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# Comparative history – a contested method

By Heinz-Gerhard Haupt

All historians compare. They compare an earlier event to a later one, a general feature to a specific one; they look comparatively at different geographic areas, at different epochs. Without comparison, almost no historical study can move forward. However, while this kind of comparison is mostly implicit, guided by common sense, it is not integrated in a conscious, methodological operation. Comparative history is more demanding and self-reflective: it is based on a clear, methodological approach, the logic of comparison and a reflection about the goals and the units of comparison.<sup>1</sup>

This approach is of recent origin in historiography. In comparison with other disciplines, such as comparative literature, comparative law or comparative religious science, history is a latecomer. The other comparative disciplines developed and began expanding in the nineteenth century, and today they have their place in the canon of literature, law and religious science.<sup>2</sup> It was only after the catastrophe of World War I that historians became aware that history written in a national framework had to be overcome. This kind of historical writing, as well as the engagement of historians in their countries, was perceived in some parts of the international academic community as being responsible for the antagonism among peoples, the outburst of military conflicts and the deaths of millions of soldiers. The Belgian historian Henri Pirenne first formulated this opinion, arguing in favor of comparison as a way of overcoming narrow, nationalist historiography. Marc Bloch took

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1. H. G. Haupt, "Historische Komparatistik in der internationalen Geschichtsschreibung", in Gunilla Budde *et al.* (eds.), *Transnationale Geschichte: Themen, Tendenzen und Theorien*, Göttingen 2006, pp. 137–149; H. G. Haupt & Jürgen Kocka, *Geschichte und Vergleich: Ansätze und Ergebnisse international vergleichender Geschichtsschreibung*, Frankfurt am Main 1996.

2. Jürgen Schriewer, "Problemdimensionen sozialwissenschaftlicher Komparatistik", in Hartmut Kaelble & Jürgen Schriewer (eds.), *Vergleich und Transfer: Komparatistik in den Sozial-, Geschichts- und Kulturwissenschaften*, Frankfurt am Main & New York 2003, pp. 9–54.

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up the argument and went further in his plea for a comparative history of Europe when he affirmed: "La méthode comparative peut beaucoup: je tiens sa généralisation et son perfectionnement pour une des nécessités les plus pressantes qui s'imposent aujourd'hui aux études historiques."<sup>3</sup> He was joined by the German historian Otto Hintze, who emphasized that comparison may serve as a way to discover either similarities or differences.<sup>4</sup> However, in the inter-war period, this approach to history was far from being widely accepted. It was reduced to a marginal existence. Even the three proponents of this approach did not excel where broad empirical comparative work was concerned; however, Bloch's book on European feudalism may be seen as an important step in this direction.<sup>5</sup>

### *Diffusion of the comparative method*

After World War II, comparison was used during the 1960s by economic historians, as well as by demographers in their specific fields. Comparative methods have also been used in the debate on industrialization patterns and on the model of a European family.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, as a broader way of understanding history, the method was developed mainly by historical sociologists. In his study on the social origins of dictatorship and democracy, Barrington Moore was one of the first to demonstrate the potential of comparison for historical analysis as he compared six countries around the world: Germany and France, Great Britain and Russia and China and Japan. His aim was to understand those social conditions in the countryside under which structures developed democratic revolutions, fascist reactions or peasant revolu-

3. Marc Bloch, "Pour une histoire comparée des sociétés européennes", in *Mélanges historiques*, 1, Paris 1963, pp. 16–40; also cf. A. Olin Hill & B. Hill, "Marc Bloch and comparative history", *American historical review* 85, 1980, pp. 829–884; D. Romagnoli, "La comparazione nell'opera di Marc Bloch: pratica e teoria", in P. Rossi (ed.), *La storia comparata: approcci e prospettive*, Milan 1987, pp. 110–125; W. J. Sewell, "Marc Bloch and the logic of comparative history", *History and theory* 6:2, 1967, pp. 208–218; H. Atsma & A. Burguière (eds.), *Marc Bloch aujourd'hui: histoire comparée et sciences sociales*, Paris 1990. For the context after the First World War cf. B. Schroeder-Gudehuis, *Les Scientifiques et la paix: la communauté scientifique internationale au cours des années 20*, Montreal 1978.

4. Otto Hintze, "Soziologische und geschichtliche Staatsauffassung", in *Soziologie und Geschichte: gesammelte Abhandlungen*, 2, ed. by G. Oestreich, Göttingen 1964, p. 251. For the context cf. S. Haas, *Historische Kulturforschung in Deutschland 1880–1930*, Cologne, Weimar & Vienna 1994.

5. E. Patlagean, "Europe, seigneurie, féodalité. Marc Bloch et les limites orientales d'un espace de comparaison", in Atsma & Burguière (eds.) 1990, pp. 279–298.

6. P. O'Brien, "Do we have a typology for the study of European Industrialization in the XIX th century?", *Journal of European economic history* 15, 1986, pp. 291–334; J. Ehmer, "Heiratsverhalten und sozioökonomische Strukturen: England und Mitteleuropa im Vergleich", in: Haupt & Kocka (eds.) 1996, pp. 181–206.

tions.<sup>7</sup> His approach was taken up by other social scientists, including Jack Goldstone, Theda Skocpol and Charles Tilly, who were all were interested in the history of revolution, as well as in social movements and conflicts.<sup>8</sup>

Among historians in different European countries, the reception to this approach, which reached its peak in the 1970s and 1980s, differed considerably. Generally, the attraction of comparative history was greater in academic communities, in which history developed strong ties with other social sciences, and in historiographies, in which a more analytical than narrative tradition of historical research predominated. For these reasons, comparison found more defenders in Germany, Austria, the Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries than it did in France, Great Britain, Italy and Spain. It was more developed in the field of contemporary history than in medieval or early modern history and it was aimed more at comparing geographic units than time periods. Until today, historians who used comparison were a minority in all of European as well as American historiography.<sup>9</sup>

However, this minority has demonstrated that comparison could be used in very different fields of historical knowledge and curiosity: in social and political history, the history of institutions and of knowledge, the history of rituals and monuments, the history of nationalism, the history of concepts and the history of criminality.<sup>10</sup> The flexibility of the method of comparison

7. B. Moore, *Social origins of dictatorship and democracy: lord and peasant in the making of the modern world*, Boston 1966.

8. C. Tilly, *The rebellious century, 1830–1930*, Cambridge 1975; T. Skocpol, *States and social revolutions: a comparative analysis of France, Russia and China*, Cambridge 1979; J. A. Goldstone, "The comparative and historical study of revolutions", *Annual review of sociology* 8, 1982, pp. 187–207; also cf. for these approaches P. Baldwin, "Comparing and generalizing: why all history is comparative, yet no history is sociology", in D. Cohen & M. O'Connor (eds.), *Comparison and history: Europe in cross-national perspective*, New York 2004, pp. 1–22.

9. H. Kaelble, "Vergleichende Sozialgeschichte des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts: Forschungen europäischer Historiker", in Haupt & Kocka (eds.) 1996, pp. 91–130.

10. Cf. for instance the impressive number of comparative studies: G. Lingelbach, *Klio macht Karriere: die Institutionalisierung der Geschichtswissenschaft in Frankreich und den USA in der zweiten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts*, Göttingen 2003; J. Leonhard, *Liberalismus: zur historischen Semantik eines europäischen Deutungsmusters*, München 2001; J. Connelly, *Captive university: the sovietization of East Germany, Czech and Polish higher education, 1945–1956*, Chapel Hill 2000; S. O. Müller, *Die Nation als Waffe und Vorstellung: Nationalismus in Deutschland und Großbritannien im Ersten Weltkrieg*, Göttingen 2002; A. Reimann, *Der große Krieg der Sprachen: Untersuchungen zur historischen Semantik in Deutschland und England zur Zeit des Ersten Weltkrieges*, Essen 2000; M. Föllmer, *Die Verteidigung der bürgerlichen Nation: industrielle und hohe Beamte in Deutschland und Frankreich 1900–1930*, Göttingen 2002; T. Kroll, *Kommunistische Intellektuelle in Westeuropa: Frankreich, Österreich, Italien und Großbritannien im Vergleich (1945–1956)*, Köln 2007; H. Rausch, *Kultfigur und Nation: Öffentliche Denkmäler in Paris, Berlin und London 1848–1914*, München 2006.

is impressive. It consists in looking beyond the national framework and in situating specific problems, constellations or structures in at least two different contexts, which are linked by a common problematic, in most cases the *tertium comparationis*. In comparison, historians try to better characterize the two phenomena being compared and to look at similarities and differences in causal analysis.

One of the methodological advantages of comparison is that it makes explicit what is mostly implicit in broader historical syntheses of European or world history.<sup>11</sup> As a kind of historical experiment, it has to formulate clear, starting hypotheses, indicate the criteria of the choice of case studies and units, develop the logic of comparison and discuss the causalities. In doing so it contributes to the elucidation of the principles of historical narration. If scholars compare the French, Russian and Chinese revolutions, in which different revolutionary actors are present – as Theda Skocpol is doing – it is likely that they would stress the importance of state bureaucracies. If Charles Tilly questions the constant elements of collective violence in Western Europe and will not reduce them to the actors and their methods, it is clear that he will refer to the state building process and favor a more functionalist approach. What distinguishes comparative methods from studies that compare without an explicit method is the fact that the comparative methods are clear and transparent and that the different methodical considerations are made explicit. This open discussion of methodology also makes comparative historians aware of the problems that asymmetric, international comparisons present.<sup>12</sup> It has been emphasized that the way in which Max Weber compared European modernity to that of Japan, for instance, was a way of appropriating non-European experiences in order to establish a European ideal type. The growing debate about how to expand comparison beyond Europe is questioning this method and asking – as Monika Junea and Margrit Pernau put it: "Do European concepts then become a yardstick for measuring societies and cultures across time and space?" The result of this approach might be that "the alien gets completely subsumed within the familiar and therefore

11. Cf. B. Stuchey & E. Fuchs (eds.), *Writing world history 1800–2000*, Oxford 2005; H. G. Haupt, "Die Geschichte Europas als vergleichende Geschichtsschreibung", *Comparativ* 14:3, 2004, pp. 83–97.

12. For the different ways of doing asymmetric comparison cf. J. Kocka, "Asymmetric historical comparison: the case of the German Sonderweg", *History and theory* 38, 1999, pp. 40–50; J. Mathes, "The operation called 'Vergleichen'", in J. Mathes (ed.), *Zwischen den Kulturen? Die Sozialwissenschaften vor dem Problem des Kulturvergleichs*, Göttingen 1992, pp. 75–99; S. Kalberg, *Max Weber's comparative-historical sociology*, Cambridge 1994.

loses its identity” or that concepts serve ”to fix the alien once and for all in approachable alterity”.<sup>13</sup>

By its particularities, the comparative method distances itself from a view of historic individualities very much defended in the historicist tradition. Its aim is not necessarily to demonstrate historical individualities, even though a successful application of comparative methods has taken place in the debate about national particularities. In the context of the German discussion as to whether a specific way of modernization during the nineteenth century favored the success of National Socialism, the international comparison was the main test of the hypothesis. In comparative studies, scholars could show that neither the feudalization of the bourgeoisie nor a lack of civil society was a specific German feature, and that they could be described as the reasons for the National Socialist victory in 1933.<sup>14</sup> However, in addition to this insistence on national particularities, which is a somewhat old-fashioned notion today, comparison is used primarily to situate specific processes or structures in broader contexts. In two specific cases, for example, it can analyze them as part of secularization or industrialization, of nation-building or of the development of the welfare state. In this way, it contributes, on the one hand, to the differentiation of a typology and evolutionary patterns of broader developments; on the other, it can show the specific contribution of certain cases to the process, as well as the specific constellations in which they are taking place. For instance, the Czech historian Miroslav Hroch has developed a comparative model for the study of nationalism during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He compares three phases of development: phase A, which is characterized by the discovery or invention of national specificities by writers, painters or intellectuals; phase B, which shows the emergence of national organizations and networks; and phase C, which is the time during which nationalism becomes a mass phenomenon. Inside this temporal framing, he can compare the form nationalism is taking in different regional or national contexts, whether it is, in phase B, a movement of peasants and burghers or, like in Hungary, a movement of liberal aristocrats; whether it is linked to religious images and institutions; or whether it is directed toward a secular nation.<sup>15</sup>

13. M. Juneja & M. Pernau, "Lost in translation? Transcending boundaries in comparative history", in H. G. Haupt & J. Kocka (eds.), *Beyond comparison?*, forthcoming.

14. J. Kocka & U. Frevert (eds.), *Bürgertum im 19. Jahrhundert: Deutschland im europäischen Vergleich*, 1–3, Göttingen 1995.

15. M. Hroch, *Die Vorkämpfer der nationalen Bewegung bei den kleineren Völkern Europas*, Prag 1968.

The question of whether developments and structures are convergent is as legitimate as the problematic of whether and why they diverge. In a study comparing Germany and France, published by Hartmut Kaelble, both approaches are present.<sup>16</sup> He can show that during the 30 years prior to World War I, divergences among the main features of the two societies were predominant, but that they gradually converged during the twentieth century, especially after 1960.

### *Methodology of comparison*

The comparative method has to be distinguished from the individualistic approach, as well as from the hermeneutic of cultural studies. For these, proximity to the sources and to the analyzed reality, as well as the study of forms of discourses and discursive descriptions, are crucial.<sup>17</sup> The link to primary sources and the analysis of categories of self-description also remain important tools of comparative studies. There is a huge gap between those studies that are working with secondary literature and trying to synthesize their results in a comparative perspective and those that are studying archival and primary sources in a comparative perspective. Nancy Green has shown how fruitful attention to the categories that the different actors are using in describing social reality can be for the discovery of cultural attitudes in different countries.<sup>18</sup> It makes a big difference if the social reality of civil society in Western Europe is described during the nineteenth century by the broad notion of "middle class" or "*classes moyennes*" or if there is a supplementary category such as "*Mittelstand*," which introduced a corporative dimension into social self-description. Recent studies on statistics stress the necessity of taking into account different methods of archival traditions and of terminology. They argue that statistics reveal at least as much about the strategic goals of collecting data, the discursive possibilities and the self-understanding as they do about the reality they are pretending to describe.<sup>19</sup>

16. H. Kaelble, *Nachbarn am Rhein: Entfremdung und Annäherung der französischen und deutschen Gesellschaft seit 1880*, München 1991.

17. U. Daniel, *Kulturgeschichte: ein Kompendium*, Frankfurt am Main 1999.

18. N. Green, "Forms of comparison", in Cohen & O'Connor (eds.) 2004, p. 42; N. Green, "Religion et ethnicité: de la comparaison spatiale et temporelle", *Annales: histoire sciences sociales* 57:1, 2002, pp. 127–144.

19. G. Crossick & H. G. Haupt, *The petite bourgeoisie in Europe 1780–1914: family, enterprise and independance*, London 1995.

As historical studies have to take into account the differences or similarities of primary sources, they must limit the number of case studies a comparative study can analyze. Normally, it is not possible to integrate more than two or three realities in a research project. As one of the major tasks of the historian is to situate the analyzed practices and views in a broader framework and contextualize them, this contextualization generally is more abstract and less convincing if the number of units compared increases. Studies about ten fascist movements in the inter-war period will provide fewer insights into the functioning of fascism than a study of the practices and organization of the Italian *Squadri* and the German SA during the 1920s.<sup>20</sup>

All comparative work has to rely on secondary literature, but this reference itself is problematic. It should be accompanied by a careful study of the current historiographical debates in the two units being compared. In doing this, one can avoid an overemphasis on national differences, which, in reality, are only differences in the state of the art. The importance attributed to the German *Mittelstand* of artisans and shopkeepers in the rise of fascism has long been seen as a national particularity because studies of this problem are missing for other European countries.<sup>21</sup> In comparing broader entities, such as empires or civilizations, the critical use of and reflection on the systematic bias that the use of a certain historiography induces becomes crucial. If mainly Anglo-Saxon literature is used to compare Chinese and Indian civilizations, it is methodologically impossible not to reflect about the problematics, debates and interests that characterize research on China and India in the United States and Great Britain.<sup>22</sup>

If comparison was used mainly by social historians during the 1970s and 1980s, more and more comparative studies are also taking into account cultural processes and practices. Studies on reading and alphabetization are done comparatively; nationalism is an important field of comparative research; and even cultural references to foreigners have been analyzed in

20. S. Reichardt, *Faschistische Kampfbünde: Gewalt und Gemeinschaft im italienischen Squadristum und in der deutschen SA*, Köln 2002.

21. C. Charle, *La crise des sociétés impériales*, Paris 2001. Also cf. the arguments for a comparative study of historiography in C. Conrad & S. Conrad (eds.), *Die Nation schreiben: Geschichtswissenschaft im internationalen Vergleich*, Göttingen 2002.

22. H. Kaelble, *Der historische Vergleich: eine Einführung zum 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, Frankfurt am Main & New York 1999, pp. 72–92; J. Osterhammel, "Sozialgeschichte im Zivilisationsvergleich: zu künftigen Möglichkeiten komparativer Geschichtswissenschaft", *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 22:2, 1996, pp. 143–164.



comparisons.<sup>23</sup> Even if, as for all historical work, the proximity to the source material remains an important element, the main emphasis in comparison is on the problematic, which guides the research and the narrative. In choosing certain features and factors of the multiple reality for a given problematic, comparative history is a constructivist enterprise, which follows one of Max Weber's principles: "schon der erste Schritt zum historischen Urteil [... ist] ein *Abstraktionsprozeß* [...], der durch Analyse und gedankliche Isolierung der Bestandteile des unmittelbar Gegebenen [...] verläuft".<sup>24</sup>

This comparison follows neither the logic of comparison that historical actors are using nor the logic of the historical material. Problems and theoretical interests determine comparison and not the other way around. The decisions as to what and how to compare are closely linked to the problematic. If one wants to demonstrate the "modern" character of the German bourgeoisie during the nineteenth century, a comparison with Eastern Europe is useful. If scholars are interested in showing the "backwardness" of Italian economic policies, then a look at Germany or England is appropriate. Frequently, comparison makes not only sense in one direction – from Germany to Eastern Europe, for example –, but in two directions as well. One might ask: What can the study of Eastern European bourgeoisie tell us about the German bourgeoisie? In this perspective, the study might focus on the ethnic composition of the middle classes and highlight the importance of Jews in the German bourgeoisie.<sup>25</sup> In the same context, a comparison of the Swedish and Italian welfare states might conclude that the Italian social system was a latecomer and less developed than the Swedish one. In looking at Italian specificities, one might argue that the importance of the family in the Italian welfare system is a factor that is underestimated in discussions of the Swedish system. The priority of approaches and problematics has been underlined by Antoon van den Braembussche when he differentiates between the

23. Cf. the contributions and the extensive bibliography in Cohen & O'Connor (eds.) 2004; H. G. Haupt, "Comparative history", in *International encyclopedia of social and behavioral sciences*, 4, Amsterdam 2001, pp. 2397–2403.

24. M. Weber, "Objektive Möglichkeiten und adäquate Verursachung in der historischen Kausalbetrachtung", in *idem*, *Wissenschaftslehre*, Tübingen 1988, p. 275; also cf. T. Welskopp, "Stolpersteine auf dem Königsweg: methodenkritische Anmerkungen zum internationalen Vergleich in der Gesellschaftsgeschichte", *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 35, 1995, pp. 339–367.

25. Also cf. P. Ther, "Beyond the nation: the relational basis of comparative history of Germany and Europe", *Central European history* 36, 2003, pp. 45–74, that is arguing in the same way.

26. A. van den Braembussche, "Historical explanation and comparative method: towards a theory of the history of society", *History and theory* 28, 1989, pp. 2–24; also cf. C. Lorenz, *Konstruktion der Vergangenheit: eine Einführung in die Geschichtstheorie*, Cologne, Weimar & Vienna 1997, pp. 231–284.

following variety of comparisons: the contrasting, the generalizing, the macrocausal, the inclusive and the universalizing comparison.<sup>26</sup> Even if, in empirical studies, the boundaries between these approaches become blurred, the choice of the type of comparison has an immediate effect on the number of particularities of compared units, as in the type of argumentation.

In case studies, historical comparison is very useful for testing the range and value of general theses about movements, structures or evolutions and, as a result, formulating new hypotheses about how movements react to certain situations, how structures change or subsist under certain circumstances and how evolutions are stopped or accelerated. In his comparison, Peter Baldwin has relativized the hypothesis that the pressure of the working-class movement is crucial to the understanding of the development of welfare systems in Europe.<sup>27</sup> The link between capitalism and fascism, which was part of a broader debate often inspired by marxism, has been analyzed by Jürgen Kocka. In a comparison between white-collar workers in Germany and the United States in the 1920s, he demonstrated that the survival of corporative features in Germany, not the fully developed capitalist social structure, can explain the tendency of white-collar workers to support the National Socialist party.<sup>28</sup>

Recently, Marc Mazower has been questioning whether the Holocaust was the most widespread form of mass violence in twentieth century history. In comparing different forms of mass murder, he emphasized that the genocide was limited to a few cases, but that the predominant form of violence was ethnic cleansing.<sup>29</sup> The test of theoretical hypotheses, which are generally formulated on a medium theoretical level, and their new formulation, are core elements of comparative work. From this perspective, comparisons of specific variations and types of class-building processes, social and cultural interaction, and networks or forms of interpretation can be fruitful components of historical analysis. For international comparisons of school and university systems, it has been shown that the comparisons help more to correct hypotheses than to develop new ones.<sup>30</sup>

27. P. Baldwin, *The politics of social solidarity: class bases of the European welfare state 1875–1975*, New York 1990; C. Conrad, "Wohlfahrtsstaaten im Vergleich: historische und sozialwissenschaftliche Ansätze", in Haupt & Kocka (eds.) 1996, pp. 155–180.

28. J. Kocka, *Angestellte zwischen Faschismus und Demokratie: zur politischen Sozialgeschichte der Angestellten: USA 1890–1940 im internationalen Vergleich*, Göttingen 1977.

29. M. Mazower, "Violence and the state in twentieth century", in: *American Historical Review*, vol 107, 2002, pp. 1147–1167.

30. J. Schriewer, "Vergleich und Erklärung zwischen Kausalität und Komparatistik", in H. Kaelble & J. Schriewer (eds.), *Diskurse und Entwicklungspfade: der Gesellschaftsvergleich in der Geschichts- und Sozialwissenschaft*, Frankfurt am Main 1999, pp. 53–104.

In all of this, comparison does not apply theoretical models to historical reality, as a crude understanding of the relationship between theory and history may suggest. The theoretical premises of comparisons do not subsist unchanged during the empirical work; rather, they are adapted and adjusted to the empirical results and submitted to a constant process of criticism and reformulation. This is due not only to the fact that empirical material is normally incomplete and not homogenous in the two compared units but also to the necessity to gain theoretical insights by means of abstraction and generalization. Further, units of comparison, and central concepts from which research begins, as well as the terminology to describe similarities and differences, are in flux and change during the process of comparative empirical research. By this mechanism, comparisons help to better interpret empirical material and to discuss theoretical assumptions on a broader empirical basis.

#### *Scope of comparison*

Not all theoretical approaches are equally useful as tools for comparisons. Macro theories, which deal with the character of Western capitalism, the civil society in the West or the European model, often invite scholars to use empirical material for illustration only. As they have a universalist tendency, they are often resistant to comparative case studies because they are – as Joachim Mathes has emphasized – very selective in taking into account the results of these studies. From the historical material, they only select those elements that correspond to the assumptions of the theoretical model.<sup>31</sup> Jürgen Osterhammel, the German historian who is one of the proponents of a non-Eurocentric vision of history, is himself reluctant to put the broad macro question about the reasons for the advance of the West on the comparative agenda. Even if this question could serve as the backbone of comparative studies, he argues in favor of more limited comparisons. "Sie sind weniger willkürlich, lassen sich besser an der Empirie kontrollieren und leichter mit den normalen Arbeitsinteressen professioneller Geschichtsforscher verbinden."<sup>32</sup>

Nor are comparisons at macro or national levels very useful either. The formulation of national models that are compared to other national models has not been very far-reaching. The debate on the German *Sonderweg* has

31. J. Mathes 1992.

32. J. Osterhammel 1996.

been based on a comparison with the Anglo-Saxon model of evolution and on a modernization theory. This approach has been criticized as being based on an idealized vision of the British situation and for not taking Germany's important regional differences into account.<sup>33</sup> During the 1990s, the debate lost its importance. The development of a theoretical hypothesis, which is too linked to national features of development and has a holistic bias, encounters problems in dealing with and explaining divergent evolutions. If studies that characterize Eastern or Central European societies of the nineteenth century apply the criteria of a civil society defined on the basis of Western European experiences, the history of Eastern Europe is written as an unsatisfactory history of what is missing. The specific evolution in these countries cannot be defined in this way. However, if the comparison deals with the importance of elements of civil society, such as middle-class associations and participation in the urban and local context, the result may be more general insights into the possibilities and limits of bourgeois self-organization.<sup>34</sup>

The debate on the German *Sonderweg* had a productive effect on comparative history, not in constructing a new model of German evolution, but in testing a more limited hypothesis about specific German evolutions. In contrast to the holistic vision of national cases, partial comparison has developed more scientific potential. Some hypotheses, such as the relationship between the nobility and the bourgeoisie or the impact of the state on society and individual mentalities, have been tested in empirical case studies and integrated into broader, more stimulating research designs.<sup>35</sup>

In adopting the constructivist comparative method, the danger of reductionism is a given. Since it cannot compare the complexity of historical phenomena, it has to reduce complex historical evolutions in order to isolate specific factors. Deborah Cohen has mentioned this danger: "While the arguments of national historians tend toward the multicausal, drawing upon all of the factors that can explain a particular phenomenon, comparatists are

33. D. Blackbourn & G. Eley, *The peculiarities of German history: bourgeois society and politics in the 19th century Germany*, Oxford 1984; J. Kocka, "German history before Hitler: the debate about the German 'Sonderweg'", *Journal of contemporary history* 23, 1988, pp. 3–16.

34. Cf. the debate in M. Hildermeier et al. (eds.), *Europäische Zivilgesellschaft in Ost und West: Begriff, Geschichte, Chancen*, Frankfurt am Main 2000.

35. H. U. Wehler (ed.), *Europäischer Adel, 1750–1950*, Göttingen 1990; H. Reif, *Adel im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, München 1999; M. Wienfort, *Adel in der Moderne*, Göttingen 2006; W. Conze & J. Kocka (eds.), *Bildungsbürgertum im 19. Jahrhundert*, 1: Bildungssystem und Professionalisierung im internationalen Vergleich, Stuttgart 1992; M. Hettling, *Politische Bürgerlichkeit: der Bürger zwischen Individualität und Vergesellschaftung in Deutschland und der Schweiz von 1860 bis 1918*, Göttingen 1999.

often caught in a mono- or bi-causal trap."<sup>36</sup> This argument tends to underestimate the selectivity inherent in national historiography and overestimate the arbitrary character of hierarchizing factors in comparative history. Nonetheless, it underlines the importance of contextualization. This contextualization of case studies is less developed when the empirical base of the study becomes larger and the objectives of comparison become more global. This difference can be illustrated by the juxtaposition between Orlando Patterson's study on slavery and the comparison Peter Kolchin makes between American slavery and Russian serfdom. Patterson concludes that slavery is characterized by dominance over persons excluded and without rights after their birth. The study remains at a very general level. In contrast, Kolchin develops a hypothesis on the frequency of resistance in the two societies and can give insights into the practices of dependent people.<sup>37</sup> One way to take into account Cohen's warning is the large framework of case studies he provides. For this practice, the excellent study of Susan Pedersen offers an example. In comparing the importance of gender to explain the development of the French and British welfare states in the inter-war period, she refers not only to the women's movement and industrialization, but also to lesser known specificities of family policy. In France, this policy distanced itself from the male breadwinner logic dominant in the United Kingdom. This example demonstrates that the larger the context, the more the results of comparisons can be innovative.<sup>38</sup>

The example of slavery illustrates comparative history's movement between generalizing and individualizing objectives. It should deal with problematics that allow insights into general trends and structures; however, it also helps to better characterize specific cases and develop innovative approaches. On rare occasions, a comparison that is looking at specific national cases can help achieve these ambitious goals. Normally, the main argument is that the national case explains, but is not the answer to a general problematic that links the case studies together and that can be used as a *tertium comparationis*. The search for specific national patterns of evolution is only part of comparison as a method of contrasting.

36. D. Cohen, "Comparative history: buyer beware", in Cohen & O'Connor (eds.) 2004, pp. 57–70, 63.

37. O. Patterson, *Slavery and social death: a comparative study*, Cambridge, MA, 1982; P. Kolchin, *Unfree labour: American slavery and Russian serfdom*, Cambridge, MA, 1987.

38. S. Pedersen, *Family, dependance, and the origins of the welfare state: Britain and France 1914–1945*, Cambridge 1993.

*Criticism of comparative history*

To summarize, historical comparison has undeniable advantages. It can overcome the stereotypes of national historiography and show even well-known phenomena in a new light. As Nancy Green puts it: "A comparative approach helps render the invisible visible; it aids us in questioning our own generalizations."<sup>39</sup> As has previously been stated, comparison is not necessarily linked only to social history; it can also be used in other fields of historical research as cultural history. It is intellectually demanding in terms of linguistic skills, knowledge of historiographies, and familiarity with theoretical approaches, for example. This is also one reason why it is limited to a minority of historians. As Hannes Siegrist has emphasized, in taking into account discussions and perspectives in different societies and cultures, comparative history is, per se, multi-perspective. It develops a sensitivity to the dimensions of differences and opens a dialogue between the author and the material, as well as between different academic cultures.<sup>40</sup>

Comparative history has been challenged by several critics. The most powerful criticism is always formulated by the national historians, who focus on specific problems of the nation state and formulate these inside a national framework. In looking back at the history of historiographies, periods of more national debates have alternated with an openness to broader comparative or international discussions.<sup>41</sup> In West German historiography, it was the discussion about the specific features of German history that introduced a strong comparative dimension into the debate about the origins of National Socialism. However, this comparative perspective of national history was not widespread, as most of the crucial debates after 1945 were limited to national history: the controversy about the origins of World War I, the *Historikerstreit* of the 1980s, and the characterization of National Socialism as a polycentric power regime and its role as a social modernizing regime. Even today, the opening to a more international perspective is blocked by processes of the re-nationalization of historical writing. It is significant that most of the research about memory and memory politics is framed in national contexts and internationalized – as Pierre Nora's *lieux de mémoire*, only later. The recruitment politics of universities and the logic of funding for research within Europe give clear advantages to national history perspectives.

39. Nancy Green, "Forms of Comparison", in Cohen & O'Connor (eds.) 2004, p. 42.

40. H. Siegrist, "Perspektiven der vergleichenden Geschichtswissenschaft: Gesellschaft, Kultur und Raum", in Kaelble & Schriewer (eds.) 2003, pp. 305–339.

41. R. Torstendahl (ed.), *An assessment of twentieth-century historiography*, Stockholm 2000.

However, specific criticisms directed at comparative history also exist. One of the most powerful is the argument presented by the French cultural historian Michel Espagne, who pointed to the circular, national character of comparative history.<sup>42</sup> He argues that comparison is linked to the nation state and restates the generally well-known features of national self-description. In this criticism, the question of the unit of comparison, which is indeed a crucial one, arises. Espagne is referring to those studies that look for national specificities and that might – if they are asymmetric and use the foreign example only to affirm the national specificities – actually turn out to favor national stereotypes and construct a holistic structure of the compared examples. But if comparative history is based on the symmetric analysis of two cases under a general problematic, there is less danger that national features will be reaffirmed. In some cases, the nation state remains important as a unit of comparison. It may continue to be the adequate framework for theoretical problems. If a study is interested in political decisions, debates on laws and the implementation of politics, it cannot avoid the national framework. If one questioned the conditions under which social laws have been formulated and decided, it is difficult to avoid a national perspective. Where social practices or demographic patterns are concerned, other units of comparisons must be used. The local or the regional are more appropriate than the national. In recent years, comparative research has demonstrated that it is much more flexible and creative in dealing with different units of comparison than a broad critique of its national bias has affirmed.<sup>43</sup> Generally, the choice of the unit of comparison is not a question of principle, but rather part of a variety of approaches to an adequate analysis, as the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur reminds us: "A chaque échelle on voit des choses qu'on ne voit pas à une autre échelle, et chaque vision a son bon droit."<sup>44</sup> From this perspective, the choice of the adequate unit depends on the problematic and logic of comparison. It might be different in regions in which borders and ethnic boundaries are

42. M. Espagne, *Les transferts culturels franco-allemands*, Paris 1999; M. Espagne, "Sur les limites du comparatisme en histoire culturelle", *Genèses* 17, 1994, pp. 256–279; M. Middell, "Cultural transfer and historical comparison: theses on their relationship", in Haupt & Kocka (eds.), *Beyond comparison?*, forthcoming.

43. For comparison between towns, see T. Bender & C. Schorske, *Budapest and New York: studies in metropolitan transformation, 1870–1930*, New York 1985; D. Lehnert, *Kommunalpolitik: Parteiensystem und Interessenkonflikt in Berlin und Wien 1919–1932*, Berlin 1991; R. Liedtke, *Jewish welfare in Hamburg and Manchester c. 1850–1914*, New York 1998.

44. Cited in R. Chartier, "La conscience de la globalité. Commentaire", *Annales: histoire sciences sociales* 56, 2001, 120.

more fluid than in those areas of Europe in which national boundaries are important points of reference and limit actions.<sup>45</sup>

Espagne suggests the concept of cultural transfer as a critique and complement to "traditional" comparative studies. He stresses the links that exist among the units studied, the hybrid structure of each compared culture and the complex ways in which goods, information and culture are transferred from one country to another. It is astonishing that in this criticism, Espagne himself is prioritizing the nation – in his case Germany and France – as units of comparison and only recently moved to comparative work on regions.<sup>46</sup> The advantage of his approach is the attention it gives to the mediators of cultural transfer, the translators, editors, teachers and travelers who are engaged in moving ideas and pictures – representations as well as academic disciplines – from one country to another. The appropriation of these transferred goods by different milieus in the two societies is a necessary part of the concept, as it postulates that national cultures are "hybrid" and should be understood as much by internal as by external factors. The analysis of the reception and transformation of the goods is not always easy, and until recently the emphasis has been more on the modalities of the process of transfer than on the appropriation or failed transfer.

Nevertheless, the studies inspired by Espagne's approach are useful for comparative historians. Marc Bloch already mentioned that there are two main methods of comparison. One between societies far away from each other in time and space, the other between closely linked societies: The later one consists in

étudier parallèlement des sociétés à la fois voisines et contemporaines, sans cesse influencées les unes par les autres, soumises dans leur développement, en raison précisément de leur proximité et de leurs synchronisme, à l'action des mêmes grandes causes, et, remontant, partiellement du moins, à une origine commune.<sup>47</sup>

From this perspective, the multiple transfers between the two societies are a precondition for a meaningful comparison, as they suggest the effects of bigger processes and evolutions, which characterize the two countries. In the

45. P. Ther 2003, p. 71, is suggesting this difference.

46. M. Espagne & M. Middell (eds.), *Von der Elbe bis an die Seine: Kulturtransfer zwischen Sachsen und Frankreich im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert*, Leipzig 1999.

47. Bloch 1963, p. 19.



field of ethnology, it was Galton who, at the beginning of the twentieth century, emphasized the study of links and transfers among the units of comparison in order to determine whether differences or similarities are the effect of influences and relationships. Comparative historians were less sensitive to the interconnection of the compared units and frequently constructed them as independent of one other.<sup>48</sup> For instance, the question of whether differences or similarities in the perception of universities and of history were the effect of structures and organization or of relationships, travels and the circulation of books, constitutes two legitimate parts of a bigger problem. The choice of one or the other depends on the problematic of the historian. However, the empirical study of both would proceed differently and adopt other methodological tools. There is good evidence that comparative history could profit from the results of transfer history by becoming aware of the constructed nature of the units of comparisons and of their connections; however, there are also good reasons to stress the fact that the analysis of cultural transfer cannot avoid the use of comparative methods. Johannes Paulmann argues convincingly:

In order to recognize, as a historian, what takes place in a cultural transfer, one must make a comparison: the position of the examined object in the past with its position in its new context, the social origins of the intermediary and of the relevant people in a country with those in the other and finally, the meaning of a phenomenon in the national culture from which it arises with that in the country where it was incorporated.<sup>49</sup>

The research on cultural transfer is part of those approaches that are reacting at the internationalization of life in the period of globalization. Cultural transfer is not replacing comparative history, but it can complement it by a relational perspective in those cases in which the study of relationships and connections are important and lead to fresh insights into historical processes. Transnational, "cross-national" or entangled history is part of the methodology of a new history of international relations and not so much oriented toward the debates on comparison. "The notion of entanglement", Shalini Ran-

48. H. Kleinschmidt, "Galtons Problem: Bemerkungen zur Theorie der transkulturell vergleichenden Geschichtsforschung", *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* 39, 1991, pp. 5–22.

49. J. Paulmann, "Internationaler Vergleich und interkultureller Transfer: Zwei Forschungsansätze zur europäischen Geschichte des 18. bis 20. Jahrhundert", *Historische Zeitschrift* 267, 1998, pp. 649–685 quotation at p. 681; J. Kocka, "Comparison and beyond", *History and theory* 42, 2003, pp. 39–44; H. G. Haupt & J. Kocka, "Comparative history: methods, aims, problems", in Cohen & O'Connor (eds.) 2004, pp. 23–40.

deria stresses, "would replace a comparison of societies in the rest of the world with those of the West by a relational perspective that foregrounds processes of historical and contemporary unequal exchanges that shaped modernities in both parts of the world".<sup>50</sup> Transnational history, which was first developed in the United States, also directs attention to the different forms of connection: "Graden der Interaktion, Verbindung, Zirkulation, Überschneidung und Verflechtung [...], die über den Nationalstaat hinausreichen – und zugleich spielt die Nation auch für sie eine bedeutsame, sogar eine definierende Rolle."<sup>51</sup> Kiran Patel limits transnational history to the last 250 years, stressing that this approach is as interested in time changes as it is in spatial developments. It is using comparison and transfer as methodological tools. In this respect, it is a broad perspective in which the nation remains the main actor even if it is shaped by the forms of transnational relations.

### Caption

"*Histoire croisée*," developed by Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmerman, is part of those approaches interested in the relationship among national societies, as well as among the colonies and the metropolis.<sup>52</sup> In their criticism of comparative history, they stress that historians cannot make abstractions from the multiple influences and links among the units of comparison. Those have to be integrated into the conceptualization of comparative studies. The main emphasis is on the self-reflection of historians, who should be aware of their concepts, interests and problematics as part of the research process. This "interconnected exploration of points of view, objects, and concepts, that flirts with radical constructivism"<sup>53</sup> has not yet been translated in empirical studies, which might show the range and problems of the approach.

50. S. Randeria, "Entangled histories of uneven modernities: civil society, caste councils and legal pluralism in postcolonial India", in Haupt & Kocka (eds.), *Beyond comparison?*, forthcoming; S. Conrad & S. Randeria, "Geteilte Geschichten: Europa in einer postkolonialen Welt", in *idem* (eds.), *Jenseits des Eurozentrismus: postkoloniale Perspektiven in den Geschichts- und Kulturwissenschaften*, Frankfurt am Main 2002, pp. 9–49.

51. K. Patel, *Nach der Nationalfixiertheit: Perspektiven einer transnationalen Geschichte*, Antrittsvorlesung Humboldt Universität zu Berlin 12. Januar 2004; K. Patel, "Transatlantische Perspektiven transnationaler Geschichte", *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 29, 2003, pp. 625–647; S. Conrad, "Doppelte Marginalisierung: Plädoyer für eine transnationale Perspektive auf die deutsche Geschichte", *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 28, 2002, pp. 145–169.

52. Michael Werner & Bénédicte Zimmermann, "Penser l'histoire croisée : entre empirie et réflexivité", *Annales: histoire sciences sociales* 58, 2003, pp. 7–36; M. Werner & B. Zimmerman (eds.), *De la comparaison à l'histoire croisée*, Paris 2004.

53. C. Conrad, *National historiography as a transnational object in representations of the past: the writing of national histories in Europe*, NHIST Programme Annual Newsletter 1, 2004, p. 4.

*Histoire croisée* shares some of the characteristics of historical comparison: it begins with problems and not with fixed units; it recognizes and analyzes the importance of institutions, processes and discursive formations and goes far beyond cultural history; it also underlines the importance of actors and their conflicts, strategies and fields of action.

Those approaches that stress transfer and connections do not replace historical comparison. They choose another analytical dimension as they prioritize the direct contacts among actors, space and institutions. They choose circulation of models, the appropriation of transfers, and hybrid structures more than they choose comparative history. In doing so, these studies are a provocation to comparative history, pushing the historians to expand the field of empirical studies and review their premises. Nevertheless, historical comparison remains an important field of historical writing and research because it is more than transnational history; it is a "histoire problème" guided by theoretical reflections and imbedded in the critical and permanent evaluation of the units, categories and results of its studies.

## Komparativ historia – en ifrågasatt metod

Artikeln är en analytisk genomgång av den jämförande historiens historiografi. Komparativ historia har, menar författaren, många intressanta fördelar, inte minst kan den gå utöver nationella stereotyper och kasta nytt ljus över fenomen vi trodde oss vara välbekanta med.

Det är ett intellektuellt krävande sätt att skriva historia då den förutsätter goda språkkunskaper, kunskap om olika historiemiljöer och historietraditioner samt vana vid att närma sig historien med ett teoretiskt perspektiv. Universitetens rekryteringspolitik och sättet att fördela forskningsbidrag i Europa ger dock alltid den nationella historien ett försprång.

Jämfört med litteraturvetenskap, juridik och religion är jämförande historia en senkommen inriktning som inte blivit aktuell förrän efter första världskriget då vissa historiker anklagade historieskrivningen för att ha drivit på nationalismen. Den belgiske historikern Henri Pirenne, den tyske historikern Otto Hintze och inte minst fransmannen Marc Bloch uttryckte alla förhoppningar om den jämförande historiens framtid och möjligheter.

Under 1960-talet utvecklades jämförande historia främst bland ekonomhistoriker, med debatten kring industrialiseringen, och historiska demografer, som diskuterade om det fanns en europeisk familjemodell. Historiskt inriktade sociologer har också skrivit jämförande historia. Barrington Moores fick med sitt banbrytande verk om fascism, bönder och demokratiska revolutioner efterföljare i Charles Tilly, Theda Skocpol med flera, som kom att använda sig av jämförande historia för att studera uppror, sociala rörelser och revolutioner. I de historikermiljöer som stod nära samhällsvetenskaperna, och vars ansats var mer analytisk än narrativ, fick dessa jämförande ansatser efterföljare, främst inom samtidshistoria.

Jämförande historia är en flexibel metod som innebär att vi lyfter blicken över den nationella horisonten och identifierar liknande fenomen eller strukturer i åtminstone två olika miljöer vilka knyts samman av en specifik problematik. Då jämförande historia är en sorts historiskt experiment måste den som gör jämförelsen utgå från klara hypoteser, noga förklara valet av miljöer eller enheter som skall jämföras, utveckla själva jämförelsen samt diskutera kausala orsaksmöjligheter. Jämförande historia tydliggör på så sätt grundvalarna för den historiska berättelsen i större utsträckning än många andra sätt att skriva historia på.

Jämförande historia är speciellt lämpat att studera utbredda processer och strukturer. Den tjeckiske historikern Miroslaw Hroch har till exempel formulerat en modell för att jämföra nationalism på 1700- och 1800-talet.

Jämförande historia låter sig dock svårligen göras med mer än ett fåtal jämförelseobjekt, om det skall vara möjligt att gå igenom och jämföra första- och andrahandskällor. Ett alltför stort antal jämförelseobjekt omöjliggör också en ordentlig historisk contextualisering. I uppsatsen anförs som exempel att en jämfö-

rande studie som begränsar sig till italienska och tyska fascistiska frivilligkårer troligen ger bättre resultat än en jämförelse av tio olika fasciströrelser under samma period. Behovet av att begränsa antalet fall som jämförs hänger också ihop med att den historiker som jämför två fall i olika länder måste läsa in sig på bägge ländernas historiografi. Annars är risken att studierna kommer att överdriva de nationella skillnaderna och betona olikheter som egentligen kanske inte finns utan beror på att vissa företeelser inte studerats i vissa länder medan de fått stor uppmärksamhet i andra.

Men även om den jämförande historien utgår från empiri baserat på historiskt källmaterial och analyserar det i ljuset av den historiska kontexten, så ligger tonvikten på en viss problematik som vägleder studiens upplägg och berättelsen den resulterar i. En jämförelse följer alltså vare sig de historiska aktörernas logik eller källornas logik. Det är problematiken och intresset för teori som skall leda fram till en jämförelse, inte tvärtom. Att testa och omformulera teoretiska hypoteser, som för det mesta formuleras på en mellannivå, är centralt i jämförande historia. Jämförande historia handlar dock inte om att tvinga teoretiska modeller på den historiska verkligheten. De teoretiska utgångspunkterna måste anpassas, rättas, kritiseras och omformuleras i konfrontation med de empiriska resultaten. Makroteorier, däremot, har ofta sådana generaliserande anspråk att de egentligen inte kan bli föremål för jämförande fallstudier.

Jämförande historia har kritiserats för att generalisera och därmed förenkla historiska skeenden. Men även historiska studier som bara berör ett fall generaliserar. Det viktiga är att dessa generaliseringar inte görs oreflekterat och att den historiska kontexten inte glöms bort. Jämförande historia har också kritiserats, bland annat av Michel Espagne, för att egentligen bara förstärka den nationella berättelsen och bekräfta dess stereotyper. Espagne menar att historien i stället bör ta sin utgångspunkt i människors kontakter och idéutbyten. Jämförande historia handlar dock inte främst om att jämföra nationer som sådana utan om att jämföra vissa företeelser i olika miljöer. Den typ av studie som Espagne föreslår är däremot väl ägnad att förnya och berika den jämförande historien, som kanske haft en viss tendens att glömma just frågor om idéöverföring och direkt påverkan. De nya sätten att skriva historia, exempelvis *histoire croisée*, som studerar påverkan och samtidighet, kan dock inte ersätta jämförande historia. Dessa inriktningar har som fokus de direkta kontakterna mellan aktörer, mellan miljöer och mellan institutioner. Jämförande historia är mer än så: det är en "problemlösar-historia" som leds av teoretiska överväganden och som innebär en permanent och kritisk utvärdering av studieobjekten, begreppen och resultaten.

*Keywords:* comparative history, transfer history, *histoire croisée*, methodology of history, historical narratives