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Comparative History: Methodology and Ethos

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Abstract
While it is necessary to distinguish between analytical and normative statements, the quest for this distinction – and for value-free science – is itself normatively based. Comparative approaches can serve important descriptive and analytical functions. They reduce the danger of methodological nationalism and intellectual parochialism in historical studies. The comparative approach allows to find an acceptable middle ground between the acceptance of basic differences and universalist claims. Method and ethos interact. But a-symmetric comparison shows that scientific productivity and political incorrectness can go together. For this, Max Weber's comparative approach can serve as an example.

Keywords
comparative history, historical methodology, German *Sonderweg*, normativity

Science and Values

Die Wertfreiheit der Wissenschaft – the value-freeness of science – has been postulated, demanded, and discussed for more than a century. Max Weber's "Wissenschaftslehre" is a classical site for the formulation of this thesis. He makes convincingly clear that there is a fundamental distinction between analytical and normative statements. Describing, understanding and explaining social reality is one thing. Prescribing how social reality should be, is another. Weber takes pains to make clear that a *Wissenschaftler* – scholar or scientist in the broad sense of the word – has the task to describe, understand and explain ; but in case he/she makes a value judgement, in case he or she takes a stand on how a conflict *should* be decided, on which alternative *should* be chosen, or on how the future *should* be shaped, he or she speaks as a citizen or a human being like other citizens and other human beings, but cannot claim scientific authority for such a personal decision, political choice or ethical conviction.

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Weber admits some modifications. He concedes that scholars and scientists can help to clarify the conditions under which value judgements are made, and that they can say something about which consequences will follow if certain decisions are taken. Weber holds that scholars can tell decision makers something about the implications which their decisions carry, and about the contradictions into which they may lead. This way, scientific statements can indirectly contribute to the preparation of value judgements, even according to Weber. But this does not distract from his basic lesson, his basic conviction: With scientific methods we can understand and explain, describe and sometimes predict, but with scientific methods we cannot justify value judgements. This is the core of Weber's *Wertfreiheitsthese*.

I think this distinction between *Wissenschaft* and *Politik*, between analytical and normative statements, between what we can do as scholars and what we can't, is well taken. Still, what we do as historians or as social scientists is heavily dependent on values. This is not necessarily in contradiction with Weber's position.

On the one hand, the questions we ask and the viewpoints with which we approach our sources are influenced by our experiences and expectations, our fears and hopes, and at least indirectly by the underlying choices and judgements which we have made, as individuals and as contemporaries, embedded in our different contexts. This is particularly clear in the case of historians but not altogether absent from the work of practitioners of other disciplines as well. I am not going to talk about this, now.

On the other hand, there is a fundamental tie between scientific practices and the world of values. To illustrate this let me return to Max Weber. One cannot overlook the passion with which he argues in favour of a clear separation between analytical and normative statements. He requires respect for this distinction in the name of clarity. He assumes as self-evident that a scholar strives and has to strive for outmost transparency. He or she must try to be aware of all the conditions under which he or she obtains the results. It is beyond questions for Weber that a scholar's approach must not be self-deceptive, that a scientist's judgement must not be self-contradicting, and that scientific procedures presuppose and produce a basic sobriety (*Nüchternheit*). Even if scientific results are unpleasant, even if a historian's findings contradict his prejudices, disappoint her sympathies, and questions his/her beloved convictions or widely shared myths, these findings have to be formulated, propagated and accepted as long as they are supported by clear evidence and/or by convincing arguments. From this Weberian conviction it is only a short step to Karl Popper who requires that scientific statements are to be exposed to

critical scrutiny, have to be confronted with the possibility of being rejected, have to be jeopardized, and that, as a result, a scientist may be compelled to revise himself/herself deeply – which is never very pleasant and may endanger one's ego.

In other words: Weber argues with normative statements in favour of the clear separation between analysis and normativity. It is a value-loaded conviction which leads him to prescribe the obligations of scientists, and mark the transgressions of which they become guilty if they over-reach and claim scientific authority for positions which cannot be scientifically supported. Clearly, Weber's methodology is normatively based, related to his ethos of clarity, sobriety, and responsibility.

In this, Weber is no exception. Usually, our daily routine makes us forget it. But in situations of conflict it becomes very clear. History as a scholarly (scientific) practice is anchored in principles which are tied to a certain world view, and which have a normative dimension. Historically speaking, this is the heritage which the sciences took over from the Enlightenment, a heritage which, at the same time, provides for a basic affinity between history and other social sciences on the one hand, and the claims of an open society on the other. It is the principle of *Kritik* (criticism, critical practice) which is central both to science (*Wissenschaft*) and to culture and politics in an open society with a well developed public space.

I know this is very abstract. In reality, the work of historians implies many different aspects: rhetorics and playfulness, aesthetics, vanity and fights. Frequently we do not match the honorable principles formulated above. Violations are not at all rare. But in the last analysis there is a basic correlation between methodology and ethos, at least in history, but certainly in other scientific disciplines as well.

Value Implications of Comparative History

Is there anything specific to comparative history when it comes to the relation between methodology and ethos? We all know what comparative history is all about. Let me just remind us of some basics.

Historical works are comparative to the extent that they systematically investigate two or more historical phenomena with respect to their similarities and differences in order to arrive at explanations, interpretations and further conclusions. The comparative approach has *heuristic* functions in that it helps to identify problems of research and issues to be discussed which would not be

identified otherwise. Comparison can have *descriptive* functions in that it helps to clarify the specific profile of individual cases by contrasting them with others. *Analytically* comparison can help to refute pseudo-explanations and to check (or test) causal hypotheses, coming near to the experimental method of which we have less in the humanities than one has in the laboratory sciences. *Paradigmatically* the comparative method has an alienating (*verfremdend*) effect. In the light of observed alternatives, one's own development appears less self-evident. Comparison opens the door to seeing other possibilities, it sharpens the historian's sense for possibilities, and allows to discern the observed case as one possibility among several. It helps to relativize one's own record in the light of others.

This is the place where one can come back to the question of methodology and ethos, and discuss it with specific reference to comparative history. Of course one can use very different units of comparison. We can compare regions and towns, migrations and religions, periods or wars. Let me concentrate now on inter-national and inter-cultural comparison.

History became a huge discipline in university, schools and the public in the period when the nation was formed and when the nation state was either demanded or established or both. The rise of history as a mass discipline and the formation of the nation respectively the nation state were strongly interconnected, they went hand in hand, at least in Europe during the 19th and 20th centuries. The reconstruction and construction of historical memories were part of the formation of a national culture, but in a post-Enlightenment period and in the epoch of the rising sciences this took place in the medium of scientific discourses: history as an increasingly scientific discipline. As a consequence, history as a discipline has established itself largely (not exclusively) in the form of national history. The consequences are still effective today. Even at the beginning of the 21st century, historians in different countries prefer to study their own history. How to define one's *own* history? More often than not the definition is one in national terms, even today. Most of us are trained and are best and most interested in one's own country's history or rather: in aspects of it.

In such a situation the decision in favour of comparative history can be a political one. Comparison can help to make the task of history writing less national, less provincial, less parochial, more international, more cosmopolitan, more universal, or – at least – more European. If comparison comes in, the atmosphere and the style, the mood and the "culture" of historical work is bound to change, to the better. Comparison helps to perceive the cultural specificity of the central concepts one uses. It makes you less certain, more open, more modest sometimes.

Oneself and "the other" – this has been one of the great topics in literature, anthropology, cultural studies and philosophy during the last years. Comparison, it seems to me, offers unique possibilities for dealing with this problem. Why? Because comparative approaches expect to find differences *and* similarities. In fact, historians are usually more interested in contrasting comparisons, in establishing differences, in specifying profiles. But one cannot do this without recognizing basic similarities between the units of comparison, as well.

This, I think, is the appropriate attitude towards "the other" (*das Andere*). We should not overstress the difference, otherwise one exoticizes the others. We should not overstress the communalities, otherwise there is the danger of incorporating, assimilating and dissolving "the other".

It is the amalgamation which counts, the mixture of differences and similarities. This mixture changes over time, the balance looks different in different constellations. This is an empirical question. But if one sees it this way, one avoids exotization as well as incorporation. This way one can accept the dignity and the right of "the other" without giving up the notion of universality altogether.

Of course, these are intellectual problems which have moral and ethical implications. Reconciling the notion of the legitimate difference between local, regional and national cultures as well as between individuals with the notion of universalist claims as to humanity, rights and intercultural communication is clearly not only a cognitive problem with methodological consequences but also a practical one with ethical implications.

Comparison allows us to find an acceptable middle ground between global and local, between a false notion of human homogeneity and equally problematic notion of otherness which exoticizes the other and destroys the ways of mutual understanding and meaningful interaction. This is the point where the methodology and the ethos of comparative history are most clearly related.

Politics of Comparison

Now I am moving to a slightly less fundamental level. International and intercultural comparison necessitates many decisions, offers opportunities and implies dangers which have practical and political dimensions, ultimately related to moral and ethical ones. There is something which I like to call "politics of comparison". I just want to sketch two related problems which may be particularly relevant to comparative studies of Central and Eastern Europe.

1. Whom do we select as "partners for comparison"? It is like in daily life: With some we want to compare ourselves, with others not. But the choice with whom to compare may co-determine the outcome. This has been shown with respect to the history of the German bourgeoisie. If compared with West European counterparts it looks relatively weak and not very influential. If compared to most East European counterparts it appears to be strong and with formative power. It is, by the way, remarkable to see how much German historians preferred to compare German history with the West instead of looking to the East. From a changing perspective – which we try to follow in the Berlin School for the Comparative History of Europe – one can expect a lot of new insights. All this has political implications.
2. There is the problem of a-symmetric comparison. By a-symmetric comparison I mean a form of comparison which is centrally interested in describing, explaining and interpreting *one* case, usually one's own case, by contrasting it with others, while the other case or the other cases are not brought in for their own sake, and are usually not fully researched but only sketched as a kind of background. The questions one asks and the viewpoints one has are derived from case A and transferred to case B. Case B is instrumentalized for insights into case A, but not studied in its own right. Let me just illustrate this by two examples: the debate on the "German *Sonderweg*" and, secondly, again, Max Weber.

I shall not bother you with details of the controversial debate about the so-called "German *Sonderweg*". I have its critical version in mind. Starting with Thorstein Veblen during World War I, and becoming more popular with regard to German history during the Nazi period and World War II, observers, social scientists and historians have searched into particularities of German history which might help to understand why German politics diverged from the West and led into catastrophies avoided in the countries and cultures of Western and Northern Europe. This question, to begin with, was a result of the West orientation of our discussions and self-definitions. It usually led to a-symmetric comparison. We compared German developments of the 19th and 20th centuries with corresponding ones in one or more Western countries (usually the United Kingdom or the United States, sometimes lumped together as "the West"). Usually the outcome was critical or self-critical. Consequently, deficits of German history were stressed: delayed parliamentarization, traditions of illiberalism, the authoritarian *Obrigkeitsstaat* etc. At the same time, there has been a tendency to slightly idealize "the West" or the history of a

Western country like England. Such limits notwithstanding, such a-symmetric comparisons have produced interesting results.

With respect to Max Weber: Basically he was interested in the development of occidental civilisation. To grasp why in the West there developed a capitalist economy, autonomous cities, bureaucratic territorial states, secularised cultures, modern science and other manifestations of "rational" outlooks and ways of life, he looked comparatively at Asiatic cultures and asked why similar phenomena did not develop there. With a Western perspective, with Western questions and concepts he analysed non-Western cultures to understand them, it is true, but primarily to better understand the path of the West. Weber's approach has yielded interesting questions and fruitful results still productive today. At the same time he instrumentalized "the other" for a better understanding of his own world. He was an imperialist, and there is something imperialistic to his way of a-symmetric comparison.

How do we relate to this impressive mixture of scientific productivity and political incorrectness? Are there better alternatives and how do they look like? Clearly, this question relates both to methodology and ethos.

I could give other examples of "politically incorrect" comparisons which are nevertheless scientifically fruitful, for example studies which are built around notions of "modern" and "backward", particularly in works which compare Western European and Eastern European history. But this must be left to another occasion. Nor have I touched upon built-in limits of the comparative approach which tends to define its units of analysis as if they were completely separate from one another, while in reality they are frequently interconnected, especially inside Europe, but also between Western and non-Western parts of the world. This is why comparison has to be supplemented by *histoire croisée* (*Verflechtungsgeschichte*, history of connectivity, entangled histories). This, again, is another topic.

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