

IS COMPARATIVE HISTORY POSSIBLE?

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ABSTRACT

In recent years the trend toward comparative histories, frequently read in terms of transnational studies, has produced some remarkably exciting work. The prospect of the comparative is gaining broader appeal, a development we should applaud but at the same time begin to examine in a critical fashion. This essay lays out some of the problems involved in comparative work and suggests ways in which we might profitably utilize these potential snares in productive ways.

Comparative history has the potential to operate as a “bridge-builder,” encouraging inventive thinking that moves scholars beyond the familiar terrain of their training. In this respect, it encourages original and innovative ways of approaching historical work. But there are lessons to be learned and problems to be faced in managing a complex scholarly enterprise of this kind. Comparative work runs the risk of reproducing and consolidating older models of universalist history that assume universal standards. It further runs the risk of assuming rather than historicizing the idea of the nation as a fixed point of historical reference rather than seeing the nation itself as a site for historical scrutiny. In this paper, my goal is to lay out these problems alongside the palpable rewards of comparative work, and then to suggest how we might turn such problems to our advantage.

Keywords: comparative, transnational, global, nation-state, determinism, universalism, exceptionalism

More than half a century ago, the Mediterranean historian Fernand Braudel hoped that historians might one day do more than “study walled gardens.”² One point of departure out of the walled garden (albeit perhaps straight into the maze) is comparative history, for enclosure is clearly not at the forefront of comparative studies. I want to take up here what I see as the advantages of comparative work as well as to discuss some of its weaknesses, and I want to respond to the quite large body of criticism that the comparative approach has attracted.

It would not be unfair to say that Raymond Grew’s claim twenty years ago that comparative history is “more widely admired than consciously practiced” still

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2. Quoted in Thomas Benjamin, *The Atlantic World: Europeans, Africans, Indians and Their Shared History, 1400–1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), xxvii.

holds true.³ Comparative studies are the exception rather than the rule, not least because the practice can be quite strenuous. Still, it might be useful to begin by asking what comparative history actually is, and what, if anything, distinguishes it from world, global, and transnational histories, all of which can claim some stake in the comparative method. At its simplest, comparative history is of course nothing more than historical investigation that works at multiple sites (two or more) in order to tease out similarities and differences or, in the words of that favorite textbook title, “change and continuity,” and to test what the local might help reveal at the level of the general. For me it can as easily compare difference or similarity; neither needs to be the dominant note in comparative history.

The historical urge to compare has a long and storied history, of course, but in the first half of the twentieth century especially, it took some rather grandiose turns in the work of writers such as Arnold Toynbee, whose attempts to universalize and synthesize a grand narrative of “civilization” would come to symbolize all that was considered problematic about comparative history. No wonder that Magnus Mörner, Julia Fawaz de Vinuela, and John D. French claim that many historians associate the comparative approach with “facile analogies, pseudo-similarities, and questionable generalizations.”⁴

In later generations, the work of the sociologist Barrington Moore on political structures, and of the *Annales* school in France, was as ambitious as that of Toynbee, if a little more measured in its conclusions. Falling rather out of fashion in the late twentieth century, it nonetheless gave its name to a highly respected journal founded in 1958, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*. Journals, as we all know, love to change their names to reflect changing styles of knowledge, but for fifty-plus years, *CSSH* has remained stalwart in its championing of the importance of comparative studies. The journal describes itself as dedicated to investigating the “problems of recurrent patterning and change in human societies through time and in the contemporary world,” and to establishing “a working alliance among specialists in all branches of the social sciences and humanities.”⁵ Nevertheless, in his 1980 analysis of some 500 essays submitted to the journal, Grew found that most gave “full attention only to a single historical case.”⁶ Indeed, he claims that those where the comparison was “from several different societies” were not generally the most effective.

I raise this point because the chances are that if you identify as a comparativist, other scholars will assume that you are comparing countries, regions, or nations, that is, the leading assumption will be that you are indeed involved in comparing two or more different societies, and that the basis of the comparison is national identity. This is, and for obvious reasons, particularly the case for those of us who work in the more recent past.⁷ In a contribution to the *American Historical*

3. Raymond Grew, “The Case for Comparing Histories,” *American Historical Review* 85, no. 4 (1980), 768.

4. Magnus Mörner, Julia Fawaz de Vinuela, and John D. French, “Comparative Approaches to Latin American History,” *Latin American Research Review* 17, no. 3 (1982), 55.

5. <http://www.lsa.umich.edu/history/CSSH/about.html> (accessed February 22, 2010).

6. Grew, “The Case for Comparing Histories,” 775.

7. Heinz-Gerhard Haupt and Jürgen Kocka, “Comparative History: Methods, Aims, Problems,” in *Comparison and History: Europe in Cross-National Perspective*, ed. Deborah Cohen and Maura O’Connor (New York: Routledge, 2004), 31.

Review, Eliga Gould claims that “comparative approaches tend to accept national boundaries as fixed.”⁸ Micol Seigel likewise declares that “most comparisons are resolutely nation bound.”⁹ The assumption is certainly not unusual, although it forgets that much of the comparative work of the 1930s and 1940s was intended as a relativist challenge to national histories.¹⁰ And although there is a good deal of cross-national comparative work (of varying quality, inevitably), there is much other work besides that falls within a comparative framework. Nonetheless there is a stubborn and widespread belief that to be comparative is fundamentally to be cross-national. This persistence seems to me to speak more to the continued domination of the category of the nation as the “proper” form for historical study than it does to the work of many comparative historians working today, an effect imposed in large part (if not always consciously) by the persistent strength of the modern nation-state in contemporary historical practice, and perhaps by an impossible longing for enduring stable national identities against which flux can be measured.¹¹ It has more to do with the profession’s continued understanding of history as nationally organized than it does with what is actually going on in today’s comparative studies. Gould and Siegel’s articulation of comparative history, clearly contrary to Grew’s findings in the journal with which he has been so closely associated, erroneously assume nationally based comparisons as normative, as definitive of the field of comparative history, hinting at the idea that comparative history is old-fashioned, wedded to essentialist views of the nation as the originary focus and goal of history-writing. This is, I would contend, a myopic view of the nature—and even more, of the possibilities—of comparative history.

The tenacity both of national histories and of the association of comparative history with those national histories goes a long way toward explaining why comparative history still has, in some circles, a bad name. Certainly there has been comparative work that echoes late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century readings of racial and national character, and thus reflects a teleological evolutionism that crowned some nations as natural and rightful leaders, and others as weaker. Critics of comparative history thus see it as reinforcing rather than questioning national specificities.¹² But such work is relatively rare these days, and

8. Eliga H. Gould, “Entangled Histories, Entangled Worlds: The English-Speaking Atlantic as a Spanish Periphery,” *American Historical Review* 112, no. 3 (2007), 766. Susan Pedersen makes the same point that “comparative historians continue to use the nation-state as their primary unit of analysis” in “Comparative History and Women’s History: Explaining Convergence and Divergence,” in Cohen and O’Connor, eds., *Comparison and History*, 93. See, too, Ian Tyrrell, “American Exceptionalism in an Age of International History,” *American Historical Review* 96, no. 4 (1991), 1031–1055, esp. 1033; Bénédicte Zimmermann, Claude Didry, and Peter Wagner, *Le travail et la nation: histoire croisée de la France et de l’Allemagne* (Paris: Editions MSH, 1999); George M. Fredrickson, “From Exceptionalism to Variability: Recent Developments in Cross-National Comparative History,” *Journal of American History* 82, no. 2 (1995), 588ff.

9. Micol Seigel, “Beyond Compare: Comparative Method after the Transnational Turn,” *Radical History Review* 91 (Winter 2005), 65.

10. See, for example, William T. Rowe, “Owen Lattimore, Asia, and Comparative History,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 66, no. 3 (2007), 781.

11. Antoinette M. Burton, *After the Imperial Turn: Thinking With and Through the Nation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 7.

12. Michel Espagne, “Sur les limites du comparatisme en histoire culturelle,” *Genèses* 17 (1994), 256–279; Seigel, “Beyond Compare.”

its existence should not make all comparative history suspect. There is no reason why comparative history need be tied to such essentialist moorings, and indeed it may be that it can play a conscious role in undoing the dominance of national histories in the discipline.

I'll return to that hope shortly. First, though, I want to say something about another objection sometimes voiced about comparative history. Donald Kelley identifies a presentist tendency in the motives of comparativists, a desire to find "present wisdom in the infinite variety of historical experience." This, he claims, is an "essential" aim of comparativism.¹³ Although his claim may have validity for the eighteenth-century texts with which he begins his disquisition, and may even bear on the work of some of the more tendentious historical sociologists who have championed comparativism, I see little evidence in today's historical scholarship to bear out this claim. Where is the presentism in Lauren Benton's comparative studies of law, or Nikki Keddie's placing of Iran in a broader regional context?¹⁴ In Peter Baldwin's detailed study of social insurance across European states?¹⁵ In Maria Bucur's comparison of the subjectivities of memory in Transylvania?¹⁶ The short answer is: there is none. Kelley's critique may describe what drives the work of earlier generations of comparative historians, but has little traction in describing the kind of work that has dominated the field in the past couple of decades wherein we see a far more nuanced and carefully grounded set of historically realized treatments.

This presentist critique leads Kelley to suggest that comparative history is out of step with modern sensibilities because it cannot accommodate postmodern ideas of contingency.¹⁷ Postmodernism and comparative history, he contends, are incommensurable because the latter necessarily embraces the metahistorical categories rejected as dangerous fictions by postmodern scholars. Kelley quotes Pauline Rosenau to the effect that comparison is meaningless because "post-modern epistemology holds it impossible to define adequately the elements to be contrasted or likened."¹⁸ Christopher Bayly notes the postmodernist critique of comparative history as metanarratives "complicit with the very processes of imperialism and capitalism which they seek to describe."¹⁹ To avoid this, his own comparative project instead attempts to recover the decentered narratives of those without power.

13. Donald R. Kelley, "Grounds for Comparison," *Storia della Storiografia* 39 (2001), 3.

14. Lauren A. Benton, *A Search for Sovereignty: Law and Geography in European Empires, 1400–1900* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010); *idem*, *Law and Colonial Cultures: Legal Regimes in World History, 1400–1900* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Nikki R. Keddie, *Iran and the Muslim World: Resistance and Revolution* (New York: New York University Press, 1995).

15. Peter Baldwin, *The Politics of Social Solidarity: Class Bases of the European Welfare State, 1875–1975* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

16. Maria Bucur, "Remembering Wartime Violence in Twentieth-century Transylvania: A Few Thoughts on Comparative History," *Hungarian Studies* 21, no. 1/2 (2007), 101–110.

17. See, too, Seigel in this vein in "Beyond Compare," 62.

18. Kelley, "Grounds for Comparison," 12.

19. C. A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780–1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 8.

There is substance to a critique of transcendent categories and indeed to the slipperiness of defining them, without doubt, but as a critique of today's comparative history, both Kelley and Rosenau miss the mark. In the first instance, non-comparative historians influenced by the postmodern position point constantly to the instability of the categories with which they work, but nonetheless continue to employ those categories as markers, always in question, always unstable, but with material consequences for those affected by them. Thus, the continued use of seemingly metahistorical categories is by no means unique to comparativists. Second, the notion that comparative history works exclusively or even principally with the metahistorical simply doesn't reflect contemporary practice, which is carefully and locally grounded and embraces a whole slew of optics that are anything but metahistorical—the network, the exchange, the local, the collaborative, and more. These are employed in part as a bulwark against what is recognized as the shortcomings of some earlier versions of this field.

Beyond the criticisms of the very practice of comparative history, there is also a tendency to conflate world history, transnational or cross-national history, and comparative history, a tendency that I suspect is related to the fallacy that comparative history always works cross-nationally. A remarkable number of the advanced degree programs in these fields that have sprung up in the past few years glibly partner comparative with global or transnational studies.²⁰ Yet practitioners for the most part are skeptical of these couplings. For Heinz-Gerhard Haupt, transnational and comparative histories are complementary but distinctive. Katarina Friberg, Mary Hilson, and Natasha Vall share his view and see the two as sufficiently separate that they identify and label their approach as both transnational and comparative as a way to underscore the productive simultaneity of difference and complementarity.²¹ Although the connections between the two approaches Friberg and her collaborators adopt should be encouraged, I wonder if the elision between transnational and comparative does not continue to feed suspicions about comparative history as principally concerned with national comparisons. Much else is going on beyond national comparisons in comparative history, and even where the comparisons being made are across national borders, the intent and result is not to fix those borders ahistorically but rather to reveal what has shaped them at particular historical moments, both externally and internally. Transnational history has come in for its own share of criticism in recent years; Matthew Hilton and Rana Mitter remind us, albeit

20. Examples include a minor in comparative and global history at Rutgers University, the aim of which is “to introduce graduate students to the challenges and rewards of comparative and global approaches to history. Participants in the program are encouraged to think broadly and cross-culturally.” http://history.rutgers.edu/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=135&Itemid=169 (accessed February 23, 2010). The University of Arizona offers a comparative and world history minor pegged specifically as a teaching field. The MA in international, global, and comparative history at Georgetown is designed as training for “professional participation in the world of global affairs.” <http://history.georgetown.edu/programs/maprograms/MAGICprogram/> (accessed February 23, 2010).

21. Heinz-Gerhard Haupt, “Comparative History—A Contested Method,” *Historisk Tidskrift* 4 (December 2007), 697-716; Katarina Friberg, Mary Hilson, and Natasha Vall, “Reflections on Transnational Comparative History from an Anglo-Swedish Perspective,” *Historisk Tidskrift* 4 (December 2007), 717-737.

from a sympathetic stance, that although the “transnational approach uncovers new forms of agency . . . it must not forget those left behind from these new global interconnections and interchanges.²² The “national” in “transnational” has frequently been regarded with a good deal of suspicion, and like the comparative method works hard to counter these associations.

Gould and Sanjay Subrahmanyam skirt the connotations of both comparative and transnational methods—the one lauding instead “entangled,” the other “connected” histories. The concern of both these scholars is in large part spatial. The idea of a hemispherically connected Atlantic is at the heart of Gould’s concerns; comparative history’s alleged insistence on “distinct entities,” he argues, cannot make sense of asymmetrical interconnections between two empires.²³ For Gould, the comparative enterprise is concerned more with borders than with borderlands, yet the concept of the liminal, subversive, and cosmopolitan borderland surely derives its power from the existence of a border (however malleable) against which the borderland kicks. The binary opposition here is created not by the use of the comparative method, but rather by Gould’s determination to carve out a distinctive sphere for “entangled” history.

Subrahmanyam, seeking to identify “the great phenomena that united the globe in the early modern period,” aims to yoke together what he sees as issues artificially severed by a long-standing, invisible, and naturalized historical conservatism.²⁴ In an effort to link European millenarian traditions to those of Islam, he sets out, among other things, what he calls the “common salient elements of Islamic millenarianism . . . from North Africa and the Balkans into South Asia.”²⁵ Connected? No doubt about it, but surely also, if implicitly, comparative in the very recognition that, in his own words, “certain common traits and themes . . . have ranged geographically from Istanbul to India.”²⁶ His repeated invocation of commonality does not magically get beyond the comparative merely by promoting “connectedness.” The two share a lineage even if their aims may sometimes differ. He is asking much the same question that Ann Stoler probes when she wonders how “we acknowledge similar configurations of rule without undermining the historical specificity of their content.”²⁷ Subrahmanyam fails to demonstrate why a comparative rather than a connected approach would *not* reveal the synchronicity he finds between these various forms of millenarianism.²⁸ He rightly invokes “the discipline of context” as a vital tool in making these connections, but context is hardly unique to the methodology of connectedness, or indeed comparison. Exploring the differing local manifestations of global issues—the cornerstone of his position—simply does not constitute, or indeed call for, a new methodology: Subrahmanyam may be seeking, entirely reasonably, a finer-grained approach

22. Matthew Hilton and Rana Mitter, “Introduction,” *Past and Present* 218, Suppl. 8 (2013), 10.

23. Gould, “Entangled Histories, Entangled Worlds,” 765-766.

24. Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Turning the Stones Over: Sixteenth-century Millenarianism from the Tagus to the Ganges,” *Indian Economic Social History Review* 40, no. 2 (2003), 130.

25. *Ibid.*, 144.

26. *Ibid.*, 154.

27. Ann Laura Stoler, “Tense and Tender Ties: The Politics of Comparison in North American History and (Post) Colonial Studies,” *Journal of American History* 88, no. 3 (2001), 864.

28. Subrahmanyam, “Turning the Stones Over,” 159.

within the comparative project, but he is not, it seems to me, abandoning its overarching intent. Comparison is, I would argue, firmly embedded in his persuasive linking of millenarian activity across the globe. This is surely why Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann stress the links between comparative history and the connected/entangled varieties championed by Gould, Subrahmanyam, and others, calling them instead “a family of ‘relational’ approaches that, in the manner of comparative approaches and studies of transfers . . . examine the links between various historically constituted formations.”²⁹

These alternative approaches, then, despite their proclaimed rejection of the comparative, mirror what many a contemporary comparative historian argues. Glenda Sluga, for example, notes that we need always to remember that the nation is a construct, an imaginary with material consequences and with a traceable historical life.³⁰ It is also what Friberg, Hilson, and Vall more pragmatically counsel in their use of the idea of a local–national continuum, eschewing universal pronouncements in favor of an analysis that specifically measures the back-and-forth between the politics of the local (in their case at the city level) and of the national (for them, Sweden and Britain). This resembles what Nancy Green calls the “mezzo level” of comparison between “regions, cities, or industries.”³¹ Friberg, Hilson, and Vall are unequivocal about wanting “to undermine the link between history-writing and nation-building.”³² Not only does their approach break down monolithic readings of the state, it recognizes networks and exchanges between different levels of governance and different political cultures and expectations. They are unambiguous in their desire to create dialogue between their various case studies, something central to the comparative approach.

Approaches such as this, which emphasize history as a necessarily relational enterprise, help in the task Natalie Zemon Davis has described as “effacing fixed center points.”³³ Rather than fixing identities and entities, these forms of comparative history undercut incipient universalisms by stressing, on the one hand, shared ideas and narratives (the exchange and influence stressed by transnational approaches) and, on the other, by breaking assumed continuities, as Jürgen Kocka has argued (and which Subrahmanyam strives to achieve in his study of sixteenth-century millenarianism).³⁴ Whereas Seigel sees comparative history as directly in conflict with the discontinuity and rupture central to postmodern and postcolonial readings, Kocka’s more generous analysis offers a rather greater potential alliance than Seigel can imagine. There is no reason why comparative methods can-

29. Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, “Beyond Comparison: *Histoire Croisée* and the Challenge of Reflexivity,” *History and Theory* 45, no. 1 (2006), 31.

30. Glenda Sluga, “The Nation and the Comparative Imagination,” in Cohen and O’Connor, eds., *Comparison and History*, 103–114.

31. Nancy Green, “Forms of Comparison,” in Cohen and O’Connor, eds., *Comparison and History*, 47.

32. Friberg, Hilson, and Vall, “Reflections on Trans-national Comparative History,” 731.

33. Natalie Zemon Davis, “Decentering History: Local Stories and Cultural Crossings in a Global World,” *History and Theory* 50, no. 2 (2011), 191. Identifying history as relational does not imply, however, that all history is or ought to be comparative. On the contrary, I am arguing here that the comparative method, capacious though it can be, is a specific and definable methodology, and not in any way a synonym for history.

34. Jürgen Kocka “Comparison and Beyond,” *History and Theory* 42, no. 1 (2003), 41.

not seek to unsettle rather than to reconsolidate, and indeed the multiple contexts demanded by comparative study seem to me to pull in that direction.

It is perhaps no coincidence that in the past few years comparative historical studies have frequently found a home in the so-called new imperial history, for, as Eugene Irschick has argued, colonial societies were invariably dialogical.³⁵ Far from a top-down imposition, imperial governance necessarily involved dialogue at every level: between colonists and their “home” governments, between colonists and those they colonized, between different kinds of colonists, between those colonized, between governments.³⁶ One could, in all seriousness, meaningfully title a book *Colonial Chatter*. Anyone who has worked in modern colonial archives knows the sheer weight of bureaucratic dialogue colonial rule entailed. This is surely a crucial area in which the comparative—far from being at odds with postcolonial/postmodern insights—specifically demonstrates their value. The networks and exchanges of cross-cultural encounter already mentioned (and as teased out by scholars such as Alan Lester and Tony Ballantyne³⁷) are a good example of the crossings that comparative history can help reveal, what Stoler has called the “circuits of knowledge production, governing practices and . . . indirect as well as direct connections” in and of imperial rule. She calls explicitly for a comparative examination of these as the most productive means of understanding the contours of colonial rule.³⁸

Similar concerns prompted me, in my 2003 comparative study of prostitution regulation, to structure the book not as a set of individual case studies but thematically.³⁹ There is no systematic comparison in the book of how regulation worked in, or affected, the colonies under investigation. Rather, my emphasis was on understanding how four different arenas could nonetheless be similarly treated by a colonial authority that chose to *collapse* comparison and treat colonized peoples as a faceless mass. By reintroducing comparisons often made invisible by nineteenth-century imperialists, I hoped to say something new about colonial authority and about the management of sexuality.

Colonialism, certainly since the eighteenth century, might be said to consist of conquest, collaboration, resistance, appropriation, and borrowing, actions that would seem incompatible with one another and yet that palpably all operated at colonial sites. To see this simultaneity and make sense of it seems to me well facilitated by the comparative method, whether the comparison is across colonial sites, between metropole and periphery, or focused within a single colonial site and at the same time.⁴⁰ Focusing exclusively on any of the actions that make up

35. Eugene F. Irschick, *Dialogue and History: Constructing South India, 1795–1895* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

36. To argue otherwise, I would contend, promotes an overly monolithic view of colonial rule.

37. Alan Lester, *Imperial Networks: Creating Identities in Nineteenth-Century South Africa and Britain* (London; New York: Routledge, 2001); Tony Ballantyne, *Orientalism and Race: Aryanism in the British Empire* (Basingstoke, UK, and New York: Palgrave, 2002).

38. Stoler, “Tense and Tender Ties,” 831.

39. Philippa Levine, *Prostitution, Race, and Politics: Policing Venereal Disease in the British Empire* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003).

40. A point that I hope answers the concern raised by Eric Hinderaker and Rebecca Horn that comparative histories “tend to generalize primarily about the differences between European colonial powers rather than the differences between places being colonized.” See their “Territorial Crossings:

colonialism runs the danger of distortion, offering monocausal explanations of complex interactions; by working in a comparative framework we stand a better chance of understanding how seemingly conflicting activities fit together to produce and sustain a phenomenon that, never ironclad and always unstable, nonetheless often lasted for lengthy periods and produced in many instances enormous profit, even while it faced a perennial need to shore itself up, to seek tighter control, to stem protest, whether through collaboration or coercion. Imperial rule itself, even while it collapsed comparison in some arenas, made constant, sometimes desperate comparisons (Are we doing better than our rivals? Who among those whom we wish to rule will serve in what capacity? What do they have that we want? What do they have that we don't have?). Why would we not heed this example but turn it to a different interpretive use, to illuminate the warp and weft of imperial rule?

Much like Friberg *et al.*'s dynamic relationship between the local and the national as an ideal medium for comparative work, so in the context of understanding imperialism we might more fruitfully explore contact across and between sites, criss-crossing between the local and the metropolitan, seeking signs of reciprocity and influence alongside similarity and difference. Such work is underway in a number of areas. Thomas Metcalf's recent work on the Indian Ocean, for example, explores the ways in which India, itself under British rule, operated as a center of colonial power, furnishing laborers, soldiers, and police officers for African and Asian colonies under British rule.⁴¹ His remapping of empire, emphasizing trans-colonial interactions and webs, and breaking down the idea of a single central ruling site, uses comparative methods to de-center, quite literally, how we view imperial rule. If we turn to another British colony, the attempts at local colonization in the Pacific by Australia clearly disrupt an overly homogeneous, single-site reading of colonial authority. Both Queensland in the late nineteenth century, and the newly federated Australia early in the twentieth century, set their sights on acquiring local colonies to create a broad Pacific empire emanating not from the so-called "mother country" but more locally. In order to understand these attempts to expand Australian influence, we need a comparative framework that looks at how these attempts were managed and asks if other such moves were being made elsewhere, as well as how they were received in a variety of locations. Likewise the adoption of a "trans-Tasman" approach that relates the histories of Australia and New Zealand emphasizes regional similarities in an attempt to move beyond wholly national narratives.⁴² As Raelene Francis and Melanie Nolan assert, "parallel developments were

Histories and Historiographies of the Early Americas," *William and Mary Quarterly* 67, no. 3 (2010), 413.

41. Thomas R. Metcalf, *Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean Arena, 1860–1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

42. Raelene Francis and Melanie Nolan, "Gender and the Trans-Tasman World of Labour: Transnational and Comparative Histories," *Labour History* 95 (2008), 25–42; *Common Cause: Essays in Australian and New Zealand Labour History*, ed. Eric Fry (Sydney: Allen & Unwin; Wellington: Port Nicholson Press, 1986); Murray McCaskill, "The Tasman Connection: Aspects of Australian-New Zealand Relations," *Australian Geographical Studies* 20, no. 1 (1982), 3–23; Melanie Nolan, "Pacific Currents in the Tasman: Comparative and Transnational Perspectives on New Zealand Labour History," *Labour History* 88 (2005), 233–241.

neither simply coincidental nor determined by similar economies, but derived, in part at least, from a sharing of people and ideas across national boundaries.”⁴³ Instances such as these have generally been revealed precisely through comparative work, such as that undertaken by Metcalf tracking Indians as they moved across the globe, comparing their position in different places and occupations, to produce a unified argument about a more layered and nuanced colonialism operating at many levels and in many places.

Recent work that brings together metropole and colony also uses a comparative structure to puncture the top-down binary that until fairly recently dominated imperial history.⁴⁴ Christopher Bayly’s *Imperial Meridian*,⁴⁵ in which he ties together domestic and imperial events, is an early example of such work. Catherine Hall’s insistence that we cannot “make sense of empire either directly or indirectly through a binary lens” is important here, pointing helpfully toward a multiply nuanced view in which there is no single outflow of power, no single colonial “mind” or reaction.⁴⁶ Although her influential book, *Civilising Subjects*, does not declare itself a comparative project, its attention to a range of sites—Jamaica and Birmingham most obviously, but also Australia, New Zealand, and a variety of Caribbean locations—and their effect on one another draws heavily on a comparative framework.⁴⁷

In all these instances what we’re seeing is a comparative approach in which the emphasis is what we might call propositional, that is, these are comparisons *of* rather than comparisons *to*. The latter (comparison *to*) sets up a hierarchy with the lead comparison as the normative entity against which something else will be compared. This is the problem with a thesis such as Alexander Gerschenkron’s on “economic backwardness” where the presupposition of a normative pattern of economic advance very easily classifies divergence from that norm as evidence of backwardness.⁴⁸ In Gerschenkron’s vision, motion is a key factor; progress is synonymous with advancement, whereas stasis (or more properly what he perceives as stasis) defines backwardness. Subrahmanyam’s point that continuity and change do not always have to be antonyms is useful here in revealing the limitations built into this particular mode of comparison.⁴⁹

A comparative approach such as that which Hall and Bayly adopt, and which works through multiplicities rather than with a single variable, can help us push past overly simple and frequently binary readings of power to more complex

43. Frances and Nolan, “Gender and the Trans-Tasman World of Labour,” 29.

44. In other words, far from being an old-fashioned remnant, comparative history has been one among the sub-fields that has prodded imperial history into a more inclusive and less top-down approach.

45. C. A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World 1780–1830* (London: Routledge, 1989).

46. Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830–1867* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 616.

47. Mörner *et al.* provide a long list of successful comparative work in Latin American history in their “Comparative Approaches to Latin American History,” 66–71. See, too, Seigel’s fully critical discussion of the common comparison of race in the US and Brazil in “Beyond Compare,” 67.

48. Alexander Gerschenkron, *Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective: A Book of Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1962).

49. Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Connected Histories: Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia,” *Modern Asian Studies* 31, no. 3 (1997), 759.

and rewarding analyses. This is neither an easy route nor one devoid of pitfalls. The historical project is always full of potential dangers, the product variously of over-simplification, hubristic over-interpretation, and more. The problems that seem to me likeliest to afflict the comparative approach (but are by no means unique to it) are determinism, universalism, and exceptionalism.

The temptations of determinism have assuredly lessened in recent years, at least among historians who are generally uncomfortable in assigning explanatory powers to grand overweening laws and designs. Yet we see its lingering effects in works that posit universal human behaviors or motives. Fernand Braudel, Marc Bloch, William McNeill, and others have understood universality to highlight the historical significance of elements such as climate and terrain, concrete and material as well as describable phenomena, rather than applying the term directly to the behavior of individuals or to human emotions. Although we might question how they then move from empirical data to human motivation and behavior, theirs is nonetheless a claim to universalism that accommodates contingency and difference. Claims to universalism that make what are in essence psychological claims seem to me a more egregious malpractice, one that a clumsy comparative history could encourage by conflating events or behaviors in a simplistic way. This is what I think of as the “human nature” school of history. Such work uses comparative history in a fundamentally ahistorical way to draw invalid links based on assumptions about human (and by extension, sometimes national) character. These are the contemporary analogues to Spengler and Toynbee, but their existence is surely not reason enough to avoid comparison. Nor is another of the universalist problems, what we might call the “Platonic danger” that Peter Baldwin and Frederick Cooper both warn against, the problem of “mistaking ideal types for historical realities.”⁵⁰

Kelley counsels that to avoid such problems comparative history should limit itself to “issues which are arguably common to various cultures.” His list is provocative: “gender, family succession, rites of birth and death, suicide, trade, technology, property, slavery, racism, imperialism, revolution [and] science.”⁵¹ There is much here to worry me if, as I take it to be, these are the human activities he would claim are universal. Why, for example, separate suicide from other forms of death? Does that not assume certain attitudes about death that have arisen mainly through religion, which is, you may have noticed, conspicuously absent from his roster of universal human traits? In what way can the concept of property be said to be universal? To my ears, the list reflects both particular times and spaces and is anything but universal. I certainly would not recommend it as a basis for comparative studies. Instead, I favor the advice of John E. Wills, Jr., who wants us to “value many very different forms of human flourishing” and not to “take any one as the standard by which others are to be measured.”⁵² I’m not

50. Frederick Cooper, “Review: Race, Ideology, and the Perils of Comparative History,” *American Historical Review* 101, no. 4 (October 1996), 1135. See, too, Peter Baldwin, “Comparing and Generalizing: Why All History is Comparative, Yet No History is Sociology,” in Cohen and O’Connor, eds., *Comparison and History*.

51. Kelley, “Grounds for Comparison,” 16.

52. John E. Wills Jr., “Putnam, Dennett, and Others: Philosophical Resources for the World Historian,” *Journal of World History* 20, no. 4 (2009), 499.

sure that Kelley has not, in some of the activities in his list, fallen prey to what Wills wisely warns us against.

At the opposite end of the spectrum to the problem of universalism is that of exceptionalism. Again it is not a problem unique to comparative work. It is a prevalent historical problem, just as likely to exist in national as in comparative histories. In my own field of British history, the exceptionalist tendency is strong enough and of sufficiently long standing to have produced one of the most enduring critiques of teleological exceptionalism, Herbert Butterfield's 1931 *The Whig Interpretation of History*, which deftly revealed the celebratory underpinnings in histories of the British political process. Robert Gregg tackles this same problem in his work on race and class in the United States and South Africa. Acknowledging the dangers of a comparative history blind to the problems of essentialism, he argues that an imperial framework can help dissolve the argument of American exceptionalism by offering a larger canvas on which to understand US history.⁵³ For Gregg, shifting to an imperial focus recalibrates how he is able to understand labor, race, class, and gender divisions at his chosen sites. The comparative, as Gregg formulates it, is not a simple description likely to embody exceptionalism, but a framing of shared categories broken open to defy exceptionalism.⁵⁴

Butterfield's warnings have palpably not been heeded by Niall Ferguson, whose claim that British imperialism was a kinder, gentler variety than that practiced by other nations manages to combine a gleeful exceptionalism with national essentialism.⁵⁵ The decent British may have made a mistake or two along the way, Ferguson tells us, but not by comparison with horrid King Leopold or the cruel Japanese. Seductively simple, reassuring if one happens to be British or an Anglophile, Ferguson's work is a textbook case of how comparative history can flatten, smooth, and reduce history to allow for streamlined and seemingly plausible explanations. This is a case of "comparison *to*" rather than "comparison *of*" with a vengeance.

Just as exceptionalism can, as in Ferguson's case, humanize (the British Empire read as a benign entity), it can also serve to demonize (Hitler being perhaps the most over-wrought example). It can also, as James Cronin has pointed out, become a study in "peculiarities."⁵⁶ History of this ilk once more reifies the nation-state: the civilized British, the militaristic Germans, the enterprising Americans, and so on. Exceptionalism necessarily emphasizes difference and will thus at some level invoke a celebratory superiority.

Comparative history does not, however, have to conform to this model, no more so than any other historical method or device. Fredrickson pointed out a few years ago that there are fine examples of nonexceptionalist comparative

53. Robert Gregg, *Inside Out, Outside In: Essays in Comparative History* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000); see especially 25, but also 154-155.

54. For a stimulating study of exceptionalism in a non-Western context, see Janaki Nair, "Beyond Exceptionalism: South India and the Modern Historical Imagination," *Indian Economic Social History Review* 43, no. 3 (2006), 323-347.

55. Niall Ferguson, *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2003).

56. James E. Cronin, "Neither Exceptional nor Peculiar: Towards the Comparative Study of Labor in Advanced Society," *International Review of Social History* 38, no. 1 (1993), 64.

work out there that do not privilege one among their case studies.⁵⁷ We might usefully recall Baldwin's contention that many historians pose questions that are comparative but then fail to adopt a comparative approach to answer them.⁵⁸ This endorses Grew's point that interest in change over time "is a commitment to comparison."⁵⁹ If that's so—and I think it is—our responsibility is surely to seek ways to get this right rather than to avoid comparisons. History is about interactions—between peoples and cultures, between values, between ecologies and environments—and the comparative is one of the key ways in which we make sense of such interactions, by exploring the very "between-ness" at work here. The question for me, then, is not whether but how: how to get it right, how to recognize a between-ness that matters, how to think about comparative work such that we avoid those bad -isms and over-simplifications that lead the comparison to lose its force. Sluga would add to my plea for "between-ness" the practice of comparing "across" and "in spite of," and these, too, are a good way forward.⁶⁰

Exercising the caution necessary to avoid these problems should not, though, render us conservative in the comparisons we do think workable. I want to use comparative work to challenge the dominance of national narratives and of Western modes—which continue to characterize a tremendous amount of the history written today, whether for professional or popular consumption. In an essay on the politics of intimacy in different modern empires, Stoler claims that the perceived "incommensurabilities between North American empire and European colonial history diminish when the intimacies of empire are at center stage."⁶¹ Stoler's ambitious project reads the state through the quotidian intimacies within families and between peoples. There is here a deliberate comparison of state formations routinely seen as too diverse to bear the weight of comparison. Yet Stoler finds not so much a simple common ground as the traces of fracture, instability, and even resistance, just those elements that critics have argued are erased through comparison. Sexuality (oddly absent from Kelley's list of universal human modes) is a topic where a comparative approach can really open up possibilities for exploring not just the management and regulation of human sexuality but the meaning of bodies, the assigning of gender status, and the consequences of reproduction. This is what Kathryn Kish Sklar has in mind when she argues that "comparisons help us to identify crucial causal paradigms of women's historical agency—paradigms that may not be visible in any other way."⁶²

Work of this sort requires a serious commitment to interdisciplinarity. Philip Howell's call, in a fine work on the management of sexuality, for "military history integrated within cultural history" mirrors my earlier plea for building bridges between the narrative mode of political history and the analytical mode

57. Fredrickson, "From Exceptionalism to Variability," 595.

58. Baldwin, "Comparing and Generalizing," in Cohen and O'Connor, eds., *Comparison and History*, 5.

59. Grew, "The Case for Comparing Histories," 768.

60. Sluga, in Cohen and O'Connor, eds., *Comparison and History*, 111.

61. Stoler, "Tense and Tender Ties," 865.

62. Kathryn Kish Sklar, "A Call for Comparisons," *American Historical Review* 95, no. 4 (1990), 1114.

of cultural and gender history.⁶³ Howell, moreover, is writing as a geographer, making his a truly substantial claim to interdisciplinary work. But these enjoinders are not only interdisciplinary, they are also at base comparative, for they are asking us to compare the findings of differently situated modalities, the interplay between the seemingly oppositional but intimately (if not always explicitly) connected spheres of the private and the public. This is not to suggest that these spheres exist in some corporeal fashion, or that they have always existed—or indeed that their effect is constant or easily measurable. On the contrary, it is their very evanescence, their inconsistency and representational nature that I wish to highlight. And it seems to me that comparative methods may well be the best shot we have at this, allowing us to measure who, where, and in what ways notions of public and private effectively shaped and regulated peoples' sexualities and lives, and how these sexualities in turn influenced the public sphere. Comparison, then, is not limited to contrast: its function in instances like this is also in querying the contrast, in highlighting congruence, and asking what and who is invested in keeping these elements politically and intellectually apart. This approach also allows us to compare, as Stoler asks us to do, what is often regarded as incomparable or incommensurable, for it dislodges through critical investigation the fixity of binary status. This is not to suggest that any and all comparison is valid, but more to propose that even comparative history might have its Braudelian "walled gardens" that prevent us from making potentially fruitful radical comparisons.

Impressively subtle in its approach is Bucur's work on memory in central Europe. Focused on a comparison of subjectivities, the basis of Bucur's comparison is threefold: she looks at particular historical moments, and at how different generations and different ethnic groups articulate their relationship to them. Bucur is explicit that for her comparative history offers a corrective to single-group or nation studies that tend to reify. This is clearly a markedly different approach to the comparative than that favored by earlier generations. It is not cross-national; its principal focus is cultural; and it claims for the comparative approach a cohering relativism produced from *within* the communities she discusses.⁶⁴

Bucur's exemplary approach is suggestive and offers new ways to consider the value of the comparative framework. In formulations such as this there is no grand law to obey and thus no universalizing; no hierarchy, and thus no exceptionalizing; and only a secondary attention to nationality, thinking instead across populations. Bucur's work demonstrates the fruitfulness of a comparative approach removed from the national comparisons still too often assumed to be at its core.

As my discussions of empire have suggested, I don't prescribe that we avoid national comparisons altogether, simply that we recognize their dangers and resist the notion that they define comparative history fully. What I would like to see is what we might call imaginings beyond the nation, as a way to keep active

63. Philip Howell, *Geographies of Regulation: Policing Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century Britain and the Empire* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 13; Philippa Levine, "Rereading the 1890s: Venereal Disease as 'Constitutional Crisis' in Britain and British India," *Journal of Asian Studies* 55, no. 3 (1996), 585-612.

64. Bucur, "Remembering Wartime Violence," 102.

the idea of the historical constructedness of the nation, and because we also need to remember that there are legitimate and important comparisons to be made that do not—and do not need to—invoke the nation.

In a collection I co-edited with Alison Bashford, we set out, with the help of some thirty-six experts in the field, to explore globally the topic of eugenics, a phenomenon that, given its immense popularity for a large chunk of the twentieth century, lends itself well to comparative considerations. Eugenics—sometimes defined as the science of good breeding—was an extraordinarily protean idea, assuming markedly different forms in different locations and among different constituencies. It appealed to those on the left and on the right. In some regions its focus was more on rural populations (often the case in the United States, an enthusiastic proponent of eugenic policies); in others, such as the United Kingdom, the focus was on the urban residuum. In countries as diverse as Iran, Brazil, France, and the Soviet Union its basic principles were Lamarckian; elsewhere a strictly Mendelian view dominated. Although Latin American countries generally used eugenic ideas to promote puériculture (better breeding), many other countries (Sweden, Germany, the United States) emphasized sterilization, the prevention of breeding. In India and Hong Kong, eugenics was practically coterminous with birth control, whereas elsewhere the control of sexuality (marriage laws, the incarceration of wayward adolescent girls, and so on) dominated.

It's an extraordinarily rich and challenging canvas: how else to make broad sense of this extraordinary set of ideas than via comparison? For the collection, we solicited a series of local studies (eugenics in Kenya, in Brazil, in Australia, and so on) and about a dozen themed chapters that highlighted the various critical threads running through the topic: evolution, race, gender, birth and population control, disability, and more. The choice was dictated by our sense that the local and the broader themes were of equal importance and that the cross-hatching that would occur if they were placed side by side would reveal a great deal about a topic of some considerable and long-standing importance. Our aim was to represent eugenics, as we claim in our introduction, as “both a transnational phenomenon of the modern period where particular themes are recognizable in otherwise vastly different locations and as place-bound histories of colonies, nations, and regions.”⁶⁵

In a retrospective essay looking back at fifty years of *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Grew noted rather ruefully that the journal staff found that explaining what they meant by the term “comparative” “was a constant challenge [to get beyond] something more than accounts of phenomena that occurred in two places.”⁶⁶ He goes on to laud the prospect of work that operates in multiple contexts, something that we hope our volume on eugenics with its different emphases, its cross-referencing, and its productive tension between the general and particular achieves. Pushing the idea of dialogue further, then, works like this offer an invitation to work locally and comparatively at the same time. On the

65. *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics*, ed. Alison Bashford and Philippa Levine (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

66. Raymond Grew, “On the Society and History of CSSH,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 50, no. 1 (2008), 12.

scale of our eugenics venture, such a task will clearly require collaborative effort, but there are also many projects where this might be achievable at a smaller and more individualized level.

Stoler hopes to find “unexpected points of congruence and similarities of discourse in seemingly disparate sites” in her work on intimacy.⁶⁷ One might equally reverse the proposition and welcome the discovery of incongruence in seemingly similar sites. Either way, the advice of Friberg *et al.* to weave together local and national (and I would add global) makes good sense. In an anthropological study of the marketing of the McDonald’s hamburger brand throughout Asia, James Watson found diverse local appropriations in how the burgers were eaten, who patronized the restaurants, and what status McDonald’s enjoyed within the local culture. These local differences were striking, but did not meaningfully disrupt the corporate look of the facilities; much remained unchanged even as local adaptations remained obdurately uninterested in following the Western corporate model.⁶⁸ This is what Laura Adams describes as local forms of global culture, and I would argue that, for the historian, they offer a good way into the pleasures and treasures that a comparative approach can offer.⁶⁹ These are not absolute differences, but quirky variants, syncretic modes that defy easy categorization. Far from forcing them into rigid categories, the comparative approach carefully handled can achieve exactly the opposite—allowing, revealing, thinking through these differences to say something that, while it acknowledges the local, speaks to a broader type of observation: in Friberg *et al.*’s words, using comparative history less as a systematic method à la Marc Bloch than as a heuristic device.⁷⁰ Comparative history is, of course, an artifact, constructed by the historian to illuminate particular points. But is this significantly different in histories that don’t make comparisons? Are they less “constructed” simply because they focus on one process, or place, or institution? Of course not.

Taking up comparative work is—and should be—a daunting task. It requires prodigious work sometimes across languages or cultures. It requires imagination and flexibility. It takes a long time—which in today’s corporate academic world earns you few friends in high places. But, as Bucur delightfully concludes, “compare we must.”⁷¹ Her simple statement reminds us that we compare whether we do so consciously or not; many of the best minds that have pondered the problems of comparative history have pointed that out. Following Bucur I want to suggest that the trick lies in normalizing the comparative, claiming it as a heuristic instrument in the standard historical toolbox, not something to be feared or shunned, but a tool to be utilized—like everything else in that same toolbox—with care and sensitivity.

67. Stoler, “Tense and Tender Ties,” 847.

68. James L. Watson, *Golden Arches East: McDonald’s in East Asia*, 2nd ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006). See, too, the comments in the “From the Editors” introduction, “Models, Margins, and Imperial Entanglements,” *Kritika* 12, no. 2 (2011), esp. 279 on local adaptation and the comparative.

69. Laura L. Adams, “Globalization, Universalism, and Cultural Form,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 50, no. 3 (2008), 616.

70. Friberg, Hilson, and Vall, “Reflections on Trans-national Comparative History,” 731.

71. Bucur, “Remembering Wartime Violence,” 103.

Is, then, comparative history possible? I like to think that not only is it possible, it might even be desirable, reformulated to challenge the very fixities some of its earlier manifestations failed to critique. Rejecting a comparative approach because it has been used poorly seems to me a reductive and unproductive stance, akin to arguing that we abandon anthropology because its origins are mired in colonialism and racism. Although we need not to forget or obscure that facet, I do not see it as sufficient reason to shun a potentially fruitful field. I would urge rather that we remake comparative history through an attentiveness to the interplay of local and global, to the meaning of rupture as well as commonality, and always with an eye to the teleologies of essentialism that plague not just comparative but all forms of historical endeavor. After all, if imperial history could be so successfully reimagined under the influence of postcolonialism and the “cultural turn,” then why not the comparative method?

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