

Between Comparison and Transfers – and What Now?

A French-German Debate

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In recent years a lively and instructive debate about comparative history has reignited, with the jumping-off point of classical comparative history. Comparative history has come to be more widely practiced in both Europe and the US since the 1970s, though only by a minority of historians. It was well received among US historical sociologists, as well as exiles from Europe, and gained significant standing through a rediscovered essay by Marc Bloch from the 1920s. Since the 1990s comparative history has been practiced more often in Europe than in the US, particularly in Germany (Berlin and Bielefeld). Comparative history was one step in a stronger transnational orientation of European historiography, and it has been weighed over several times. In the classical sense, one can understand comparative history as the systematic search for differences and similarities—for divergences and convergences—between various means of comparison. The development of comparative typologies and their contextualization was bound to follow.¹

After a quarter-century of comparative history, during which hundreds of comparative works were published, a debate began in the mid-1990s in which four concepts were developed: first, the concept of 'transfers'; then, the concept of 'entangled history'; after that the concept of *histoire croisée*; and, finally, the concept of a combination of comparative and 'relations history'. The development of these concepts sprang from each other and now contests historical doctrine.

Michel Espagne put forth the concept of 'transfers' in a 1994 article in the journal *Genèses*. He understood a transfer as the processes through which the norms, images and representations of one culture appear in another by the transmission of concepts which transmission is intimate through migra-

tion, as well as through meetings and the reading of texts from another culture. In the article he called for more room to be given to studies of transfer in historical scholarship, since he argues that every nation is constituted not only by its own traditions, but also to a significant extent by such transfers from other nations. The history of a nation cannot be understood when the writing is limited only to its national history. He strongly criticizes classical comparison, because it possesses several weaknesses that transfer studies alleviate. It is obliged to first construct the objects of comparison in order to begin making a comparison. It must, therefore, considerably remove itself from reality, and often leave transfers from other nations or civilizations unconsidered. Transfer studies are not similarly constrained, and therefore more closely represent reality, since they follow change through the transmission of one culture into another. Classical comparison primarily concentrates on structures and institutions, and largely excludes experiences and history. Experiences, however, stand at the centre of transfer studies. Classical comparison, moreover, fails to adequately address the historian's central object: time. As a general rule, it compares societies from the same time period. By contrast, time is an essential element of transfer studies, since the studies are always analysing change.

Jürgen Osterhammel has argued very convincingly in a similar vein, but with important differences. In contrast to Espagne, Osterhammel is not primarily interested in transfers among European countries, but in transfers between Europe and Asia, as well as other non-European societies. His definition of the concept of transfer is broader than most others: transfers are not just cultural, but also political, social and economic developments.

'Entangled history' or 'shared history', as developed by the social scientist, Shalini Randeria, and the historian and specialist of Japan, Sebastian Conrad, raises a critique of classical comparison similar to that of Espagne but continues Osterhammel's line of thought in two respects. According to this concept, transfers join together and integrate not only adjacent countries, nor only members of similar cultures such as France and Germany, but also countries spatially separated from one another, such as Japan and Germany. Entangled history states that direct and indirect transfers take place everywhere and bind together all civilizations in the world. More significantly, it claims emphatically that colonizers and colonized societies are strongly bound to one another through transfers and not only through the much-researched transfers from the mother country into the colonies, but also, though less frequently noted transfers from the colonies to the mother countries. The concept of entangled history therefore stresses a shift in emphasis away from Europe.

In reaction to this argument French historian and German specialist, Michael Werner, and French political scientist, Bénédicte Zimmermann, constructed the concept of *histoire croisée*. Three key elements have con-

tributed to the comparative history debate: *histoire croisée* is more or less grounded in a scepticism regarding the stand-alone existence of transnational spaces, movements, languages, values or institutions, and the nation is seen as a central point of orientation. As a result, this concept requires that transnational research of any kind take into account the fundamentally different perspectives of the different societies being compared and thus continually switch perspectives and become increasingly reflexive. Moreover, *histoire croisée* requires going beyond the predominantly *binational* orientation of comparative and transnational research to consider *multi-lateral* approaches and research. Finally, in the framework of this concept, the clear opposition between the disadvantages of classical comparison on the one hand, and the advantages of transfer studies, on the other, is reconsidered: it is argued that comparison and transfer share similar strengths and weaknesses.

Along with *histoire croisée* is a fourth concept: the combination of comparative and transfer studies. The basis of this idea is that transfer studies possess the same weaknesses as classical comparison. It argues that transfer studies must also construct their objects in order to define what constitutes a change through transmission from one culture to another. In addition comparisons, and not only transfer studies, operate across the dimension of time since they not only address similarities and differences, but also divergence and convergence. Comparisons are also argued to, indeed, deal with experiences. Moreover, transfer studies and comparisons rely upon and compliment one another. Comparisons require the consideration of transfers because transfers are a significant factor when addressing convergence and divergence. Without transfer studies, one overlooks an important explanation for divergences and convergences. Conversely, transfer studies require comparison because it is only through comparison that the delivering culture can be distinguished from the receiving culture; and it is only through comparison that the actual content of a change, which is at the core of a transfer, can be determined. For example, when one argues that the German nation largely consists of transfers from French culture, one must use comparison to figure out what is German and what is French. Finally, transfer studies further require comparisons, because comparisons become more a part of everyday thinking as the two societies are more tightly integrated, and as increased movements between them take place. Dealing with such everyday judgments and prejudices, explaining them, testing them and incorporating their influence, are considerable tasks for social scientists and historians, especially in a strongly integrated world.

In this debate, three things are noteworthy or worthy of critique:

1. This is not merely a methodological debate, but a part of a transnational reorientation of historical studies. This reorientation tool

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place in a time-specific historical context in Europe and would have had little chance to occur in earlier epochs. It has, without a doubt, been spurred on by massive anxiety over globalisation in times of growing unemployment and the decline of the European economy: falling behind Japan, Southeast Asia and the US; it was also encouraged by the recovery of the European Union since the 1980s, as European intellectuals came to see the EU as a significant transnational centre of European power; the process of individualisation, through which strong loyalties to European nation states were loosened in many European countries for citizens and historians alike and transnational values of international agreement and understanding came to be more highly prized; and, finally, through the new kinds of transnational wars since the 1990s, in which the main actors were no longer states alone and in which Europe, as a whole, was included. Without this time-specific historical context, the new transnational orientation of historians would remain incomprehensible. The debate, only briefly presented here, discussed different options for a transnational orientation of social and cultural history. Comparison was an alternative to transfer and relations studies. At the same time, the combination of both approaches was possible, because both options were concerned with the same goal of creating a more transnational historiography. They were not—and so as not to create any misunderstandings—the only options. The broader cultural and economic history of international relations, which was also developed during the 1990s, was another important, and not always clearly distinguished, option.

2. The debate under deliberation took place within a relatively small circle, and is not widely familiar outside it. It was limited to specialists of the last two and a half centuries and was not absorbed, for rather obvious reasons, by early modern historians or historians of the Middle Ages. It became increasingly a debate between social historians and Germanists, disciplines unfamiliar with one another and among whom there had not been close dialogue for a long time. Among the conventional partners of historiography—political science, sociology, ethnology, philosophy and law—the debate had little response. In these disciplines similar problems were discussed from time to time, usually under the topic of *Gattung* problems—in which one cannot compare objects that are tied in a close relationship. But the debate over *Gattung* problems was completely separate from the debate discussed here.
3. Up to this point in the debate no one has attempted to write a detailed scholarly history of historical comparison and historical transfer and relations. They certainly did not first begin in the 1970s, as is usually

thought in Europe. In the most interesting contributions on the subject the history of general social and cultural comparison is traced back to the Enlightenment, or even to Greek and Roman civilization (see the work of Peter Brockmeier, Lorraine Daston, Chris Lorenz, Lars Mjølset, Jürgen Schriewer).

What are the most significant challenges in the current status of the debate? How should historical comparison and relations history develop further?

The first, and most important, requirement has to do with the fact that this methodological debate precedes the practice of historical research. While the methodological works about classical historical comparison emerged at the end of a long practice of comparative history by historians, the discussion regarding the other concepts developed somewhat in reverse. Neither for 'entangled history', nor for *histoire croisée*, nor for the combination of historical comparison and relations history, are there a great number of empirical studies – and there are no internationally known, heavily cited and frequently translated model studies for future studies to engage. Transfer studies also do not a sea of research in which to swim. The immediate need for empirical research is imperative – otherwise the debate runs the danger of becoming lost in the abstract. Model studies, above all, often require many years of work.

A second requirement to further the debate is for abstract concepts beyond historical comparison to be reconciled with one another. How 'transfer history', 'integration history', 'relations history' and transnationality relate to one another is still too little considered, though there are proposals to do so. But the scholarly language also remains too unstructured. Should one abandon the term 'transfer history' in favour of 'integration', because the concept of transfer is too narrow and only means *changes* among concepts, experiences, and meanings through the transmission of these from one culture to another, while 'integration' is much more comprehensive? Or rather is 'transfer' a broader concept than 'integration', because transfers can take place between countries that are not tightly integrated and have little direct interaction? Or are both 'transfer history' and 'integration history' too narrow and should be dropped in favour of the neutral expression 'relations history' – which is not limited to changes through transnational transmission, and does not assume that all societies in the world are integrated and that foreign relations are an essential element of a particular society? Or is the concept of 'relations history' also too narrow for the transnational history of the twentieth century, because it cannot address important transnational developments such as international institutions – the World Bank, the United Nations, the European Union, the Catholic

Church – or transnational social spaces, movements, values, languages and discourses, as these cannot be reduced to relations between individual countries of societies, but, rather, possess their own, internal logic? Would it really be possible and sensible to break down the decision of the European Commission into French, British, German and Spanish contributions and relations, or to explain the decisions of the Catholic Church through reference to the relations among particular national daughter-churches? Does not the concept of relations history thus also have clear limits here? Would it be best to choose a kind of hierarchy among transnationality, relations history, integration history and transfers?

The third requirement: this debate needs to cease its exclusivity. It should be communicated more strongly to neighbouring disciplines, and they should be brought into the dialogue. Above all, the debate should move beyond its Franco-German exclusivity and open up into the Anglo-Saxon, Spanish-speaking and East Asian space. To this end, translations of key texts in English, Spanish, Chinese or Japanese would be necessary. The debate, which to this point has been bound tightly to the European context, would gain a new pulse through dialogue with these non-European historians.

NOTE

1. This essay appeared first as 'Die Debatte über Vergleich und Transfer und was jetzt?', in *Geschichte.transnational* (Forum), <http://geschichte-transnational.clioonline.net/forum/id=574&type=diskussionen>, 8 February 2005.

A 'Transnational' History of Society

Continuity or New Departure?

JÜRGEN OSTERHAMMEL

*The following text is a revised version of a contribution first published in the journal *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* in 2001.¹ At that time, the editors were organizing a round table on the question of the desirability and possibility of a 'transnational' history of society. I was invited to provide a comment because of an academic background that is rather unusual for German historians. For a long time, my main fields of interest have been modern Chinese history and the history of the British Empire. In earlier articles, I had advocated historical comparisons occur not just between European countries or societies or even within the 'West', but across cultural borders and spanning wide spatial distances. What would a proponent of that kind of intercivilisational comparison have to say about the new catchphrase of 'transnational history'? The following text retains the gist of my arguments of 2001. It takes only selective account of the extensive debate that has taken place since then. Some of my earlier ideas would merit reconsideration in light of recent theoretical discussions, and, more importantly, of practical historiographical work that has been undertaken. My own basic convictions have remained the same: I am not persuaded that classical comparativism has been completely superseded and made obsolete by a programme of entangled history. Comparison and the analysis of intercultural and intersocietal transfers do not present a stark alternative. They complement one another, and there are numerous examples in recent historical scholarship for the successful combination of both approaches. Finally, I am not happy with a recent tendency to establish Transnational (with a capital T) History as a separate and perhaps even autonomous field. 'Transnational' refers to a particular perspective in the same way as 'national' does. It is always useful to ask whether new knowledge or insight can be gained from looking at a historical phenomenon in such a 'transnational' perspective. But this does not mean,*