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How Can we Teach “Western Civilization” if it doesn’t exist? Rethinking the European History Survey Model

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How can a junior professor, fresh from graduate school, with its requisite seminars in historiography, theories, and methods, not have her soul crushed by teaching a survey course in “Western Civilization”? The nation-state model, the chronological model, the Cold-War model, the grand-theory model, and the “great-men-of-history” model were all dutifully trounced in my graduate seminars, and I assume in many others across North America. Also, as with many schools deemed primarily research-based institutions, I was primed in my graduate program for a career in historical research not teaching, a situation few junior scholars can actually secure.¹ Therefore, as scholars of all levels and all institutions inevitably face the Western Civilization survey course, we teacher-scholars confront a dilemma: how can we teach Western Civilization if we don’t believe it exists? This dilemma informed my personal mission in my first year of full-time teaching: I wanted to retain my integrity as a scholar, maintaining a commitment to integrating social, cultural, gender-nuanced, bottom-up, periphery-core-challenging ideals in my survey course: “A History of Western Civilization.”

The title and course “Western Civilization” have persisted unchanged long after critiques have become standard. Some universities have attempted change by opting to use alternate

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¹ Many history PhD granting institutions with high job placement records are classified as “RU/VH” or the Carnegie Foundation’s classification for a “Research University” with “Very High Research Activity” at a doctoral-granting institution. See <http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/classifications/index.asp?key=791>, accessed 28 February 2009.

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course titles, such as “History of Europe, since 1815,” “the Development of Europe,” or “The Rise of the West?”² Other schools have replaced western civilization altogether with “world history” courses. Since I could not change the title, I tried to reconceptualize the course, keeping in mind the nuance of my training. However, I found that the most conservative critics of changing the model were my students themselves. I studied my first semester’s course evaluations, unsure if the students were pleased with my conceptualization of the course. One student noted, “a 100 level history class should be facts and figures . . . She has turned this entry level class into what some would consider 300 level difficulty.” A fellow classmate countered, “she liked to focus on the significance of historical events. She did not crush us with countless names and dates.” At times, my attempts to make the topic more relevant and include recent historiographical turns were met with disappointment: “. . .The [text] book was very rarely used in class. We instead used ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ sources. . . .[This] is a bit ridiculous. I would expect this in a 300-400 level class but not Hist 111.” Why were my attempts to update this curriculum met with such distaste and disappointment? I perhaps failed at helping students appraise what they were learning or more significantly *how* they were learning, but I think I was also up against a long tradition of history teaching that has resulted from disconnecting our research from our teaching. Bringing our research and training into the classroom could mean much more than teaching a specialized upper-level course in one’s subject; indeed, it could require a reconsideration of the entire model. Bringing my research into the classroom includes introducing methodology by conveying to students that there is a more meaningful array of actors and factors in contemporary European history than they are perhaps used to hearing about.

My research challenges the very concepts that I find myself teaching, which is why I personally find the model of the course “Western Civilization” so problematic. In order to make my case, I should perhaps explain who I am as a scholar. My current research is on Turkish “guest workers” in Germany, which have yet to be included in German history textbooks, courses, or conferences in any way more than a cursory manner. I have made the case in my scholarship that just because minorities do not pass the test of “Germanness” (what some would consider troublesome, seemingly blood-based citizenship tests of an earlier era) does not mean that they should not be the subjects of serious study within German history. In short, the foundation of my research is that Turkish workers, in a situation that mirrors their lived reality, have remained in a historical no-man’s-land: they are excluded from contemporary German history because of their status as “non-Germans” and excluded from contemporary Turkish history because they left.³ Furthermore, within the study of postwar Europe, while historians have long concerned themselves with the rebuilding of the economy, the architecture and

² See Belinda Davis, “The Development of Europe” syllabus for History 102, Fall 2008 Rutgers University; Quinn Slobodian, “The Rise of the West? Europe 1789-2003” syllabus for History 201, Fall 2008, Wellesley College.

³ Many history texts of modern Turkey either do not mention guest worker migration or do so only with fleeting references. Compare, Nicole Pope and Huge Pope, *Turkey Unveiled: a History of Modern Turkey* (Woodstock and New York: Overlook, 1997, 2004). For an argument challenging using a solely a national prism to view the history of national working classes see, Eric Hobsbawm, “What is the Workers’ Country,” in *Workers: Worlds of Labor*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984). Hobsbawm writes, “both immigration and emigration have a bearing on the history of national working classes,” p. 53.



housing, and the governments, a closer look at how societies sought (or not) to rebuild the social fabric of Europe has gone unnoticed. Additionally, historians of the postwar period have not considered the Turkish Republic as a participant in the "Western bloc's" postwar economic recovery, partially because of Turkey's ill fit into the available categories of "Eastern," "Western," "European," or even as part of the "Third World."⁴ Narratives of Western modernity have assumed that modernization only occurs in nation-states that have been constructed as "Western."⁵ In sum, I use my research to rethink the categories of Europe, European, and to reconsider what "Race" means in Germany after 1945. Finally, my findings demonstrate that Turkish guest workers are necessarily a part of the central issues of German and European social, political, and cultural history after 1945, especially in the context of debates concerning "who are Europeans?" and "what makes Europe?" Therefore, it is important to me when I teach European history that I not shore up the very categories I work to challenge in my research.

Another main point of my research is a methodological one that includes making a case for oral history and the history of everyday life. I hope to prove that before ethnic Turks became the homogenized community that policy makers, scholars, and journalists often describe, there was a period when guest workers were individuals who took each condition, each aspect of the program, and transformed it, negotiating it on their own terms. Because personal desires, decisions, and experiences are necessarily individual, I have investigated home life, life stories, and private life through workers' own recollections. My conclusions were that, significantly, guest workers did not just bide time in West Germany, but built lives, invested in their jobs and relationships, and steadily staked claims while developing the long-term desire to stay. My research directly influences my teaching by affecting how I view postwar European history, where Europe is, and who can be historical actors, encouraging me to consider non-textual sources in my research and in my teaching. My challenge then is to bring the same rigor of goals, methods, significance, sources, and responsibility that I have in my research into the classroom and into the concept of "Europe" that I present to my students.

My main point is this: if I were truly to bring my research into the classroom, it would not be through an upper-level special topics seminar, but rather through a fundamental rethinking of how to teach any course, especially the foundational, 100-level survey. I am not proposing major changes to the content of the courses, but rather a reconceptualization of how to present

⁴ The Turkish Republic was a NATO member since 1950, making it technically a part of the "Western Bloc;" however, its slow economic growth and culturally-Muslim population cause many to think of the country as "Eastern," despite Cold War political alliances.

⁵ Historian Young-sun Hong writes, "By decoupling or dissociating sovereignty from territoriality, transnationalism forces us to rethink those narratives of Western modernity that viewed the territorial nation-state as the primary site of progress, Eurocentric opposition between 'traditional' community and 'modern' nation-state, place-based subaltern experience and state-guided productivist modernization and development, between the West and all of those people who were believed to lack those constitutive features of Western modernity (or at least who were constructed as lacking them)." H-German Forum on Transnational History, http://www.h-net.org/~german/discuss/Trans/forum_trans_index.htm, accessed March 31, 2009; See also, Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978).



the material, actors, causes, and ideas we as teachers find most relevant. I would like to make a case for refocusing surveys to include micro, macro, social, and cultural history, as well as so-called “marginalized people,” including women, immigrants, and sexual, racial, and religious minorities even when covering traditional survey-level topics. However, I do not find myself as a teacher adding “marginal voices” to a “dominant” narrative or having to “make room” for new perspectives, but rather telling the same narratives with different voices or from different perspectives. For example, when teaching the transitions Russia undergoes when leadership changes from Lenin to Stalin, I find that students understand the human impact of agricultural collectivization—and its significance—quite well after watching interviews of oral history interviews of women who lived through the experience as starving young girls.⁶ As teachers and scholars we can pose the question: what happens when previously excluded groups are allowed a voice in the narrative?

Surveys necessarily involve making choices about the inclusion and exclusion of material. These choices not only define us as scholars and teachers but also have the potential to mold new generations of students. At the University of Minnesota, Dr. J. B. Shank begins his survey course with the statement, “there is no such thing as ‘Western Civilization’ and this is a course about it.”⁷ However, Dr. Shank does not just present his undergraduates with graduate level talk of “constructed categories”; he begins with an exercise: “Take a map or globe and try to draw the boundaries of the ‘West.’ It is not easy to do, is it?”⁸ Shank explains, “Western Civilization is a fiction and refers to something that does not exist.”⁹ Shank’s point is that “the West” is a category that is only meaningful in relation to another place: “to study the history of ‘West’, therefore is to study the history of a mental map more than a geographical map.”¹⁰ Getting students to approach a subject with an understanding of a mental map will fundamentally alter how they view the rest of the course during the semester. This exercise also introduces students to the idea of historical debate. Shank notes, “What is this class all about? At root, it is an invitation for you to join in this debate, an argument raging all around the world about the character and influence of ‘Western Civilization.’”¹¹ Without exactly this type of critical inquiry, no chronological, nation-state based history textbook or course could make much sense to students. Instead students and teachers could cooperatively work toward an understanding of historical significance, interrelatedness, and interactions of historical actors and events at all levels.

Other examples of syllabi that “question the west,” introduce students to the idea of cultural exchange. Take for example, the syllabus for “European Global Expansion,” by Professor Bonnie Smith of Rutgers University: “[this course] emphasizes that Europe developed

⁶ I found clips of oral history interviews contained within the documentary, *Stalin: Man of Steel* (A&E Television, 2003) DVD.

⁷ JB Shank, “Western Civilization: 1500 to the Present Statement of Course Goals http://www.tc.umn.edu/~jbshank/WestCiv_Statement.htm (accessed Feb 24, 2009).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ http://www.tc.umn.edu/~jbshank/WestCiv_Lecture1.html (accessed Feb 24, 2009).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.



in relationship to the rest of the world and that the rest of the world simultaneously profited from Europe, resisted its power, spread its own civilization, suffered from European domination, and eventually threw off European control.”¹² Furthermore, Marc Matera begins his class with a thesis that questions Europe’s dominance. His survey course on European history syllabus states, “in contrast to the traditional and largely inaccurate story of Europe’s ascendancy to dominance by the late nineteenth century that is usually taught in ‘Western Civilization’ courses, the image of modern Europe that will emerge from this class is a complex picture of diverse populations and interests interacting”¹³ Another professor, Quinn Slobodian of Wellesley College, invites his students to have an opinion about the subject matter, noting in the opening lines of his syllabus for his course “Rise of the West?”:

The addition of a question mark to the course title indicates the intended approach . . . , which is to engage not [just] . . . with the celebrations of European civilization Whether a syllabus that ends with among other things, the Holocaust and the Algerian War, should be described as a ‘rise’ is one of the questions we will debate. . . . [W]e will proceed according to themes rather than rigid chronology. We will be especially attentive to the repercussions of the various developments on gender dynamics and to populations beyond Europe’s continental borders.¹⁴

Does this type of thinking—challenging assumptions and placing even the course topic up for debate—risk distracting students by creating an epistemological crisis or a case in which existing assumptions are dispelled and students are left grasping for new sets of assumptions to make the history course seem rational again?¹⁵ I don’t think so. I believe what all of these syllabi have in common is that they are modeling analytic thinking, intellectual curiosity, and introducing historical debate to the very subject at hand, priming students to engage with the subject of the course *before* they engage with the course material.

Another set of issues is in the choice of textbooks or even whether or not to use them. Rutgers University professor of German history, Professor Belinda Davis, noted: “Even in the finest and most nuanced textbooks, historians still reproduce in unproblematic fashion terms and concepts, such as, for example, ‘the West,’ that scholars have challenged for years, and that these same historians might be unlikely to use in their own scholarly writing.”¹⁶ Dr. Davis points out the most significance point of the problem: why do we teach with concepts that we would

¹² Bonnie Smith, “European Global Expansion” Hist 110 syllabus, Rutgers University Fall 2007.

¹³ Marc Matera, “Development of Europe” Hist 102 syllabus, Rutgers University Summer 2006.

¹⁴ Quinn Slobodian, “Rise of the West? Europe 1789-2003” Wellesley College Hist 201, Fall 2008.

¹⁵ For sources on postcolonial views of “western civilization” see, J. Jorge Klor de Alva, “The Postcolonization of the (Latin) American Experience: A Reconsideration of ‘Colonialism,’ ‘Postcolonialism,’ and ‘Mestizaje’” in Gyan Praksh (ed.), *After Colonialism: Imperial Histories and Postcolonial Displacements* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995) pp. 241-275; Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Academic Press, 1974); Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978); Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

¹⁶ Belinda Davis, correspondence, 25 February 2009.



never use in our research? Or, rather, how can we bring our research to our teaching by rethinking the how we present history? One strategy of rethinking the model of the “survey of the history of western civilization” is the increasing inclusion of social and cultural history not as an additive, but with substantive readings. The editor of *The Social Dimension of Western Civilization*, Richard Golden, points out in his introduction the benefits of including social history, noting, “social history . . . sheds light both on previous neglected areas of human experience and on forgotten and nameless people, including minorities and those at the bottom of the social scale. . . . Social historians take an analytical approach instead of the narrative and chronological approach . . . [Their] goal is to . . . make known the lives of ordinary people.”¹⁷ I believe that the contribution of texts such as Golden’s as well as the philosophy behind it is not to “make visible” the minorities, but rather to challenge the causal relations of historical processes: *who* makes *what* happen? In her course description for “Development of Europe,” Professor Temma Kaplan notes the importance of including social and cultural sources as locations of social change: “By emphasizing [in this course] political, social, and artistic challenges that have characterized European societies and the ways ordinary people, including women and members of ethnic minorities, have reshaped history, the course will reassess some popularly held ideas about culture and war and about the possibilities for far-reaching social change.”¹⁸ These types of sources do not teach progress, but rather actions, values, patterns, and relationships which might in the end teach students *more* about the historical process simply because they invite discussion, questions, and analysis.

Rethinking the model also includes understanding and incorporating post World-War II and post-cold and even post 9/11 vantage points. According to Professor Bonnie Smith author of several useful and nuanced textbooks in European history, “students focused mostly on the world wars and the Cold War may overlook both the path-breaking, prewar developments as well as the more recent dynamic of the Common Market, European Union, and 2004 integration of eastern European countries into the EU.”¹⁹ Dr. Smith also prefaces her latest undergraduate textbook with the following questions, “Is the history of this single continent [Europe] obsolete? Is the history of Europe too old and irrelevant in a globalizing and high-tech world to be worth our attention?”²⁰ Smith concludes that this history is not obsolete if we are able to view it from a fresh perspective, one that takes seriously how Europe’s history is actually “woven with many threads,” or influences that are global, regional, national, local, religious, ethnic, and individual.²¹ It is then possible to teach a course about a region or area while also recognizing a

¹⁷ Richard M. Golden, ed., *The Social Dimension of Western Civilization Vol. 2 Readings from the Sixteenth Century to the Present*, 5 ed. (Boston: Bedford St Martin, 2003), xxi.

¹⁸ Temma Kaplan, “Development of Europe II” Syllabus for His 102, Rutgers University, Spring 2009, <http://history.rutgers.edu/dmdocuments/510102Kaplan.pdf> (accessed March 1, 2009).

¹⁹ Bonnie G. Smith, “Preface for Instructors” in *Europe in the Contemporary World: 1900 to the Present, A Narrative History with Documents*, 2007, vii.

²⁰ Ibid. viii.

²¹ Ibid. ix.



constructed entity that is constantly in a state of flux, not just geographically, as the borders continue to shift, but also in the "minds of its own citizens."²²

Finally, the current economic downturn has also added pressure to considerations of teaching the humanities in general.²³ Educators in the social sciences and humanities are being asked to quantify the marketability and usefulness of their subjects at a time when schools at all levels are looking to make cuts. Class sizes are increasing, part-time faculty are losing positions, and hiring-freezes are becoming frequent.²⁴ It is especially (and predictably) in this sort of economic climate that the utility of the social sciences comes under fire. In a recent *New York Times* article on the economic crisis's impact on the humanities, the author noted that as schools deem humanities courses increasingly irrelevant (due to their lack of marketability), they continue to thrive only at the more elite private liberal arts schools: "as money tightens, the humanities may increasingly return to being what they were at the beginning of the last century, when only a minuscule portion of the population attended college: namely, the province of the wealthy."²⁵ This brings me to my last point about the Western Civilization survey—what is at stake. If the purpose of a survey course in European history or in any field of history, or the humanities for that matter, is to create analytic thinkers who can function as responsible citizens in the world (something that inherently benefits all), then the value systems and skill sets with which we leave our students become a valuable contribution to society as a whole.

²² Ibid. ix.

²³ *New York Times*. "In Tough Times, the Humanities Must Justify Their Worth." 24 February 2009. http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/25/books/25human.html?_r=1&em (accessed 27 February 2009).

²⁴ Ibid.; "To Keep Students, Colleges Cut Anything But Aid" *New York Times* 27 Feb 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/28/education/28college.html?hp> (accessed Feb 27, 2009); "How the Economic Downturn is Affecting Colleges: A Sampling" *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 28 Nov 2008, <http://chronicle.com/weekly/v55/i14/14a01501.htm>, (accessed Feb 27, 2009); "Rising Enrollments Buoy Some Colleges, Burden Others" *Chronicle of Higher Education* 28 Nov 2009 <http://chronicle.com/weekly/v55/i14/14a00102.htm>; <http://chronicle.com/weekly/v55/i14/14a00103.htm> (accessed Feb 27, 2009); "Colleges Protect Workers and Cut Elsewhere" *Chronicle of Higher Education* 9 Jan 2009, <http://chronicle.com/weekly/v55/i18/18a00102.htm> (accessed 27 Feb 2009); "Voluntary Cuts: New Tactic to Preserve State Support" *Chronicle of Higher Education* 17 Oct 2009, <http://chronicle.com/weekly/v55/i08/08a02501.htm> (accessed Feb 27, 2009).

²⁵ *New York Times*. "In Tough Times, the Humanities Must Justify Their Worth," 24 February 2009. http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/25/books/25human.html?_r=1&em (accessed February 27, 2009).

