood as ‘a form of historical analysis in which phenomena, events, and processes are placed in global contexts’, then the possibilities for enriching our grasp of Europe's place and role in history grow substantially. Scholars such as Akira Iriye, Sandrine Kott, Kiran Klaus Patel, Patricia Clavin, and Glenda Sluga have already substantiated such possibilities through recent transnational histories that have often focused on international organisations.

Too many historical accounts have depicted some of the most important phenomena in modern times as radiating from a single region, variously called ‘the West’, ‘Europe’, and ‘Western Europe’. If one regards global history as the study of the making and unmaking of links between human societies, however, this approach should help us incorporate various non-European perspectives. Beyond debunking Europe's self-serving foundational myths and uncovering their inherent hypocrisy and epistemic violence, such an increased diversity of perspectives promises – alongside heightened gender balance within the profession – to be a key source of intellectual renewal in our field. As Jeremy Adelman has recently contended, getting beyond Eurocentrism means that “Europe” and its centrality in the global narrative is relative and needs to be explained globally.

New histories of the contemporary era

Problematising our own age, roughly covering the past forty years, and developing historical questions that emanate from the realities we inhabit today promises to be a fruitful way to rediscover the potential of writing contemporary European history within a global context. Deriving historical questions from present-day observations is an established heuristic practice in our discipline, even if such an approach admittedly carries the risk of an undue degree of presentism. To complicate matters, our own epoch's high level of contingency makes it difficult to decide just which set of questions should take centre stage in any empirical investigation. The manifold contributions on the decline and death of democracy while Donald Trump was still in office illustrate the difficulties and dangers inherent in an approach that is driven by a highly circumstantial set of observations. The problem of contingency can be kept in relative check, however, by the observation that, in contradistinction to Eric Hobsbawm's influential
concept, Europe's 'long twentieth century' has come to an end. This sense of an ending, and the ways in which this brings into stark relief some of the late twentieth century's defining features, now makes it significantly easier for historians to approach our era of profound conceptual transformation as a new *Sattelzeit*.

While the terminus date is still up for debate depending on one's particular perspective or emphasis, with 2004, 2008, 2016, and 2020 all among the strong contenders, most historians would agree that a fundamental reconfiguration of Europe's political and economic order has been under way for some time. As Ulrich Herbert has perceptively noted, just when the answers to the challenges of high modernity had largely gained acceptance, the foundations of the capitalist-industrial economy began to change again. The consequences have been difficult to foresee and they still need to be measured from a historical perspective. If the rough outer contours of the era are becoming increasingly clear, it is also evident that the most common starting point for histories of contemporary Europe, the year 1945, no longer serves as a useful point of departure for understanding our own age. We no longer inhabit an age primarily shaped by the socio-political dynamics triggered by the multiple crises of the mid-twentieth century such as the Second World War, the experience and legacies of genocidal violence, and the subsequent Cold War division of the continent. Nor do the major political conflicts within European societies today emanate from the way in which these societies have dealt, and continue to deal, with those “catastrophic” and “traumatic” pasts.

We would, therefore, suggest that one of the most pressing tasks for contemporary historians is to locate and explain the tectonic shifts that have led to the collapse of the old and the beginning of a new era. In other words, the work in front of us is that of exploring the genealogy of our own age and in doing so lay open the causes behind our current condition. Andreas Wirsching and Andreas Rödder have successfully sketched out this approach in their recent books, which unfortunately have exerted limited influence outside of Germany. In line with existing work, we would argue that the period to be analysed needs to start in the 1970s or 1980s. As a result, the end of the Cold War division of Europe in 1989 would need to be approached as a consequence of ongoing changes as much as the starting point of something novel.

Such a historiographical project has the potential of being a truly critical endeavour if it returns to European history what one might describe as the discipline's emancipatory edge. By recognising our present as just one of many possible futures in the past, we can expose it as the result of rather contingent structures, ideas, and events. By disentangling such lineages, we might ultimately arrive at an understanding of the possibilities and limitations of socio-political change today.
Four suggestions

Within the limits of this essay, it is impossible to do justice to the breadth of potential subjects with which such a new contemporary European history would have to engage. Four themes, however, strike us as timely and especially important. First, our territorial conceptions of Europe, and the resulting distribution of material resources and power between the different parts of the continent, need to be subjected to intense scrutiny. If Europe clearly needed to be placed into global contexts and provincialised, Western Europe still needs to be de-provincialised to arrive at a European history worthy of the name in a post-Cold War era. A key promise associated with “Europe” in recent decades has indeed been the overcoming of the continent’s Cold War-era division. Contrary to the hopes and expectations of many, however, the East-West divide has largely been reproduced in the decades since 1989, not least in much of what counts as mainstream Western historiography.

This raises several intriguing and underexplored questions about how exactly Europe’s recent history of oscillation between expansion towards and exclusion of “its East” has played out; regarding convergences and divergences in European history and why deepening European integration since 1989 has fostered relatively little of the former; about the shift towards divergence between Europe’s core areas and its eastern but also southern peripheries since the 1970s and the coincidence of this shift with new legitimisation strategies that more peripheral elites through “European accession”; the changing attitudes of both western and eastern Europe to the influence of the United States and the shifting ways (including a remarkable eastward shift) in which its socio-political system has been held up by Europeans as a model to be striven for; and the parallel and comparative study of the transformation of asymmetrical power relations in Europe, such as West-East and gender relations, in both cases of which the systematically disadvantaged have made strides in recent decades without achieving anywhere near full equality.

Questions of intellectual and conceptual translation, primarily how Western discourses were received and adapted in Eastern Europe, would have to be added to this list to grasp how epistemic hegemony has been imposed within Europe since the end of the Cold War. Exploring the connections and common threads in the histories of Eastern and Western Europe and, more particularly, studying the ways in which Eastern Europe has both come to be shaped by and has actively shaped broader European processes in the contemporary era could in turn help define the relations between intra-European history and the history of Europe in global contexts.
Second, and connected to such new questions regarding the contemporary history of East–West entanglements in Europe, one might explore the broader reconceptualisation of the political that has taken place since the 1970s and which still requires explanation. As such, what ought to constitute the heart of political debate and struggle saw a fundamental redefinition in the last decades of the twentieth century across Europe and beyond. As Samuel Moyn has recently argued, struggles about material inequality and concomitant social rights, which were at the heart of political conflict since the advent of mass politics in the nineteenth century, were gradually replaced by the fight for individual human rights which accompanied and in fact helped foster neoliberalism.32 While pre-existing collectivist utopian ideals did not completely disappear and sometimes took centre stage, most notably amongst those resisting the hardship and suffering brought by de-industrialisation, this shift did lead to a growing emphasis on the expansion of individual rights and liberties to disadvantaged groups and to minorities that had been hitherto persecuted. It found its prime expression in the ways in which women, ethnic and religious minorities, people with a disability, and LGBTQ groups fought, and keep fighting, for recognition and legal equality within European societies.

This process, which we still need to approach and grasp through detailed socio-cultural histories of the period, saw the emergence of novel forms of political mobilisation around questions of social discrimination. Such movements at times encouraged the development of sectional and “identity” politics that spoke primarily to the interests of specific groups and that concomitantly might have encouraged a new culturalism and processes of re-traditionalisation. In other instances, however, mobilisation as a reaction to gendered, sexual, and racist forms of discrimination successfully articulated the agendas of wider segments of society.

From today’s perspective, it is striking how mainstream the recognition of difference has become in Western Europe. Propositions and demands that at one time seemed revolutionary have been absorbed by practically all major democratic parties without the polarising logic of identity-based politics thereby being superseded. This happened at a time when much of Eastern Europe was preoccupied with the newly rediscovered project of nation-building.33 It is indeed one of the great historical ironies of modern times that the more homogenous Western parts of the continent have become significantly more diverse whereas the much more diverse Eastern half has been reshaped, partly through its belated attempt to “imitate the West”, into smaller and much more homogeneous units.

One might be tempted to describe the new politics as the successful taming or pacification of groups and agendas that were once considered radical and a threat to the
established order and view this process as a form of compensation via culture at a time of limited social mobility. This is perhaps most visible in the way in which various demands from the environmental movement have entered the political mainstream without sufficiently far-reaching policies being implemented. It is also evident in how conservative parties in some parts of Europe have recently absorbed the recognition of the rights of LGBTQ people, though such recognition admittedly remains highly contested in more peripheral areas of the continent.\textsuperscript{34}

It is indeed remarkable how universal and complete the disappearance of the category of material inequality has been within hegemonic political discourses at a time of increasing material inequality. Such a process certainly cannot be taken for granted but presents a genuine historical puzzle. We ought to analyse why this redefinition of the political took place; what were the strategies of those involved in this process; and how exactly did this lead to a reconfiguration of the key terms of political engagement – not least via the Soviet collapse of 1989-91 and the subsequent foundation of the European Union at Maastricht. Again, there is an obvious global dimension to this dynamic: the redefinition of the political was not unique to Europe, but occurred in many places around the world, prompting the question of how the European trajectory in this time has been shaped by global influences while simultaneously remaining distinctive.

Third, when dissecting this transformation, one might start by exploring the long process of individualisation that in many respects characterises societies in our times and that the on-going pandemic has tragically exposed. Recent work has emphasised the ways in which an increasing individualisation set in across European societies from the 1970s onwards, becoming particularly pronounced in the 1980s and 1990s. This was based on a new emphasis on the primacy of personal autonomy, individual liberation, and freedom of choice as the hallmarks of the fulfilment of the self. It brought with it a gradual collapse of some of the familial and collective forms of identification and socialisation, and ultimately to a waning of the structures of solidarity and politicisation that many Europeans, both in the West and the East, had taken for granted for decades.\textsuperscript{35}

The net result was the emergence of a new European culture that celebrated the individual while it saw the decline of numerous collective forms of organisation, from local sports clubs to trade unions and mass parties of all colours. This was accompanied by growing calls and country-specific policies to shrink the remit of state activity, which led to the gradual reduction of the forms of collective solidarity that had been consensual across the political spectrum in the recent past. This included, most notably, the scaling down of the welfare state as well as the closure or trimming of public spaces, ranging from public libraries to municipal swimming pools.\textsuperscript{36} To be sure, this was a
transnational process that played out faster and took sharper forms in Eastern Europe, if it was arguably also more cushioned by abundant references to the “national community”.  

The historical question here, which is again unintelligible outside of a global context, is how and why this process of neo-liberalisation unfolded: who were the actors, political forces, and institutions driving it from the first wave in Margaret Thatcher’s Britain to the second wave in Mikuláš Dzurinda’s Slovakia and beyond; how did such a fundamental shift in basic attitudes and values amongst Europeans come about; why were some European societies so receptive to such new discourses and why did others not adopt many of the basic premises of market fundamentalism; and how did this process impact the political imaginaries of Europeans as well as the activities of policymakers in welfare capitalist states as well as in formerly state-socialist societies?

Fourth, environmental perspectives promise an especially fruitful path to foster critical-historical research into our era. In the twenty-first century, any promise regarding the future universalisation of European and Western styles and levels of modernity is being undermined by our evident planetary limits. The urgent necessity to reconsider the role humankind is going to play in the Anthropocene needs to be accompanied by a critical rethinking of our foundational values and narratives. This calls for a thorough re-examination of the historical record, including the devastating acceleration processes observable in contemporary times.

Questions concerning the oppression, exploitation, and underdevelopment of other societies and the depletion of the planet’s material resources would need to be discussed simultaneously, not least to reassess Europe’s path into modernity. More specifically, how contemporary Europe has inherited or has broken with civilisational pride and economistic ideas that are predicated on the externalisation of costs is another major question that links environmental history with an agenda of studying Europe in global contexts. At the same time, and this clearly amounts to a quandary, historians ought to remain independent of and critical towards dominant political agendas and identity discourses.

Concluding remarks

Pursuing global contextualisation without abandoning the European scale, writing European history that substantially integrates East and West in an analytical framework beyond the pieties of “overcoming the Cold War divide”, exploring the
reconceptualisation of the political and the new cult of the individual while also shedding critical light on processes of acceleration and their environmental-planetary limits offer some of the key avenues through which we propose to renew and expand the agenda of a previous generation invested in the project of writing contemporary European history. That still leaves the question of how what we have sketched above relates to what is realistic, a question that can only be answered with reference to academic institutional contexts. A moot question in this regard will be how independent and critical scholarship can flourish when much closer forms of European unity do not appear to be an immediate prospect. Discourses on “European identity” sound largely passé, and the attention of the rest of the world is turning in different directions. The United States and its academic powerhouses, which have been responsible for so much pioneering scholarship in the recent past, have lost considerable interest in historical studies as well as things European, and are unlikely to regain it, which amounts to the most consequential expression of this shift in attention.  

In light of the peculiar, dualistic reception of much European scholarship in recent decades, most notably the special academic prestige attached to English-language publications versus the wider reception of studies written in the manifold languages of our primary sources, bridging the gap between the international and national levels appears to us to be an important and timely ambition. At the same time, if contemporary European history today intends to exert a heightened public impact, it must preserve its distinctive capacity to combine analytical sophistication with narrative quality. This is arguably made more difficult by trends of professionalisation that reward the use of a discipline-specific language. 

But there is reason for guarded optimism. If historiographic innovation tends to flourish in the aftermath of major upheavals, the renewal of European history writing might just be around the corner. As the current pandemic is bringing into sharp relief some of the defining features of our age, it might ultimately stimulate members of our generation, formed as we have been by high expectations and subsequent disappointments, to realise some of the high promises of the vingt glorieuses. 

1. We should like to thank Vincent Lagendijk and Jannis Panagiotidis for their insightful comments on an earlier version of this article. For a classic critique of the federalist literature on integration, see Alan S. Milward, *The European Rescue of the Nation State*, London 1992.  


14. See Carl E. Schorske, Thinking with History: Explorations of the Passage to Modernism, Princeton 2016. For a broader exploration of this dynamic, see Chris Lorenz, ‘Out of Time? Some Critical Reflections on François

15. On the question of value judgements in historical scholarship, see Donald Bloxham, History and Morality, Oxford 2020.


https://europedebate.hypotheses.org/?p=740&preview=true


30. For a first attempt to discuss this question, see Ferenc Laczó / Luka Lisjak Gabričić (eds.), The Legacy of Division. East and West after 1989, Budapest–Vienna 2020.


34. Examples include David Cameron speaking out in favour of gay marriage in 2012 or the German CDU’s 2017 U-turn on gay marriage and adoption rights. The most radical expression of this process might be found in the Netherlands, where advocating LGBTQ rights has become an important propagandistic tool of the extreme right to stigmatise Muslim societies.


41. For the idea concerning the timing of historiographic innovation, see Christoph Conrad, Europa zwischen National- und Globalgeschichte, in: Journal of Modern European History 14.4 (2016), pp. 479–484.