

Review of: Sebastian Conrad, *The Quest for the Lost Nation. Writing history in Germany and Japan in the American Century*

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Sebastian Conrad's study pursues, in its core chapters, a comparative history of historical writing in (mostly West-)Germany and Japan in the period of ca. 1945-1960. In the contexts of both countries, Conrad proposes to trace the themes, the arguments, the ideologies that inform the texts professional historians produced. In his view, historiography has remained too strongly dominated by an understanding of change in terms of methodological paradigms. A broadly discursive perspective that integrates also occasional discussions of academic micropolitics and binds historical writing consistently to societal macropolitics is, in his view, more promising for understanding the course of the history of history. At the same time, such a perspective permits the pursuit of larger questions through the lens of historical writing: the history of discourses of nationhood after military defeat; the history of the political deployment and "mastering" of the immediate past; and the broad constellations that inform collective memories.

Conrad demolishes the well-entrenched cliché according to which the West German process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (of "coming to terms with" or – in the translation the present volume employs, and with good reason – "mastering the past") was largely a success story while in Japan a similar effort has mostly been eschewed. In the period 1945-1960, on the contrary, discussion of the recent national past among Japanese historians was not only much livelier, but also far more critical of the developmental path of the nation since the onset of industrialization and modernity. For the most part, this critical discourse resulted from the relative swiftness with which a Marxist perspective on modern history was established and made hegemonic in the discipline after the war. In Germany, by contrast, a variety of restorative agendas and an overall national-conservative political outlook held sway throughout the entire period; among professional historians, a novel perspective emerged only after 1960.

The chapters cover, to begin with, German and Japanese historians' controversies as regards the periodization of modern history, and especially the values that were to be attached to the modernizing efforts of the Bismarck and the Meiji governments respectively. Subsequently, Conrad discusses similar historical debates that revolved around the dictatorial regimes of the thirties and forties. The next chapter pursues, as a methodological digression of sorts, the "invention" and institutionalization of contemporary history as a field in both Germany and Japan after 1945. Conrad then turns to the role of Orientalist perspectives as achieving a "temporalization of space", i.e., a distortive representation of spatial relations in the temporal terms of modernity and backwardness. A concluding chapter seeks to sketch the broad lines of historiographical development until ca. the year 2000, and at the same time emphasizes the transnational "entanglement" of both German and Japanese historiographies, especially with that of the United States. This last chapter has largely been added to the present edition of the work, the English translation of Conrad's German-language 1999 dissertation. Alterations are

otherwise minor, though the text has been somewhat tightened for the translation.

The overburdening of historical writing, as it is placed in the awkward position of having to grant access to matters of memory, *Vergangenheitspolitik*, and, indeed, the “quest for the lost nation” at large, is at first glance problematic, at second interesting. In a sense, the literature on these large topics has meanwhile grown to such abundance, and the notion that historical writing has neither jurisdiction over nor productivity in the domain of “memory” has so often been repeated that Conrad’s decision to ignore such barriers of methodological skepticism at times feels rather refreshing. The equanimity and sobriety with which he treats, and “provincializes” debates in the two countries – so often regarded as indispensable and central for understanding any kind of “mastering of the past” – is one of the most prominent merits of the book. It comes to the fore particularly in the chapter on Orientalist discourse, which constitutes an important readjustment of perspective for the understanding of post-war disciplinary history in both Germany and Japan. Conrad’s study was written in the midst of an extraordinarily polemical discussion that concerned the tacit solidarities of German post-war historians with their Nazi period forbears; the shift of perspective to the Orientalist constructions inherent in the historical discourse of the period remains remarkable as a departure from the limitations of this context.

By way of criticism, it bears mention that the book neglects discussing the institutional and media infrastructures and the translation processes through which historical writing inserted itself into the discursive belaboring of the immediate past, after the “traumata” (a term Conrad does not use) of the Second World War. Therefore, in the chapters, it is often the conversation – or the altercation – of historians among themselves that stands in for the nation at large. The connection between these altercations and a broader, non-disciplinary public is not systematically pursued and remains something of a desideratum. As for the relations that hold between historical writing and the political field in general, Conrad more or less implicitly grants ideology primacy over the historians’ historiographical choices. But whether this conventional notion of a historical literature as determined by the structure of the political field best supports his line of argument, remains an open question. Ultimately, such a perspective would lead to a reduction of historical writing from agent to symptom, which seems contrary to the intention of the study.

Conrad’s attack on the centrality of methodology is certainly in line with what the history of science has achieved in other fields regarding the erstwhile-unchecked sovereignty of “theory”. Yet, he did not enlist the services of the history of science as a guide to achieving novel perspectives on matters to do with the practical production of scholarly knowledge. The messiness of historical writing thus never quite emerges, and the narrative remains aligned with the notion that there was, at the end of the day, quite some discipline in the discipline. As a result of this penchant towards presupposing a pre-given order in his object of research, Conrad joins the long line of scholarship that has regarded the modernist section of historical writing, and its constant struggles and quarrels for the discursivation of the immediate past, as the center of innovation in the discipline. This seems problematic if one considers the enormous importance of, for instance, medieval studies in the first half of the 20th century; the dominance of pre-contemporary studies in the *Annales*, but also the outsized role of medievalism in the infamous German *Volksgeschichte* might have constituted a fair warning against the preference for the

modernists. Perhaps, though, it is by now, fifteen years later, more obviously impossible to subsume “the discipline”, no matter in what national or transnational context, under a single overarching line of historical argument. Traditional attempts to write histories of scientific disciplines in their entirety mostly have been abandoned. One may be tempted to surmise that future histories of history will, and indeed should, pay ever more heed to the already longstanding reality of disciplinary fragmentation.

These criticisms notwithstanding, Conrad’s study remains a valuable, clearly argued, and concise account of West German and Japanese post-war historiographies. On the German side, the book has been one cornerstone (among others) of the critique of the inverted nationalism of German *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, in which the pursuit of moral purity in the judgment of the national past tends to inform a novel sense of national pre-eminence. The Japanese side of the study can still serve as a model for the understanding of history as a discourse that is both non-European and not fundamentally “other”. Ultimately, it is this part of the book that more clearly indicated the decidedly global orientation Conrad’s studies have since taken.

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