

Eurocentric Historiography: An Analysis of International Politics in the 21st Century and Its Effect on Changes in Historiography of Countries in Europe

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Abstract

History is a form of the collective memory of societies. The history of any society is not independent of others. Historiography traditionally focused on relations among political authorities, namely, states. Within this context, societies had been equated with states. Geographical discoveries, which began at the end of 15th century, culminated in the emergence of a Eurocentric view of world history. The development of Eurocentric historiography was not an outcome of convention, but rather a reflection of world politics at that time. Historians began to write history by treating states dominant at regional and global scale as basic to their work. In this study, it is explained that international politics has had an important role in the development of Eurocentric historiography. To this end, historiography and the links between society and modern states are examined; the development of the Eurocentric international system is reviewed; the re-construction of non-European society by modern states is assessed; whether or not non-European societies are capable of an alternative historiography is debated; and, finally, it is claimed that modern international practices have determinative influence in the development of Eurocentric historiography.

Keywords: *Historiography, Eurocentric, International Politics, Non-European Societies, Alternative Historiography.*



A. INTRODUCTION

History is collective memory, in most cases, history is confined to events that happened in the past, and the present is excluded from history. However, if history is considered as a factor that partially affects and determines today, it is not possible to confine history only to the past. Because what happened in the past continues in the present. Because societies tend to think and act in line with the requirements of collective memory (Helmond et al., 2019). Historians are also the main actors in the creation of this memory. For classical historians, important political events were a basic research topic (Kasetsiri, 2019), in which wars or other relations between states were considered as primary events. Both the power struggles within the state and its reflections on interstate relations have been the primary sources that classical historians refer to in the process of forming the collective memory. In this, the acceptance that the class or ordinary people do not have the power to influence history has been effective as much as the tradition coming from chroniclerism, which writes history as the "history of great men". Although postmodernism dealt a significant

blow to classical history, political history, that is, the history of states, started to revive with the ethnic nationalism that emerged at the end of the 20th century (Rundle, 2019).

In today's world, the boundaries of the nation and society are largely determined by the boundaries assumed to be finalized between nation-states (Pohl, 2019). States have a dominant role in historiography. In politics and interstate relations, the phenomenon of power constitutes a central position (Landecker, 2021). The function of power in historiography is undeniable. In this case, power is related both to the power area within a country and to the power struggle outside the borders of the country. Thus, it turns out that the conjuncture of world politics has a central function in historiography. Whichever geography is the center of world politics, other geographies take care to write their own history within the framework of relations with that center. Since Europe has been the dominant force in world politics for the last four hundred years, it is not unusual for Eurocentrism to emerge in parallel historiography (Maghdid, 2018).

The enlargement of Europe has been through modern nation-states, the emergence of which is based on the Treaty of Westphalia of 1648. The treaty is an important breaking point in the history of international politics, and therefore it has been turned into a "myth" (Kumar, 2022). In fact, the Treaty is the result of a struggle for power within Europe and a century-long series of wars. With the treaty, the power in Europe was disintegrated, and political entities called nation-states came into being. After this point, the history of Europe has been identified with the history of modern nation-states. In the following centuries, with the spread of the modern nation-state practice to the rest of the world through European colonial states, non-European societies began to imagine their own history within the structure of the modern nation-state (Grec, 2020). The developments that Europe has made in the material field have of course also manifested themselves in the "organization of violence"; weapons technologies have developed, armament has increased and the rest of the world has become easier to dominate (Marashi, 2021). As a result, on the one hand, Europe was evaluated in the center, on the other hand, non-European societies tried to position themselves in the new world in parallel with the nation-stateization process.

In the 19th century, the discipline of history also got its share from the extension of scientific methods, which first became widespread in science, to social sciences in order to understand the nature of man and society. Accordingly, the aim of the historian is to reveal with all its nakedness what happened in the past. The first resources to be consulted in the research of history based on scientific methods were the state archives, which, still valid today, mostly contain documents on interstate relations. Thus, the discipline of political history emerged (van Gassen, 2019).

Political history provides a basic framework for many fields of social sciences (Criss, 2006). Thus, the habit of classical historiography was maintained through nation-states in the modern era. In the intellectual historian's point of view, "every age produces the thoughts it needs" (Cannon, 2018). Accordingly, the power centers that are decisive in the writing of history are taken as a basis. The most important power center that the rest of the world considers is of course Europe, or rather the European

colonial empires. In modern historiography, Eurocentrism has become not an option available to historians, but a historical necessity imposed on them by world politics. A historiography has become almost impossible without considering the power center included in the concept of the "West". The geographies included in the definition of "West" are Western Europe, North America, Australia, New Zealand and Japan. Etymologically, "Europe" means "west" in ancient Greek (Heckman, 2018). However, it includes, more specifically, Western Europe and North America, and a few other regions that have reached their level of development.

In this context, the construction of Eurocentrism was embodied by the operation of two parallel processes together. First, Europeans have placed themselves in the center of the world map since the 16th century (Lyons, 2018). The other is that other societies have fallen into the trouble of positioning themselves according to Europe. With the decline of the political and economic structures in the old continents such as the Ottoman Empire, China, Iran and India, and the rise of the Europeans in the political and economic field in the same period, Europe became the center of the development of humanity in historiography (Yokoe, 2018).

In this context, Eurocentrism in modern historiography actually followed a parallel course with the development of European states' dominance over the world. The development of Eurocentric historiography is not a result of exclusively historiographic habits, but reflects the general aspect of world politics at that time. Historians have engaged in historiography based on states that are ultimately active on a local, regional and global scale (Ambasciano, 2018). In this context, in this study, the international policy dimension of Eurocentric historiography is explained. Historiography, the link between society and the modern state were examined, the development of the Eurocentric modern states system was reviewed, the reconstruction process of non-European societies by modern states was evaluated, it was discussed how possible an alternative historiography of non-European societies is, and as a result, modern Eurocentric historiography habit was established. It has been argued that inter-state practices play a decisive role.

B. METHOD

This research uses qualitative research with descriptive analysis approach. The type of data used in this study is secondary data using literature study techniques. The discussion opens by analyzing History, Society and the Modern State, then Modern States System and Eurocentrism, and finally analyzing how is an Alternative Historiography Possible.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. History, Society and the Modern State

Classical historiography is based on subject-centered fiction. Historians have taken into account two main subjects while creating their stories. Some of them have created this story on the basis of nations, that the history of nations is illustrated by recording the events that occur both within the states, which are the political entities

created by the nations, both within themselves and in their relations with the outside, and evaluating them in a partly cause-effect relationship. In this fiction, there is the identity of society-nation and nation-state. In fact, there is a society-state identity in the explanations regarding the emergence of the state on the axis of modern ideas that flourished in Western Europe in the more recent period. The establishment of a sovereign authority by convention or constitution symbolizes the birth of the state, as well as the transition of a group of people from the state of nature to the state of society.

The creation and implementation of the contract, unforeseen problems, the change of the sovereign from time to time and the relationship of the sovereign with other sovereigns necessitate a historiography dependent on the state. The state is identified with society, and society with the nation. The history written becomes the history of the nation. Power is something that can be observed in the relationship between an actor exercising it and other actors exercising it. Thus, the subjectivity of the sovereign who exercises power and the objectivity of the society over which power is exercised are complementary to each other and is what reveals the text of history.

Other historians, on the other hand, consider not the nation or state as the main subject, but the phenomenon of civilization, which includes many nations and states, as the main subject of history. For example, Toynbee saw the decisive actors of world history as civilizations rather than states (Baliva, 2022). States are the carriers of civilizations in the political arena. According to this conceptualization, world geography is divided among various civilizations. Civilizations are like organic creatures, they are born, grow, mature, age, and then are left to die. And history is nothing but the life story of civilizations. Each civilization is maintained by being represented by different nations or states. In this respect, the history of nations constitutes minor and complementary elements in the history of civilization. While the study of history, which is identical with the state, tries to write a text dependent on the political authorities on the world geography, the initiatives that center civilization try to create a historical text by going over the wider geography and human beings. Regardless of the point of view, people and societies try to reconstruct themselves through historiography in terms of their past, in a sense, to have a meaningful place in the world they live in and to create a future perspective accordingly (Brooks, 2018).

In this context, historiography is actually an attempt by societies to make sense of their worldly lives, to acquire higher goals, and to assign some missions for themselves. The historian is also the actor who actually performs this work on behalf of the society. The assumption that a society without a history has no future is not in vain. In this sense, the work of historical research and text writing is not only bringing to light the events that happened in the past, but also an effort to illuminate the present of societies and to gain the ability to predict their future.

Historical research in the modern world has embraced "methodical nationalism". There is a general acceptance that the world is made up of nations, that nations are embodied in states, and that history takes place between states. Different

ethnic or national communities will eventually be assimilated within the borders of the existing state, which in practice is carried out by nationalizing the most populous and widespread ethnic identity (constituent element) within the borders of the state. Thus, the modern nation-state will be built. The historian embarks on the task of writing a national history based on the official archives of the state and putting the state in the center. Western European historians naturally write the history of the colonial empire in the same perspective (Paik, 2018).

The rewriting of history has undertaken a constructivist function in the modern state's work of providing national unity (Banac, 2019). On the other hand, although the state as a political structure is a phenomenon that has always existed, its constituent elements have undergone radical transformations over time. What is understood by the modern state today is the model that emerged in Western Europe in the 16th century and spread all over the world, which formed the basis of current international law, as legally guaranteed by the UN Charter (Erkulwater, 2018). In this context, modern historiography has developed in line with the method that accepts states as subjects, not civilizations. The priority is to place the state in a meaningful place in the regional or global conjuncture, to stabilize it and to make this existence permanent as much as possible. Thus, methodological nationalism centered on the nation-state and identifying it with society has been accepted as a general principle in historiography. In historiography, once the state is placed at the center, the history of the society is constructed in a way that prioritizes the continuation of the existing political structure. In this context, conceptualizing the ground that the state will have in the face of developments on a regional or global scale is both priority and urgent.

It is for this reason that, in the modern period, political history occupied a central place in this regard. For example, the development of political historiography in German was ultimately embodied in the narrative of events that first emerged in the West and affected the world (Sunarso, 2018). These include the French Revolution, the Congress of Vienna, the Workers' Revolutions of 1830 and 1848, the establishment of the Italian and German Confederations, the Anglo-Chinese Opium Wars, the American Civil War, the First and Second World Wars, the Middle East problem, and the Cold War. The main purpose here is to define and illuminate the ground that modern German will have in the developments in the region and the world.

2. Modern States System and Eurocentrism

With the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, the sovereignty of the state tended to become absolute. The state got rid of two bonds and made its sovereignty absolute. The first was freed from subordination to the hierarchical structure in which the empire and the church were at the top, and the second was freed from the semi-sovereign locality of feudal principalities (Vushko, 2018). The Treaty of Westphalia can also be characterized as the secular constitution of the modern international system (Koopman, 2019). Because the interference of the Roman Catholic Church in the internal affairs of sovereign states was ended. Thus, the rivalry and struggle between states was freed from the disguise of religion and placed in the context of

“power”. Power has a central place in the definition of international politics. This is why interstate relations are defined as “power politics” (Morgenthau, 1992). In the international arena, states try to maximize their power, thus creating a safe environment for themselves. The condition for international peace and stability is the situation in which the powers of the states are balanced in a way that does not cause war between them (Baldwin, 2002). The West's central position in world politics was made possible by making others accept its physical power (Zerilli, 2022).

State, sovereignty, and territory are fundamental phenomena in the practice and research of international relations. Classical historiography is also largely based on these facts. They have been socially and politically constructed throughout history. Recognition, negotiation, diplomacy, international law, conditions of war and peace included in interstate practices are determined by the principles of sovereignty and territoriality. The basic characteristics of the modern state, which started to take shape in Western Europe from the 16th century and is now widespread all over the world, based on sovereignty and territoriality, have been detached from the historical context and universal validity has been attributed to them as always and everywhere. Thus, the modern system of states was identified with the West. Eurocentrism is ultimately an ideological choice and an undeniable feature of modern historiography.

Ancient Greece inspired both modern political science in general and modern international relations more specifically (Schmidt, 2022). Ancient Greece, along with Judeo-Christian and ancient Rome today, is one of the three foundations on which Western society rests. The privileged position of the West and its view of other societies begin from this point. Because in the Greek city-state, individuals (men) belonging to the city-state were accepted as honorable citizens of the city-state, while other societies living in the area outside the city-state were categorized as “barbarians”. Barbarians need to be ruled and are susceptible to enslavement. This understanding has prepared the historical basis of the view of non-European societies with the rise of Europeans.

From the end of the 19th century, Europe began to expand towards the rest of the world, so Eurocentrism in the current sense was built by going through various phases over a period of about six centuries. In the process of European enlargement, alienation has been an internal motor force. With the thesis formed on the opposition of nature and human beings and their struggle with each other, Europe has attempted to dominate nature. In this context, geographies outside of Europe have been considered as a part of nature that can be dominated (Rashid, 2012). Colonization, enslavement and plunder were seen as natural results of this understanding. Europe ceased to be a “self-sufficient” society and turned to looting, and then to trade, production and exploitation. Already, the first capital accumulations in Europe were made by the Spaniards and the Portuguese, and then this capital was used in the production process first in England and then in France.

The development of trade is one of the important factors in the collapse of the feudal system in Europe. Trade, freed from local borders, became functional in the emergence of the modern nation-state. The interaction between the economic and

political structure paved the way for Europe's exit from the Middle Ages. The promise of progress was associated with the notion of civilization, and all coercive practices, including war, were legitimized by Europeans as part of their work to bring the uncivilized – the barbarians – to the standard of civilization. In fact, the practices introduced by Europeans in this first phase of expansion are not qualitatively different from the practices of previous civilizations. Tendencies to enrich, own more efficient means, colonize others, develop trade, and establish political domination are also present in the expansion of previous civilizations..

Since the 19th century, Europe's increasing financial power has also brought about an increase in its effectiveness in the intellectual field. By the 18th century, the philosophy of "Enlightenment" showed itself in many fields (Buzan, & Lawson, 2013) and claimed to lead all humanity. By the mid-18th century, however, China and India represented the most modern state in many of their production techniques, and these Asian cultures were representative of progress, prosperity, and wealth. Particularly in the 19th century, industrialization accelerated, increasing the financial power of Europe over the rest of the world, and this contributed to the construction of the Eurocentric perspective. Imperialism, which gained momentum in the 19th century, was combined with the idea of "progress" and legitimized. The "European miracle" is narrated in a Eurocentric way.

Until the beginning of the century, the share of Europe in world production was not very important. By 1700, the share of Asia in the world's production was estimated to be 61%, while the share of Europe was 31%. However, by 1913, this picture was completely reversed. Asia's share in world production decreased to 24%, while Europe's share increased to 68% (Buzan, & Lawson, 2022). This number shows that by the beginning of the century, the balance of power in the world economy has become completely Eurocentric. Parallel to this development, in the production and reprocessing of physical and social knowledge, especially in historiography.

Europe's leadership and central position has been consolidated. Material power and wealth accelerate the acceptance of the spiritual values of those who have them. In addition, the fact that the two great world wars, which deeply affected the world, took place in a Eurocentric way, in a sense represented the power of Europe and reinforced the periphery of the others. After the end of the Cold War, the thesis that the West is victorious and that history is coming to an end, is based on the assumption that the non-Western alternative is seen as defeated (Fukuyama, 1992).

The second is international law. In the period following the Treaty of Westphalia, some basic legal rules began to take shape in addition to diplomatic practices in relations between sovereign and equal nation-states. In parallel with the increasing weight of European states in world politics, the history of international law has been identified with the expansion of European civilization. Some practices such as sovereignty and equality of states, political independence, territorial integrity, non-interference in internal affairs have become the basic principles of international law. Modern states have been regarded as the main subject of the legal system in question. As of 1904, there are 46 states in the world that are the subject of international law. Of

these, 22 are European, 21 are American, and the other 3 are Japan, Liberia and Congo (Koskeniemi, 2021). However, it should also be taken into account that the modern international law system, which developed in a Eurocentric way, was fed from ancient sources.

Colonization and colonialism occupy an important place in the generalization of international law to the world. For example, in the conclusion declaration of the Berlin Conference of 1885, it was explained that the world consisted of "civilized" and "barbaric" nations. The marital part is those belonging to the European culture. The transformation and rise of Europe was envisioned in a linear line and conceptualized as the "progress of humanity". This approach has reversed the cyclical understanding, which has been a dominant historiographic approach since ancient times. The most mature analysis of the cyclical understanding of history is found in Ibn Khaldun's *Mukaddime* (Uludağ, 2021).

The European decisiveness in international law started with the Treaty of Westphalia, and with the establishment of the UN in 1945, it was opened to the full participation of other nations. However, the participation of others has developed not as a challenge to the basic philosophy of international law and an alternative proposition, but as an extension of the rights of European states to others. The writing of modern international law has followed a parallel course with the expansion of European culture and civilization. During this expansion, the European powers were conceptualized as "righteous" civilized nations, while the others were described as "unrighteous" and "barbarian tribes prone to enslavement". This point of view is nothing more than a typical repetition of the classical Greek city-states' view of the outside world. The rest of the world was considered as material means, even right, contributing to the welfare of the mother country (Tekeli, 1998). While Westerners were dealing with the East, they put themselves in the center and started to build an East that would serve them in line with their current interests (Said, 2012).

Today, as a result of the changes experienced since the second half of the last century, the subjects of international law have also tended to expand. Subjects such as liberalization of trade and economic activities, development problems of underdeveloped countries, protection of the environment, and respect for human rights have come to cover the whole world with a progressive discourse within the framework of the ideals of "enlightenment" and "civilization" exclusive to Europe (Koskeniemi, 2011). Many international conventions have been signed, which have become binding for states that are parties on a global scale, and even non-parties in some special conditions (such as the Vienna Conventions of 1949, the UN Charter, the Convention on the Prohibition of Genocide), and some international institutions have been established in line with these (International Court of Justice, UN, International Criminal Court). Court of Human Rights, European Court of Human Rights), thus, it is aimed that every point of the world will progress in accordance with the same civilization criterion. Within the framework of current international law, for example, the principle of self-determination is accepted by almost everyone.

Today, the nation-state process can be managed relatively stable in the developed West. Many separatist tendencies that exist in Europe today are fighting in a more peaceful way (such as Basque, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Corsica) through the strengthening of local governments, the recognition of autonomy, and the preservation of local culture and identity. In addition, the European Union, which emerged as a political structure beyond the nation-state, is actually a tool for keeping the micro-divisions within the continent together at the macro level. However, the number of nation-states in the world is constantly increasing through the application of this principle in non-European geographies that cannot manage the nation-state process in a healthy way. The principles and practices of international law, developed as Eurocentric and dependent on the modern state, have led to a Eurocentric approach to history, just as in diplomacy. Both the development of European states followed such a course and the tendencies of states in non-European geographies were in this direction. Thus, it represents the weight of power in world politics.

3. How Is an Alternative Historiography Possible?

One of the most important macro-scale determinants of non-Western societies having a Eurocentric perception of history is the modern state system. At the micro level, people accept Eurocentrism for practical reasons. Due to political pressures in other societies, authoritarian-totalitarian regimes, underdevelopment, unemployment, poverty, underdevelopment in basic welfare indicators, even hunger and famine, the majority of people in underdeveloped geographies today want to migrate to geographies in the developed countries class. The most effective way to achieve this aim is, of course, to learn and assimilate the language and culture of the West to a certain extent. Among those who want to immigrate, Westerners choose and only accept those who will be useful to them. This development also deprives the underdeveloped countries of human capital. Underdeveloped countries, deprived of material resources by colonialism and the global political economy, are thus deprived of human resources and left to their own fate. In such a situation, non-Western societies readily accept Eurocentrism in their search for meaning.

Under the current conditions of world politics, it seems that non-European societies' realization of an alternative historiography depends on certain conditions. If these are realized, it is possible for each society to reveal its own unique history without centering Europe. The first of these conditions is the level of development of the country. Through the opportunities acquired depending on economic, technological, social and human development, the archeology and anthropology of the geography can be subjected to a new interpretation and a unique perception of history can be created. The originality obtained may cease to be a result limited to Eurocentrism. As long as the main subject that creates the historical data and builds the perception without the development criterion is European, the historiography of a particular geography will naturally have a Eurocentric character. For example, the primary aim of both African states that gained independence in the second half of the 20th century and African research financed or supported by the West is to determine

the Western type of glasses that African researchers will have within the existing system of states. In this way, it was possible to filter the studies on Africa from the perspective of global political economy. In other words, the easier exploitation of Africa's resources and hegemony on the continent.

Of course, among these researchers, there are those who try to save their approach from the hegemony of the West and to associate the ancient history of the continent with today, but these correspond to a very small mass in total. After all, it was this second type of researchers who tried to come up with suggestions for the real solution of the problems that Africa is facing today. They attempted to break the intellectual dependence of the continent on the West by attempting to write an alternative African history outside of Africa built by the Western hegemony. In this framework, the battle for the liberation of Africa emerged on two fronts. The first is the intellectual level. The second is the actual war against the post-colonial ruling elite, which is supported by the West in every possible way. The most fundamental difference between the West-financed research and the views of critical researchers trying to construct an alternative African history to the ancient period is related to today. The former try to ignore the relation between antiquity and the present, while the latter, on the contrary, attempt to establish a relation between antiquity and today. Studies that try to reveal the differences between the education system in ancient African societies and the modern education system are also an attempt to write an alternative history of Africa. However, as long as the problem of underdevelopment prevailing in the continent and the dependence of the ruling elites on the world economic and political system continues, it seems difficult to reveal an authentic African history for now.

Another important factor affecting the success of non-Western societies in alternative historiography is their level of effectiveness in international politics, which is directly related to development. If this activity is based on strong dynamics and can be long-term, the perception of the region and the world of various social segments within the country in question may change. The change in perception will of course include the "Western" and Eurocentric understanding of history. A stronger country may become more aware of its position on the axis of the West, and in a sense, it may have the chance to see the limits of its power. For example, it would not be wrong to read the change in the position that Germany has occupied in international politics for about ten years, partly within this framework.

Increasing interest in history, efforts to make sense of history, and thus the demand to have a more active role in the future are the elements that complement each other. Because the country's increasing effectiveness in regional and world politics is being tried to be made permanent based on some of the imaginations in history, so it is expected that it will have a chance to get rid of the grip of Eurocentric history. However, it is not clear for now how long this initiative can be sustained steadily. Germany's prestige and visibility in the region and in the world has tended to increase, thanks to the dynamism taken from its strengthening economy and rising development indicators, and the expansions made in foreign policy. The natural

consequence of this development is that German's history should be re-discussed and handled in a more original way. Of course, originality will emerge in parallel with the development of the ability to get rid of orientalist hegemony. As a result, it is likely that a new conception of history will have a chance in life in the center of German.

D. CONCLUSION

Development in all aspects of human life will create an opportunity to change the balance of power in international politics nationally, regionally, and globally. This trend inevitably opens the way to an alternative perception of world affairs. On the other hand, sustaining the current practices of international politics, like diplomacy and international law, decreases this opportunity, as they contribute to further political and economic fragmentation in non-Western society. Divisions make those societies more vulnerable to Western intrusion, which preserves the current Eurocentric outlook. For this reason, non-Western societies should search for other ways to expand their economies of scale in both politics and economics as well. The current form of the nation state and the practices of international politics were shaped within the boundaries of Eurocentrism. However, if all these requirements are fulfilled, non-Western parts of the world will have a chance to develop an alternative historiography.

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