

COMPARISON AND BEYOND

JÜRGEN KOCKA

ABSTRACT

The merits of the comparative approach to history are undeniable. Comparison helps to identify questions, and to clarify profiles of single cases. It is indispensable for causal explanations and their criticism. Comparison helps to make the “climate” of historical research less provincial. Still, comparative historians remain in a minority. Many cherished principles of the historical discipline—proximity to the sources, context, and continuity—are sometimes in tension with the comparative approach. More recently, new transnational approaches—entangled histories, *histoire croisée*—challenge comparative historians in a new and interesting way. But *histoire comparée* and *histoire croisée* can be compatible and need each other.

This comment¹ first underlines the great importance of comparison for gaining historical insight by discussing major functions comparative approaches fulfill in historical studies. It then tries to answer the question why, nevertheless, comparison has usually been a minority phenomenon among historians. Third, it will draw attention to a relatively new challenge that comparative history faces today, and that may well lead to putting comparison into a new context. A few conclusions are offered at the end. For the purposes of this comment I want to stress that comparing in history means to discuss two or more historical phenomena systematically with respect to their similarities and differences in order to reach certain intellectual aims.²

Which aims? What are, methodologically speaking, the purposes and functions of comparison in historical research and presentation? I propose to distinguish among heuristic, descriptive, analytical, and paradigmatic purposes.

1. Presented to the panel “Problems of Comparative Explanation” at the Fourth European Social Science History Conference in The Hague, March 2, 2002.

2. For other aspects and surveys of the literature cf. Jürgen Kocka, “The Uses of Comparative History,” in *Societies Made up of History: Essays in Historiography, Intellectual History, Professionalisation, Historical Social Theory, & Proto-Industrialisation*, ed. Ragnar Björk and Karl Molin (Edsbruk, Sweden: Akademityck AB, 1996), 197-209; *Geschichte und Vergleich: Ansätze und Ergebnisse international vergleichender Geschichtsschreibung*, ed. Heinz-Gerhard Haupt and Jürgen Kocka (Frankfurt and New York: Campus, 1996); Jürgen Kocka, “Storia comparata,” in *Enciclopedia delle scienze sociali* (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia italiana, 1998), vol. 8, S. 389-396; Heinz-Gerhard Haupt, “Comparative History,” in *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences* (Amsterdam and New York: Elsevier, 2001), vol. 4, 2397-2403; Hartmut Kaelble, *Der historische Vergleich: Eine Einführung zum 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt and New York: Campus Verlag, 1999).

Heuristically, the comparative approach allows one to identify questions and problems that one might miss, neglect, or just not invent otherwise. For this Marc Bloch gave an example from his own research. As an agrarian historian he had studied the English enclosures of the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. From that he developed the assumption that something analogous should have taken place in France, albeit yet undiscovered by local research. Starting with this question Bloch revealed for fifteenth-, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Provence corresponding though not identical changes in the structure of landownership and in this way contributed to a far-reaching revision of the history of the region.³ This was an act of intellectual transfer, based on assumptions about similarities between England and France, a productive insight made possible by comparison.

Descriptively, historical comparison helps to clarify the profiles of single cases, frequently just of one single case, by contrasting them (or it) with others. Many examples come to mind: for example, all characterizations of historical phenomena as “first” or “belated”; or claims for particularity, like the notion of a “German *Sonderweg*” or “American Exceptionalism”; and many other examples—from a typology of regional industrialization processes in Western Europe to the idea of a distinctive path of Western modernization compared with other parts of the world. Comparison in this sense is ubiquitous, and even plays a role in historical works that one would not classify as comparative in the full sense of the word. It should be added that comparison does not only help to support notions of particularity, but is also indispensable for challenging and modifying such notions.⁴

Analytically, the comparative approach is indispensable for asking and answering causal questions. This point has been made frequently, in methodological detail and with many examples.⁵ Nowadays, global history is a field that offers itself for comparative approaches with causal aims, be it with respect to the rise of science in different civilizations over the centuries, with respect to the different paths of economic change and growth, or with respect to other problems.⁶ Max Weber pioneered this type of ambitious comparison. Sewell and others have stressed that comparison can play the role of an indirect experiment facilitating the “testing of hypotheses.” While one may be skeptical about this claim (since the *ceteris paribus* clause can rarely be fulfilled in historical studies), it is beyond doubt that comparison is indispensable for historians who like to ask causal questions and provide causal answers. Along the same line it should be stressed that the necessary criticism of given explanations, including the

3. Marc Bloch, “Pour une histoire comparée des sociétés européennes” (1928), in *Mélanges historiques*, ed. Marc Bloch (Paris: École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 1983), vol. 1, 16-40.

4. The debate and research about the questions of a “German *Sonderweg*” can serve as an example. Cf. Jürgen Kocka, “Asymmetrical Historical Comparison: The Case of the German *Sonderweg*,” *History and Theory* 38 (1999), 40-51.

5. Cf. William H. Sewell, “Marc Bloch and the Logic of Comparative History,” *History and Theory* 6 (1967), 208-218; A. A. van den Braembussche, “Historical Explanation and Comparative Method: Towards a Theory of the History of Society,” *History and Theory* 28 (1989), 2-24.

6. For a recent overview of these debates, see Gale Stokes, “The Fates of Human Societies: A Review of Recent Macrohistories,” *American Historical Review* 106 (2001), 508-525.

rebuttal of “pseudo-explanations” both of the local and of the generalizing type, needs comparison as well.⁷

Finally, just a word on the paradigmatic function of comparison. In this respect comparison helps to distance oneself a bit from the case one knows best, from “one’s own history.” *Verfremdung* is the German word. In the light of observable alternatives one’s own development loses the self-evidence it may have had before. One discovers the case with which one is most familiar as just one possibility among others. Frequently historians are relatively concentrated on the history of their country or region. Because of this, comparison can have a de-provincializing, a liberating, an eye-opening effect, with consequences for the atmosphere and style of the profession. This is a contribution of comparison that should not be underestimated, even today.

These points should suffice in order to remind us of the many advantages comparison has. Why is it nevertheless the case that comparative history has had a minority status for a very long time, and continues to have that status even today? There are many practical reasons as well as reasons related to the cultural and national functions the discipline has had over the centuries. After all, as a mass discipline history emerged in close interconnection with the rise of the nation-state, at least in the West. I am not dealing with these impediments of comparative studies now. Rather, I want to discuss three serious methodological reasons that make comparison difficult, three characteristics that constitute a certain tension between the comparative approach and the classical tradition of history as a discipline.

1. The more cases a comparative study includes, the more dependent it becomes on secondary literature, and the more difficult it becomes to get near to the sources and read them in their original language. But proximity to the sources and command of their language has developed as a major principle of modern historical scholarship as it has emerged since the late eighteenth century, for very good reasons.

2. The comparative approach presupposes that the units of comparison can be separated from each other. It is neither the continuity between two phenomena nor the mutual influences between them that constitute them as cases for comparison. Rather they are seen as independent cases that are brought together analytically by asking for similarities and differences between them. In other words, the comparison breaks continuities, cuts entanglements, and interrupts the flow of narration. But the reconstruction of continuities, the emphasis on interdependence as well as narrative forms of presentation, are classical elements of history as a discipline.

3. One cannot compare totalities, in the sense of fully developed individualities. Rather, one compares in certain respects. One has to decide with respect to which viewpoints, questions, or *Erkenntnisinteressen* one wants to compare two or more cases. The more cases one includes, the more important becomes this selective decision about the viewpoints, questions, and problems with respect to which one wants to compare. In other words, comparison implies selection, abstraction, and de-contextualization to some degree. One realizes this right

7. Again Bloch has given examples. Cf. note 3 above.

away if one thinks of multi-case comparisons. Whoever tries to compare, let us say, twenty regional industrialization cases or demographic patterns in forty French cities in the middle of the nineteenth century, has to isolate the objects of comparison, the relevant “variables” from their context to a large degree. But the emphasis on context, on embeddedness, on *Zusammenhang* is dear and central to history as a discipline. Again there is a tension between the comparative approach and some of the much cherished and worthwhile principles of historical studies, at least in the West.

These are the major methodological reasons why comparative approaches were traditionally not in the center but at the periphery of history as a discipline. This also explains why comparative approaches became much more popular and much more central once history became more social-science oriented in the 1970s and 1980s.⁸

Most recently the wind that blows into the face of comparative historians has become even stronger. In addition to the more traditional and conventional objections historians may have against too much and too rigorous comparison, there are new ones, new reservations against clear-cut comparative approaches, this time on the side of the youngest, in an interesting way. After the end of the East–West conflict around 1990 both the accelerated processes of internationalization and the renewed debates on globalization started to change the way in which we define historical questions and explore historical problems. As a consequence, there is a new stress on “entangled histories,” on “*histoire croisée*,” on “*Verflechtungsgeschichte*” or “*Beziehungsgeschichte*” which I find in some tension with basic principles of comparative history.⁹

There is, fortunately, much interest now in transnational approaches to history. The different currents of global or world history are cases in point. Comparative approaches, international and intercultural comparisons, are just one way for realizing this rising transnational commitment. There are other ways as well, for example, studies and interpretations using postcolonial theories.¹⁰ According to this view one is much less interested in similarities and differences between, let us say, Europe and the Arab world, but rather in the processes of mutual influencing, in reciprocal or asymmetric perceptions, in entangled processes of constituting one another. In a way, the history of both sides is taken as one instead of being considered as two units for comparison. One speaks of entanglements; is interested in travelling ideas, migrating people, and transnational commerce; mutually holds images of “the other”; and one talks about men-

8. On the basis of a comprehensive survey Hartmut Kaelble identifies the 1980s as, quantitatively seen, the breakthrough phase of comparative social history in Europe. Hartmut Kaelble, “Vergleichende Sozialgeschichte des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts: Forschungen europäischer Historiker,” in Haupt and Kocka, eds. *Geschichte und Vergleich*, 97.

9. Cf. Johannes Paulmann, “Internationaler Vergleich und interkultureller Transfer: Zwei Forschungsansätze zur europäischen Geschichte des 18. bis 20. Jahrhunderts,” *Historische Zeitschrift* 267 (1998), 649–685; *Globalization in World History*, ed. Anthony G. Hopkins (London: Pimlico, 2002).

10. Cf. Robert J. C. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford and Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2001).

tal mapping, including aspects of power, subordination, and dominance. Cultural dimensions are usually central to such an approach. Europe and non-European parts of the world, the West and non-Western civilizations are the most preferred topics for such approaches. "Entangled histories" has become a key phrase, for instance advocated by the sociologist-ethnologist Shalini Randeria. Another variation of this type of approach has been called "*histoire croisée*," such as a *histoire croisée* between Germany and France in the nineteenth century as propagated by Michael Werner, Bénédicte Zimmermann, and Sandrine Kott.¹¹

These are highly interesting and promising developments. But this type of transnational approach goes beyond comparison. Or does it fall back behind comparison? At any rate, from an entangled-history point of view, comparison appears a bit too mechanistic, a bit too analytical in that it separates reality into different pieces in order to analyze, that is, to compare the pieces as units of comparison, whereas it would be necessary to see them as one, as one web of entanglements, one "*Zusammenhang*" of *Verflechtungen* and relations. In fact, Espagne and Werner, who came from the study of literature and culture, and who have pioneered this approach with respect to developments in Germany and France, very early and effectively criticized the comparative approach.¹² In the meantime they have many sympathizers, particularly among cultural historians.

Certainly, neither the built-in strengths of the historical method nor the recent interest in transcultural and transnational entanglements should be taken as justifications for withdrawing from comparative history. Proximity to the sources and control of languages are important imperatives of historical research. But they must not be taken as excuses for professional over-specialization, nor should they prevent the broad perspectives and comprehensive interpretations historians must be able to offer in this global age. The stress on continuity and context are indispensable for and characteristic of historians' work. But on the other hand continuity is just one guiding principle of historical reconstruction among others, and while historians have to take context seriously, their intellectual operations are always selective, viewpoint-related and, in this sense, analytical; they never reconstruct totalities in full. Consequently, comparative approaches only emphasize and make particularly manifest what is implicit in any kind of historical work: a strong selective and constructive component. Comparative history compels its practitioners to explicitly reflect upon these

11. Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Connected Histories: Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia," *Modern Asian Studies* 31 (1997), 735-762; Shalini Randeria, "Geteilte Geschichte und verwobene Moderne," in *Zukunftsentwürfe: Ideen für eine Kultur der Veränderung*, ed. Jörn Rüsen et al. (Frankfurt: Campus, 1999), 87-96; *Le travail et la nation: Histoire croisée de la France et de l'Allemagne*, ed. Bénédicte Zimmermann et al. (Paris: Maison des sciences de l'homme, 1999); Jürgen Osterhammel, "Transnationale Gesellschaftsgeschichte: Erweiterung oder Alternative?," *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 27 (2001), 464-479; Sebastian Conrad, "Doppelte Marginalisierung: Plädoyer für eine transnationale Perspektive auf die deutsche Geschichte," *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 28 (2002), 145-169; Emma Rothschild, "Globalization and the Return of History," *Foreign Policy* (Summer 1999), 106-116.

12. *Transferts: les relations interculturelles dans l'espace franco-allemand (XVIIIe et XIXe siècle)*, ed. Michel Espagne and Michael Werner (Paris: Editions Recherche sur les civilisations, 1988).

epistemological premises of their work, while these premises are frequently just implicit in other approaches. The new interest in transnational entanglements is most welcome and promising. However, it must not lead away from but should incorporate rigorous comparison, which remains particularly indispensable for historical studies with global reach if they do not want to become merely speculative or feuilletonistic.

But comparative historians should react to the old caveats and the new challenges in a productive way. Usually they will limit the number of cases they compare in order to take contexts sufficiently into consideration. More importantly, they can and should incorporate elements of the “entangled histories” approach into the comparative design of their research. Certainly, the act of comparison presupposes the analytical separation of the cases to be compared. But that does not mean ignoring or neglecting the interrelations between these cases (if and to the extent that they existed). Rather, such interrelations should become part of the comparative framework by analyzing them as factors that have led to similarities or differences, convergence or divergence between the cases one compares.

This has been done before. Take Alexander Gerschenkron’s classical comparison of European industrializations as an example. He, in a way, took European industrialization as a whole. At the same time, he compared its parts or segments, that is, industrialization processes within different countries. He gave much weight to the interrelations between them, for example, to the export and import of capital, labor, methods, and ideas as well as to processes of perception, imitation, transfer, and rejection between the industrializers in different European countries. And he showed that some of these interrelations contributed to more similarity while others led to important differences between national patterns of industrialization in Europe.¹³ Philipp Ther investigates the origins, programmes, organizations, and public support of opera houses in nineteenth-century East Central Europe and Germany. While analyzing their differences and similarities, he also shows how they perceived and influenced one another—all of them elements of a comprehensive culture of Central Europe.¹⁴

Many other examples could be given in order to show that it is both possible and desirable to treat historical phenomena as units of comparison and, at the same time, as components of a larger whole. Comparative history and the “entangled histories” approach are different modes of historical reconstruction. There is a tension between them, but they are not incompatible. One can try to analyze in comparative terms and tell a story, nevertheless. It is not necessary to choose between *histoire comparée* and *histoire croisée*. The aim is to combine them.

Friedrich-Meinecke-Institut
Berlin

13. A. Gerschenkron, *Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1962), 5-51, 353-364.

14. Philipp Ther, “Geschichte und Nation im Musiktheater Deutschlands und Ostmitteleuropas,” *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* 50 (2002), 119-140.