Introduction

Discussions of comparative history's standing within the historical profession are marked by an inherent inconsistency. Historians have repeatedly endorsed comparative history as an antidote to national history's faults but at the same time expressed skepticism as to the possibility of it being practiced by a considerable proportion of the profession. Endorsement and skepticism are well founded. A historian who limits his study to a single country – in too many cases, his own – is very often unable to perceive the true contours of its uniqueness or to comprehend that the local phenomena he studies are merely variants of some general ones; transnational comparison may help him overcome such shortcomings. On the other hand, comparative history is considered as too demanding. Historians, especially in this era of unprecedented publication, have difficulty keeping abreast with the research done in their own area; how can they be expected to cope with primary sources and secondary literature pertaining to a second area, to say nothing of a third or fourth?

Several outlines of comparative history that practicing historians have published during the past four decades provide a possible way out of this quandary. These outlines distinguish between a "hard," systematic, comparative history, which requires a full mastery of the history of two or more entities and tests hypotheses by examining all the pertinent data, and "soft" varieties, which focus on one entity but widen a historian's horizons by having recourse to secondary literature pertaining to another entity – or to several other entities – so as to gain a wider perspective, think up new questions and elicit insights. The variety that Jürgen Kocka has aptly called the "asymmetrical comparison" is especially promising. For instance, a student writing her dissertation on the Public Works Department in British Palestine in the years 1920–48 might understand the subject of her choice far better were she to delve into the secondary literature dealing with parallel bodies in, say, British India and the Sudan, to say nothing of Britain itself; it stands to reason that such reading would lead her to ask questions about British Palestine's PWD she would otherwise have not formulated, and it is well-nigh certain that only by such comparative reading would she be able to discover the particularities of Palestine's PWD. A comparison with parallel organizations in neighboring French Syria and Lebanon would have a similar effect. Moreover, the adoption of a comparative perspective would free the dissertation from constriction to local history and allow its author to join a larger community of scholars traversing political and linguistic boundaries.

Most articles in the present volume are based on papers delivered at the First and Second Spring Schools in Comparative History held at the Institute for Advanced Studies of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The first School, directed by Patricia Crone and myself, lasted from 5 to 9 May 2002 and discussed a number of cross-comparisons (i.e., studies comparing societies separated by time and space) and parallel comparisons (i.e., studies comparing contemporary and neighboring societies), as well as comparative history's prospects and pitfalls in general. The second School, directed by S.N. Eisenstadt, lasted from 16 to 19 June 2003 and compared diverse forms of globalization, the basic assumption being that – contrary to theories that regard globalization as an exclusively modern or contemporary phenomenon – partial globalizations have already developed in earlier historical periods and in various regions. The two Schools took place at the height of the second Palestinian uprising, with continuous violence in Jerusalem and elsewhere in the country. A few of the scholars from abroad who had agreed to lecture in the Schools eventually chose to stay home – in one extreme case, just a couple of days before scheduled arrival. Yet these cancellations did not critically affect the Schools, as in almost all cases we were able to recruit spirited scholars to replace the more fainthearted ones. The lecturers who decided to abide by their original commitments and come to a city repeatedly harassed by suicide bombers, surely deserve respect; but I believe that their pursuit of academic activities within so charged an atmosphere gave them also an unforgettable life experience.

The volume opens with my survey of the main outlines for comparative history offered by practicing historians from the late nineteenth century down to the present, tracing the outlines' interconnections and remarkably slow convergence. It is followed by Jürgen Kocka's discussion of the ethical implications of comparative history and the ethical problems to which it – and especially asymmetrical comparisons – may give rise. Diego Olstein concludes this part of the volume by arguing that comparative history is well suited to bridge the gap between monographic and macro-history.

The second part of the volume contains a number of studies that exemplify the potential of symmetrical, asymmetrical, parallel and cross-comparisons. Sabine MacCormack combines her unique mastery of the histories of both Ancient Rome and Pre-Columbian and Spanish America to offer a symmetrical cross-comparison of the Roman and Inca empires. Tamar Herzog provides an asymmetrical cross-comparison between early modern European expansion and present-day globalization, underlining the historian's dilemma between describing a past he or she reconstructs today and a past experienced by contemporaries. Michael Confino offers a basically asymmetrical comparison – partially parallel as far as chronology is concerned – that contrasts serfdom in Russia and slavery in the American

South. Nehemia Levtzion presents a symmetrical, parallel comparison of a large number of Muslim networks of renewal that emerged in the eighteenth century, from West Africa to China and Southeast Asia (although the fact goes unmentioned in this posthumously published article, a systematic comparison of these extraordinarily widespread networks led to the discovery of their common origin). S.N. Eisenstadt studies the modern Japanese political system within the framework of analyzing multiple modernities; his is an asymmetrical, parallel comparison. Peter Baldwin provides a symmetrical, parallel comparison of modern welfare states and raises a series of intriguing questions about their future. Finally, Susan Reynolds argues that comparative studies of feudalism exemplify the pitfalls that beset attempts to compare phenomena described by the same word yet essentially differing from one another. Though such attempts may be stimulating, she contends that instead of comparing entire societies vaguely labeled as feudal, historians may do better by comparing specific elements of different societies and establishing the extent to which they tend to cluster together.

The volume concludes with a report by Elisheva Baumgarten, Esther Cohen and Ruth Roded – on the problems they encountered when they joined forces to teach a course in comparative history.

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Outlines for Comparative History Proposed by Practicing Historians

Benjamin Z. Kedar

The extent to which comparative history was ignored by practicing historians just four generations ago is best exemplified by a short article that appeared in the *English Historical Review* in April 1890. Its author was the 27–year-old French historian Charles-Victor Langlois (1863–1929), who was to become an eminent medievalist and to co-author an influential introduction to historical studies. In this article, Langlois forcefully pleaded for a comparative study of social, political and legal phenomena in medieval England and France.[1] From a present-day standpoint, such an undertaking would be deemed anything but innovative; yet at the time Langlois was right to present his views as "new enough, seeing that to my knowledge they have never yet been applied."[2]

On a more abstract level, Langlois argued that comparison is the chief method that allows a historian to establish causal links between phenomena and study the laws that regulate their succession, "for there is no surer means of knowing the conditions and causes of a particular fact than to compare it with analogous facts. With identity of effect we can reach conclusions as to similarity of cause, and differences of detail explain in their turn the differences of environment under which the facts have been produced."[3] In other words, basically identical effects permit identifying the similar causes that generated them, whereas subsidiary differences among results are traceable to the particular conditions in which each of them originated. Also, when the comparison of institutions in several related societies reveals a marked similarity, it is possible to reconstitute the ancestral civilization in which these societies originated. In rigorousness and sophistication, Langlois' effort was a far cry from, say, John Stuart Mill's methods of inquiry propounded in 1843.[4] Nevertheless, he did forcefully draw attention to the potential importance of comparison for historians.

In addition, Langlois attempted to explain why – unlike philologists and students of primitive societies – historians had not yet embraced the comparative method. First, he argued with baffling ingenuousness, the

1 Charles-Victor Langlois, "The Comparative History of England and France during the Middle Ages,"*English Historical Review* 5 (1890), 259-63.

2 Ibid., p. 263.

3 Ibid., p. 259.

4 *John Stuart Mill's Philosophy of Scientific Method*, ed. Ernest Nagel (1843; New York, 1950), pp. 211-33.

phenomena of modern history are so complex that their comparison leads only to the detection of differences. "It would be useless to compare the present institutions of China with those of France, or of England – even of England under the Georges – with those of France under the Bourbons; they have nothing in common; they each have separate filiations which in no way help to any reciprocal explanation."[5] Second, the comparative method has been discredited by its protracted abuse by rhetoricians who employ, for stylistic ornamentation, similes devoid of any explanatory value. A serious historian will not follow in their footsteps by comparing chronologically disparate phenomena that resemble one another only in some superficial manner, nor will he engage in the "mere mental sport, more amusing than useful": the picking out of fortuituous coincidences.[6] Third, the comparative method requires a profound knowledge of the histories of two or more neighboring countries. Few historians possess it.

Langlois resolutely advocated limiting the application of the comparative method to phenomena that are basically similar and in contact one with another, such as the social, political and legal developments in medieval France and England. He believed that this application would also make it possible to detect interchanges of influence between the phenomena under scrutiny.[7] In short, he supported what may be called *parallel comparisons* – that is, studies comparing contemporary and neighboring societies – and rejected out of hand *cross-comparisons*, or studies comparing societies separated by time and space.[8]

Langlois' article of 1890 provides a useful starting point, because it allows for a better evaluation of the progress made by subsequent practicing historians who proffered outlines for the study of comparative history. It is also worthwhile to compare Langlois' rudimentary theoretical thinking

5 Langlois, "The Comparative History," p. 260.

6 Loc.cit. – In pointing out that rhetoricians tend to resort to historical comparisons Langlois may have been influenced by Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 2.20.

7 Langlois, "The Comparative History," pp. 261-62. For surveys of earlier (and later) discussions of the role of comparison in historical studies see the articles by Theodor Schieder, "Möglichkeiten und Grenzen vergleichender Methoden in der Geschichtswissenschaft," *Historische Zeitschrift* 200 (1965), 529-51, repr. in his *Geschichte als Wissenschaft. Eine Einführung* (2nd ed., Munich, 1968), pp. 195-219, 234-38; Reinhold Bichler, "Die theoretische Einschätzung des Vergleichens in der Geschichtswissenschaft," in *Vergleichende Geschichtswissenschaft: Methode, Ertrag und ihr Beitrag zur Universalgeschichte*, ed. Franz Hampl and Ingomar Weiler (Darmstadt, 1978), pp. 1-87; Hartmut Kaelble, *Der historische Vergleich. Eine Einführung zum 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt/Main, 1999).

8 The terms "parallel comparisons"and "cross-comparisons" were devised by Patricia Crone and myself while planning the First Jerusalem Spring School in Comparative History. It should be noted that our "parallel comparison" differs from the "parallel comparative history" discussed in Theda Skocpol and Margaret Somers, "The Uses of Comparative History in Macrosocial Inquiry," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 22 (1980), 176-78, 187-92. — Independently of us, Patrick Geary contrasted comparative studies of neighboring and contemporary societies with those of unrelated historical

with Émile Durkheim's intricate *Rules of the Sociological Method* of 1895, where the comparative method is presented as amounting to indirect experimentation, concomitant variation is singled out as the one and only among Mill's methods of inquiry that is pertinent to the study of social phenomena, cross-comparisons are deemed of fundamental importance, and the comparison of societies that are different yet at the same stage of their development is emphatically advocated.[9] Nevertheless, both Langlois and Durkheim believed that comparison is crucial for the st udy of causation.[10]

A further attempt to deal with the prospects of the comparative method in historical studies was made by Gustave Glotz (1862–1935) – soon to become a leading historian of ancient Greece – in the opening lecture of the course on Greek history he delivered at the Sorbonne in 1907. Similarly to Langlois, he observed that historians rarely had recourse to the comparative method, despite its importance for the establishment of historical laws and its crucial contribution to the progress of several sciences. Again like Langlois, he rejected "fleeting analogies" proffered to bolster an argument and easily invalidated by some obvious difference, and decried the allusive, anachronistic uses of present-day terms that evoke a groundless analogy or even identity between some past situation and the present. Glotz advocated abstaining from a comparison of grand events and concentrating instead on a careful study of the institutions, customs and juridical principles of different societies, a study that should be aimed at detecting some of the laws regulating societal evolution. As much as possible, one should compare people related to each other (here Glotz recalls Langlois) or societies that have reached the same degree of development (here Durkheim's influence is evident). As for the possibility of filling a gap in the history of one society with facts observed in the history of another, Glotz calls for great prudence. The procedure, he claims, is admissible only when the evolution of the first society is well known, the gap is small and located between two perfectly determinable points, and the evolution of the second society is identical.

phenomena: Patrick Geary, "Vergleichende Geschichte und sozialwissenschaftliche Theorie," trans. Brigitte Pohl-Resl, in *Das europäische Mittelalter im Spannungsbogen des Vergleichs. Zwanzig internationale Beiträge zu Praxis, Problemen und Perspektiven der historischen Komparatistik*, ed. Michael Borgolte (Berlin, 2001), pp. 29-38. In the English abstract (p. 382), Geary used the term "cross-cultural comparative study."

9 Émile Durkheim, *Les règles de la méthode sociologique* (Paris, 1895), Ch. 6; idem, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, trans. S.A. Soloway and J. H. Mueller (London, 1938), pp. 125-40.

10 It might be worthwhile to survey subsequent outlines for comparative historical studies proffered by sociologists and historical sociologists and to investigate, inter alia, whether the gap in sophistication between Langlois and Durkheim prevails also among later practitioners of their respective crafts. Indeed, the disregard of sociologists' outlines in the present paper is arbitrary, for numerous reasons. However, my intention is to draw attention to the growth in preoccupation with the comparative method among *practicing* historians. On the particular features of historians' application of the method see Kaelble, *Der historische Vergleich* (see above, n. 7), pp. 97-113.

These requirements are however so severe that one wonders whether Glotz really believed the procedure to be employable at all. He then went on to categorically proscribe a prolongation of the evolution curve at its extremes – that is, an attempt to infer origins or predict the future.[11] Henri Berr (1863–1954), the proponent of a comprehensive, scientific "historical synthesis" aimed at the discovery of laws, immediately hailed Glotz's lecture for charting a course that integrates sociology and history and thus definitely improves on Durkheim. Somewhat later he hailed Glotz for propagating the comparative method as a tool that allows one to detect laws empirically, without any a priori idea or sociological preconception.[12]

It was on 9 April 1923 that the comparative method was catapulted into the limelight of the historical profession at large when, at the outset of the Fifth International Congress of Historical Sciences that took place in Brussels, Henri Pirenne (1862–1935) delivered his keynote address, "De la méthode comparative en histoire." Pirenne, as well as being one of the most influential historians of that period, was also a Belgian national hero. In the wake of the German conquest in 1914 he led the resistance to the German demands to reopen the University of Ghent and hold all courses in Flemish, was arrested in 1916 and deported to Germany, where he observed with disdain the patriotic pronouncements of many of his erstwhile German colleagues. His return to liberated Belgium became a triumph.[13]

The eloquent if unmethodical keynote address stemmed to a considerable extent from Pirenne's wartime experiences. During the Great War, he declared, history was mobilized by the belligerents and misused to bolster the people's courage and expose the adversary as a natural and hereditary enemy, with criticism and impartiality giving way to subservience to generals and politicians. Racial theory provided a pseudo-scientific basis for these excesses of nationalism, with race often identified with nationality. Yet the one method that provides for a true comprehension of national originality and individuality is comparison. "By comparing, and only by comparing, can we

11 Gustave Glotz, "Réflexions sur le but et la méthode de l'histoire," *Revue internationale de l'enseignement* 54 (juillet-décembre 1907), 481-95. J.G. Droysen (1808-84) had proposed closing gaps in documentation by having recourse to analogy: see Johann Gustav Droysen, *Historik. Vorlesungen über Enzyklopädie und Methodologie der Geschichte,* ed. Rudolf Hübner, 3rd ed. (Munich, 1958), pp. 156-63, 340. For a discussion see Schieder, "Möglichkeiten," pp. 535-36; Bichler, "Die theoretische Einschätzung," pp. 5-8.

12 H[enri] B[err], "Le but et la méthode de l'histoire d'après M. Gustave Glotz," *Revue de synthèse historique* 15 (1907), 357-61; idem, *La synthèse en histoire. Essai critique et théorique* (Paris, 1911), p. 130 n. 2. Berr propagated his vision of a "historical synthesis" in the *Revue de synthèse historique* he edited and, since 1920, in his prefaces to the volumes that appeared in the series *L'évolution de l'humanité*. For another contemporary approach to the subject see Louis Davillé, "La comparaison et la méthode comparative, en particulier dans les études historiques," *Revue de synthèse historique* 27 (1913), 4-33, 217-57 and 28 (1914), 201-29.

13 See Bryce Lyon, *Henri Pirenne: A Biographical and Intellectual Study* (Ghent, 1974), pp. 204-90.

arrive at scientific knowledge. We shall never reach it if we confine ourselves to the limits of national history." Historians should transcend national and local viewpoints, strive instead to perceive history in its entirety, and regain thereby the universal perspective that prevailed from Classical Antiquity to the Enlightenment. Its demise in the nineteenth century under the twin impact of romanticism and nationalism led to an exclusive concentration on national history that proved fatal to true understanding. To revert to the universal perspective one should embrace the comparative method, "through which, and only through which, can history become a science and liberate itself from the idols of sentiment." Thus comparison, leading as it does to a universal outlook, provides the one reliable remedy against the perversion of scientific history by nationalism.[14]

In his own research, Pirenne dealt with medieval Catholic Europe without comparing it systematically with other entities (though he did compare developments in its various parts). He repeatedly called attention to analogies with modern phenomena – especially during his internment in Germany and after – occasionally raising questions of a cross-comparative nature.[15] Yet his main contribution to comparativism was the prominence he conferred on the approach in a high-profile assembly of historians.

The impact of Pirenne's address was immediate. Henri Berr, whose propagation of "historical synthesis" Pirenne had approvingly mentioned in his footnotes, agreed that the comparative method is of crucial importance in scientific research. Yet, Berr went on to say, comparison is an instrument that may serve aims of diverging value. When it is crudely employed to point out some analogies in the development of groups or periods, it merely leads to broad statements that hint at the underlying problems but do not solve them. But when comparison is applied within a study of historical causality, and scientific synthesis unravels the permanent factors at play and exposes their nature and interrelationships, it may detect explanatory causes. In other words, Berr intimated that Pirenne's conception of the

14 Henri Pirenne, "De la méthode comparative en histoire," in *Compte rendu du Ve Congrès International des Sciences Historiques, Bruxelles 1923*, ed. Guillaume Des Marez and François.-L. Ganshof (Brussels, 1923), pp. 19-32, with the quotations appearing on pp. 28, 31. For an attempt to establish the biographical background of the address see Adriaan Verhulst, "Marc Bloch and Henri Pirenne on Comparative History. A Biographical Note," *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire* 79.2 (2001), 508-10. Verhulst's conclusion that the address was "purely occasional" is disproved by Pirenne's dwelling upon well-nigh the same ideas in a paper written in 1928 and published, in English translation, three years later: Henri Pirenne, "What Are Historians Trying to Do?" in *Methods in Social Science: A Case Book*, ed. Stuart A. Rice (Chicago, 1931), pp. 444-45.

15 See Lyon, *Henri Pirenne*, pp. 232, 269; Alexandre Eck, "Henri Pirenne et la science historique," in *Henri Pirenne: Hommages et souvenirs*, 2 vols. (Brussels, 1938), 1:261-62; Mauro Moretti, "Henri Pirenne: comparazione e storia universale," in *La storia comparata: Approcci e prospettive*, ed. Pietro Rossi (Milan, 1990), pp. 98-109.