

COURTS AND DYNASTIES: STRATEGIES OF COMPARISON

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Comparison has long since been recognised as a powerful and necessary corrective for the biases created by our predominantly national historiographies. Leading scholars from Marc Bloch to John Elliott have praised and practised comparative history. Yet they also noticed that their colleagues still massively opted for national history. From the 1970s onwards, moreover, comparison has increasingly been criticised by poststructuralist and postmodern scholars. Transnational, transimperial, and global 'connected' history seem to have superseded comparison as the leading paradigm transcending national views. These variants of the 'entangled history family' have many advantages, but I will argue that they cannot replace comparative history.

It is high time for a reappraisal, moving comparison to the centre stage of the historians' craft. This can best be done by taking into account the criticism generated by the 'cultural turn' and by reconsidering research designs, levels, and units of comparison. In my talk I will outline different strategies of comparison, taking as starting points my detailed comparison of the courts of Vienna and Versailles and my more recent global comparative study of dynasty.

The archival legacies of the Austrian Habsburg and Valois-Bourbon courts made it easy to establish a sound framework for comparison: numbers, costs, hierarchies, and activities of the court. These materials highlighted, for example, that Louis XIV was exceptional and successful because of his *reduction* of his court: numbers dropped sharply in the 1660s. Only at the comparative level could it become clear, moreover, that the dignitaries at the French court under Louis XIV and his successors enjoyed a far stronger position than their compeers at the Austrian Habsburg court in terms of income, established rights, and security – *de facto* heredity – of office. French courtiers did not as a rule form part of the king's inner councils, but they held extensive rights of nomination at court and increasingly influenced nominations throughout the institutions of the French state. A wider group of noble families in Vienna to some extent monopolised court office, yet neither at court nor in the councils were they ever able to claim rights to certain offices. Every courtier had to rise through the ranks and, in the process, would depend on the emperor's graces. Hierarchies in Vienna were relatively straightforward, starting with the date of nomination into the twofold ranking system of chamberlains and councillors controlled by the emperor. Every emperor could build this hierarchy anew, and without undue cost: honorary officers went largely unpaid, and their expanding numbers lost their position with the death of the emperor. French courtiers maintained their office from reign to reign, and hierarchy was never as orderly or manageable as in Vienna. Comparison, in short, proved wrong powerful traditional national views of French absolute kings with subdued nobles versus powerful Habsburg magnates dominating a weak emperor. It showed that royal power in France in some respects was more limited than imperial power in Vienna – an unanticipated outcome.

Detailed knowledge on various European courts, expanded and tested through intensive cooperation with specialists of other areas, made it possible to define themes and questions relevant for dynastic power worldwide. These themes, the chapters of my *dynasties* book, can be pictured as concentric circles, moving outward from 1. the ruler (ideals and practises, person and position), to 2. the dynasty (succession, reproduction, role of women) and 3. the court (the balances between inner and outer; kings as manipulators or objects) and finally to 4. the realm as a whole (interaction versus withdrawal). These themes served as an open framework to be challenged and refined by examining a series of widely diverging cases from across the globe, ranging from small scriptless African chiefdoms to the Chinese empire with its millennia-old script culture. Interestingly, at some points these extremes showed great resemblance: both ritual kings in Africa and Chinese emperors were held responsible for cosmic harmonies, rainfall and harvests. Government-by-paper and differentiated administrative hierarchies were present only in more developed polities, yet certain aspects of dynastic power can be found at all levels of scale and development. Everywhere, the lifecycle of the incumbent caused phases of weakness and strength; everywhere, kinship rules defined the patterns of succession conflict and alliance. Arguably, consolidated larger polities tended to adopt more fixed succession rules, favouring continuity and concentration of power, particularly male primogeniture. Its growing prevalence may have distorted our view of dynasty worldwide. In many African polities matrilineal succession prevented concentration in the male line: succession moved sideways, to maternal brothers or sisters' sons. Prohibitions against the succession of kings' sons can also be found in patrilineal African polities. Here, too, dynastic power was seen in terms of power sharing among a number of groups. Circulation, kingmaking, and consultation do not easily fit the familiar Aristotelian triad of monarchy-aristocracy-politeia. Nominal omnipotence of the ruler more often than not coincided with competition of powerful elites gathered at the centre: perhaps a premodern mirror image of Robert Michels' 'iron law of oligarchy'? African examples unexpectedly became a lynchpin of the comparison, because they forced me to redefine key aspects of dynastic power and reassess common East-West dichotomies.

Many examples can be provided here, quite a few among them raising doubts about European exceptionalism. In one respect, however, Europe was unique: the gradual reduction of legitimate succession to offspring generated through monogamous marriage. Elsewhere, polygyny remained the rule. This remarkable divergence had major consequences – for the size of royal clans, for the nature of internal and external rivalries and alliances, for the role of women and the organisation of space at court. Nevertheless, rather than reducing levels of succession violence in Europe, it relocated violence from internal rebellion to the international battlefield. A pervasive universal aspect relating to succession strife deserves to be mentioned here: the problem of princes. Rights of succession always entail potential conflict: hence, everywhere princes form a difficult category. Throughout the world we can observe two ways to deal with this predicament: maintaining the princes under some form of surveillance at court, or sending them out to frontier areas to fight and govern. Interestingly, the two variants alternate over time in many regions: there is no regionally consistent pattern. Ottoman, Safavid and

Mughal princes were first sent out, then held in detention at the centre; Chinese, African and European dynasties show recurring variants of the same two patterns.

The comparison of dynastic power across the globe highlights several universal tendencies, yet it also unveils markedly different regional traditions. However, some of these differences can also be read as functional equivalents, as culturally diversified responses to a similar predicament. Overall, cyclical views of dynastic power, with phases of integration and devolution coinciding with new dynasties replacing enfeebled predecessors, predominate in premodern political thinking. A repetition of patterns formed part of the expectations of learned commentators. On the other hand, linear change can be observed in many consolidated polities of the early modern age. The balance between cyclical alternation and change over time is discussed in the conclusion of my book. In the last instance, political contingency and the impact of individual rulers render implausible all rigid models of dynastic power.

Comparison can help to set new standards for historical research in a globalising world: at the level of detailed contextual examination of a few interrelated cases, and at the global level, following different research designs and aims. Comparison helps to redefine the parameters of regional and national research. It creates a yardstick and framework of reference and forces us to reassess national and cultural stereotypes. Finally, comparison, if pursued with an open mind, will come with surprising and at times even unsettling outcomes.