



FORUM

Comparative History and comparative Sociology

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I'd like to begin with a paradox. There is a substantial corpus of work that makes use of the comparative method and might be equally well described as social history or historical sociology. However, the view of comparison itself that is held by historians and sociologists, at least the ones of my generation or earlier, is rather different, not to say diametrically opposed; sociologists take the value of comparison for granted, while many historians remain suspicious of it. When they do practice comparison, sociologists are bolder, happily moving across great distances in space and time, like Michael Mann, for example. Historians are much more cautious hence this paper, without my intending it, has turned into a comparative study itself.

I

Comparative history, in the sense of parallel histories, goes back to the ancient world, to Plutarch and his parallel lives of Greeks and Romans. The approach was revived in the early modern period, especially in Italy, and used to study the virtually simultaneous revolts of the 1640s, extending from Catalonia and Portugal, via Naples and Sicily, to the Ukraine and Istanbul. For example, in 1652 count Maiolino Bisaccioni published an account of these revolts and an attempt to explain them in a book entitled *Guerre civili de gli ultimi tempi*.

In the eighteenth century, when the idea of system was becoming important, Montesquieu, whether or not we follow Raymond Aron in calling him a sociologist, compared and contrasted monarchies and republics as political and social systems, while Adam Smith contrasted what he called the 'mercantile system' with the system of free trade.

In the early 19th century, some historians produced parallel histories of states. Ranke wrote on the Ottoman and Spanish Empires (1827), for instance, and Joachim Lelewel, the Polish historian in exile in France, on Spain and Poland in his *Historyczna paralela* (1831).

If one take the comparative method in a more precise sense, however, it was a new discovery beginning in the natural sciences (comparative anatomy, for instance) and spreading to linguistics, sociology and literature as well as to history. In Britain, John Stuart Mill produced a classic discussion of the comparative method. In France, it was advocated by Durkheim, and in Germany by Weber, who considered himself a historian but has been described by posterity as a sociologist (favourably by sociologists but pejoratively by some historians).

In the early twentieth century a comparative approach was advocated by historians of the calibre of the Belgian Henri Pirenne and Marc Bloch. In the USA, Crane Brinton and Roger Merriman pub-



lished comparative studies of revolution, following in the footsteps of Bisaccioni (whether they were aware of this or not).

The comparative approach may be said to have been institutionalized when a journal devoted to the subject was founded over half a century ago, in 1958: *Comparative Studies in Society and History*. It would be interesting to carry out an analysis of the articles, to discover how many are written by sociologists and how many by historians, and also how many are genuinely comparative rather than mini-monographs that the editor juxtaposes to others on similar themes.

Since that time, the comparative method has been used regularly by historical sociologists, notably by three North Americans, Barrington Moore (1966), Theda Skocpol (1979) and Jack Goldstone (1991). Intriguingly, and in a repetition of the first use I cite here, all of them are concerned with revolution. Robert Bellah also uses this method, continuing Weber's work with a study of Buddhism and capitalism in Japan, while other scholars have made comparative studies of bureaucracy and the process of industrialization.

On the other hand, [pure?] historians have been relatively slow to follow the examples of Bloch and Pirenne. In the 1970s, when I edited a series of studies in comparative history, it came to an end rather quickly after only four titles had been published, because I could not persuade more historians to collaborate. Many historians imagined comparison as a simple and doomed search for similarities and dismissed comparison, as some still do, with the phrase 'you can't compare apples and oranges', an idea that irritated the Belgian classicist Marcel Détienné into writing his brilliant essay, *Comparer l'incomparable* (2000).

However, the tide may be turning. Recent British examples include three distinguished contributions. Another classicist, Geoffrey Lloyd, has written about the study of the natural world in ancient Greece and ancient China. The global historian Felipe Fernández-Armesto both compares and contrasts the histories of North and South America. Sir John Elliott, a scholar with a high reputation among both conservative and innovative historians, has long defended comparison and recently published a book about the British and Spanish Empires.

II

In a sense all historical writing is comparative, at least implicitly. Historians like to say that they are concerned with the particular, leaving generalization to social scientists, but as Max Weber once remarked, it is only possible to establish 'what is specific, say, to the medieval city ... if we first find what is missing in other cities (ancient, Chinese, Islamic)'.

Explicitly comparative history comes in a number of varieties. Comparisons are usually made between two or more places, regions or social groups during the same period, leaving comparisons between different centuries to historians of literature and art, scholars who are less tied to a single period than usual for general historians.

However, to focus on the same period for both halves of a comparison may not always be the best strategy. I had to face this problem in my essay on the patricians of Venice and Amsterdam in early modern times, since the apogee of the two groups occurred at different moments, that of the Venetians in the 15th and 16th centuries and that of the Amsterdammers in the 17th century. I decided to study them over the same period, the 17th century, in order to see how the two groups, who were both involved in international trade, responded to the changing economic situation.



Today, one grand comparison between different cultures in different periods awaits a historian ambitious enough to undertake it. I am thinking about comparisons and contrasts between the Christian Reformation of the 16th century and the Muslim Reformation of our own time. Where the first Reformation was associated with the printing press, the second Reformation depends on newer technologies such as the video cassette, allowing the laity to listen to and to discuss sermons in their own homes. I hasten to add that this is not my idea: Ernest Gellner used to speak about Muslim Puritanism, while Eickelman has considered the place of new media in new forms of Islam, but the theme is surely still in need of development.

Again, there are different forms or levels of comparison. Between whole cultures or aspects of them (such as birth-rates, literacy, etc), or between events such as revolutions (including scientific revolutions), and structures, such as feudalism. Or between what Bloch called 'neighbourly comparisons', such as kingship in England and France, and distant comparisons, such as feudalism in France and Japan.

Some historians prefer precise, systematic, quantitative comparisons (the size of cities, for instance, or the number of calories consumed or the number of hours worked in different places, periods or social groups). Other scholars practice more intuitive, qualitative comparisons – between ideas, for instance, between systems of education or even between individuals (such as the 17th-century statesmen, Richelieu and Olivares).

Some scholars look mainly for similarities, others for differences. Paradoxically, though, a focus on apparent similarities sometimes generates awareness of underlying differences, while an emphasis on difference may lead to the discovery of similarities, especially functional equivalents, a concept that has, I think, outlived the demise of functionalism.

Comparison makes absences more visible and a few comparative studies have been explicitly concerned with such absences. Werner Sombart, officially an economist but active in sociology and history as well, published a famous article entitled: Why is there no socialism in the United States? To the example of Sombart we might add those of Durkheim's follower Marcel Granet on the absence of notions of sin and law in China; Joseph Needham on the absence of a Scientific Revolution, again in China, leading to a great debate on the 'Needham question'; or Ross McKibbin's essay, inspired by Sombart, 'Why was there no Marxism in Great Britain?'

III

On this interdisciplinary occasion it may be useful to return to first principles and to ask: Why compare at all? What are the uses or advantages of comparison? I can think of two main answers to this question.

In the first place, we need to make comparisons in order to avoid *campanilismo* at its different levels (city, nation, or the whole of the west). D tienne makes this point eloquently: "Il y a une valeur  thique de l'activit  comparative ... C'est qu'elle invite   mettre en perspective les valeurs et les choix de la soci t    laquelle on appartient ... on apprend ...   porter un regard critique sur son propre tradition" (D tienne 2000, 59).

It was for this reason that Arnaldo Momigliano praised Toynbee, despite the many weaknesses of *A Study of History*, as a contribution to deparochialization. As Elliott recently re-iterated: 'Even imperfect comparisons can help to shake historians out of their provincialisms'.



It is easy when beginning research, all too easy, to think of one's chosen topic as special, singular or even unique, especially if the topic comes from one's own culture.

In Britain, for instance, historians of the early modern period have taken considerable interest in the Grand Tour to Italy and elsewhere undertaken by British aristocrats, often without realizing that nobles from other countries, especially in northern Europe from the Netherlands to Poland, undertook similar tours for similar reasons. Whether there were national or regional differences in routes taken or places seen remains to be discovered – a comparative study is yet to be undertaken.

The question of singularity is – in yet another paradox – a general one. A comparative historian will [might?] note that exceptionality has been asserted by a number of different nations such as the British, French, Spanish, Germans (with their famous *Sonderweg*), Russians (with their Russian soul), Americans, Japanese (with the *nihonjinron* tradition) and so on.

Island-nations such as Britain and Japan have been guilty of insularity. In the Spanish case, we might speak of peninsularity, but the cases of France, Russia, Germany and the USA remind us that the problem is a more general one – cultural nationalism. The Belgian historian Pirenne, after the First World War, advocated the comparative method precisely as an antidote to nationalism. As a recent study by the French historian Anne-Marie Thiesse points out, the process of the creation of national identities, with their stress on the unique qualities of each nation, is a process with many common features.

On a smaller scale than the nation, note the idea of the singularity of Venice, which goes back at least as far as Francesco Sansovino's *Venetia città nobilissima e singolare* (1581). Rather than asking whether or not early modern Venice was singular, it would be more useful to ask: In what ways, and to what extent, was it singular? Venice differed from Florence in the same period in some ways, from Genoa in other ways, from Amsterdam in others, from ancient Rome in others, from Bangkok or the Japanese port of Sakai in still more, but yet it still had something in common with each of them. Viewed within comparative perspective, Venice appears to be a unique combination of elements, most of which have parallels elsewhere.

On a larger scale, think of the idea of the singularity of the West. Today, one of the leading crusaders against such Eurocentrism is Jack Goody, the British social anthropologist who successfully reinvented himself as a historical sociologist or cultural historian. Goody has criticized both the sociologist Norbert Elias and the historian Keith Thomas for overemphasizing the uniqueness of the West.

More generally, he has denounced what he calls the 'theft of history', that is the description by western historians of humanism, individualism, capitalism, modernity and so on as if they were completely western discoveries or inventions, ignoring parallels in China, the Islamic world and elsewhere.

So the first argument in favour of comparison is a rather general one, that it discourages collective narcissism.

Secondly, and more precisely, it has often been pointed out that a comparative approach, including [that encompasses?] contrasts, allows us to test explanations. Whenever we offer historical explanations of anything, we depend on implicit comparison. The question: 'why did the French Revolution happen?' implies, why not in England? Why not 50 years earlier or later? And so on. Making the comparisons explicit makes explanations easier to test.



Again, the recent interest in what is known as ‘counter-factual’ history – if the Spanish Armada had landed in England, for example – depends upon comparison, between what we believe to be the consequences of something that happened and the possible consequences of something that didn’t happen.

As Goody puts it: “Comparison is one of the few things we can do in the historical and social sciences to parallel the kind of experiments the scientists do”. (cf. S. F. Nadel (1951) *Foundations of Social Anthropology* and Piasare, *L’etnografo imperfetto*).

An obvious topic for collective research of this kind is emigration and immigration. One might study the history of emigration from different places (such as Italy, the Ottoman Empire and Japan in the later 19th century) to different places (USA, Australia, Argentina, Brazil, etc.), to see how far the reception of the emigrants varied with the culture of the hosts or the guests.

We also need comparison, as I suggested earlier, to draw our attention to significant absences. In Brazil, the absence of the press and of universities in colonial times leaps to the eye as soon as we look at Brazil’s neighbours, the viceroyalties of Mexico and Peru. The Spanish Empire decentralized, while the Portuguese colonial strategy was to centralize both printing and higher education in the metropolis.

IV

It is time to turn to the negative side to problems with, and critiques of, comparison.

A recent critique comes from the supporters of connected history or *histoire croisée* especially, but not exclusively, in France. Their sharpest criticisms concern the creation of artificial entities such as Protestantism and capitalism, homogenizing what is, in fact, varied. This is a danger for all historians, comparative or not, since we find it difficult to do without concepts such as ‘Britain’ or the ‘Renaissance’, but it is especially acute where comparisons are involved.

The supporters of *histoire croisée* offer the study of connections, especially intercontinental connections, as a substitute for comparison (‘beyond comparison’, to quote the title of one of the manifestos). In my view, connected history is to be welcomed, but not as a replacement for comparative history. The two approaches are complementary and we need them both.

One obvious danger of comparison is that of ignoring the cultural context of the practices or institutions that one is studying. In the early days of the discipline of anthropology, James Frazer exemplified an ambitious comparative approach in his huge book *The Golden Bough*, ranging from ancient Greece to modern Africa in search of similar practices. In what has become a classic critique, Bronisław Malinowski pointed out that Frazer ignored cultural contexts and so misunderstood both the function of the institutions and the meaning of the practices. As a critique of Frazer, he was surely successful, a comparative approach, however, is not tied, or does not have to be tied, to a lack of interest in context.

A second problem or danger is the problem of treating as static groups practices or situations that are in reality always changing. This kind of freezing is not inevitable, however, it is perfectly possible for a comparative historian to focus on process. In the case of my book on the patricians of Venice and Amsterdam, for instance, I focussed on a process that has been described as ‘aristocratization’. In a culture in which the social group with highest status was that of noble landowners, it was



tempting for successful merchants to leave trade and buy land, perhaps even a title, which would certainly raise the status of their children, if not their own.

Another serious danger is linked to one of the greatest successes of the comparative approach, the discovery of significant absences. The danger is that of viewing a given culture only [purely?] in terms of absences. In a famous study that is now over half a century old, the French historian Philippe Ariès noted what he called the absence of a sense of childhood in the Middle Ages. More precisely, what he observed or thought he observed was the absence of the idea that children behave differently from adults; that in a sense they belong to another culture. Specialists in the Middle Ages, provoked by Ariès, have produced a more nuanced account of medieval attitudes to children, distinguishing those of males and females, for example.

Distant comparisons in particular raise this problem, as the case of Max Weber illustrates. In his day, Weber seemed to escape Eurocentrism by placing his investigation of the rise of capitalism in an Asian context. Today, by contrast, he is criticized for Eurocentrism because his comparative study assessed other cultures essentially in terms of their lack of what the West possessed (capitalism, individualism and even rationality - as he defined it).

Max Weber was struck by the fact that in Germany in his time, around the year 1900, the North was both Protestant and capitalist while the South was neither. He went on to argue that Protestantism encouraged a 'worldly asceticism' that allowed merchants to build up their capital in a way that Catholicism, Islam or Buddhism did not.

However, as the American sociologist Robert Bellah has argued, a similar ethos may develop in different religions. Writing during the rise of Japanese capitalism in the 1950s, which Weber did not live to see, Bellah claims that there was a Japanese Buddhist equivalent to the Protestant ethos.

The question of absences is one aspect of a larger problem; the problem of ethnocentrism. Michel de Certeau's famous question, 'Where are you speaking from?' becomes especially acute; do you come from one of the cultures compared, or neither?

A notorious example of ethnocentric comparison comes from the history of feudalism. Western scholars discovered analogies to the feudal society of the West in Japan and India, either exaggerating the similarities or treating the differences as deviations from the norm. Within Europe, many scholars treated French feudalism as the model into which to fit other forms of medieval society, from Scandinavia to Italy.

The example of feudalism illustrates the way in which western ethnocentrism is encouraged by the western origin of the conceptual apparatus with which historians work. Even apparently unspecific terms such as 'university', 'portrait', or 'grammar' were originally coined with the European experience in mind, with the consequent danger of forcing Islamic institutions, Indian artefacts or Chinese texts to fit a western model.

V

There seems no third way between using this western apparatus of comparison and refusing to compare at all. To undertake comparison while remaining aware of the danger of Eurocentrism appears to be the lesser evil.



One precaution that we can take, though, is to follow what might be called the principle of rotation. That is, we can take different regions as the norm in their turn. Weber, Bloch and other famous comparatists began with the West. It is equally legitimate to invert the procedure. For example, one well-known concept in economic history that has moved from East to West is that of 'industrious revolution', which Jan de Vries borrowed from Akira Hayami.

Again, we might discuss whether or not seventeenth-century Spain was a 'closed' or 'secluded' country' on the model of Japan in the age of *sakoku*. To a lesser degree, given [their?] expansion in the Americas. Or perhaps look at the pleasure quarters of early modern Venice or Rome, Paris or London as western examples of the 'floating world' (*ukiyo*) to be found in Japanese cities such as Edō, Kyōtō or Ōsaka. Similar catalogues of talents, addresses and prices (Venice, Amsterdam, the Covent Garden ladies). Using concepts that originated outside Europe encourages a certain distancing from our own culture.

To summarise, my basic argument is that comparison is risky, but that lack of comparison is even more dangerous. It is dangerous because it encourages us to take for granted ideas that need to be tested.

Take the case of Norbert Elias and his famous study of what he called the 'Civilizing Process', more precisely perhaps the rise in early modern Europe of social pressures towards increasing self-control (which he believed to be linked to the centralization of government). Elias virtually ignored the rest of the world in his study. This was a pity, since the history of some other regions supports his theory.

However, similar pressures and similar results can be found in in Japan (in the age of the taming of the samurai in the Tokugawa period) and perhaps China, when it was unified under the Han dynasty.

The traditional grand narrative of western civilization was an account of uniquely western events: renaissance, reformation, scientific revolution, enlightenment and so on. In short, modernity was made in Europe and exported elsewhere. It is more realistic, as well as more humble, to think of these major events in the plural: renaissances, reformations, enlightenments and modernities. This is not to say that all reformations are the same, but that they reveal what Wittgenstein called 'family resemblances'.

In short, a comparative approach helps historians to test their explanations and also to liberate themselves from current assumptions in their own culture, thus taking a few steps towards the polyphonic history that is needed in our increasingly multicultural age.

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