

## **Professor Matthias Middell (Leipzig University) | “Comparative History and Cultural Transfers”**

On September 23<sup>rd</sup> in the Golden Hall one of today’s leading experts in comparative, global and transnational history, University of Leipzig professor Matthias Middell, delivered a talk. In his lecture “Comparative History and Cultural Transfers,” Middell turned to the factors essential for understanding the development of historiography over the last quarter century, and gave an overview of the paths that became the story of cultural transfers. He then offered his critical reflections of the latter in relation to comparative historical studies.

### **From Globalization in History to a Global History**

At the beginning of his presentation, Middell focused on how the processes of globalization and reactions to them in the field of the humanities have stimulated a fruitful search within the historical community. In the 1990s historians were forced to dispute the ideas prevalent among their colleagues in the social sciences that globalization, by creating entirely new world circumstances, made old historical experience uncalled for. In response, representatives of the historical profession insisted that globalization is not only a contemporary phenomenon, but has its own history that must be explained.

Middell paid great attention to the debate accompanying the conditions of so called global history. His proposed view of the key problems discussed in the framework of a new direction—an understanding of globalization (whether it is seen as a combination of natural processes or as a controlled political project), the consequences of the growth of transnational connections (whether they lead to global homogenization), and society’s dependence on new technologies—is of particular interest due to the fact that Middell currently heads the network of organizations of global and world history. Among discussions in the field, the scholar singled out one in particular that dealt with the historicization of the idea of the “great divergence” between countries classified as “developed” and “underdeveloped” and was spurred by the rapid economic growth in China during the last decades of the twentieth century. In a number of recent studies, as he noted, the genealogy of the great divergence was significantly shortened. This, in turn, has shaken the notion of the deep conditionality of the primacy of the West, which has allowed us to explain world development through the study of how innovations (such as capitalism, ideas of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, modern ideology), originate in a specific region and spread outward more or less successfully.

### **The Impetus of Heinrich Heine and the Concept of Cultural Transfer**

In 1994, according to Middell, came the discovery by global history researchers of one another, and scholars united around the concept of the cultural transfer (*transfers culturels*). This marked the beginning of the former’s interest in creating new, non-Western centered narratives and interweaving them with the methodological

computations of the latter. The school of *transferts culturels*, once inspired by the study of the interpenetration of French and German culture (symbolized in the figure of Heinrich Heine, whose work on appropriation has been claimed by each), has offered a new perspective in considering the dynamics of cross-cultural relations.

Instead of studying the external effects of certain sources of innovation through their export, representatives of *transferts culturels* focused on how one culture makes other elements “its own,” and why these and not others are in demand as they are adapted to their own context, and finally recognize (or, conversely, hide) whether what is present in a culture has external origins. Considering the evolving historiography of cross-cultural relations, Middell noted the tendency of scientists engaged with it to invent new designations, among which there is not always a significant difference. So, *transferts culturels*, extending to the United States, collided with the history of “cultural encounters;” researchers of German colonialism interested in the influence it has had on the development of the metropolis called their own sphere of activity “entangled history,” and competition for funding between the founders of the concept of cultural transfers, M. Espagne and M. Werner, led to the invention by the latter of the concept of *histoire croisée*.

### **Historical Comparative Studies: The Price of Prestige**

In the next part of the lecture Middell introduced a number of considerations regarding the status of comparison in historical research, the constraints it imposes on scholars, and the ambiguous correlation that evolved between comparative history and the direction of *transferts culturels*. Middell recalled that in the beginning of the last century the leading social scientists pointed to comparison as the only way to obtain conclusive social knowledge that could compensate for the inability to conduct experiments. Noting the prestigious position of comparativists in historical society within this premise, Middell encourages us to distinguish this interpretation from the understanding of comparison as a part of everyday experience, which allows us to establish cultural differences between countries, periods, etc.

Middell stressed that objects of comparison are not given, but rather created in the practice of it, based on a few specially selected parameters. This requires a certain decontextualization and a breaking of ties that prevent comparison and thus produces a contradiction between the comparison and the concept of cultural transfers, placing connection at the forefront. In addition, Middell noted, if in France the combination of comparative history and *transferts culturels* is seen as perfectly acceptable, then in Germany supporters present two clearly demarcated camps that have been in a state of acute confrontation for twenty years.

When it comes to comparing nations, states, or even larger objects, says Middell, the unavoidable design of comparison itself contains a potential danger. The past two hundred years in Africa looks uncivilized, underdeveloped and backward in comparison to Europe, because the comparison was organized around finding analogs to European institutions. If, however, one supplemented this with a question of analogs of African

institutions in Europe, that is, to carry out a reciprocal comparison, then the results may be different.

### **“Putting Comparison and Connections Together?”**

In his conclusion, Middell expressed some skepticism about the effectiveness of appeals for a broad synergy of comparativists and historians of cultural ties (the above slogan was used at a recent international conference in London.) However, coming from him this did not sound pessimistic. Perspective, in his view, comes from a comparison of parallel transfers (such as in 17<sup>th</sup> century Russia and Italy, where French absolutism was perceived as one and the same composition imported from France and adapted to their own contexts.) Middell also urged not to overlook the fact that comparison is not the exclusive prerogative of the researcher: participants in the historical process, prompted by an interest in the outside world and the possibility of beneficial borrowing themselves often resorted to comparisons between other cultures and their own.

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After the lecture Middell answered questions from the audience. In particular, he expressed a generally affirmative position to professor Boris Kolonitsky’s question about the existence today of global historiography. He cited, among other things, the transnational circulation of ideas, increased weight of the international community at the expense of national association, and the common traits in the education of historians in various countries. Placing the development of ecological history in the context of his address (a question from Julia Laius, director of the Center for Environmental and Technological History), Middell acknowledged that despite the advent of the post disciplinary era, there is still a need to overcome the boundaries between historians and specialists studying the environment in the spirit of the traditional natural sciences. He also suggested the fruitfulness of studying the corporate culture of international environmental organizations. In response to a question from the dean of the history department Aleksandra Bekasava, he suggested that culture in the broad sense can be understood as the assumption of a plurality of configurations linking individuals and groups that actualize some aspects of experience while not taking others into account. Discussing the role of the nation in the modern world (a question posed by history professor Samuel Hirst), he identified the seventies as a time when the hierarchy of spaces in which the national component formed was blurred. Presently a clear hierarchy does not exist, but a number of basic functions of the national government clearly have clearly not been leveled or replaced by other structures. Commenting on the final question by Michael Crom in evaluating the strangeness of the criticism of comparative history based on the corresponding methods of particular trends mentioned in the lecture, Middell pointed out the distinction between the theoretical presentation of comparative history and its application, which is not (in his view) without ideological implications and therefore in need of improvement.