Speaking From the Fringes: Which Europe Belongs to Europe? – Why Europe, Which Europe?

Recently a group of historians from four “marginal” countries, applied for a grant to conduct transnational research on a specific subject in twentieth century women’s history, and were rejected. The review included positive observations on the importance of narratives from the fringes and on breaking up the centre-periphery binary. Yet, the importance of the research for existing narratives was questioned: Why ‘should historians ... in ‘big’ countries take an interest in these studies?’
The rejection is not the issue here – it is part of submitting papers and applying for grants. But the implication that a research project needs the attention or approval of the “big” countries is troubling. Who are they anyway? And why should they have the authority to decide what is a worthy subject of historical study? While I do acknowledge that the question above is a call for a more persuasive argument for the research, it also reflects the strong hold that mainstream history, the grand narratives of Europe, have on us who are moulded by them.

I have felt this myself – the need to follow the paradigm, to be accepted. But I have also felt the urge to challenge this notion and ask if the framework of European women’s and gender history is too narrow instead of seeing my empirical and national sources and historical perspective as the problem.  

Therefore, I welcome this timely debate on European history, eloquently formulated by Sonja Levsen and Jörg Requate in their opening paper, ‘Why Europe, Which Europe? Present Challenges and Future Avenues for Doing European History’. Put simply, two main themes are the core of this debate. The first is the call for de-centring or revising European history and its status and role in global history. There is already a vast literature on this issue, as Levsen and Requate mention, and contributors to this debate have already added new views.

The second, and this will be my point of departure, is the question “which Europe?”. That is, what and whose history and historiography it is, this history that has been represented as the history of Europe and thus the ‘model of universal development’. The fact is, however, as Jitka Malečková, Efi Avdela and Alexander Semyonov point out in their papers, European history has been too narrowly defined both geographically and epistemologically. This is not a new argument. Thus, European women’s and gender historians have been discussing the “grand narrative” of women’s and gender history for quite a while without much progress. Therefore this particular debate, with various “marginal” contributors, is of immense importance for historians of women, gender and sexuality. We need to discuss the margins and boundaries, real and mental, of Europe, both geographical and historical and ask what and whose history is considered “worthy”.

I speak as an historian of women's and gender history living and working in Iceland, a sparsely populated island in the North Atlantic, geographically on the margins of Europe. This is a personal narrative about: a) the academic marginalisation that so often seems to be unavoidable for history from places that are geographically and linguistically marginal, and b) the challenges, which are also mine, of practising history from or on the margins. I will thus talk about margins and boundaries, and the conscious and unconscious practices of directing national, regional, marginal studies into what should
be an all-encompassing history of women in Europe but turns out to be the “big three” – Great Britain, France and Germany. Or, what Malečková defines as ‘Small Europe’ as opposed to ‘Big Europe’ that would include all of Europe, and its former colonies.\(^7\)

Some of the contributors have already discussed some of these issues. Efi Avdela speaks from a Greek point of view and identifies much of what I have been thinking about. For instance language, which has a huge effect on how we manage to situate ourselves in the transnational world of academics.\(^8\)

What history is worth telling?

What makes history worth telling, worth being, has been an interest of mine ever since beginning to attend Nordic, European, and international conferences on history and gender studies in the late 1990s. I soon realised that while Iceland was of interest to many people, it was more so as a tourist attraction, a strange little place, exotic even, to visit. Its history was of lesser importance, even in the Nordic context. Thus, I was asked, on several occasions, if my expertise in women’s and gender history was on English or French women’s history. I found this both strange and uncomfortable because it suggested that working on my own national history was not good enough – as if I were not doing real history. It made no difference arguing that even though my empirical sources were mainly Icelandic, it was not a history explored in isolation but in relation with transnational theorisation and studies. I must acknowledge, however, that until recently my expertise has mostly been Western. Furthermore, if anything, modern women’s and gender history is essentially transnational with its women movement and long history of transnational collaboration of suffragists, for example.

When working on my book on women’s education and the construction of gender in Iceland 1850–1903 in early 2000s I explored notions and conflicting discourses on femininity, domesticity, separate spheres, women’s rights, and education. Thus, I used the traditional themes of European women’s and gender history, and theories in feminist history, as a frame of study and narration.\(^9\) I knew that there would be different representations and experiences as Iceland in the nineteenth century was nothing like the metropoles in which European women’s and gender history is rooted. In 1850, Iceland was an agricultural society with a population of 59,000 people, still barely affected by industrialisation. Reykjavík was only a village of about 1,100 people. Furthermore, Iceland was under Danish rule. Copenhagen was the centre for Icelandic affairs and education for young, promising men. And for them, especially in the first half of the nineteenth century, Copenhagen was both a culture shock and a place of
fascination, with its big houses, noise, dense population, and beautifully dressed women strolling in the gardens of the city. The difference between rural Iceland and the city life in Denmark (and neighbouring countries) was considerable and a topic frequently discussed in letters.

While seeing similar discourses, ideologies, and change in Icelandic women’s history as elsewhere in Northwest Europe, there were differences too. For instance, in representations of domesticity, the ideology of separate spheres, and women’s education and work, Iceland followed trajectories other than those presented in general surveys of European women’s and gender history. Modernisation, to use that contested term, was both a late and slow comer in Iceland where majority of women were either housewives at farms or farm labourers until the last quarter of the nineteenth century. How, for instance, did a farmer’s wife adapt to (and perceive) the domestic ideology of middle-class urbanised women in Copenhagen or Edinburgh? This led me to question whether the history and experiences of Icelandic women had any relevance beyond its national context other than being one more voice in the steadily growing multi-vocal chorus of women European history. A chorus that perhaps no one listened to.

These reflections were also related to the conflict between transnational or global history and national or local history. There has been much discussion among historians on how restricting national historiography can be for historical research and the necessity of moving beyond the national or the ‘national gaze’. It is, however, also important to realise that although there are too many examples of narrow national histories it is also not possible to understand national history without it being contextualised; explored in relation with international or transnational developments. The history of a nation, state or a region does simply not occur in an empty space but in interrelation with other countries and cultures. And even global history, the trope everyone is expected to be striving for, is not easily defined. It is, in fact, also regional (regions, continents, or parts of them) because it concerns simultaneously the macro and micro, human relationships, entanglements of different experiences and cultures. Furthermore, we must ask who is really expected to go beyond the national? I fear this demand is more frequently directed towards us on or from the margins, and is perhaps also a demand we put on ourselves because we are looking for acceptance, to be included.

The mental map and the margins
The grand narrative of women’s and gender history in Europe is structured around the history of industrialised cities in countries such as Great Britain, France and Germany – a history based on empire and metropole, rooted in theories of modernisation. This narrative emerged from local and national studies of a specific and privileged part of Europe but became the model to which national histories are compared. This grand narrative is like a map to follow, in some sense like a mental map as discussed by Levsen and Requate, on which we try to find the right path and place for our national history. Where do our local experiences of worldwide changes, ideologies, or events fit in? By using transnational epistemologies and theories to contextualise our local history and practices, we seek to make our local or regional research more transnational. The universal is imported into the national. Doing it the other way around, bringing the local to the global has until recently not been as self-evident. The tendency has been to see historical research conducted on the margins and by ‘marginal’ scholars’ as ‘case studies’, argues Malečková. Although women’s and gender history (feminist scholarship) is in essence both interdisciplinary and transnational and thus usually perhaps more open to new perspectives or variants of history I do agree with Malečková when she claims: ‘This suggests that the feminist scholarly community is not always as open as one would assume and, arguably, this in turn influences how European gender histories are written.’

Indeed there are fine examples of books that escape the grand narratives and manage to include many different histories, yet to provide a contextualised history. One such is *Women in Twentieth Century Europe* by Ann Taylor Allen. Another more recent and challenging example of how history can be practiced from a transnational and global perspective is a chapter on ‘Citizenship and Gender’ by Ragnheiður Kristjánsdóttir and Anupama Roy in a new book on democracy. The authors are from Iceland and India – both marginal in European perspective – and carefully avoid Eurocentrism and being steered by Western histories.

This is a result of a growing awareness among women’s and gender historians of the need for more diverse histories of women in modern Europe, especially narratives from places that have been seen as margins or peripheries. A timely discussion on that subject was Lynn Abrams’s article on conflicting narratives of women in Europe, based on her experience of writing a survey of women in Europe in the long nineteenth century and writing a local/regional history of women in the Shetland Islands. There was a dissonance between the lives of women in Shetland and the paradigm of European women’s and gender history, especially regarding separate spheres, ideas about women’s work/men’s work, and power relations, which surprised Abrams. As a result, she argued that the ‘margins’ had a history worth telling and ‘should not be placed on the margins and regarded as peripheral to the core study’.
Abrams’s findings did not surprise me but were nevertheless refreshing at the time (2008) since they offered some hope for marginal histories. The difference was, however, that she was looking and speaking from the centre of the prevailing narratives, admitting that she felt slightly uncomfortable when challenged by these different stories. I have felt the other way around, uncomfortable within the framework of modernisation and progress, of urbanisation and education, of upper middle-class women enjoying salons and culture etc. The reason is not that nineteenth-century ideologies did not find their way to Iceland or that change did not take place. The difference lies in when and how. Transnational history explores exactly this – the different representations and perceptions of ideologies in different societies. How they were accepted – translated – into new circumstances. Women’s and gender historians may not have been properly addressing this.

Furthermore, the question of being backward or in the forefront of change, of modernisation, is not necessarily constructive because there are so many variations in history. Speaking of Icelandic women, their status and perceptions off gender in the nineteenth century, I have found resonance with German studies into rural women in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. The same can be said of rural areas in Scotland (for instance Shetland), Norway, Sweden and Finland. There is thus not necessarily the pattern of the mainstream history, of the centre, that local or regional experiences follow.

A woman’s life – a case study or history?

One of the subjects I have been working on is the life and letters of a nineteenth-century Icelandic woman named Sigríður Pálsdóttir. She was born in 1809 and died in 1871. She lived an ordinary life but wrote letters to her brother for more than half a century, from 1817, when she was eight, until she died in 1871. I have been fascinated by her life since the mid-1990s, when I first encountered her letters.

From the beginning, I was determined to explore and write about Pálsdóttir’s life as a worthy subject of historical study both within and beyond her national context. And indeed her life has proved to be a fascinating mirror for historical research, empirically, theoretically, and epistemologically. A history from the margins that can help illuminate differences in European and global history.

Pálsdóttir’s life, the letters she left behind, has enabled me to write about her life in relation to feminist biography and historiography and discuss how influenced biography
still is by ideas about worthiness and claims about representation. As I have argued elsewhere it seems that an ordinary woman’s life is only worth exploring and writing about if it enlightens the lives of other women or social processes. I have strived to demonstrate that Pálsdóttir is worthy a biography of her own – if I may refer to Virginia Woolf’s famous title. Pálsdóttir’s literacy and epistolary practices have also enabled me to discuss the life and experiences of an ordinary woman from geographically and historiographical margins in relation to the grand narratives of women’s history in nineteenth-century Europe. How her life conformed with the ideology of domesticity and separate spheres and, for instance, if and how she can be compared to European “literary women”.

Consequently, it seems to me that it is not the subject, the historical agent or theme we choose to explore, or the nationality of it, that poses the problem when dealing with the centre and margins, grand narrative and less prominent stories, but the frame of narration; the theories and epistemologies in which we ground our research. The narrative that has become the women’s and gender history in Europe are is narrow. We need to expand it so that it includes the varied voices and experiences of women in the past.

No centre, no margins?

This said, it is also important to consider the concepts used: margins, periphery, centre, national, international, local, global, none of which I have tried to define in this short paper. There are hierarchies in concepts, they are binary and define each other. Will a call for voices and experiences from the margins result in historiography without hierarchies? Will there be no centre and margins, just ‘competing histories’, to refer to sociologist Liz Stanley’s argument in 1990 that it was impossible to do a single and complete women’s history.

Or could the ‘competing histories’ and multiple voices result in histories that would confirm the centre because they would be received as narratives about strange people and backwards regions? Perceived as different stories and experiences, yes, but stories that will not dissolve the boundaries between the margins and the centre, the metropole. With this approach, nothing would change. The margins would still be gazed at by the centre, as exotic and strange perhaps, but not as part of the mainstream history.
I do hope that we will manage to cross the borders of local and global, of margins and centre, of national and international and write different histories of different lives and experiences. Create a mosaic with diverse colours and shapes. I believe that it is possible if we acknowledge that it is not only the national that is too narrow but also the frames of “European” epistemology, theory, and historiography. That means we need not only to question or reject the frameworks of European grand narratives that have been forced upon other continents and cultures. It means also to challenge these stories within and to accept, especially those living within the metropole of the historiographical empire of the “big three”, that there are other experiences and other stories to be told. History is not one size fits all.

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1. In private possession. Review report received by e-mail March 24 2021.
11. On global history see e.g.: Jürgen Osterhammel, The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century, Princeton 2014; Sebastian Conrad, What is Global History?, Princeton 2016; Thomas...
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