

≡ PREFACE ≡

Comparative history deals with similarities and differences between historical units, e.g., regions, economies, cultures, and national states. It is the classical way of transcending the narrow boundaries of national history. Comparative history is analytically ambitious and empirically demanding. The last decades have witnessed the rise of comparative history, but its practitioners have remained a minority, and its critics have not been completely convinced.

Entangled history deals with transfer, interconnection, and mutual influences across boundaries. It can be another way of moving beyond the limits of national history. Its rise is more recent. It has been fuelled by post-colonial perspectives, by a renewed interest in transnationalism, and by the intellectual consequences of globalization. It has been practiced in different contexts, e.g., in the overlap between French and German history, in the study of transnational migration, with respect to cultural transfer, or in the expanding areas of global history.

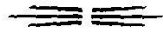
There is much tension, but there is also productive and innovative cooperation between comparative history and entangled history. German-speaking historians have dealt with these issues, over the last years, programmatically, empirically, and with new results. They were influenced by the international discussions, but also could build on their own traditions. Most of their research and debate has been conducted in German. Their approaches and results deserve to be brought to the attention of readers who do not have access to this language.

It is the aim of this book to introduce readers to this type of research and debate. It presents a selection of unpublished and published articles and essays dealing with comparative and entangled history. The introduction surveys the field and discusses issues of theory and method. It proposes different ways of cooperation between comparative and entangled history. Five contributions follow whose authors play an important role in the German debate about comparative and entangled history. Finally, six case studies are presented, which apply and frequently combine comparative and entanglement approaches. The focus is on European history in the twentieth century, but there is also attention to global contexts and their impact on European and German history. In one way or another, the con-

tributions deal with the changing role of national history under the present conditions of Europeanization and globalization.

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Comparison and Beyond

Traditions, Scope, and Perspectives of Comparative History

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The discussion on comparative history (*vergleichende Geschichte*, *histoire comparée*) is ongoing. Its value is praised; its benefits are acknowledged. But most historians are not interested in systematic comparison. Indeed, there is no lack of old and new objections to comparative history, or at least to certain types of comparative history. The topic remains controversial.¹ The current boom in transnational and transregional approaches—in the form of ‘entangled histories’ (*Verflechtungsgeschichte* or *histoire croisée*)—gives the issue of comparison a new timeliness. We can observe a certain upsurge in comparative history over the past decades; progress, however, has been limited, and comparison has remained a matter for a minority of historians.²

This introductory essay starts out with a discussion of what ‘comparative history’ means. We follow this up with a discussion of the different purposes and types of historical comparison in existence today, and we survey the role comparison plays in various narratives. We then discuss the tension between some classical historical methods and the principles of historical comparison, which help to explain why comparison has had such a difficult time internationally in historical studies. From this, we develop the traits that are or should be specific to comparison in historical studies. Finally, we discuss recent changes in the field of comparative history: the impact of cultural history, the changing units and spaces of comparison, and the opportunities and problems of transnational approaches that recently have moved into the foreground. Particular attention is given to the relation between *histoire comparée* and *histoire croisée*, i.e., comparative history and entangled histories (including connected and transfer history).

The chapter closes with an overview of the contributions to this volume. We pay most attention to the German literature and debate.

Definition and Goals of Comparison

Similarities and differences

In comparative history, two or more historical phenomena are systematically studied for similarities and differences in order to contribute to their better description, explanation, and interpretation.

By emphasizing the study of the similarities and differences of at least two comparative cases as centrally characteristic, comparative history is distinguished from studies devoting themselves to the analysis and interpretation of *one* constellation, as differentiated and comprehensive as it may be. There are excellent examples of transnational and transcultural works that are nevertheless not comparative.³ When defined in this way, comparative history is also distinguished from entangled histories (*Verflechtungsgeschichte, histoire croisée*), which does not seek similarities and differences between two (or more) units of research—e.g., between France and Germany, between Christianity and Islam, or between three village communities or several discourses—but, rather, insists on relationships, transfers, and interactions, i.e., the entanglements between them. However, it will be shown that *histoire comparée* and *histoire croisée* are compatible and have many points of contact.⁴

Studies that are comparative in the full sense of the term should also be distinguished from those in which comparisons show up only *en passant*, by the wayside or implicitly. Such implicit comparisons frequently appear. In the following, we will look at studies in which comparison plays a central methodological role and is a key element of research and narration. Finally, the above definition indicates that comparison in history is seldom an end in itself, but usually serves other goals.

On the most general level, one can distinguish between two basic types of historical comparisons, namely, between those which are aimed mainly at weighing contrasts, i.e., which are targeted at insights into the differences between individual comparative cases, and those which focus on insights into agreements, i.e., generalisation and, thus, the understanding of general patterns.

This distinction has been discussed repeatedly in the literature. John Stuart Mill already contrasted the ‘method of difference’ with the ‘method of agreement.’ A.A. van den Braembussche refers to Mill, as do authors such as Theda Skocpol and Charles Tilly, in order to distinguish between the ‘contrasting type’ and the ‘universalising type’ of historical compari-

son, only to situate various mixed forms between these main types.⁵ Otto Hintze made a similar distinction already in 1929: 'One can compare in order to find a generality upon which that which is compared is based; one can compare in order to more clearly comprehend one of the possible objects in its individuality and to distinguish it from the others.'⁶

Comparative historians usually do both in different combinations. The distinction made by Otto Hintze and others, however, is fundamental, and comparative studies can be differentiated according to the way they combine and weigh these two dimensions.

Methodological Functions

On a second level, which allows a somewhat more precise distinction, we can identify different methodological purposes that are served by historical comparisons:

- a. In heuristic terms, comparison allows scholars to identify problems and questions that would otherwise be impossible or difficult to pose. Drawing from his own research, Marc Bloch provided an example from agrarian history to show what comparison is capable of uncovering. After investigating the English enclosures from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries and assessing their functions, he thought it likely that comparable processes could have taken place in France, even if scholars had not yet uncovered them. Proceeding from the assumptions of French analogies or equivalents, as inspired by the English example, Bloch uncovered corresponding, if not identical, changes in agrarian property structures in Provence in the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries. In this way, he contributed to a profound revision of this region's history. This productive act of scholarly transfer was based on the conviction that the problems of agrarian societies were similar on both shores of the English Channel. They called for parallel, if not identical, solutions if certain innovations—in this case, the emergence of a capitalistically managed agriculture—were to occur.⁷
- b. In descriptive terms, historical comparison, above all, helps to apply a clear profile to individual cases and often to a single, particularly interesting case. For example, one discovers that the German workers' movement emerged as an independent force relatively early on only when compared to other workers' movements, such as those in England or the United States. The unusually powerful position, remarkable cohesion, and great historical impact of the German *Bildungsbürgertum* (educated middle classes) only become visible in comparison with other European societies. The delayed development of the West

German industrial city of Oberhausen only becomes apparent in contrast to other comparable places.⁸ Historical peculiarities only become clearly visible when one refers to comparable examples, which are sufficiently similar in some respects, but differ in other respects.

- c. In analytical terms, comparison makes an important contribution to the explanation of historical phenomena. On the one hand, it serves to criticize pseudo-explanations. Again, Marc Bloch provided a good example. When historians discovered by comparative studies that the intensification of pressure by the medieval and early modern manorial system in most regions of Europe took place more or less simultaneously (although in different forms), they took a sceptical look at all locally specific explanations of this phenomenon that local and regional historians had been quick to proffer. Instead of focusing on regional explanations, historians using the comparative method looked for more general explanatory models and, in this case, arrived at the declining ground rent and its causes.⁹

On the other hand, comparisons can serve as indirect experiments and can help to ‘test hypotheses.’ In this respect, it is important to think carefully about the ‘experimental design.’ When a historian attributes the appearance of phenomenon ‘b’ in a society to condition or cause ‘a,’ he or she then can subsequently check this hypothesis by looking for societies in which ‘b’ appeared without ‘a,’ or ‘a’ existed without leading to ‘b.’ In this way, one can either accept the hypothesis for the time being or continue refining it.¹⁰ To be sure, this procedure can run up against tight limits, since historians—unlike natural scientists in their laboratories—rarely find the *ceteris paribus* condition sufficiently fulfilled between the constellations they compare.

Along similar lines, comparison helps to find or check generalizations. Thus, the comparative observation of specific forms of social protest in different societies can help determine the link between state power and social protest in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The comparison of different national cases can also demonstrate that and how the organizational ability of specific industrial workers was influenced by their system of work and by the structure of their communities.¹¹

- d. In paradigmatic terms, comparison can help to de-familiarize the familiar. When examined in light of observable alternatives, a specific development can lose the ‘matter of course’ appearance it may have possessed before. Comparison opens our eyes for other constellations; it sharpens what Robert Musil has called our *Möglichkeitssinn* (sense of the possible). It transforms one case into one among many possible cases. Comparison leads to de-provincializing historical observation.

As John H. Elliott put it: 'above all a comparative approach forces us to reconsider our assumptions about the uniqueness of our own historical explanation.'¹²

This has an impact on the atmosphere and style, the mood and culture of historical studies, including the way in which central terms are used. Frequently, comparison reveals their cultural specificities and historicity. A broad-based comparison with different, e.g., non-Western or historically remote, alien cultures can lead scholars to challenge the most general of terms. In this way, it is possible to highlight the cultural framework within which one works and which is often not discussed in noncomparative studies. Comparison encourages the historian to reflect on his own cultural foundations and on the culture of his own scholarly discipline.¹³

Comparison in different plots

Comparison is rarely practised in a pure form or for its own sake. Comparisons are usually built into different narratives or plots. There, they serve different functions within different contexts. Without any claim for completeness, we shall examine four different cases.

Asymmetrical Comparison

Frequently, one looks into another country, another society or another culture in order to better understand one's own. One hopes to understand the peculiarities of one case by looking at others. Often the other case (cases) is (are) used for purposes of background only, while intensive investigation is reserved for the area or problem in the centre of attention. This has been the way in which proponents of the German *Sonderweg* thesis usually looked into West European examples—or more generally 'the West'—in order to specify (and frequently criticize) 'German particularities'. This has been the way in which proponents of the 'American exceptionalism' thesis used to compare their findings with other cases in order to pinpoint (and frequently praise) particularities of US history. Max Weber's comparative studies were not completely void of this attitude when he looked into non-Western religions and civilizations with the purpose of understanding better what he termed 'Western rationalization' (or modernization).¹⁴

These are contrasting comparisons of an asymmetrical type. They are asymmetrical in that the cases used for the comparison merely get sketched in as background. Instead of a full-blown comparison, we are usually left

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